

Implementation of Tactics and Institutions in the Sino-Tangut War

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Abstract

The military performance of the Northern Song Dynasty was not always weak. During the reign of Emperor Zhezong (1095-1100), the Song forces gained decisive victory over the Tanguts in 1098, earning a geographic and strategic advantage over their enemies. This paper argues that institutional reforms, rather than the adjustments in overall tactics, proved to be more decisive in this turnaround. By closely analyzing the battle of Haoshui Chuan in 1041, the essay tends to suggest that the early Song institutions—recruitment abuses, garrison rotation, and civil-official dominance—crippled combat effectiveness and prevented Elastic Defense from being successfully implemented. While the Wang Anshi's new policy, such as the Baojia and the Jiangbing training systems, along with the improvements of the quality of the commanders following the continuous warfare between the Song and the Tanguts, improved the troop quality, command flexibility, and cohesion. These improvements eventually allowed Zhang Jie, an outstanding commander, to successfully implement the tactic of Elastic Defense in the battlefield, securing the victory of the battle of Pingxia Cheng in 1098. The study concludes that institutional transformation was decisive in shifting the Song from passive defense to forward and elastic defense against the Tanguts.

Keywords

Elastic Defense, Sino-Tangut War, Military History.

1. Introduction

"...Interrogating spies who revealed their lax defenses, [the Song commander] dispatched Zhe Keshi and Guo Cheng with light cavalry for a night assault. Storming straight into the enemy commander's tent to capture him, they seized his entire family, taking over 3,000 prisoners, along with 100,000 cattle and sheep. The Xia emperor was stunned with terror...After the battle of Pingxia, Xia could no longer field an effective army." [1]

This record comes from the biography of Zhang Jie, the commander of Jingyuan Lu (a military district in the Song Dynasty) during the reign of Emperor Zhe. In the bitter winter of 1098, Zhe Keshi and Guo Cheng did a long distant raid, all the way to the headquarters of Xia and captured the two most important commanders for Xia. For many residents, this text may be shocking. As Song was famous for its prosperous economy, art, and literature, but never its military. As for the reason for its weakness in this domain, many casual history enthusiasts and academic scholars have often attributed it to national policies, or to the prevalence of Confucian idealism. Indeed, the Northern Song during the reign of Emperor Ren, as commonly perceived, favored using wealth to deter war. And during this period, the Song army's performance was largely unimpressive. As they have suffered heavy losses in the battle of Sanchuankou, the battle of Haoshuichuan, and so forth. During the century-long Song-Xia wars, especially the reign of Emperor Zhe, however, the Song army was sometimes quite aggressive. In battles such as the Battle of Hongdezhai (1092) and the decisive Battle of Pingxiacheng (1098), the western army eliminated tens of thousands of enemy troops despite the huge numeral disadvantages. By 1099,

the Song Dynasty had pushed the defensive line to the Hengshan Mountains, gaining a decisive geographical and tactical advantage [2]. So, how did the Song manage to turn the tide in its war with the Tangut in only a few decades?

The question, as mentioned above, is worth discussing. But it received scant scholarly attention over the years. It was not until the 1990s did western scholars begin to notice the importance of the Chinese military history as a whole, not to mention the military history of the Song. Thus, biases of Song's military power do occur in many monographs. Dieter Kuhn, in his book *"The Age of Confusion Rule: The Song Transformation of China"*, a well-known work on Song's history as a whole, had mainly focused Song's development in areas such as culture, philosophy, and economy, composing many amazing analysis in these domains. As for military affairs, it has also conducted some valuable argumentation, breaking the stereotype "while deciding on military affairs, the officials in the Song Dynasty would follow the rules set by Confucius" [3]. However, it still has its limitations, as it still identified Song's defense institutions as "weak and outdated [3], ignoring the successful counter attack in 1090s and the middle of thirteenth century. Eventually leading to an incomprehensive conclusion.

A Later published historic article, *"Military Institutions as a Defining Feature of The Song Dynasty"* has made great improvement on this research topic. It identifies how literati that governs the military businesses in institutes such as Shumiyuan affects the upper culture of the dynasty [4]. Nevertheless, Lorge's article did not focus on the specific examples of battles as it wasn't its priority. Besides that, for articles that mainly focus on the Sino-Tangut war, such as *"A Crisis in the Literati State: The Sino-Tangut War and the Qingli-era Reforms of Fan Zhongyan, 1040–1045"* by Paul Jacov Smith. Little did they show the continuity and changes throughout this hundred year's battle. As they were mainly describing one certain period of the war, for instance, 1040 to 1045 or 1081 to 1085 and so on, without viewing this war as a whole. *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 5, The Sung Dynasty and Its Precursors* has always been recognized as one of the most influential work among the western studies of Song Dynasty, devoting considerable attention to the Song–Xia War and to the broader question of military affairs in the Northern Song. Yet, its treatment of these issues remains relatively limited in proportion to the volume's overall scope. Consequently, Western historiography has yet to give sustained attention to the specific questions that this study seeks to address.

In contrast, within Chinese academia, Song history remains a relatively young yet rapidly developing field. Over the past several decades, scholars have produced a number of groundbreaking studies that significantly expanded our understanding of Song institutions and frontier policy. On the institutional level, representative works include Wang Zengyu's *An Initial Exploration of the Military System of the Song Dynasty*, Chen Feng's *A Study of the Northern Song Military Elite and Related Issues*, Wang Zhanyang's doctoral dissertation *Military Command and Strategic Decision-Making in the Northwestern Frontier of the Northern Song: A Case Study of the Song–Xia War*, and Fan Xuehui's *A Study of the Three-Command Headquarters System in the Song Dynasty*.

