

A GENERAL HISTORY OF CHINA

VOLUME

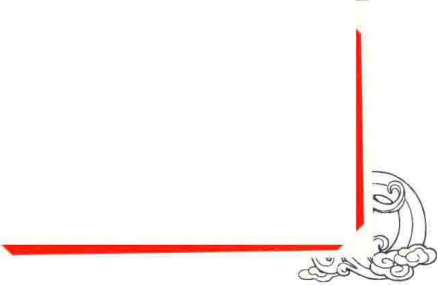


From the Three Kingdoms Period to
the Sui and Tang Dynasties




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TWENTY- TWENTY-ONE ONE THREE KINGDOMS



1

The Battle of Guandu

When history moved into the last period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, contradictions brought about by various social problems shook the foundation of the empire. A total collapse was inevitable. What was waiting was a spark to ignite the hot air. If there really was a burning, it would destroy the unification of the whole country which had lasted more than 400 years under the Qin and Han dynasties. Nobody would have thought that the outbreak of war could bring about a separation lasting nearly four centuries.

It was a time ripe with dynastic changes and social disorder; battles were waged between different warlords and conflicts erupted amongst ethnic minorities. It is quite difficult to say whether all of these happenings should be regarded as the dawn of heroes, or an elegy to our great nation. Let us examine once again the chaotic prologue of our history and recall how Cao Cao, a well-known warlord of the time, began to realise his ambition of building a unified country under his command.

DURING THE CLOSING years of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the problems of both land and slaves had merged with those of refugees and the expansion of influential powers. In addition to the fight between the eunuchs and the relatives of court women, there was also an uprising of the Yellow Turbans. The Eastern Han Dynasty had an encounter with a fearful storm.

Because of the appearance of many separatist warlord regimes, the central government that had existed merely in name was unable to hold onto its waning power. It could do nothing but limp on its last legs. By this time, a fierce struggle was being waged between the most powerful groups. He Jin, a relative of the royal family, invited Dong Zhuo to come into the capital despite many high officials being opposed to him doing so.

A cruel warlord stationed in Hedong (east of the Yellow River), Dong Zhuo deposed Emperor Shao immediately after having entered the capital. He appointed Liu Xie, Prince of Chenliu, as the new emperor (known in history as Emperor Xian of the Han Dynasty). Before long, Dong Zhuo began to take hold of authority by himself after forcing Yuan Shao and other faithful high officials to leave the capital.

According to the section biographying Dong Zhuo in *History of the Eastern Han Dynasty*, in 190, the first year of the era of Chuping, chosen by the regions and commanderies of Guandong area, Yuan Shao became the chief of a confederation against Dong Zhuo. Before long, forced by the approach of confederated armed forces, Dong Zhuo left, taking the sovereign with him, moving the capital from Luoyang to Chang'an. Soon afterwards, though Wang Yun, a court official, succeeded in eliminating Dong Zhuo by scheming, he himself was persecuted by Li Jue and Guo

Si, two military commanders under Dong Zhuo. After that, there broke out civil wars amongst different groups of the northwestern warlords that would last as long as five years.

Despite the fact that these warlords headed by Dong Zhuo had been exterminated, the imperial regime of the Eastern Han Dynasty was doomed as well. Before the death of Dong Zhuo a fight erupted due to conflicts amongst the northeastern warlords who had Yuan Shao as their leader. It eventually turned into large-scale civil war.

Since the time of Dong Zhuo's sedition, powerful and aggressive figures had come into their own. Although there were only a small number of politicians who attempted to restore the Han court, most of them were waiting for a chance to take over the authority and establish a new regime.



LÜ BU AND DIAOCHAN

The romance of Lü Bu and Diaochan took place in the Three Kingdoms Period. It has been adapted into various literary works, films and TV dramas. In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, Diaochan, receiving instruction from official Wang Yun, used her beauty to turn Dong Zhuo and his foster son Lü Bu, a mighty military general, against each other. This picture illustrates the scene in which Dong Zhuo happens to see the tryst between Lü Bu and Diaochan.



