



Tumu Crisis and the Weakness of the Military System of Ming Dynasty

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Abstract

In the year of 1449, Ming lost the battle against the Oirats in Tumu Bao due to its poor military system. In this article, the history of the Tumu Crisis and the military system of Ming dynasty were systematically studied. The article, First of all, analyzed the weakness of the military system of Ming from five aspects, and concluded that the main problems were the lower social statue of the army and a serial unrealistic regulation. Following that, the article explained how the military system caused the Tumu Crisis. It is found that the low quality of the military personnel caused by the army family system, the inefficient supply system, the war-weary attitude and the poor leadership were the main reasons for losing the battle.

Keywords: Ming dynasty, Tumu Crisis, Military system, Army family system, Supply system, War-weary attitude, Leadership

Introduction

The Ming Dynasty is a time that Han Chinese ruled China again after the Mongolia Alien conquest. As a society had intrinsic atmosphere and valued peace and knowledge, this dynasty made its military system very careful and conservative. This military system was made to keep the society stable and had no ambition to expend. But out of the expectation of the system-maker, the system had never given the peaceful environment for our dynasty. This article analyzed the problems of the military system of Ming Dynasty and studied a military crisis of Ming Dynasty in the year of 1449 as a case.

1. The Analysis of the Military System of Ming

The military system of Ming was founded during the ruling time of Hongwu Emperor and Yongle Emperor. This military system guided Chinese military organization and military actions until the end of Ming Dynasty in the year of 1644. In my point of view, this military system was founded with the ideology known as “value the intellectual, and despise the martial” and with a lot of regulations which were alienated from reality. And after this system came into force, there wasn’t any successful reform of it during the following 270 years. This military system made the efficiency in military very low and led to the defeats of some crucial battles, and finally, this system put an end to this Dynasty.

Firstly, the strong political inclination to the civil servants made a negative situation to the military personnel. In the Ming government, comparing with civil servants, the military personnel always had the lower status, a reason was that the civil servants who selected by the Imperial Examinations always regard the military personnel with contempt or condescension. In the early years of Ming, the position of commander-in-chief was abolished by the Hongwu Emperor because of his afraid of its great power. Since then, there was no senior position offered for the military personnel in the bureaucracy system. The highest military officials were Generals which located in 83 military distinctions all over the country. And these Generals must obey the command of the Beijing cabinet and the Defense Minister which were controlled by the civil servants. What’s more, the military officials even had no right to dispatch their soldiers without the agreement of the local civil servants, and the supplies for the army were also provided by the local governments. This system was founded by the Hongwu Emperor to defang the military forces and ensure the military officials would have no power to threat to the central government. All in all, the low social statue of the military personnel led to the low level of the military operations and low quality of the soldiers.

Secondly, Ming government always hold a passive position towards the war, it seldom tried to take the initiative position to attack its enemies. The reasons of this phenomenon are complex. On the one hand, it was because after the

ruling of the alien Mongolia government, the feeling of disgrace made the personality of Han Chinese intrinsic and conservative. On the other hand, what's more important, to ensure the stability of its dominion of China, the Ming government tried its best to avoid war because the war always causes social unrest. As the war always cost a lot of money and made a heavy burden on the common people, the government always wanted to end the war when the military conflicts wasn't serious to reduce the civil stress.(Note 1) This passive position always made the government lost the favorable strategic situation and made the negative influence for the generals made the military decisions.

Thirdly, Ming used the "Army Family System" to find the soldiers of its troops. The system leaded to both a poor quantity and quality of the standing army. So called Army Family System is a system founded by the Hongwu Emperor to ensure the quantity of the soldiers was amplitude. This system established that the standing army was provided by the two million "Army Families". Each Army Family must provide one man as a soldier and did their duties generation by generation. The Hongwu Emperor thought this system would not only ensure the quality of the standing army, but also made the common people be free of the military service. But in fact, as most of the Army Families were made by force, they would always escape to avoid the military service (Note 2). So from the early years, this system began to lead the situation that the quantity of accrual soldiers was less than the quantity of the Army Families. Year by year, the situation gets worth. At the year of 1569, after two hundred years after the Army Family System was founded, the quantity of the standing army all over the country was only 845,000, much less than the legal quantity as 3138,300 (Note 3). On the other hand, the soldiers from the Army Family was always lack of training, so when met the enemies in battles, they even defeated without fighting (Note 4).