With respect to specialized studies of the Song–Xia War, important contributions include Li Huazui's *A History of Song–Xia Relations* and He Guanhua's *Expanding the Frontiers and Subduing the Enemy: A Study of the Mid-Northern Song Commander Li Xian*. On the level of strategic and tactical analysis, Zeng Ruilong's twin monographs—*Expanding the Northwestern Frontiers* and *Managing the Strategic Frontiers of You Yan*—stand out for their originality and methodological rigor. The former, in particular, is noteworthy for its creative application of the modern Western military concept of "elastic defense" [5] to the study of pre-modern Chinese warfare, a pioneering move that has had lasting influence on the field.

Nevertheless, existing scholarship still tends to focus on the description of military campaigns or tactical principles, paying insufficient attention to the institutional foundations that made the implementation of such strategies possible. Building upon Zeng Ruilong's insights, the

present study seeks to explore this neglected dimension by offering an institutional interpretation of the Song's military strategy during the Sino-Tangut conflict.

In this case, this study first demonstrates the military institutions that were formed during the early Song and explains how the political environment at that age made them the way they were. Then, it reveals why these policies are no longer effective when facing the Tanguts. Later, this research identifies how the reforms of Wang Anshi affected the general strategies of Song on the battlefield. Finally, by providing a vivid example, the battle of Pingxiacheng, this research argues that the successful implementation of advanced military institutions, enabled application of tactics like the elastic defense on the Song-Xia battle field, proved decisive in securing Song's victory in the war against the Tanguts.

2. Historical Context

"Is the Son of Heaven born to rule? No! He who commands the strongest army shall claim the title [6]." An Zhongrong, general that serves the Hou Jin Dynasty, claimed this. And this represents people's attitude towards the imperial power during the age of Five Dynasties and Ten Countries. Generals and Warriors could start a rebel and oust the emperor out of his throne at any time [7]. And life of the civilians was at stake. In 902 when Zhu Wen the warlord led his troops and surrounded Chang An, the capital city of the Tang Dynasty. Si Maguang, a renowned historian in the Song Dynasty depicted the scene by writing:

...It was winter, with heavy snowfall. The city had run out of food, and countless people died from food and starvation. Some lay dead, their flesh already eaten by others. In the market, a pound of human flesh was sold for a hundred coins, while dog meat was worth five hundred [8]. Such situations were random in that chaotic age. Forty years later, Guo Wei captured the capital of his own dynasty and formed the Houzhou, and he himself became the first emperor of the dynasty. But only ten years later, in a similar way, Zhao Kuangyin (also known as Song Taizu), one of the most influential generals in Houzhou(951—960), led him man entered Kaifeng (the capital), and claimed the throne. These examples propose that imperial power had lost its sacredness in that time. And this is what Tai Zu needs to do once he became the emperor: to restore the superiority of the imperial power and to quickly stabilize the overall situation of his country. "Since the late Tang dynasty, several decades have witnessed eight imperial families rising and falling," Tai Zu said, "Battles never cease, and the people suffer bitterly. What is the Reason for this?" Expressing his concerns for the stability of his reign, while chatting with one of his most trusted officials, Zhao Pu. And Pu offered a concise and powerful reply: "To remedy this, we need only gradually strip them of their authority, control their fiscal resources, and reclaim their elite troops. Then peace will naturally prevail under heaven [9]." This conversation had surely satisfied the emperor. And later on, he began conducting the founding institutions that were mainly "designed for defense and internal security [10]."

In the autumn of 961AD, as the night banquet in Bianjing dispersed, so did the military power of Shi shouxin, Wang shen qi and many other generals. They were asked to give up their power in exchange for wealth and titles of nobility, and eventually they all agreed [11]. This is the famous incident "Release For a Cup of Wine", from here, Zhao Kuangyin began his plan. For the central political system, he constructed the Shumiyuan, an institution that focuses on military matters, separated from the civil organizations, having the authority to send troops. At the same time, San ya was formed to check and balance Shumiyuan, with only the right to command troops but couldn't send them from their campsite to the battlefield. In this way, no civil officials could obtain military power singlehandedly [12]. And for local governance, he established policies that forces all regions to turn in the taxes they received to the capital, only remaining a decent amount for daily expenses [13]. Besides that, the emperor asks the local to charge the elite soldiers to the imperial forces, leaving the weak ones for local troops. These were the main

changes Emperor Taizu had done for the political system. They were indeed considerate, as indeed the Song Dynasty witnessed exceptionally few insurrections initiated by military commanders. Compared to these political reforms that the author had mentioned above, the adjustments Taizu did to the military system was more creative and determined the keynote of the dynasty. First of all, instead of the Fubingzhi that gradually collapsed after the middle Tang (starting from the middle of 8th century), what Tai Zu established was an improved version of Mubing Zhi. Mubingzhi is an institution that thrived during mid-late Tang and the age of five dynasties which government recruit individuals and make them full-time soldiers. And Taizu added another function for this institution: to “recruit the untamed fierce man from all parts of the nation” [14]. In other words, is to place unemployed and bankrupt workers in the military camp so that they would not deign to destabilize the society [15]. Another disruptive innovation in the early Song is the creation of the institution of Geng Shu, a policy that requires the imperial force and guards the border and the capital to relocate every three years. At the same time, the generals stay in the same position. Thus, generals could never conduct strong relationship with his soldiers.

These restrictions and policies have shown Taizu’s purpose of “establish preemptive safeguards for potential crises, and design precautionary systems for unforeseen complexities” [16]. And it is undeniable that these institutions did serve the purpose of stabilizing the polity and remained functioning throughout the reign of Song. But extreme safeness comes with a cost. Cai Xiang, an official that serves the dynasty during the reign of Ren Zong once pointed out that the expenses of the soldiers had increased by a tremendous amount a century after Mubingzhi was founded [17]. And the overall quality of the imperial army had also significantly decreased. Together, these problems shall be exposed at the reign of Renzong when Northern Song had to face the challenge of Tanguts led by an ambitious ruler—Li Yuanhao.