YUAN SHAO

Yuan Shao was born in a family with many members who had served in prominent positions within the civil bureaucracy of the Han Dynasty. In his early years, Yuan served as an official under the Han court. In 190, he was elected as leader of the coalition in the campaign to oust Dong Zhuo. However, the coalition dissolved quickly. After the dissolution, Yuan occupied Jizhou, Qingzhou and Bingzhou in the wars against other warlords. Yuan's power reached its peak after he defeated Gongsun Zan in 199 but only a year later he received a fatal defeat in the Battle of Guandu against Cao Cao.

Yuan Shao had long wished for it as well. In his book titled *After Reading the Historical Events Retold as a Mirror for Government*, Wang Fuzhi, the author, said: 'At the very start of the expedition against Dong Zhuo, Yuan Shao had an ambition to replace the Han regime with a new regime of his own.' However, although Cao Cao was quite weak in the confederation, he wished very much to unify the whole country. As a consequence, Cao Cao played an active role in the first stage of fighting against Dong Zhuo.

Being the adopted son of an eunuch, Cao Cao was in quite an inferior social position compared to Yuan Shao. In Yuan's family there had been high court officials for four generations. For the first years of his career Cao Cao had to rely on the help of others, with initial achievement coming thanks to expansion conducted by Yuan Shao.

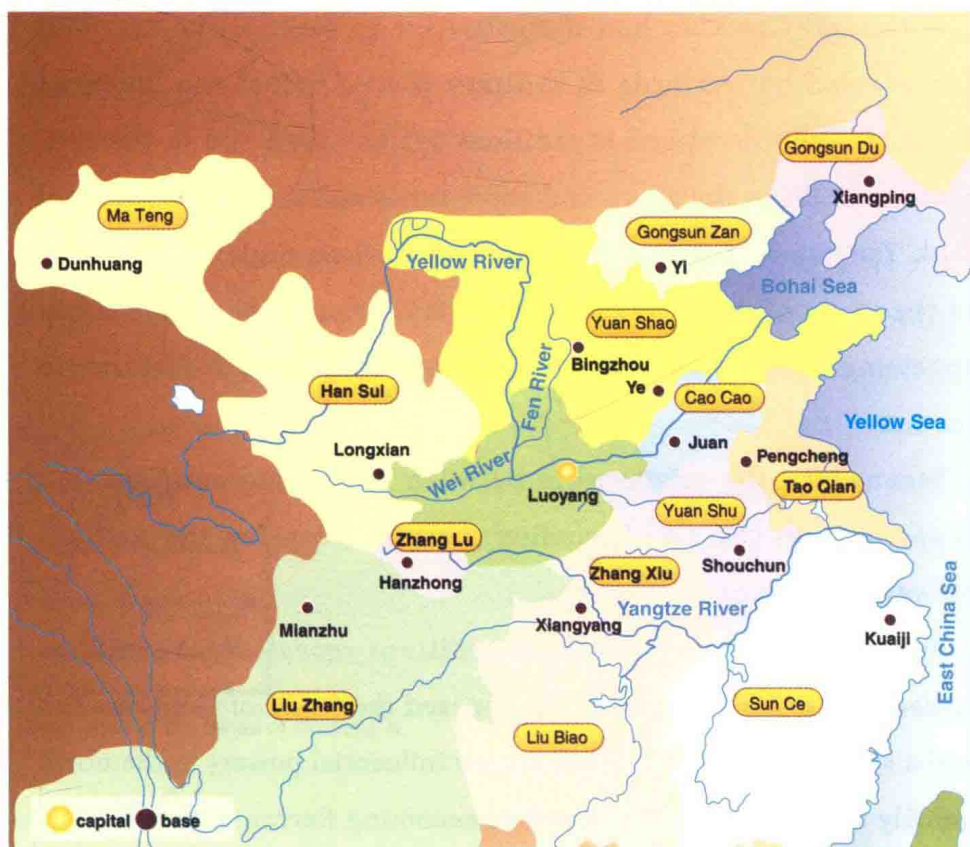
**CAO CAO** ♥

Cao Cao (155–220), courtesy name Mengde, a local of the State of Pei (present-day Bozhou, Anhui Province), was a famous statesman, strategist and litterateur of the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Cao Cao laid the foundations for what was to become the State of Cao Wei in the Three Kingdoms Period.

