# Cao Cao Doc

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The Hero of Chaos (Historical Cao Cao)

Note: This document draws from multiple sources, but it should not be treated as a fully verified historical source. It is intended more as an analysis. Also, please avoid using this document to compare historical figures with fictional ones; I would prefer it to remain within History SCD. If you have any questions, my Discord is: @azraelyc, thanks for reading (:

## Early Life

Cao Cao wrote poetry and was considered among the earliest and formative examples of the Jian'an style. Cao Cao's poetry was described as "unpretentious yet profound," and notably, he would compose odes and set them to music.

*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry_of_Cao_Cao*

**(Verbal Comprehension>Crystallized Intelligence)**

Cao Cao was educated through private tutors rather than the imperial university, which at the time was considered ineffective. This meant he received a more advanced education than most people in the Han Dynasty. Being taught privately allowed for tailored, high-level instruction, typically covering the Confucian classics, political theory, as well as rhetoric and administrative skills. At age 20, Cao Cao received a key nomination, Filial and Incorrupt (孝廉).

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 23.*

**(Crystallized Intelligence)**

Chen Shou actually portrays Cao Cao as “clever and calculating, but also violent and immoral… people thought little of him.” This is notable because Chen Shou served the rival state of Shu Han, so he had little incentive to speak favorably of Cao Cao, yet he still acknowledged these qualities.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 30.*

**(Fluid Intelligence)**

Cao Cao behaved recklessly in his youth, engaging in things like falconry and dog racing, despite being a Filial and incorrupt . His uncle tried to expose him, but Cao Cao seemed able to lie convincingly and escape consequences, discrediting the accusations against him.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 29.*

**(Sophistry>Acting Skills)**

An interesting anecdote, preserved in the anthology Shishuo xinyu, tells how Cao Cao and Yuan Shao raided a wedding party. Cao Cao broke into the bride’s tent, threatened her with a sword and sexually assaulted her. The two men then fled but then Cao Cao called out “Here’s the villain!” so that the pursuers turned on Yuan Shao; he barely escaped, torn and bleeding, while Cao Cao left unscathed.

*Note: Though this might be fake.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 31.*

**(Fabrication)**

His friend Wang Jun is said to have observed that Yuan Shao and Yuan Shu would cause trouble throughout the world, and Cao Cao was the only one capable of restoring order

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 31.*

**(Leadership)**

Cao Cao showed a strong interest in military theory and studied it closely. He even wrote on the subject, including *Jieyao* 接要 (“Summary of the Essentials”), which suggests he was comparing different texts, extracting core principles, and organizing them systematically.

He also produced a commentary on the *Sunzi Bingfa*, a work that was already regarded as a major classic. His commentary remains part of the traditional canon.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, pp 32-33.*

**(Crystallized Intelligence)**

# Collapse of the Han Dynasty



***Context: He Jin and the Empress Dowager conspired to eliminate the eunuchs at Yuan Shao's urging. This was largely driven by widespread resentment toward eunuchs among officials and noble families, who viewed them as a corrupt and destabilizing force that had wielded excessive influence at court for far too long.***

Cao Cao, however, pushed back against the idea of a total purge. While he acknowledged that some eunuchs were indeed corrupt, he believed a full-scale purge was unnecessary and dangerous. His position was that only the most egregious offenders should be removed, not the entire class. A total elimination would provoke an aggressive backlash. He also cautioned against inviting regional warlords to assist with the purge, arguing that bringing in outside military forces was an unnecessary risk that could destabilize the state. Worse, involving outsiders would likely cause the plan to leak.

As it turned out, Cao Cao's predictions proved accurate on every count. The eunuchs discovered the conspiracy and responded with hostility. He Jin was assassinated before he could carry out his plan. And when the regional warlords were summoned anyway, one of them, Dong Zhuo, marched his army into the capital and seized power for himself, plunging the Han dynasty into chaos.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, þ 45.*

*Chen Shou and Pei Songzhi, Sanguozhi 429, 1.5.*

**(Prediction>Abductive Reasoning>Risk Calculations>Inductive Reasoning)**

Dong Zhuo appointed Cao Cao as Colonel of Resolute Cavalry, indicating that he saw him as a capable figure. However, Cao Cao refused to become involved with Dong Zhuo's regime. He viewed Dong Zhuo and his followers as brutal and therefore unreliable, and likely did not want to place himself under the control of someone with that character. As a result, he left the capital under a false identity and fled east by back roads.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 48.*

**(Emotional Understanding, Trap Evasion)**

Cao Cao reaches Chenliu, where anti-Dong Zhuo forces are gathering. He then sells family property to raise troops, sought help from people like Wei Zi, and eventually gathers about five thousand men. Then he joins the coalition against Dong Zhuo.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, pp 49-50.*

During the coalition campaign against Dong Zhuo in 190–191 CE, Yuan Shao proposed: elevating Liu Yu, a member of the imperial clan serving as Governor of You Province, to the position of a rival emperor, essentially to counter Emperor Xian, who remained under Dong Zhuo's thumb in Chang'an.

Cao Cao pushed back against this. For him, Emperor Xian, whatever his circumstances, was still the biological son of Emperor Ling and therefore the lawful ruler of Han. The coalition fighting Dong Zhuo derived its moral authority precisely from the claim that it was defending the legitimate Han order against a usurper. Installing a second emperor would shatter that justification entirely, the coalition would no longer look like loyalists rescuing a captive ruler, but rather like yet another faction exploiting the chaos for its own ends, no different from Dong Zhuo himself. It would hand their enemies a powerful argument and fracture the already fragile unity of the alliance.