Fourthly, the military supply system was in a similar situation with the Army Family System. The supply of the Army was from the local government instead of the state funding. As the local city was always divided into many different tax unites, the supply of a troop was always from many different places (Note 5). Since the tax unites was lacked of coordination and overall planning. The food and material supply of army was always in a poor situation. Some generals even blackmailed the local rich families for money and goods because of the poor supply from the local government. Otherwise, to ensure the army has a good fighting capability, some military goods as weapons and armors must be product in professional factories for a good quality. But the supply system means those special things were provided by the local governments, so their quality was usually not so good (Note 6).

Fifthly, there were also a lot of problems in the military official promoting system. Firstly, the standard of a good military leader was not his military strategy and experience; it was his courage and strength. Secondly, they mean ways to promote a military leader were military examination and heritage. Heritage was the most common way to produce a military leader. Another way is to take the military examination. But the examination tested only the Wushu and Confucianism texts (Note 7). As most of the generals of Ming were always very stupid (Note 8), the emperors and high class officials always believed that when the war breakouts, the generals need to be leaded and guided by the civil servants (Note 9).

2. The Tumu Crisis Caused by the Military System

2.1 The History of Tumu Crisis

In the year of 1449, the Oirats Tribe beat other Mongolia tribes and united Mongolia. The Oirats attacked Ming boundary on the pretext of the bad treated of its envoys in Ming. And Ming army lost the battle in Datong. The Imperial Government was shocked by the news and the Zhengtong Emperor decided to fight the Mongolia by himself with his half million soldiers. But the Imperial army also lost serious of battles in the boundary. The Imperial army was terrified by the Mongolia army and decided to retreat to Beijing. But because the Imperial Army changed the retreat plan for many times and wasted too much time, the Oirats army caught up the Ming army and put a Ming troop with 50 thousand soldiers to rout. In August 14th, the Zhengtong Emperor and the front troop reached Tumu Bao, a military fort located in the Great Wall and just 35 miles away from the Xuan City. Emperor decided not entering the Xuan City for waiting for the impedimenta in Tumu Bao. But at night the main force of the Oirats also arrived at Tumu Bao and surrounded the Ming army. To make things worse, the Oirats Army also occupied the river and cut off the water supply of Ming army. The soldiers of Ming felt thirsty and tired after a long time fighting. The next day, the Oirats negotiate with Ming for peace and the Ming army thought the war had stopped and began to move their camps to the river for water. But the Oirats troop suddenly appeared and attacked the moving Ming soldiers. The terrified Ming soldiers threw their weapons and armors and ran away. The Oirats chalked up a great victory and even captured the Zhengtong Emperor (Note 10).

Insert Figure 1 About Here

2.2 The Analysis of the Tumu Crisis in the System Aspect

2.2.1 The Low Quality of the Military Personnel Caused by the Army Family System

Most of the soldiers in the Tumu Crisis were from the Army Families. Beside the few soldiers from the Five Military Camp Beijing, most of them were just famers in the ordinary days. As lacking military training and experience, they

were even terrified when they passed a gorge although there was no enemy at all (Note 11) The soldiers were always in the fear and had no faith to defend their country. So when the Ming army was attacked by the Oirats in Tumu Bao, the soldiers threw all their amours and ran away without any resist. The Zhengtong Emperor said after the Crisis as: The generals were arrogant and the soldiers were lazy, they made me in the bad situation (Note 12). But the soldiers of Oirats were experienced and skillful as they had experienced a lot of battles. How could the amateur soldiers of Ming defend these professional military personnel?