3. The Downfall

Although Western Xia was officially established in 1038, its foundation was laid decades ago. Li Jiqian and Li Deming, the father and grandfather of the first emperor of Xia, had expanded Tangut’s territory to the southeast of the Hengshan Mountain Range, obtaining a geographical advantage against the Song [18]. Losing the mountains, Song could only set their defenses alongside the rivers and valleys, which makes communications fairly difficult for different military districts. Thus, when Yuanhao focus his troops to attack a single district, the Song Dynasty would be outnumbered. Nevertheless, some erudite people at that time had also noticed this situation and was eager to offer advice and make changes. For instance, Wang Yaochen, a Senior official who once worked at the frontier mentioned this:

When the bandits invade the border regions, the concern is not their ability to break in but their inability to get out. The mountains, plains, rivers, and valleys near the frontier vary in strategic difficulty, but troops cannot advance along narrow paths...Once they (the army of Xia) enter Han territory, they split up to plunder, driving captured people and livestock, and carrying off wealth and goods. Their men and horses grow weary and exhausted as they hurry back along their return route, their fighting spirit diminished. If elite troops seize the strategic points, crossbows are deployed to shoot, ambushes are set on the flanks, and their vanguard and rear guards are cut off, while attacks and pursuits are launched continuously, how can they avoid defeat? Hence, the bandits’ real concern is their inability to get out [19].

This tactical concept that was embodied in the paragraph was called “interdiction”(遮斷) at the time. Nowadays, according to professor Zengruilong, we would prefer to identify it as elastic defense [20].

The elastic defense represents a positive defense strategy, which the defend side may keep some of its troops hidden, and when the invaders perpetrate deep into the nation’s boundary,

these soldiers would assist their allies in the front side and ambush the foes [21]. In this way, the defense side may prevent troops to be dispersed along a lengthy battle line, or to be caught in a protracted war of attrition [22]. Many factors were required, though, to conduct successful elastic defense, including the establishment of an effective command system, the construction of organized field army, and so on. Yet, due to many problems, elastic defense may not be applicable for Song in the 1140s. And the battle of Haoshuichuan could serve as a great example of this problematic application.

In the February of 1041 [23], Yuanhao invaded Song's Jingyuan District with approximately 100,000 men [24]. At the same time, Hanqi, the commander and the highest official of Jingyuan, received a gen from Song's spy which proposed that Yuanhao was going for City Wei (In the southwest of today's Gansu province). Thus, he asked general Ren Fu to lead 18,000 men and go west from the head quarter so that they could conceal in the mountains [25]. In Hanqi's view, this troop could ambush Yuanhao's army when Yuanhao retreats. In order to achieve this goal, in his command, Han Qi added sternly: "...If you disobey these orders, even in merit, you will be executed [25]." Unfortunately, Ren Fu deviated from the planned route the very next day after his departure. He pursued the "retreating" Xia troops southward for about a day, all the way to the mouth of Haoshuichuan. At that moment, Ren fu's men and horses were all exhausted, as soon as they got there, they fell into the trap of Yuanhao. And after struggling for half a day, the Song army was annihilated, losing over 10,300 soldiers and many elite commanders of the northwest legion [27]. This devastating defeat, along with the battle of Sanchuankou(1040) and the battle of Dingchuanzhai, posted an abundance of weakness in the military aspect of Northern Song.

Here, the author shall discuss the problem from two perspectives.

Primarily, the overall low quality of the commanders and the low efficient chain of command [28]. Generally, generals during Ren Zong's reign were of relatively low quality. Most military officers lacked the ability to implement tactics consistently on the battlefield. Likewise, it was fairly common for them to underestimate their foes and fall in Yuanhao's traps, showing cowardice and impatience rather than prudence and perseverance. Numerous military cases could be implied to support this statement: such as Huang Dehe, the rearguard commander of the Battle Sanchuankou, betrayed his commander and fled toward the home front when he noticed his troops was ambushed. Causing Song's formation to collapse and led to the eventual failure [26]. Ren fu that was mentioned above is also a good example, alongside with Ge Huaimin, the commander of Battle Dingchuanzhai. Different from Haoshuichuan, which the troop ratio was about 1:6 [27][28], Ge Huaimin obtained a troop with more than 70,000 man [29], having little disadvantage compared with Yuanhao. Yet, refusing the advice of his superior Wang Yan and his subordinate Zhao Xun, which was to "hold the position...use weak troops to lure the enemy, and ambush them upon their arrival to achieve victory [30]." Instead, he decided to move straight forward and challenge the enemy at Dingchuanzhai, where he eventually died [31]. All these instances suggests that most commanders at the 1040s Sino-Tangut battlefield does not obtain the ability to imply the tactic of elastic defense or interdiction.