*There was also a deeper suspicion at work. From Yuan Shao's argument, it appears that Cao Cao had recognized that Yuan Shao's proposal was less about solving a political problem and more about personal leverage, thus ambition; a compliant emperor of Yuan Shao's own choosing would give him a tool for dominating the coalition and eventually the court itself.*

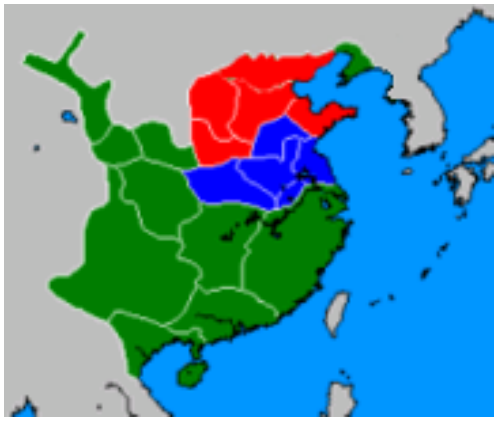
*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, pp 57-58.*

**(Abductive Reasoning>Deductive Reasoning>STP>Emotional Perception)**

***Note: In the end, Cao Cao's suspicion on Yuan Shao proved, the coalition eventually collapsed as its factions turned on one another, with Yuan Shao emerging as the most dominant.***

**(Prediction)**

# Consolidation Era (The Rise of Cao Cao)



**Black Mountain Campaign**

***Context: When Cao Cao was appointed as Administrator of Dong Commandery, he faced an immediate crisis: relentless raids from the Black Mountain bandits, a force tens of thousands strong and hardened by years of insurgency. At this stage, Cao Cao was still a minor warlord, with a fragile power base. One of the bandit leaders, Poison Yu, launched a raid directly against Dongwuyang, Cao Cao's capital.***

Many assumed Cao Cao would rush to its defense. Instead, he refused to take the bait. Rather than defending, he drove his forces rapidly into the Taihang Mountains to strike the enemy's home bases. Cao Cao thus compels Poison Yu to abandon his offensive and return to his base, but it was late, when he finally arrived Cao Cao not had defeated various Black Mountain groups, but also the Xiongnu chieftain Yufuluo at Neihuang in the south of Wei commandery

*Dongwuyang was saved without a siege, and the Black Mountain bandits were expelled from Dong Commandery.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 62.*

**(Indirect Manipulation>Abusing Insecurities)**

***Context: Another major threat appears, which are Remnants of the Yellow Turban Rebellion, a massive bandit army (possibly hundreds of thousands).***

While out on a scouting mission, he unexpectedly stumbled into the enemy's main camp. With only a 1000 men, far too few for such a force, he was defeated. Yet the setback brought a crucial advantage: intelligence. From Bao Xin, who would later fall in battle, Cao Cao learned

that although the rebels were vast in number, they were desperately under-supplied, surviving only through plunder. Bao Xin advised him to adopt a defensive strategy.

Cao Cao took this advice to heart. After the defeat, he reorganized his forces by caring for his men to build morale, instituting strict discipline through clear rewards and punishments, and refusing large direct clashes. Instead, he focused on ambushes, surprise strikes, and relentless day-and-night skirmishes. This war of attrition steadily broke the Yellow Turbans' strength. In time, the rebels collapsed. Cao Cao pursued them into Jibei, and in the winter of 192/193, he secured their mass surrender: 300,000 soldiers and 700,000 dependents. From these he selected the best fighters to form a permanent unit, the famed Qingzhou Troops, who would become the backbone of his armies.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, pp 64-66.*

**(Abusing Insecurities>Strategy Building>Info Gathering)**

After repeated defeats, the Yellow Turban remnants were worn down and desperate. Cao Cao offered what they lacked: safety, legitimacy, and stable livelihood, far preferable to their endless cycle of plunder. The result was a mass submission, with the rebels reorganized into the Qingzhou Troops, now serving directly under his command.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 66.*

**(Mass Manipulation)**

***Context: With a strengthened army and a stable base of manpower, Cao Cao transitioned from survival to expansion. His growing power now allowed him to act offensively, where personal grievances and political opportunity could be used to justify broader campaigns.***

After Tao Qian was implicated in the death of his father, Cao Cao seized the opportunity to launch an invasion.

*In truth, the killing had been carried out by an officer named Zhang Kai, who then fled south of the Huai, but Cao Cao used the event as a pretext for "vengeance."*

Playing this role, he struck into Tao Qian's Xu Province, bypassing towns and driving straight into the heart of enemy territory. His offensive was ruthless and rapid. He stormed ten cities, crushed Tao Qian's army at Pengcheng, and forced Tao Qian to retreat to his capital. Cao Cao pressed forward mercilessly, leaving devastation in his wake, towns emptied, inhabitants slaughtered, and even animals wiped out. Although he soon withdrew to Yan Province without completing the conquest, Xu was left shattered. Within weeks, Cao Cao returned and renewed

his assault, even besieging Tan, Tao Qian's capital. Victory was nearly within reach, but events at home derailed the campaign. His trusted lieutenant Chen Gong and old ally Zhang Miao turned against him, appalled by the scale of his massacres, and betrayed him. The betrayal forced him to abandon the offensive, and it also drew Lü Bu into the conflict as a new enemy.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 72.*

**(Fabrication>Demoralization)**

*In late 195, the fifteen-year-old Emperor Xian of Han fled in desperation. As in his earlier arguments over legitimacy with Yuan Shao, this shows that Cao Cao understood that whoever controlled the emperor would gain immense political legitimacy. His initial efforts to bring the emperor under his influence failed, as Xian was protected by Yang Feng, Dong Cheng, and Han Xian. However, Cao Cao eventually prevailed through the strategy of Dong Zhao, who engineered a separation between the emperor and his escorts and arranged their ambush and elimination. From that point onward, the emperor became Cao Cao's puppet, ruler in name, but captive in reality. Installed as a nominal sovereign, he served as a tool of Cao Cao's authority.*

**(Influence Building)**

Cao Cao's tuntian system resettled refugees, surrendered bandits, and displaced peasants onto abandoned land, where they farmed with state-provided oxen and tools while also defending themselves. Instead of paying taxes like in the old Han system, they handed over a share of their harvest (50–60%) directly to the government, bypassing landlords and corrupt officials. This gave people stability, tied them personally to Cao Cao's regime, and turned wastelands back into productive farmland. At the same time, it provided a steady, reliable food supply for his armies, the lifeblood of war. In effect, Cao Cao became the largest landholder in northern China, with the people as his tenants. It was a nice move because he solved famine, rebuilt war-torn territory, created loyal subjects, and secured military logistics all at once.