2.2.2 The Supply System Worked very inefficiency

The poor food and material supply was an important reason for this crisis. Although it was mentioned very little in the history records, but we can still find some materials to understand it. For example, before they went the boundary, the Emperor gave every soldier some money and materials, but when every soldier received those things, the things got chaos (Note 13).

Secondly, when the Oirats Army attacked the Beijing City, the government even couldn't find enough food for the soldiers guarded Beijing. But as the capital, it should be enough food for long term use for some urgent times. Then the government had to transport the supply of food for soldiers from Hubei, Nanjing and Guangdong with were far away from Beijing. The reason for the government got the supply from such far places must be there were no enough stores in the whole north provinces. But as the front boundaries were all in the north parts, the government should have very amplitude store in north. So how could the country with such a poor supply and store satiation won this long-term war against Mongolia in the long boundary (Note 14).

So we can see the chaos and deficiency of the supply system was a very important reason of the losing of this war.

2.2.3 The War-weary Attitude Made a Negative Influence for Making Military Decision

Before the Tumu Crisis, besides few attack to Mongolia to attack some military inventions from North Yuan which wanted returning China again (Note 15) the government always kept a peaceful attitude to the Mongolia. Hongwu Emperor and Yongle Emperor always wanted to make a very friendly relationship between Ming and Mongolia because the government had no money to pay the war and the people were very tired after a long time of civil war (Note 16). Secondly, in the ruling years of Hongwu Emperor, he made his sons as Yan King, Nin King, and Su King lived in the boundary with their own armies to resist the Mongolia and protect the boundary (Note 17) But after the Jingnan campaign, the Yongle Emperor was afraid about the military power of these Kings in the boundary, so he immigrated all the Kings into inner China under his control. This decision weakened the military system in the boundary in a large scale. And in the Hongxi and Yuande time, because of the civil wars among Mongolia tribes, the boundary was peaceful in most of the time. So the government began to pay less attention to military. The Emperor during this time always treated the Mongolia inventions as robbers and only expelled them from China (Note 18). What's more, to save the military expenses, the Hongxi Emperor abounded a lot of land and forts which was far away from inner China and hard to live and supply (Note 19). But in the early years of Zhengtong Emperor's rule, the Oirats united the Mongolia tribes and began to invade China. The War-weary Attitude before made the situation very bad for Ming.

2.2.4 The military leaders promoted by a preposterous policy always had no abilities to lead the army

In the Tumu Crisis, the highest commander was Zhengtong Emperor who grown up in the palace in a peace time and never leaded any military actions before. He was totally a green hand in this crisis. Another leader was the emperor's minion, eunuch Wangzheng. He was a teacher in his early years when he was an ordinary people and after he became an eunuch, he became the head official of the Forbidden City because his good relationship with Zhengtong Emperor. He also had no experience about military affairs.

The quality of the military officials was also not good. Among many generals, only few persons as Zhang Fu (Note 20), Zhu Yong (Note 21), Wu Kezhong (Note 22) and Chen Huai (Note 23) had the experience of war, but they were all very old at this time. Most generals as Chen Ying (Note 24), Jin Yuanshun (Note 25) were in the army just because they heritage their jobs and statues form their fathers or brothers. Some of them even hadn't leaved the Beijing City before this action.

Some other officials as Cao Ding (Note 26), Kuang Ye (Note 27), Ding Xuan (Note 28) and Wang Zuo (Note 29) followed the army as the advisors also had no military experience. They were evaluated as officials from the Imperial Examination and totally blind before the military affairs.