At the same time, there were some critical conflicts between the relatively prevalent system of literati commanding troops and the "traditional" local military management system when it came to resisting external enemies. Since the reign of Emperor Taizu, the frontier regions mostly established so-called Military Area Commanders (dubushu) as the highest leaders of an administrative district. Before the reign of Emperor Renzong, the position of Military Area Commander was still largely held by military officers, and its status was almost equivalent to that of the Civil Transport Commissioner in the civil official system [32]. However, under the rule of Emperor Renzong of Song, with the continuous development and growth of the ideology of "elevating civil culture while suppressing military influence" [33], the position of "Military Commissioner and Pacification Commissioner" (jinglüe anfushi) was gradually popularized in

the frontier regions, and this position was primarily held by civil officials. According to scholars' statistics, by the end of Emperor Renzong's reign, only 21% of the Military Commissioner and Pacification Commissioners in the five districts of Shan Xi (Hedong, Huanqing, Fuyan, Jingyuan, and Qinfeng) were of military background. At the same time, it became increasingly common for Military Commissioner and Pacification Commissioners to concurrently hold the position of Military Area Commander. For example, Fan Yong (981–1046) served as the Military Area Commander of the Fuyan District in 1038, concurrently holding the position of Military Commissioner and Pacification Commissioner for both the Fuyan and Huanqing District [34]. Xia Song (985–1051) also served during the same period as the Pacification Commissioner of the Jingyuan and Qinfeng Districts, concurrently holding the position of Military Area Commander of the Shan Xi District [35].

In contrast, military generals such as Liu Ping and Ge Huaimin could only serve as deputies to civil officials. From an institutional perspective, their power was indeed significantly diminished. As for the attitude and vigilance toward military generals in the upper echelons of society at the time, it goes without saying. In the eighth year of the Qingli era, when the emperor wanted to promote Di Qing, a military general with illustrious military achievements, a censor commented as follows: "The court has always regarded military men as rough and feared that they might not act with precision in critical situations. Therefore, civil officials were appointed to oversee and pacify, exclusively controlling military advances and halts... Thus, entrusting Di Qing alone is sufficient to handle matters, but I truly believe otherwise [36]." Under such a system of extreme vigilance and disdain for military generals, they indeed had little say in strategic deployments [37], while preparatory work before certain battles was assigned to literati who lacked military knowledge, such as Fan Yong during the Battle of Sanchuankou. History has shown that many such literati made erroneous choices at critical moments. For instance, in 1040, Fan Yong misjudged Li Yuanhao's strategic intentions and urgently ordered Liu Ping and Shi Sunyuan to reinforce Yanzhou [38], ultimately leading to this mobile force being ambushed by Li Yuanhao and nearly annihilated. Moreover, at the macro-strategic level, some civil officials serving as commanders also made significant errors. For example, in December 1040, Han Qi and Fan Zhongyan, two of the most outstanding literati serving in the northwestern border regions of the Jingyuan and Fuyan Districts, disagreed on the strategy for dealing with Western Xia. Both went to the imperial capital to convince the emperor on whether to take radical measures or to stand firm and fight steadily without engaging in large-scale battles [39]. However, they failed to convince each other or the emperor to adopt their tactics. After two months of struggle, the Battle of Haoshuichuan arrived, and they missed the ideal period to respond.

In summary, whether it was the military generals' ability to react on the battlefield, the adaptability of literati commanders, or the border military management system designed with the original intent of "preventing abuses," all proved inadequate to counter the incursions of the Tanguts.

Last but not least, the distribution and the overall quality of the soldiers also serve as an important factor in the failed attempts of applying elastic defense. According to the statistics provided by professor Wang Zengyu, there were 489 commands in Shanxi District and Hedong districts, assuming that the phenomenon of empty pay does not exist (though impossible), the total amount of soldiers would be 4,500 soldiers. Yet 150,000 of them gathered in 19 large cities or military camps, leaving only one third of the troops being available to assist the frontier or to instantly engage in field combat [40]. With only 90,000 or less troops and a battling frontier that is approximately 1200 kilometers in length [41], it's quite reasonable that the Northwest Legion had to face enemy ten times of their own size in their own country. Under this situation, apart from a few heavily fortified cities that were difficult to break through, the Western Xia forces could roam freely through the territory of Song. Zhang Jie, the commander of the

Northwest Legion during the 1090s once advocated that “Only when the combats troops are deployed outside can the garrison troops dare hold firm behind the walls” [42]. Obviously, Song in the 1040s could not achieve such matter.

Similarly, from an institutional perspective, army during the reign of Renzong also has its limitations. As mentioned earlier, one important function of the Song dynasty’s recruitment system was “to gather the fierce and bold men of the realm in order to protect the people [43].” In the early years of Emperor Taizu, only several tens of thousands of elites were carefully selected from the armies of the southern kingdoms. Even under such strict standards, the imperial guards remained sharp and formidable: Wang Quanbin destroyed Later Shu in just sixty-six days, and during Taizu’s reign the Khitan did not dare to launch any large-scale invasion. Later on, as many large-scaled military operations, such as the march of Yongxi, had ended in failure, Song began to adopt a more conservative approach towards military. Even before the League of Chan-yuan, what Song mainly conduct in the frontier was a massive defense system formed by waterways [44]. The system could effectively enhance the transport efficiency and lower the speed of Khitan’s calvary. Granted, it was an obvious act of defense, representing Song’s narrowing desire for the Yan yun provinces. As this tendency for peace instead of war continues to grow, lowering the standards for recruits was quite reasonable. Thus, the execution of this system deteriorated in later generations. In April 1000, during a famine in Tanzhou (modern Hunan), the court forcibly conscripted local refugees. They registered as many as ten thousand men at once—an obvious decline in standards [45]. A similar case occurred during Emperor Renzong’s Qingli era (1041–1048), when Chancellor Fu Bi recruited 4,500 men from among flood victims in Hebei, claiming them to be “elite troops [46].” With displaced peasants filling the ranks, a decline in combat effectiveness was inevitable. At the same time, as the warfare occurs and more soldiers were required, officers used the numbers of recruits as a metric for rewards. As such, many relatives of soldiers were enrolled in military services [47].