**(Leadership>Influence Building)**

## Peripheral Isolation Strategy

*Context: As previously mentioned, Cao Cao was at this moment consolidating power by leveraging Emperor Xian as a source of political legitimacy. What is easy to overlook, however, is that from the very beginning, as far back as his Black Mountain campaign, Cao Cao was in an environment completely hemmed in by rival powers, each threatening him from a different direction. He was not dealing with a single enemy but with multiple competing warlords. This reality made his strategy far more fragile and complex than it might appear on the surface. Using Emperor Xian as a political*

*instrument could only work if every surrounding threat was kept in check, one unchecked rival could unravel everything. Yet directly confronting each enemy through open warfare was neither practical nor efficient given his resources. So rather than attempting to defeat his rivals one by one on the battlefield, Cao Cao develops a Strategy, a more subtle one, where he sought to keep each threat neutralized, occupied elsewhere, turned against one another, or simply kept at a distance, buying him the time and stability needed to quietly consolidate his own power base.*

**1. Yuan Shu**

Yuan Shu had already begun to undermine his own position through a series of blunders, like when he tried to declare himself as emperor. This act ruined his legitimacy in the eyes of everyone. Cao Cao thus did not need to defeat this enemy, just make sure he falls and remains isolated. Thus Cao Cao worked to cut off any potential support. He formally recognized Sun Ce's authority under the Han banner, and then maneuvered Lü Bu away from him, ensuring that Yuan Shu would face his eventual downfall.

**2. Lü Bu**

Lü Bu was a dangerous threat to confront head-on. Cao Cao thus does 3 things here.

1. He showed Lü Bu with prestigious titles and honorifics to keep him placated, while quietly denying him anything that would translate into real political or territorial power, like for example the governorship of Xu, which was dangled but never granted.
2. Cao Cao also puts Liu Bei into position as a proxy adversary, forcing Lü Bu to drain his resources fighting yet another rival rather than turning his attention toward Cao Cao himself.
3. Cao Cao lastly monitors Lü Bu's camp, by planting informants, ensuring he was never caught off guard.

**3. Sun Ce**

Sun Ce had previously been aligned with Yuan Shu as mentioned before, but Cao Cao moved to bring him into his own fold. He granted Sun Ce official titles and even sealed the relationship through a marriage alliance, giving him the prestige of being recognized as a Han general. But Cao Cao also simultaneously installed his own loyalist, Chen Yu, as administrator in the heart of Sun Ce's own territory, a quiet but deliberate move to undercut his authority from within. This forced Sun Ce to expend energy proving his worth and fighting to assert control over land he nominally already held, keeping him too preoccupied with his own affairs to pose any serious threat to Cao Cao.

**4. Liu Bei**

Though comparatively weaker at this stage, Liu Bei occupied a useful strategic position. His reputation as a loyalist of the Han made him politically valuable, and his forces, once reinforced, could be directed toward contested regions. By appointing him to governorship and supplying him with troops, Cao Cao enabled Liu Bei to re-establish himself in Pei, where he functioned as a counterweight to Lü Bu.

**5. Yuan Shao**

Lastly, Cao Cao's most formidable opponent, Yuan Shao. However, his attention was divided by ongoing operations against Gongsun Zan in the north, and he hesitated to engage immediately. Cao Cao avoided confrontation, even humbling himself by lowering his own rank to placate him. This bought him precious time to consolidate Xu and eliminate the lesser threats first.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, pp 102-117.*

**(Strategy Fortitude>Strategy Building>Strategy Logistics>Planning Coverage>Planning Versatility>Indirect Manipulation>Bluffing>Strategy Complexity>Misdirection)**

***Context: There came a moment when, despite his earlier gains, Cao Cao was in dire peril. His crushing defeat against Zhang Xiu had left him exposed, and his advisers Guo Jia and Xun Yu warned him of the danger: if Yuan Shao in the north and Lü Bu in the east ever combined their forces, Cao Cao would be caught between them and annihilated. War had not started yet, but his strategist informed Cao Cao the position he was in, and how it could affect him later on, if the situation turned dire.***

## Cao Cao's Strategy: Isolate and Destroy Lü Bu

Cao Cao's objective therefore would be to eliminate Lü Bu before any alliance with Yuan Shao could be forged, even if it was not against him. After all, Yuan Shao was still not a threat, and he was too busy in the north. But Lü Bu could not simply be charged directly (As mentioned before, he was much stronger than Cao Cao.) Thus Cao Cao reasoned that he first had to be isolated, stripped of any potential support, and left with nowhere to turn. To accomplish this, Cao Cao embarked on a campaign to seal every flank and neutralize every threat before making his final move.

**Cao Cao's Planning Coverage:**

1. **Diplomatically:** To the west, Cao Cao deployed diplomacy rather than war. He sent Zhong Yao to negotiate with the frontier warlords, and through careful political maneuvering, extracted their sons as hostages, effectively buying their loyalty, or at

least their neutrality, and ensuring they would not cause trouble while his attention was directed elsewhere.

2. **Through War:** In the south however, he turned on Yuan Shu, whose domain was already decaying from internal rot. Cao Cao delivered a sharp, decisive blow, routing his forces and driving him back across the Huai River. Yuan Shu never recovered, fading into irrelevance and posing no further threat.

But the south was not entirely clean. Zhang Xiu, the man who had previously humiliated Cao Cao in battle, still held Nanyang, and this could not be left unresolved. Unlike the other fronts, this one could not be settled through diplomacy or a single sharp strike. It had to be fought through. Cao Cao first seized Wan city, pushing Liu Biao's supporting forces back to the Han River and severing that connection. He then pressed the siege against Zhang Xiu at Rang. But the situation deteriorated rapidly when Liu Biao's reinforcements arrived, catching Cao Cao compressed between two hostile armies with no clean line of escape.