So we can find that most of the leaders in this military action had no ideas and knowledge about military. The strong political inclination to the civil servants hold by the government made the country had very few good military leaders. The generals with no experience made a lot of mistakes about common sense during the war. For example, the army even had no clear pan before they went to the boundary for war. The emperor and his officials made decisions in the march only according to the news from the spies and they always changed their mind. It delayed their actions and gave the valuable chance to the enemy. Then, just after a little setback in attack, the whole generals become afraid and retreated. But in their way back, instead of entered the Xuan City, they chose to stay in a dangerous place, Tumu Bao, just for waiting their impedimenta. What's more, they put their champs in a place without water resource. And when the Oirats surrounded them, they had no ideas to fight. In the next day, they easily relaxed during the negotiation and moved their camps to the place near the water. Then the tragedy happened: the Oirats soldiers suddenly appeared in

front of the relaxed Ming soldiers, the soldiers of Ming began to run away and the soldiers of Oirats began to slaughter (Note 30). The strategies made by the generals had dug a grave for their troops.

3. Summary

All in all, the Tumu Crisis was not an incident; it was the result of the poor Military System of Ming. Although the Ming Dynasty had luckily escaped from this disaster, in the following 200 years, it would face similar crisis time by time, and would finally collapsed in the year of 1644 by the attacking both from the civil rebellion and alien invasion. One of the most important reasons for its death was this evil military system founded in the beginning of this Dynasty.

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Notes

- Note 1. The History of Ming: (The Emperor Xuanzong said a general) the common people feels very tired about the pressures of war, so don't fight too much with the enemy, just expel them.
 Note 2. The Annals of Taizhong Emperor. p2172.
 Note 3. Fiscal Administration during the Ming Dynasty: by Ray Huang.
 Note 4. Classical selection of Imperial Ming:Chapter205, p6.
 Note 5. The Annals of Taizhong Emperor. page 2871, p2998.
 Note 6. 1587, A Year of No Significance, page 156. by Ray Huang.
 Note 7. The History of Ming. p2806.
 Note 8. Imperial Ming Classical selection:Chapter350,p3.
 Note 9. The Annals of Shenzhong Emperor: Chapter225.
 Note 10. The History of Ming: chapter 32.
 Note 11. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6093.
 Note 12. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6093.
 Note 13. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6080.
 Note 14. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6185- 6193.
 Note 15. The History of Ming.
 Note 16. The History of Ming.
 Note 17. The History of Ming.
 Note 18. The History of Ming.
 Note 19. The History of Ming.
 Note 20. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p612.
 Note 21. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6120.
 Note 22. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p 6125.
 Note 23. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6125.
 Note 24. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6125.
 Note 25. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6125.
 Note 26. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6127.
 Note 27. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6127.