Consequently, the total amount of warriors during Renzong’s reign had reached about 1.25million [47]. The historian Fan Zhen, one of the most prominent figures of the eleventh century, observed in a memorial to Renzong: “Now in Hebei and Hedong we have kept over 300,000 soldiers for fifty years... and of these, half are old, weak, or cowardly. When facing the enemy, such men are the first to collapse [48].” Similarly, the official Lü Jingchu reported in the 1050s: “...more than half are sickly, aged, or faint-hearted... when fighting, they are the first to flee [49].” It was therefore widely recognized at the time that the quality of Song soldiers was fairly grotty. The *gengshu* system (rotation of garrisons) further reduced military effectiveness. Thus, comparing with the corruption of the Mu Bing system, the problem caused by this institution are foreseeable. Designed originally to prevent commanders from gaining too much local power, it brought great trouble at a time when border defense was most pressing. Long-distance marches often meant only suffering and death for soldiers, especially for guards relocated from the north to the south, where casualties could reach more than half [50]. More seriously, this system created a situation where “soldiers did not know their generals, and generals did not know their soldiers,” which fostered laziness and neglect in training: “officers and men indulge one another as if in play; if drill is even slightly frequent, resentment arises.” Sima Guang once lamented such disorder in a memorial [51]. Even the most elite units were affected. Tian Kuang, an official on the frontier, complained that members of the Dragon Guard cavalry could scarcely shoot arrows a few meters, and some could not even mount their horses [52]. In the eyes of foreign powers, such a fatigued army was naturally seen as weak. In one encounter between Song and Western Xia forces in 1042, the Song army fielded both the imperial *Wansheng* troops and the locally recruited *Huyi* militia. Strikingly, the majority of Western Xia forces attacked directly at the *Wansheng* unit, which shows how little confidence they had in the combat power of the Song imperial guards [53].

Beyond the military sphere, institutions such as recruitment and the *gengshu* system also imposed heavy burdens on Song society, especially its economy. According to the estimates of scholars Deng Guangming and Wang Shengduo, military expenses during Renzong's reign consumed around sixty to seventy percent of the state's total revenue; some even argue the proportion reached five-sixths [54][55]. Such a crushing burden produced only feeble troops and timid soldiers. For the Sung, facing two semi-nomadic states with well-developed political systems, the situation was extremely serious. Reform had already become an urgent necessity. Yet what form would such reform take, and when would it arrive?

4. Of the Reforms and the Uprise

'The time for grand accomplishments is at hand!' [56].

The above discussion is based on Wang Anshi's Memorial on a Century of Peace in Our Dynasty (Ben Chao Bai Nian Wu Shi Zha Zi). After the signing of the Song-Xia peace treaty in 1045, no large-scale wars broke out between the two states for more than twenty years. The aging Emperors Renzong and Yingzong showed little interest in launching attacks against the Western Xia. Both of which were relatively conservative rulers who preferred maintaining stability over pursuing painful structural reforms. This attitude was likely related to the growing influence of the scholar-official class and the gradual consolidation of the so-called "ancestral laws" (*zuzong zhi fa*), though this paper will not discuss the matter further [57].

During this period, many scholars and officials offered proposals to improve the military system, including Tian Kuang, Sima Guang, and Wang Yaochen. The most famous effort, however, was the Qingli New Policies initiated by Fan Zhongyan and Han Qi. The seventh of its ten reform clauses aimed to revive the Tang dynasty's *Fu Bing* (militia) system to strengthen the combat power of the Song army [58]. Yet none of these proposals were adopted. As a result, by 1067—the year Emperor Shenzong ascended the throne—the situation on the frontier remained dire. At that time, pacifist ideas dominated political discourse. When the nineteen-year-old Emperor Shenzong began his reign, he often heard opinions such as that of Fu Bi, who advised him in 1067: "Your Majesty has only recently taken the throne; you should spread virtue and benevolence. May the realm speak of no wars for twenty years." Influenced by Confucian ideals, many scholar-officials showed little enthusiasm for territorial expansion. Yet Shenzong himself was a vigorous and ambitious ruler, deeply dissatisfied with the international situation. Ministers like Wang Anshi—who aspired to "restore the lost frontiers of the Han and Tang" [59]—naturally attracted his attention. In the same year Wang submitted his Memorial, 1068, he was promoted to *Can zhizhengshi* (Vice Chancellor). Thus began the far-reaching New Policies (*Xin Fa*), one of the most influential and long-lasting reforms in Chinese history, which profoundly reshaped the military institutions of the late Northern Song.

To realize his dream of recovering lost territory, Wang Anshi pursued two major strategies. First, he sought to "cut off the right arm of the Western Xia" by occupying thousands of *li* of land in what are now Gansu and eastern Qinghai, subduing or eliminating the local tribal groups there [60]. On this reclaimed land, he established a new administrative unit, the *Xihe District* (*Xihe Lu*), and captured Lanzhou in a major military campaign [61]. This effectively secured the Song's rear for future expeditions against the Western Xia and threatened its western frontier.

The second and more enduring effort—our present focus—was a series of institutional reforms designed to strengthen the army's combat effectiveness, improve the quality of its officers, and enhance coordination between commanders and soldiers. The first measure taken was the abolition of the *gengshu* (rotation of garrisons) system, followed by several innovative initiatives. Among them, the *Baojia* system was the earliest to be implemented. It was officially promulgated in the twelfth month of the third year of the Xining era (1070). The Extended Continuation to the Comprehensive Mirror preserves the original edict, which reads in part:

“Ten households shall form one bao; from among them, one with ability and energy shall be chosen as baozhang (head of the bao). Fifty households shall form one large bao, likewise selecting the most capable and wealthy as leader. Ten large bao shall form one du bao, with two men of courage and good conduct chosen as chief and deputy officers. Households with two or more able-bodied men shall provide bao soldiers; those with additional strong and skillful members may also be attached to the bao. Aside from prohibited weapons, bows and arrows may be kept privately for martial training. Each large bao shall assign five men nightly for patrol. If robbers appear, drums shall sound and neighboring bao shall come to the rescue. Those who capture criminals shall receive rewards, while households concealing crimes such as robbery, arson, or murder shall be punished according to the collective responsibility law [62].”