At that time, due to the incessant fighting amongst the northeastern warlords, the peasant uprisings of both the Yellow Turban in Shandong and Heishan bandits in Hebei (an offshoot of the Yellow Turban Rebellion during the Eastern Han Dynasty) expanded swiftly. In the face of such a situation, Yuan Shao decided to cope by the following two methods: the first was to prevent these two peasant rebellions joining forces; the second was to take strict control over the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River by expanding his influence toward Yanzhou. Thinking that talented Cao Cao could be of assistance, Yuan Shao, in the capacity of confederation chief, assigned him to serve as the governor of Dongjun Commandery.

Soon after getting this chance, Cao Cao hurried to have the Heishan bandits along the south bank of Yellow River eliminated and to incorporate the cream of the Yellow Turban into his own Qingzhou

army. After carrying out a series of expeditions, he set up bases in Yanzhou and Yuzhou commanderies. After the annex by war amongst different warlords, there remained merely a handful of influential warlords. Despite having increased his force, Cao Cao remained a common member of the warlord group. By what kind of talent would he eventually become an overlord of northern China?



Separatist warlord regimes in the late Eastern Han Dynasty

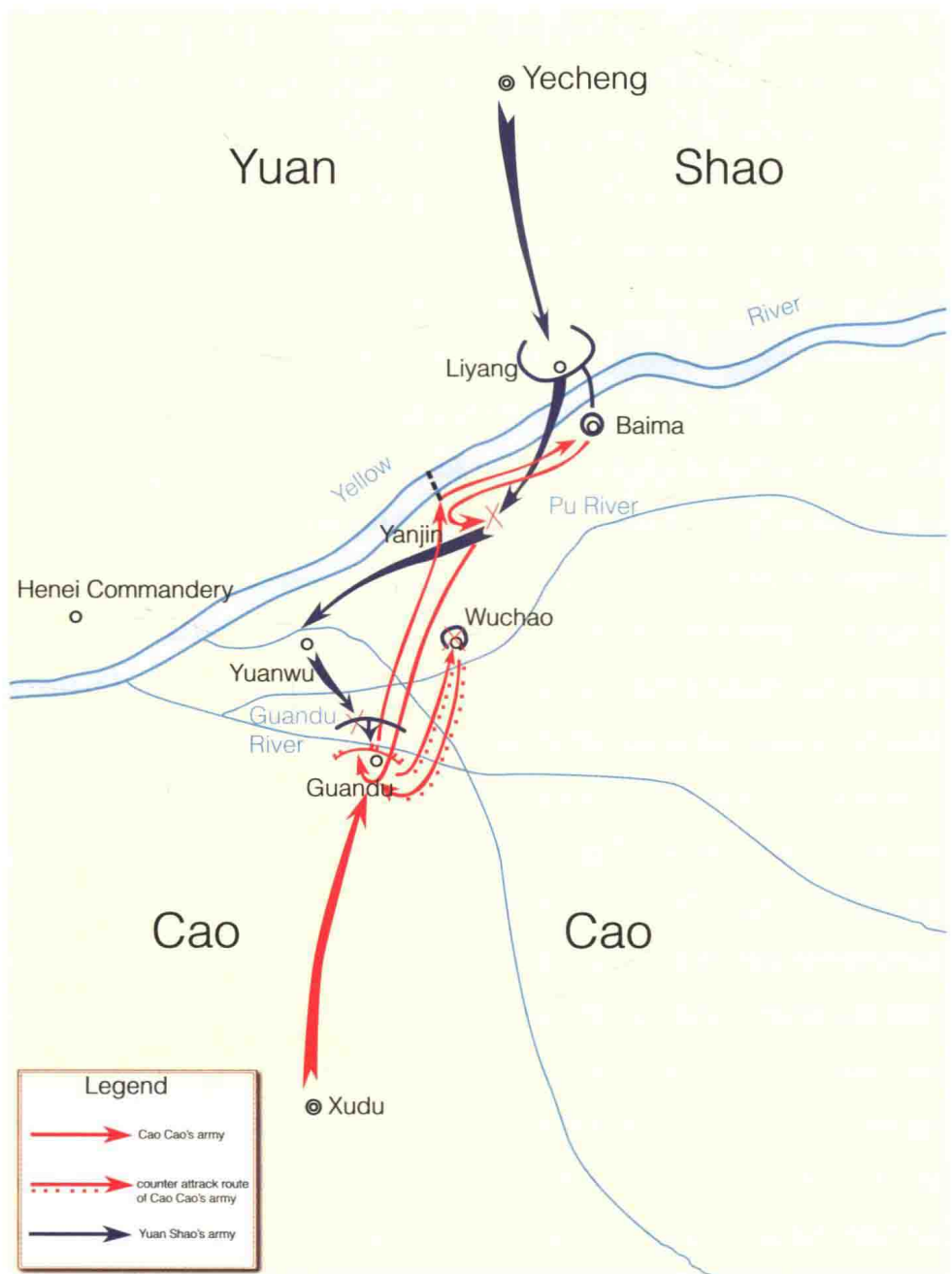
When warlords were absorbed in how they would expand their territory, Cao Cao made a politically crucial decision. He decided to welcome the emperor.