**The Battle at Anzhong (198):**

Rather than panicking or doubling down on a failing position, he improvised a small plan. He broke off the siege and retreated, but as the pursuing armies chased him, they ran straight into ambushes he had seeded along the road bleeding the enemy until they finally cornered him. And then finally, when he found himself cornered on what he himself described as a "death ground", terrain with no avenue of withdrawal he stopped and turned to fight. This was his plan all along, knowing his men had no escape in that position, he weaponized that desperation, transforming the absence of hope into raw, savage fighting courage. A psychological trick that Han Xin famously did at Battle of Jingxing, where fighting with one's back to the river left soldiers no choice but to win. The gamble paid off. Cao Cao reversed the situation entirely, inflicted severe casualties, and stabilized the front.

The result was not a sweeping conquest, but it didn't need to be. Zhang Xiu retreated into a defensive posture, Liu Biao withdrew from open engagement, and Nanyang was effectively neutralized. All his flanks were now secure. The stage was set for the second Phase.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, pp 106-108.*

**(Planning Coverage>Improvising>Adaptability>Bluffing>Emotional Understanding>Coercion>Tactics)**

## The End of Lü Bu

With his perimeter sealed and his rear protected, Cao Cao unleashed himself against Lü Bu.

By 198, Lü Bu had driven Liu Bei (who remember was fighting against Lü Bu because of Cao Cao) out of Pei and occupied his territory, unsettling the smaller warlords of the region. Cao Cao marched east, absorbed Liu Bei's scattered remnants into his force, and advanced on Xiapi.

Lü Bu planned to bleed Cao Cao's army in the river valleys and strike when they were spent.

But Cao Cao gave him no such opportunity, he drove straight through, linked up with Chen Deng's forces, and hammered Lü Bu's armies in engagement after engagement, stripping away his strength battle by battle until Lü Bu had no choice but to retreat behind the walls of Xiapi.

Then advised by his strategists, Cao Cao diverted the Si River, the very waterway Lü Bu had intended to weaponize against him, and used it to flood the city. Xiapi became an island. With no relief coming and no way out, the siege turned inward. Suspicion spread through Lü Bu's camp like a disease. When Lü Bu, under the pressure of isolation and paranoia, began lashing out at his own officers and accusing them of conspiracy, he made his fatal mistake, he turned his suspicion into a self-fulfilling prophecy. His officers, now genuinely threatened, opened the city gates themselves and handed Cao Cao the victory.

In the end, as everything collapsed around him, Lü Bu knelt before Cao Cao and begged for his life, but Cao Cao would execute him.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, pp 106-108.*

**(Tactical Response>Tactics)**

# The Guandu Campaign



## Guandu Campaign Preparations

After Yuan Shao finished off Gongsun Zan in the north, Cao Cao inferred correctly that he would be next. So even before the war began, he started preparing carefully. He placed forward positions along the Yellow River, but anchored his main defense further back at Guandu. His choice of Guandu shows very good reasoning as Yuan Shao held a massive numerical advantage, and in open terrain that kind of superiority is nearly impossible to overcome, he could simply outflank and overwhelm (and Cao Cao probably foresaw this.)

But Guandu neutralized all of that.

1. With marshland on one side and waterways and flooded ground on the other, Yuan Shao's enormous army had nowhere to spread. All that manpower got funneled into a narrow front, where Cao Cao could concentrate his smaller force and hold the line. The numbers were still there, but Yuan Shao couldn't use them properly.
2. Then there was the terrain itself. Guandu sat on elevated ground, which meant any assault on Cao Cao's position required attackers to push uphill while defenders rained down on them. That kind of fighting bleeds the attacker far more than the defender, so every charge Yuan Shao ordered would cost him disproportionately.
3. Finally, the logistics. Guandu was near the Bian River, connected to the canal network, and had Xu close behind as a major supply base. Cao Cao's supply lines stayed short and secure, while Yuan Shao's stretched long and vulnerable the further he pushed.

What makes this so impressive is that the Ward hadn't even started yet, and Cao Cao had already thought through all of it. He anticipated the threat, chose his ground deliberately, and built a defensive system designed to turn Yuan Shao's greatest strengths against him.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 124.*

**(Planning Process>Planning Applicability>Planning Coverage>Abductive Reasoning>Anticipation)**

## Pre-Guandu Strategic Consolidation

With Yuan Shao actively building alliances and regional figures defecting to his side, Cao Cao probably recognized that marching north immediately would leave him dangerously exposed. His policy was therefore to first systematically neutralize every surrounding threat through a combination of military force, political maneuvering, and strategic appointments.

In terms of dealing with people Cao Cao would do the following:

1. Liu Bei had recently turned against Cao Cao and allied with Yuan Shao. Before he could pose a serious threat, however, Cao Cao launched a lightning campaign and swiftly defeated Liu Bei at Pei, capturing both Xiapi and Guan Yu. Notably, Cao Cao did not simply neutralize this threat, he turned it into an opportunity. By treating Guan Yu well and granting him command, he effectively gained a capable ally from a former enemy, while Liu Bei was left with no choice but to flee to Yuan Shao.
2. Cao Cao likely also kept Liu Zhang and Zhang Lu in mind as potential threats, though both he and we can probably infer that he considered them too geographically distant to be an immediate concern.
3. As for Zhang Xiu, who had previously fought against Cao Cao, this situation proved relatively straightforward to resolve. Zhang Xiu personally submitted to Cao Cao after his adviser Jia Xu persuaded him that doing so was in his best interest.