Essentially, the Baojia system combined elements of local policing with the Tang Fu Bing model. In the north, it emphasized military organization; in the south, social control [63]. Peasants were placed within a vast system of collective responsibility—those who failed to report crimes by their neighbors faced severe punishment. Meanwhile, these men received basic training, including archery and martial exercises, granting them limited combat ability. Because they farmed in peacetime and supported themselves, the government could reduce the fiscal burden of maintaining large standing armies.

Through this design, Wang Anshi hoped gradually to replace the costly mercenary recruitment system (Mu Bing) and thus restore fiscal balance. Unfortunately, due to interruptions and resistance to the reform, his goals were never fully achieved. By the ninth year of Xining (1076), however, the Baojia system had been extended nationwide, covering nearly seven million people, with about 560,000 receiving formal military training [64]. This number grew further during the campaigns of the 1090s. Undeniably, the system played a major role in supplementing the Song’s field forces. According to historian Li Huazui, during the Five-District Campaign against Western Xia in 1081, the Song army mobilized roughly 310,000 troops [65]—several times the size of the field army during the Qingli era. For the first time in decades, the Song launched an offensive war beyond its borders.

At the same time, the quality of troops trained under the Baojia system remained relatively high. Chancellor Zhang Dun reported to Emperor Zhezong in 1095: “When the late emperor first implemented the Baojia system, seventy thousand men were enrolled in the capital and three other districts. Though public opinion was noisy, once training began, their skill surpassed that of the regular troops [67].” In the same year, Zeng Bu, the vice prime minister, also remarked: “During the Xining years, when I served in the Ministry of Revenue, the Baojia soldiers summoned from the counties showed great proficiency in their exercises [66].” These accounts suggest that Baojia training did strengthen the army’s capabilities, marking a notable improvement over Wang Anshi’s earlier lament that “those recruited under the old system are mostly lazy, deceitful, and unmotivated [67].”

Of course, the Baojia law also imposed heavy burdens on the peasantry. To avoid the fatigue of drills and inspections, many peasants fled or even mutilated themselves—an undeniable negative consequence [68]. Nevertheless, in terms of military training and mobilization, the Baojia system achieved measurable success.

Another major reform under Emperor Shenzong aimed at improving both troop quality and command coordination was the Jiangbing system (“Training the Officers and Soldiers”). As discussed earlier, one of the greatest weaknesses of the Song army lay in the lack of discipline and cooperation between officers and men. The reform thus became imperative. If the Baojia system addressed the quantitative side—expanding the number of trained troops—then the Jiangbing system improved quality, and the two complemented each other.

The origins of Jiangbing training can be traced back to Fan Zhongyan’s tenure as commander in Fu yan District, where he, troubled by the weakness of his troops, selected several officers and

a portion of soldiers for intensive instruction. Once trained, these men were appointed as instructors (jiaotou) to train others—about twenty thousand field soldiers in total [69]. Within a year, significant results were observed, and records note that “they all became skilled troops [70].” During Shenzong’s reign, Cai Ting, the military commissioner of Jingyuan District, adopted similar methods [71]. In 1074, the emperor formally endorsed the practice, establishing the Jiangbing system and extending it nationwide. September of the same year, this policy was implemented to four districts near Khitan and five districts near the Tanguts. In 1078, according to the statistics provided by professor Wang Zengyu, there were approximately 30 “Jiang” [72], including 320,000 elite soldiers, archers and foreign troops. Warriors integrated into the new military organization continued to increase in the following years. Due to space limitations, only one example shall be given: in 1075, the Jingyuan district has five Jiang, and until 1079, there were eleven Jiang in this district [73]. The establishment of Jiang Bing Fa is a crucial event in the military institution history of the Song Dynasty, as it represents the transformations of the military organization. The organization changed from Ying Bing to Dui Bing [74]. As mentioned above, the main purpose of the old organization was to prevent rebellions from within, yet the new Jiang Bing system was aiming at defeating the enemies outside the frontier. Surely there shall be many differences between these two systems. Primarily, there emerges a tighter relationship between a commander and his warriors, unlike the Geng Shu System that requires the soldiers and commanders to separate and recombine in every three years [75], the Jiang Bing System allows commanders to maintain close bonds with its troops. This act had certainly increased the strength of the troops. Also, unlike the imperial guards that mainly stay in the capital and the garrison troops that stays far behind the frontier, Dui Bing always stay close to the battle field, making sure that “the soldiers know their commanders, and the commander knows his soldiers” [76]. Overall, both the collaboration ability and the quality of the army had been greatly enhanced.

5. The Endgame

“The Land of Songs and Joy, Now Claimed by the Han” [77].

In the 1090s, as the young Emperor Zhezong took personal control of the government, the Song army once again turned its gaze westward toward its long-standing rival, the Western Xia. Yet, compared to Emperor Renzong’s passive defense and Emperor Shenzong’s reckless offensives during the Yuanfeng era, Zhezong and his ministers adopted a more measured—but still assertive—approach: the strategy of fortress construction (*jinzhu baozhai*).

This tactic, first developed by Fan Zhongyan, aimed to wear down the Western Xia by gradually building fortresses deeper and deeper into their frontier, thereby eroding their power and territory over time. The cornerstone of this strategy was the construction of Pingxia Cheng.