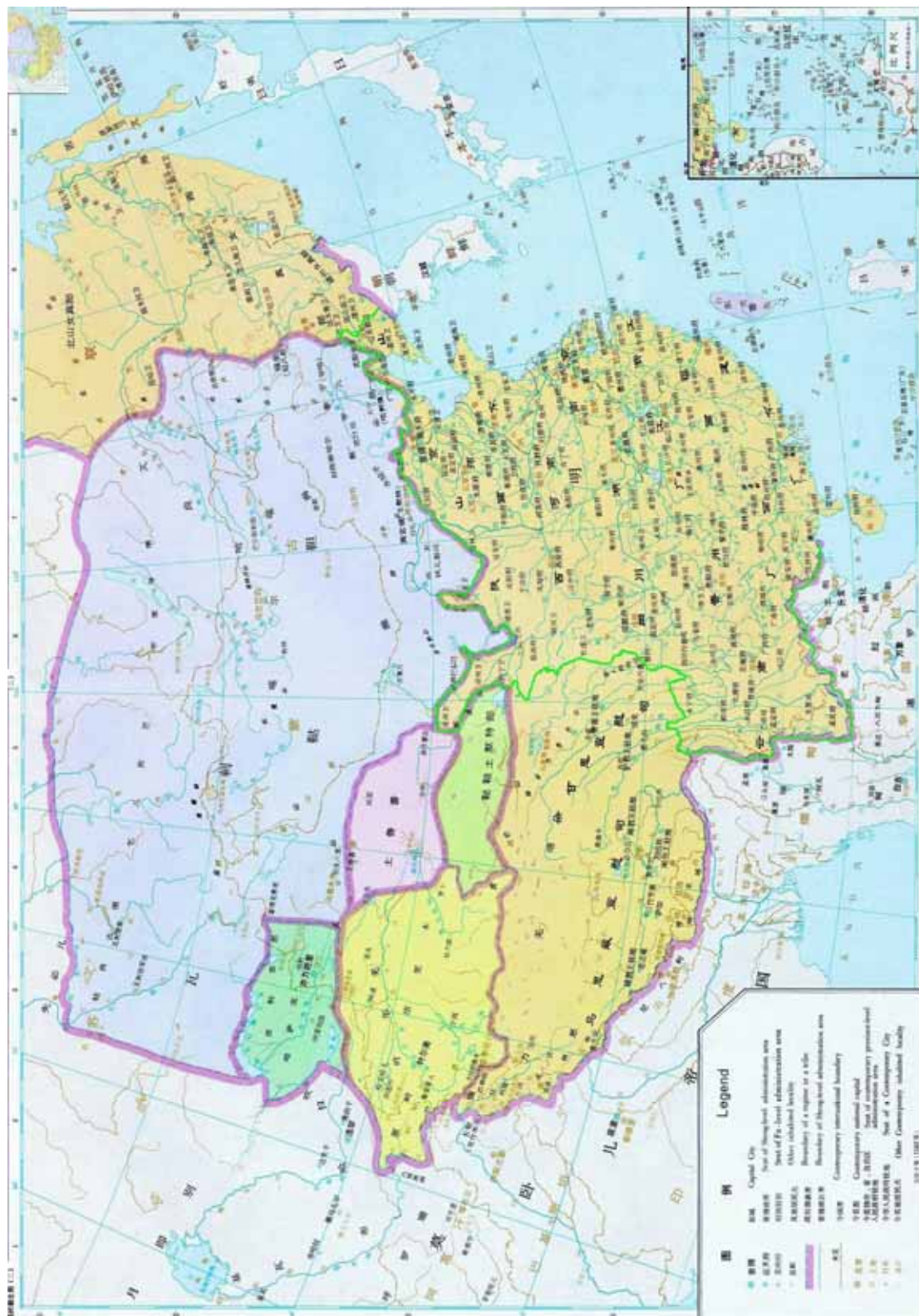
Note 28. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6131.

Note 29. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6131.

Note 30. The Annals of Yingzhong Emperor: p6122 - 6132.

Appendix 1.

A Map of Ming in the year of 1542: (Inside the green line is China Proper and the purple part is Mongolia tribes)



Appendix 2.

A Picture of a General of Ming Dynasty:



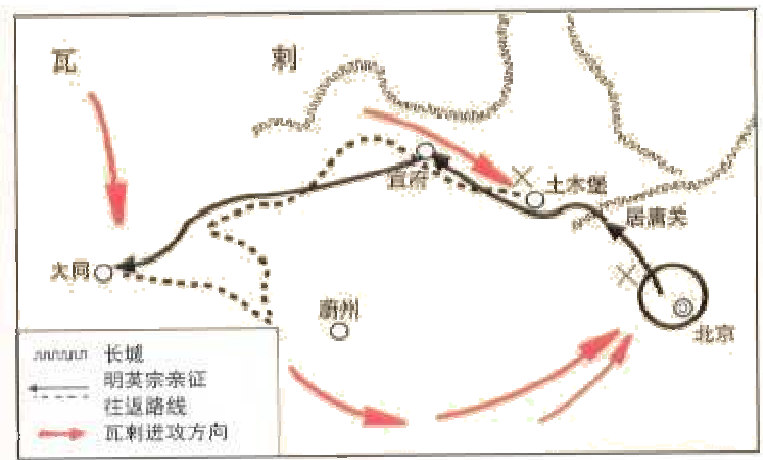


Figure 1. The map of Tumu Crisis