In terms of securing his flanks, Cao Cao would do the following:

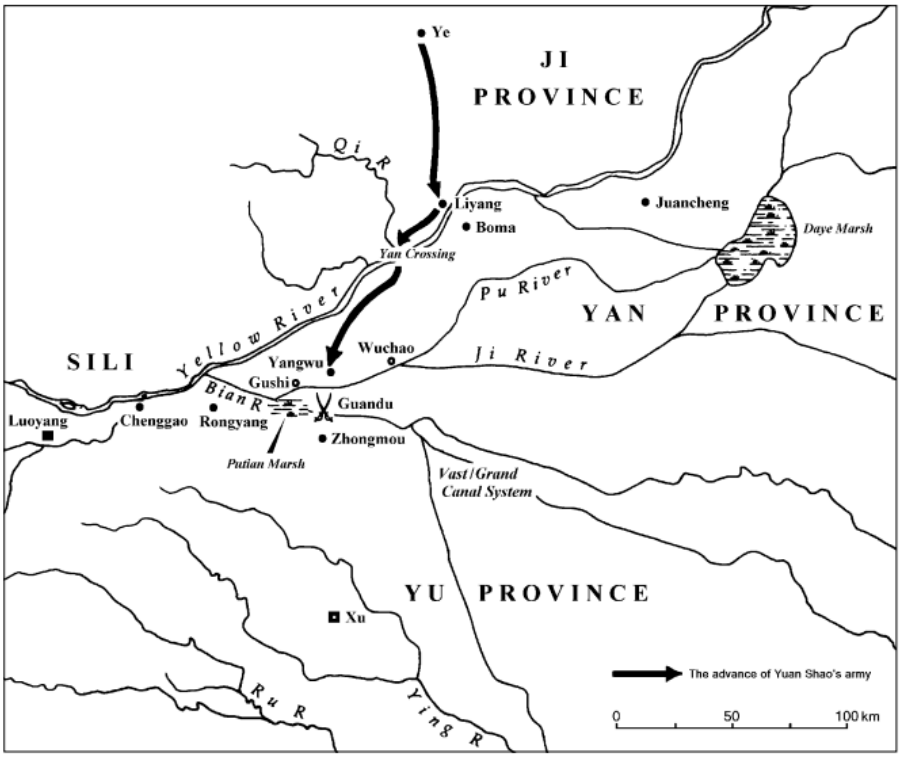
1. Cao Cao also stabilized the west and secured his rear:
    - Xiahou Dun was given control of Henan
    - Zhong Yao was tasked with stabilizing Chang'an
2. There were also territories that still needed to be secured, particularly in the north. Sui Gu had allied with Yuan Shao, but Cao Cao dispatched Cao Ren, who crushed him in battle. Cao Cao then appointed Wei Chong to govern the region in his place.
3. On the eastern flank, there was Zang Ba, who had previously been allied with Lu Bu. This situation proved easy to resolve, as Zang Ba willingly submitted to Cao Cao. Cao Cao shrewdly took advantage of this by granting him regional autonomy, while also ordering him to launch attacks into Yuan Shao's territory. This move not only secured the eastern flank but also served to distract Yuan Shao and force him to spread his forces thin.
4. Finally, there was Yan , the homeland of the Yuan family, and therefore a region filled with their supporters and sympathizers. To deal with this, Cao Cao dispatched Man Chong, who destroyed around twenty enemy camps and lured local leaders to a meeting, where he had them killed, effectively eliminating any organized resistance in the area.

Much of this was not strictly pre-planned; rather, it consisted of tactical actions carried out in the name of his Strategic policy of neutralizing threats and securing his position. However, this strategy clearly formed part of his **Guandu Campaign Preparations** plan.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 124.*

**(Strategy Fortitude>Strategy Building>Planning Coverage>Risk Assessments>Anticipation>Emotional Manipulation)**

## The Guandu Campaign




Map 9. *Operations about Guandu 100–200*

*Context: Yuan Shao launched a massive propaganda effort against Cao Cao, portraying him as corrupt and villainous. This shook Cao Cao's allies and gave Yuan Shao both the moral advantage and greater resources. Yuan Shao made the first move, advancing his huge army to Liyang, south of Ji Province, and immediately sending Yan Liang to strike at Boma, a vital stronghold of Cao Cao north to the Yellow River.*

Cao Cao rapidly identified what Yuan Shao wanted to do, and the importance of Boma, as the stronghold controlled movement in the Yellow River.

Cao Cao responded, but rather than rushing to defend Boma directly, Cao Cao used deception. He marched his army north toward Yan Crossing, deliberately creating the impression that he intended to cross the river and strike at Yuan Shao's flank. Yuan Shao took the bait and diverted forces to counter the perceived threat. Cao Cao then abruptly reversed course, moving rapidly with a small, mobile strike force back toward Boma. The sudden attack caught

Yan Liang completely off guard, his army was destroyed and he was killed in the engagement, relieving the siege entirely.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 137.*

**(Misdirection>Abductive Reasoning>Tactical Response)**

Yuan Shao abandoned his assault on Boma and shifted his strategy, deciding to confront Cao Cao directly and march southwest along the Yellow River toward Guandu.

But Cao Cao, intimately familiar with the local terrain, was already preparing his next trap. The riverbanks were lined with flood control dykes, tall enough to conceal men and horses, and Cao Cao used them to hide his cavalry from view. When Yuan Shao's horsemen, led by Liu Bei and Wen Chou, crossed the river to engage, a portion of their forces broke discipline and began looting Cao Cao's supply train. Cao Cao seized the moment. With only around 600 cavalry, he launched a sudden and ferocious charge into the disorganized enemy, routing them completely and killing Wen Chou in the process.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 139.*

**(Planning Process>Concealment)**

*Context: The deaths of both Yan Liang and Wen Chou in rapid succession were a devastating blow to Yuan Shao's officer corps; these were his two most capable and celebrated generals. Yet despite this, Yuan Shao refused to abandon his offensive. He still commanded close to 100,000 men and understood better than anyone what was at stake. Some of his advisors urged caution, but Yuan Shao recognized that Guandu was the decisive point of the entire war, contemporary sources even rank it as more strategically critical than the famous Battle of Red Cliffs.*

*For Yuan Shao, pressing forward aggressively was not recklessness, it was a necessity.*

**(Demoralization>Abusing Insecurities)**

## The Battle of Guandu (OPERATIONAL SITUATION)

*Context: By the time autumn arrived, the opposing forces of Cao Cao and Yuan Shao had fully concentrated around the Battle of Guandu, establishing fixed positions for what both sides understood would become the decisive confrontation of the campaign.*

For roughly two months, neither army committed to a full-scale battle. Instead, they engaged in a prolonged phase of skirmishing, probing attacks, and logistical warfare. Small detachments clashed frequently, and both sides attempted to disrupt each other's supply lines through raids and harassment. Despite these continuous efforts, the situation remained

strategically deadlocked: neither Cao Cao nor Yuan Shao managed to gain a clear operational advantage.