In 1097, Zhang Jie, the Military Commissioner of Jingyuan Circuit, “marched out along the Hulu River and built two fortresses at the mouth of the Shimen Gorge and on the southern bank of the Haoshui River [78],”—these being Pingxia City and Lingping Fort. Their positions were crucial: northward, they threatened the Western Xia capital, Xingqing [79]; northwestward, they menaced the key Western Xia forward base at Tiandu Mountain [80]; westward, they connected with the fortifications of Xihe Circuit, forming a powerful defensive line. If both strongholds could be secured, the Song would gain a significant strategic advantage.

The Tangut forces, however, were fully aware of this plan. As the Song army began construction, over 100,000 Tangut troops launched more than ten fierce assaults [81] on the Song formation. Zhang Jie later recalled that the situation “nearly turned into another Yongle disaster.” Fortunately, both Zhang and his subordinate commander, Zhong Pu, had prepared meticulously. Zhong even had detailed maps drawn before the campaign began [82]. With around 100,000 troops and 10,000 [83] laborers, the Song forces managed to complete the

fortifications despite losing roughly 3,000 men. Pingxia City now stood as a Damoclean sword hanging over the Western Xia — something the Tangut regent, Empress Dowager Liang, could never tolerate.

The Siege of 1098

In the summer of 1098, Song commanders received intelligence from a Tangut defector warning of a large-scale assault within months. The report was only partially believed by the central government, but the Bureau of Military Affairs still ordered full alert along the frontier, commanding reinforcements from all nearby circuits to move toward Pingxia. The directive also emphasized “elastic defense” — a flexible strategy of interception and harassment:

“Wherever the enemy approaches through narrow passes, troops should ambush and strike from the flanks, cutting off supply trains and baggage; if an opportunity arises, they must act swiftly [84].”

This coordination showed remarkable improvement in the communication between central and local command compared to earlier reigns.

By September, intelligence from the front reported that the Western Xia had mobilized over 1,500,000 troops north of Tiandu Mountain. Within weeks, 300,000 Tangut soldiers had surrounded six Song fortresses [85], including Pingxia City itself. Based on multiple sources and Professor Zeng Ruilong’s research, Pingxia had about 30,000 defenders, though 10,000 had been sent to nearby positions. Huan Qing District had sent about 10,000 men, including 3000 cavalries. There were also 10,000 people from Qin Feng District, and if the reinforcements coming from Xihe is similar to the battle of 1097, reinforcements from neighboring districts likely brought the Song’s total front-line strength to 60,000–70,000 men [86][87]—still far fewer than the Tangut host.

Inside the city, however, was Guo Cheng, one of the most capable commanders of his generation [88]. Outside, elite Song troops stood ready to engage. Beyond Jing Yuan District, Zhang’s colleagues were ready, too. Confident in his plans, Zhang Jie declared:

“If the enemy comes, they will fall into my design [89].”

The Tangut siege began soon after. For thirteen days and nights [90], waves of Tangut assaults crashed against Pingxia’s walls. Chronicles record that “fire and stones filled the air without pause,” [91] the attack was so fierce that “the city was about to fall”. The attackers used siege towers, battering rams, sappers, and earthworks [92], yet Guo Cheng’s defense held firm [93]. The Song countered with *shenbi bows* and rolling stones, inflicting heavy casualties. Though newly built, Pingxia endured the storm.

The Song commanders knew well the limits of frontier warfare [94].¹⁰⁰ Once hostilities began, the five military regions of Shaanxi could barely support one another, and the Tanguts often fielded their entire national army. Thus, the Song adopted the tactic of “shallow raids”—counterstriking across the border whenever the Tangut army was fully committed elsewhere, forcing them to retreat.

In October, the Xihe Circuit’s commander Wang Min led a raid deep into Tangut territory, destroying their base at Zhuoluo Right Division. His troops “killed over 1,300, captured 300, and seized 25,000 head of livestock, burning hundreds of miles of camps [94].” According to the memoir of Lv Huiqin [95], similarly, the Fuyan Districts dispatched four “Jiang” [96] (around 20,000 men [97]) for another incursion. Since Fu Yan did not assist Pingxia City, this attack should be disastrous for the Tanguts. These raids devastated the Tangut frontier, and morale collapsed— “upon hearing of these attacks, the Tangut soldiers lost their will to fight and lifted the siege of Pingxia [98].”

On the main battlefield, the Tangut army, weakened and short on supplies due to the Song’s scorched-earth policy, began to falter. A violent storm destroyed many of their siege machines, and by mid-November they were forced to retreat. As they withdrew, a Song ambush force

under Wang En and Zhong Pu struck from the rear, inflicting additional losses [99]. Though Tangut sources are scarce, and we could not determine the exact amounts of losses for Western Xia in this massive warfare. Yet, according to the Empress Dowager “slashed her own face in grief and shame,” [100] and “after Pingxia, the Tanguts could no longer muster their armies [101].” We could indeed recognize the enemy’s exhaustion, Zhang Jie must have noticed it as well, as he swiftly launched a follow-up offensive. He ordered Guo Cheng and Zhe Keshi to lead 10,000 cavalry in six columns against the Tiandu Mountain base, capturing two Tangut generals (Weiming Alai and Mole Dobu) along with 3,000 subordinates [102]. Then, commanding more than 80,000 men [103], the Song army began a massive fortress-building operation across the Hengshan Mountains, linking the Xihe and Jingyuan defenses—some 750 kilometers of fortified line completed by April 1099, and taking over the Tian Du Mountain [104]. As Chancellor Zeng Bu proudly proclaimed:

“Now that Tiandu and Hengshan are ours, the desert is our border; the enemy can no longer gather troops or supplies to threaten us [105].”