In 196, under control by Zhang Yang, Han Xian, Yang Feng, and others, Emperor Xian of the Han Dynasty returned to his old capital. By using various conflicts amongst his opposing powers, Cao Cao utilised the opportunity offered by Dong Cheng and dispatched his armed forces to Luoyang to take control of the sovereign. Long before others had time to take any counter measures, Cao Cao forced the emperor to go to Xuchang. Afterwards, the emperor was completely under his control, and Cao Cao won a great political advantage.

Although Cao Cao had the initiative in politics, he was still surrounded by warlords in military fields. Before the Battle of Guandu, Cao Cao waged expeditions against Yuan Shu in the east, against Lü Bu in the south and three times against Zhang Xiu, and took Yangzhou, Xuzhou, Yanzhou and Yuzhou under his control. In the name of the sovereign of the Han Dynasty, he succeeded in appeasing various warlords, sweeping away the fear of disturbance in the rear.

Meanwhile, the relationship between Yuan Shao and Cao Cao changed. With Cao Cao becoming stronger every day, the conflicts between them became greater.

While Cao Cao was waging expeditions repeatedly, Yuan Shao hastened to expand his power. He annexed the forces of Gongsun Zan and a sharp confrontation between two influential powers in the north quickly appeared. With the conflict becoming fiercer, a now-famous campaign called the Battle of Guandu began.



Sketch map of the Battle of Guandu

It was Yuan Shao who began to take action soon after he and Cao Cao had exterminated their opponents. Yuan Shao dispatched an army to attack Xuchang. Cao Cao was still weak, low in military units and there were still a number of anti-Cao Cao forces around the emperor attempting to take action. When news of a south expedition by Yuan Shao arrived, a couple of officials in the side of Cao Cao, becoming restless, began to turn over to Yuan Shao in secret.

However, Xun Yu, an adviser in the camp of Cao Cao noted that Cao Cao still bettered Yuan Shao in four fields, including righteousness and using people. Guo Jia put forward something similar and believed that Cao Cao would win the battle.

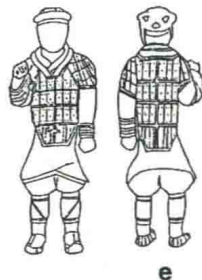
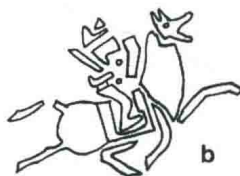
Relying on these remarks to encourage his soldiers, Cao Cao soon decided he would strike the first blow. He dispatched an expeditionary army to Liyang and stationed its main forces at Guandu.

Before the Yuan Shao invasion, Liu Bei, who was stationed in Xudu, started his fight against Cao Cao. On hearing this news, though staying at Guandu, before Yuan Shao could dispatch his army, Cao Cao soon led his to defeat Liu Bei's, disposing of all the hidden dangers.

In the first month of the fifth year of Jian'an, Yuan Shao issued a manifesto for the fight against Cao Cao. One month later, after the expedition forces had arrived at Liyang, Yuan Shao ordered General Yan Liang to first besiege and then attack the place known as Baima. After this, the Battle of Guandu broke out. On hearing this news, instead of marching forward to raise the siege of Baima, Cao Cao led his army north to march on Yanjin, absorbing Yuan Shao's armed forces who also moved in the direction of Yanjin. Then Cao Cao took a rapid U-turn back to Baima, killing Yan Liang, a well-known general in Yuan Shao's



Soldiers in Han art: a) Swordsman from Wu-liang-tzu, 2nd century AD; b) Cavalryman from I-nan, Shantung, 2nd or 3rd century AD; c) Pottery figurine, possibly late Han (after Dien); d) Officer from Yang-chia-wan, 2nd century BC (after Dien); e) Infantryman from same source as d).