Desperate to break the stalemate, Yuan Shao devised a strategy "The Southern Strategy". He would send Liu Bei south to Runan to rally Yellow Turban insurgents and foment a rebellion, with the ultimate goal of threatening Xu City.

It was a genuinely smart plan.

- If Xu City were threatened or captured, Cao Cao's logistical base and lines of communication would be compromised.
- This would force Cao Cao either to withdraw from Guandu or divide his already smaller army.

However, Cao Cao responded rapidly. As he would send Cao Ren to move against Liu Bei before the latter could consolidate support or generate significant disruption. Liu Bei's contingent was swiftly defeated.

BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, it seems Cao Cao appeared to have inferred the reasoning behind Yuan Shao's move. Even though Liu Bei did nothing to Xu City, Cao Cao correctly inferred that the city itself was the true objective behind Yuan Shao's move. Recognizing this, Cao Cao took a precautionary measure and kept Cao Ren stationed to protect Xu City not because there was an immediate threat, but because he anticipated that Yuan Shao, having committed to this strategy, would almost certainly try again.

Indeed, Yuan Shao soon would try again. This time, he dispatched Han Xun on a wide flanking maneuver, advancing through difficult marshland terrain with the aim of striking Xu City directly rather than indirectly. But Cao Cao, who had now kept Cao Ren stationed in the region, was ready. And as a result, Han Xun's force advanced unknowingly into a trap.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 140-142.*

**(Anticipation>Tap Setting>Prediction>STP>Abductive Reasoning>Tactical Response>Emotional Understanding)**

While all this unfolded, Cao Cao was reinforcing his defenses using rammed earth walls and wooden palisades.

Yuan Shao pushed back hard with a combination of earthen mounds topped with wooden towers to rain arrows down into the camp, tunnels dug beneath the walls to destabilize them, and relentless arrow fire.

Cao Cao met these threats in kind, erecting his own towers, digging counter-tunnels to neutralize the mining operations, and deploying so-called "thunder-cars", believed to be stone-throwing machines or ballistas.

*Note: Cao Cao despite having less than half of Yuan Shao's troops still held the Operational tempo, and managed to stalemate, neutralize and counter Yuan Shao over and over.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 142-143.*

**(Tactical Response>Tactics>Fast Thinking>Critical Thinking)**

***Context: Cao Cao's counteraction would eventually cause internal collapse within Yuan Shao's army.***

**(Demoralization)**

A key advisor, Xu You, defected to Cao Cao's side. This was not merely a political defection—it had immediate operational consequences. Xu You brought with him critical intelligence, most importantly revealing:

- The location of Yuan Shao's primary supply depot at Wuchao
- The fact that it was guarded by Chunyu Qiong
- And that this depot represented a central logistical vulnerability

Xu You advised Cao Cao to strike Wuchao, emphasizing that Yuan Shao's army, despite its numerical superiority, depended heavily on this concentrated supply base.

**The Battle of Guandu (TACTICAL SITUATION)**

Cao Cao decided to go forward with the previous assessment.

He would select approximately 5,000 elite troops. And he would create a very cunning plan to strike Wuchao via deception. The Deception involved multiple layers:

- His troops would carry Yuan Shao's banners to appear as friendly forces.
- Horses were gagged to prevent sound during movement.
- Soldiers carried bundles of firewood, allowing them to pose as logistical units.
- If challenged, they claimed to be reinforcements sent by Yuan Shao to secure the rear (Contingency.)

All this enabled Cao Cao's force to advance deep into enemy-held territory without creating suspicion.

Once they reached Wuchao, they initiated their attack. The assault was sudden and caught the defenders completely unprepared, allowing Cao Cao's troops to overwhelm them quickly and set the entire supply depot on fire.

The resulting blaze lit up the night sky and was also intended to spread confusion and disorder throughout Yuan Shao's army, as the chaos obscured the true nature and scale of the attack, making it difficult for Yuan Shao's forces to determine what was happening, how many enemy troops were involved, or where they were positioned, and severely hindering Chunyu Qiong's ability to coordinate an effective response.

**Planning Formulation Summary:**

**Disguise as the enemies logistical units** (Contingency: cover story) ⇒ **Advance at night through enemy territory undetected** (in silence, gagging horses) ⇒ **Reach Wuchao** ⇒ **Launch sudden surprise attack on the camp** ⇒ **Set the entire supply depot on fire (**probably with help of the firewood they brought to disguise themselves as logistical units) ⇒ **Use the blaze to create confusion and mask true force size and positions** ⇒ **Destroy Yuan Shao's logistics** ⇒ **trigger collapse of his army**

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 145-146.*

**(Bluffing>Concealment>Planning Formulation>Contingency>Tactics>Abusing Insecurities>Acting Skills, Strategy Fortitude)**

*Context: At this decisive moment, Yuan Shao made a major operational error. Instead of concentrating his forces to defend Wuchao, the true center of gravity, he chose to. Launch a frontal assault against Cao Cao's fortified position at Guandu. Send only a small, insufficient detachment to protect or reinforce Wuchao* ***(Cao Cao's fire made it impossible to determine how big the army was).*** *Then the small force sent to Wuchao was easily defeated, the supply depot was completely destroyed, and after that morale collapsed, many generals defected, the army finally fled, and Cao Cao had stunningly won Guandu*