An intriguing anecdote recorded in *Guo Cheng’s Biography* illustrates the Song commanders’ maturity. During the siege, a dispute arose among Wang En’s reserve troops. One officer, Guo Zude, proposed charging out to rescue the city. But Zhong Pu disagreed, saying:

“It would be useless. We refrain from fighting not out of fear, but because it would do great harm. If we attack and lose, the enemy will display our captives to the walls, and the garrison’s morale will collapse. Let us wait. As long as Guo Cheng holds, the city will not fall [106].”

After the siege, Guo Cheng himself agreed with Zhong’s judgment. This episode perfectly embodies the concept of elastic defense: relying on fortifications to wear down the enemy, and striking only when the retreat begins. While before the enemy retreats, what reinforcements should do is to standoff with the enemy and reassure the colleagues who were defending the cities from the foes. Which is similar to what Zhang Jie mentioned “Only when the combat troops are deployed outside can the garrisons dare hold firm behind the walls”[107]. More importantly, it shows the Song generals’ sophisticated grasp of morale and coordination—far beyond the abilities of their mid-11th-century predecessors. The Battle of Pingxia stands as a turning point in the Song–Xia wars, showcasing the fruits of decades of military reform. Despite operating in harsh terrain, the five frontier districts coordinated three major fortress campaigns between 1097 and 1099 [108] —proof of vastly improved communication and logistical systems. While civil officials still dominated overall command, field generals now had greater autonomy. The Pingxia campaign was jointly planned by the civil administrator Zhang Jie and the military commander [109] Zhong Pu—a rare balance between bureaucratic strategy and battlefield expertise. Equally notable was the central government’s restraint. Emperor Zhe Zong and his chancellors, Zeng Bu and Zhang Dun, provided broad strategic goals but refrained from micromanaging tactics—a sharp contrast with earlier reigns.

By the end of the decade, the northwest army had transformed. Generals like Zhe Keshi, Zhong Pu, Miao Lü, Guo Cheng, and Gao Yongnian. Fortunately, the armies led by these rising stars were themselves worthy of being called elite forces. Tempered by decades of reform and more than fifty years of relentless warfare, the northwestern corps of the Northern Song had evolved into the empire’s most formidable military power.

They could maintain formation and deliver devastating counterattacks even when facing enemies several times their size—foes who were no less well-equipped. This rare level of discipline and combat effectiveness had already been demonstrated in multiple engagements: the Battle of Lanzhou (1083), the First Battle of Pingxia (1097), and the Second Battle of Pingxia (1098) among others.

A court confident enough to grant its frontier commanders real autonomy; a cadre of brilliant strategists; a generation of capable field generals; a disciplined and battle-hardened army; and

a flexible, efficient command structure—with these elements finally in place, the Song military had at last met all the conditions necessary to carry out true elastic defense.

After years of continuous effort, they achieved what Fan Zhongyan and Wang Yaochen had once envisioned: to seize control of the Hengshan region, shift from passivity to initiative, and build an impregnable defensive line anchored in geography itself. From that moment on, Western Xia—the long-standing scourge of the Northern Song—ceased to pose any real threat to the realm of the Han.

From this point onward, Western Xia ceased to pose a major threat to the Song.

6. Conclusion

In sum, following the scholarly framework laid out by Zeng Ruilong in *Expanding the Northwestern Frontier*, this paper seeks to illustrate the crucial influence of military institutions—particularly those related to the quality of troops and the command system—on the implementation of concrete battlefield tactics.

Through two case studies—the Battle of Haoshuichuan (1041) and the Battle of Pingxia (1098)—the author demonstrates how, when facing the same adversary and similar terrain, the Song army exhibited drastically different performances before and after institutional reform. These examples further substantiate the paper's central argument regarding the transformative power of organizational change in warfare.

From an academic perspective, although Zeng Ruilong's work was completed over two decades ago, its unique approach—rare within the field of Chinese military historiography—has scarcely been reflected in more recent research of the past decade. This paper, therefore, offers a modest institutional-history-based supplement to the study of “grand strategy” in the context of ancient Chinese warfare. It is my hope that it might inspire colleagues in the West to further explore this still-vast and promising field.

From a contemporary standpoint, it is well known that the Song dynasty was an era of Neo-Confucian revival, producing a remarkable generation of thinkers. One of the defining ideas of Northern Song Confucian political culture was the doctrine of pacifism—the belief that expansion into so-called “barbarian territories” was both unnecessary and undesirable, as the costs of conquest far outweighed any potential gain. Thus, all external military ventures were often deemed futile.

Yet, as this study has shown, the mid- to late Northern Song period defied that orthodoxy. The long-held aspiration of Wang Anshi and Emperor Shenzong was to “restore the lost frontiers of the Han and Tang.” Inevitably, this vision could not ignore the Sixteen Prefectures of Yanyun. According to Wang Shao's *Strategy for Pacifying the Rong (Ping Rong Ce)*, “To reclaim Yanyun, one must first subdue Western Xia; to subdue Western Xia, one must first secure the Hehuang region” (modern southeastern Qinghai).

Historically, however, Hehuang had only been firmly under Han control for a few decades at the height of the Han and Tang dynasties. To call it “old territory” was thus somewhat misleading. Nevertheless, the Song court was willing to devote decades to its conquest purely for strategic purposes. This fervent longing for ancestral lands was powerful enough to make Wang Anshi and his peers abandon deeply rooted Confucian ideals. Professor Nicolas Tackett would describe this as some kind of “proto-nationalism” in Medieval China, and is precisely this phenomenon that warrants further reflection—and it is why I believe that the study of Song–Xia military history carries broader, even universal significance. Through examining the northwestern expansion campaigns under Shenzong and Zhezong, we gain deeper insight into the evolving psyche of the Chinese civilization, and, perhaps, foster a better mutual understanding between the modern West and China.

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