Soldiers in the Eastern Han Dynasty 

armed forces and then defeating Wen Chou, one of Yuan's brave military commanders. Cao Cao had achieved a minor victory before the decisive campaign.

From then on there were few fights between the confronting forces of Yuan Shao and Cao Cao. In the fourth month of the fifth year of Jian'an, Yuan Shao decided to launch a fight for total victory, marching his armed forces toward the south bank of the Yellow River. However, Cao Cao did not engage him but had his soldiers hold their ground in deep trenches and behind high ramparts. As a consequence, Yuan Shao elongated his supply lines.

At this juncture, Yuan Shao, neglecting suggestions made by his counsellors brought about the turning point of the whole situation. Xu You, one of Yuan Shao's chief advisers, left in anger, joined the camp of Cao Cao and disclosed the actual situation regarding Yuan Shao's storage of army provisions. Soon afterward, having personally selected 5,000 elite cavalry, Cao Cao ordered them to make a sudden attack on Wuchao with the banner of Yuan Shao's army. Soon afterwards, hearing that Wuchao was encircled by Cao Cao's armed forces, Yuan Shao failed to dispatch army to rescue Wuchao from a siege, but came to assume that it was a good chance to wage a sudden attack on Cao Cao's base camp.

Yuan Shao ordered Zhang He and Gao Lan to attack Guandu with their main forces, dispatching several thousand cavalymen to strengthen the defence of Wuchao. Apart from exterminating Yuan Shao's cavalymen, Cao Cao also burned all of Yuan Shao's army provisions.

Meanwhile, since Cao Cao had already strengthened defence, Zhang He and Gao Lan failed to win any victory in their attack on Guandu. Seeing that the situation was hopeless, they soon decided to defect to Cao Cao. Under fierce attack by Cao Cao, Yuan Shao was forced to retreat across the Yellow River with his eldest son, Yuan Tan, and eight hundred cavalymen. After this defeat, Yuan Shao totally collapsed and then, because of an extended illness, he passed away. Soon after exterminating Yuan Shao's remaining sons, Cao Cao, eventually accomplished the unification of north China.

Although there can be many reasons for the success or failure of a war, a record in the book entitled *Records of the Three Kingdoms* may provide some insight. During their childhood, Yuan Shao once inquired: 'What

do you intend to do in the future?’ Instead of making a reply, Cao Cao asked Yuan Shao the same question. Yuan Shao, his childhood friend, replied, ‘First of all, strive to occupy the northern region of both Hebei and Shanxi, because it is full of man power and horses. After that, in order to win the whole country, launching a southern expedition is necessary.’ Upon hearing this, Cao Cao quickly replied, ‘I would try to make use of talent throughout the country. Then administer with justice. After that, I would surely become invincible.’ This statement shows clearly that, apart from paying great attention to the use of talent, Cao Cao was endowed with both profound qualities and broad vision. Later on, both of them developed according to their own thoughts and plans. However, after the campaign of Guandu, Cao Cao suffered a defeat at the Battle of Red Cliffs. Having gone off its unified track, history began to turn back, eventually leading to a tripartite confrontation.

2

The Battle of Red Cliffs

In his poem entitled 'Memories of the Past at Red Cliffs', the well-known Song Dynasty poet Su Dongpo (1037–1011) wrote:

'East flows the mighty rivers,
Sweeping away the heroes to time past;
This ancient rampart on its western shore,
Is Zhou Yu's Red Cliffs of Three Kingdoms' fame;
Here jagged boulders pound the clouds,
Huge waves tear banks apart,
And foam piles up a thousand drifts of snow!
A scene fair as a painting,
Countless the brave men here in time gone by!'

In 208, there was a gathering of heroes at Red Cliffs. At that time, Cao Cao, the winner of the Battle of Guandu, led hundreds of thousands of soldiers towards the south, wishing to achieve his aims to unify the country. His opponents began to form allied forces. There was Sun Quan, the lord of the southern lands and Liu Bei who had already spent time gathering together many brave generals. Hence, heroes, including Zhou Yu, Zhuge Liang, Lu Su, Guan Yu, Gan Ning, Zhang Fei and Zhao Yun gathered at Red Cliffs. These heroes would soon display their brilliant talents.