**(Demoralization)**

## What was Cao Cao's Strategy at Guandu?

Cao Cao faced an army more than double his size, Yuan Shao commanded around 110,000 troops against Cao Cao's 40,000. Yuan Shao was also a capable strategist who recognized Cao Cao's ambitions throughout his consolidation period, which is precisely why he felt pressured to launch a massive offensive before his rival could grow any stronger. This explains why Yuan Shao was consistently on the offensive and held the initiative, while Cao Cao adopted a defensive and reactive strategy. Rather than engaging where Yuan Shao was strongest, Cao Cao

carefully retreated, drawing the enemy deep into terrain of his choosing. This stretched Yuan Shao's supply lines and forced him into overextension. Cao Cao then entrenched himself at Guandu, using its fortified position to neutralize Yuan Shao's numerical advantage — an army that cannot break through fortifications gains little from its size. Cao Cao also secured his flanks politically and geographically, building alliances and eliminating potential threats via campaigns. Yuan Shao later attempted to counter this by turning allies against him, using Liu Bei and briefly flipping Zhang Xiu, but it was not enough to destroy what Cao Cao had built. In effect, Yuan Shao was walking into a trap: Cao Cao had chosen the terrain, controlled the operational tempo, and countered every move made against him. Cao Cao's ultimate goal appears to have been a logistical victory, harassing and trying to destroy Yuan Shao's supply lines. Xu You's defection accelerated this, but it is likely Cao Cao would have won regardless, at greater cost and over more time. The sources claim he lost only 8,000 men to Yuan Shao's 80,000, figures that may not be fully accurate, but it does tell us Cao Cao managed the entire campaign with few losses.

***Summary: Outnumbered, Cao Cao chose a defensive position on favorable terrain, baited his enemy into overextension, and aimed to win via logistics, exhausting and harassing Yuan Shao's supply lines until his larger army could no longer sustain itself.***

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 151-152.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD, p 124.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 124.*

**(Strategy Fortitude>Strategy Building>Strategy Logistics>Strategy Forecasting>Planning Formulation>Planning Applicability>Abusing Insecurities>Tactical Response)**

After Guandu, Cao Cao didn't immediately destroy Yuan Shao, but he consolidated his power. He:

- Pushed Liu Bei away, removing threats in the south.
- Secured the east by winning over local warlords like Chang Xi (thanks to Zhang Liao's diplomacy).
- Strengthened his base by repairing canals and visiting his homeland.

**(Risk Assessments>Planning Coverage)**

# Unification of Northern China




***Context: After Guandu, Yuan Shao attempted to recover his position but died unexpectedly. His death triggered a succession crisis between his sons, Yuan Tan and Yuan Shang, which soon escalated into civil war. Cao Cao seized this opportunity, initially achieving success, but he was forced to halt his campaign when the brothers temporarily allied and Liu Bei stirred unrest in his own territory. On top of that, his advisor like Guo Jia urged patience, suggesting it would be wiser to wait until the brothers turned on each other again. Cao Cao agreed and withdrew for the time being.***

As Guo Jia had predicted, the two brothers soon fell into conflict. Recognizing the opportunity, Cao Cao moved to exploit the situation when Yuan Tan sought his assistance.

He therefore formed an alliance with Yuan Tan, and to be sure of it, he fortified this alliance through a marriage arrangement between his son and Yuan Tan's daughter. This alliance offered limited direct military benefit, but that was not its primary purpose. Yuan Tan contributed little of real value, but that was beside the point. Its real value lay in stabilizing one front of the conflict and ensuring that Yuan Tan remained dependent and effectively contained, allowing Cao Cao to focus his efforts against Yuan Shang.

Thus Cao Cao crossed the Yellow River at Liyang and advanced toward Ye, the core of Yuan Shang's power. Faced with the immediate threat to his base, Yuan Shang was forced to abandon his campaign against his brother and return to defend the city against Cao Cao.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 214.*

**(Strategy Fortitude>Logical Manipulation>Risk Assessments>Indirect Manipulation)**

When Cao Cao reached Ye, the Yuan family stronghold, he realized he couldn't sustain a long siege without securing food and supplies. In the spring of 204, he solved this problem by constructing an enormous canal system:

- He diverted water from the Qi River into the Qing River.
- Linked it through an old channel (today's Wei River).
- Completed what became known as the White Canal.

This waterway allowed him to transport vast amounts of grain and provisions directly to Ye's gates.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 214.*

**(Strategy Logistics>Strategy Building)**

**The Siege of Ye**

Cao Cao then began his full siege. Step by step, he tightened the noose: blocking all roads, cutting off reinforcements from Bing Province, and undermining the walls with mounds and tunnels. He also dug a massive moat around the city, filling it with water from the Zhang River. Ye was completely sealed off, no food in, no escape out. By early autumn, starvation set in among the defenders.
*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 216.*

**(Strategy Fortitude>Abusing Insecurities)**

**Destroying Yuan Shang's Relief Force:**

Yuan Shang eventually returned with a relief force of 10,000 men, intent on breaking the siege of Ye. What is striking about Cao Cao's response is its deliberate simplicity, rather than devising an elaborate plan or strategy, he simply waited. But why? You see, Cao Cao had perfectly read the situation and understood how everything would unfold.

Even his own advisors grew anxious, fearing Yuan Shang might strike directly and shatter the siege. Cao Cao dismissed their concerns and gave out his reasoning:

***"if he came from the west, where Gao Gan in Bing province could offer support from the rear, his men would have a line of retreat available, would feel more secure, and would fight less fiercely."***

As Cao Cao had foreseen, Yuan Shang swung north and approached from the west, the psychologically comfortable route, not the decisive one. Cao Cao had perfectly perceived Yuan Shang's need for security, and anticipated not just what Yuan Shang would do, but why.

Yuan Shang attempted to coordinate with Shen Pei, the commander holding Ye from within, relaying signals through messengers and fire beacons. But Cao Cao moved to sever that coordination, blocking Shen Pei's attempted sortie before routing Yuan Shang's army outright and driving the remnants into the surrounding hills. When Yuan Shang sought terms of surrender, Cao Cao refused. Yuan Shang's officers deserted him one by one, and with no army left to command, he fled north to Zhongshan.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 216-217.*

**(Emotional Perception>Emotional Understanding>STP>Field Envisioning>Prediction>Abductive Reasoning)**

With Yuan Shang's army broken and scattered, Cao Cao seized his seal and insignia, and immediately put them to use. Displaying these symbols of authority before the walls of Ye was a masterstroke of psychological warfare: to the defenders still holding the city, it announced without saying much, that their saviour was defeated.  Yet Shen Pei refused to yield. He continued to organize resistance. His defiance, however, was ultimately undone not by force but by betrayal. His own nephew opened a gate under cover of night, and Cao Cao's troops poured in. Brutal street-by-street fighting followed before Ye was finally taken and Shen Pei captured.

It is highly probable that the decisive turning point was not the storm of the gates, but that earlier act of symbolic warfare, the public display of Yuan Shang's seal and insignia. By stripping away the last illusion of legitimacy from the defenders' cause, Cao Cao eroded the will to resist from within, turning men against Shen Pei before a single soldier had crossed the threshold. It stands as a reminder that in Cao Cao's hands, perception and psychology were weapons every bit as potent as steel.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 217.*

**(Direct Manipulation>Indirect Manipulation>Demoralization>Emotional Manipulation)**

Having taken Ye, Cao Cao moved to incorporate the city into his territory. He retained local officials in their posts, projecting continuity and stability. Then announced that newly acquired territories would be exempt from taxation for a full year, a tactic that spread goodwill among a population that had long endured the misrule and excesses of the Yuan family.

Then he made propaganda stunts, such as when he took custody of Lady Liu, Yuan Shao's widow, he treated her with formality and generosity, returning her personal treasures, arranging a pension for her upkeep, and even paying his respects at Yuan Shao's tomb.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 218.*

**(Propaganda>Mass Manipulation>Charisma)**

Since Yuan Tan did not help in the siege of Ye, and was at this point actually trying to win over surrendered Yuan Shang officials, Cao Cao grew suspicious and then used this as an excuse to frame Yuan Tan of a betrayer of their alliance. He annulled the marriage pact between his son Cao Zheng and Yuan Tan's daughter, sending her back.

*This shows it was never his intention to be Yuan Tan's ally.*

In early 205, Cao Cao marched against Yuan Tan, who withdrew to Nanpi in Bohai. At the Battle of Nanpi, both sides suffered heavy losses. However, Cao Chun, leading the elite "Tiger and Leopard Cavalry," launched a decisive charge that turned the tide. Yuan Tan fled in disguise but was thrown from his horse and killed. With his death, Cao Cao's control over the North China Plain became secure and unchallenged.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 219.*

**(Bluffing>Fabrication)**

When the scholar Wang Xiu, a loyal adviser to the now dead Yuan Tan, arrived too late to save his master and begged simply to be allowed to bury him, Cao Cao saw something worth preserving. In that single gesture, a man risked his standing before a conqueror simply to honor a defeated lord, Cao Cao probably perceived in him qualities such as loyalty, moral integrity, and the courage to act on principle regardless of personal cost.

Thus Cao Cao needed to test it, to prove he was right. He sent him back to Le'an with a deliberate complication embedded in his orders, the instruction to execute Administrator Guan Tong, who had stubbornly refused to surrender. Wang Xiu defied the order. Instead of carrying out the execution, he argued that Guan Tong's obstinacy was not treason but honorable loyalty to his former masters, and brought him before Cao Cao to plead his own case. This was the test passed. Wang Xiu had demonstrated not only that he possessed integrity, but that he had the judgment to distinguish principled loyalty from mere defiance (Cao Cao also probably perceived this distinction in Guan Tong, as he would later accept for him to be retired.)

Thus Cao Cao drew Wang Xiu into his staff. He understood that men of that character, once genuinely won over, would serve him with the same fierce fidelity they had shown his enemies.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 221.*

**(Emotional Perception>Emotional Understanding)**

With Yuan Shang driven into exile among the Wuhuan, Cao Cao turned his attention to the last remaining pillar of Yuan resistance, Gao Gan, Yuan Shao's nephew, who still held Bing Province to the west. Now controlling the southern flank of Gao Gan's territory, Cao Cao moved to finish. He advanced into the hill country east of Ye, pushed through the Hu Pass against minimal resistance, and laid siege to Huguan, the fortified city guarding its head.

*Huguan fell by the third month, and with it, Gao Gan's ability to sustain any meaningful resistance collapsed.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 224.*

**(Tactics)**

# The White Wolf Mountain Campaign



***Context: Tadun, the Wuhuan chief, had sheltered Yuan Shang and was using him to legitimize his raids into northern China. While he wasn't strong enough to overthrow Cao Cao, his presence was a lingering threat to stability. So Cao Cao resolved to march north and crush the Wuhuan once and for all.***

Before the northern expedition, Cao Cao cleaned up threats in his rear areas:

- Defeated pirate Guan Cheng near Shandong, driving him to offshore islands.
- Crushed Chang Xi in Donglai, who had rebelled again.

These were handled by subordinate generals (Yue Jin, Li Dian, Yu Jin), showing Cao Cao's strength and ability to delegate. With his rear secure, Cao Cao could focus fully on the Wuhuan.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 231.*

**(Planning Coverage, Risk Assesments)**

Before launching his northern campaign, Cao Cao set up a reliable supply system by using rivers and canals to move food and equipment. He based operations at Yi City. He had canals built or upgraded:

- Pinglu Trench: linked the Hutuo and Gu Rivers near Yi.
- Quanzhou Trench: ran along the coast near modern Tianjin, from the Yi River to Baoqiu.
- Xinhe ("New River"): extended east along the Bohai Gulf to the Luan (Ru) River, possibly beyond.

These waterways allowed provisions to be floated by barge:

- From the southern plains up to Yi City.
- Then down the Gu and Yi Rivers to the coast.
- From there, north and northeast toward the steppe front.

Why barges?

They weren't slower than ox carts, but carried far heavier loads, grain, fodder, weapons, while sparing the roads and draft animals. By summer, Cao Cao had created a stable canal-and-river network that sustained his northern army. Thanks to this preparation, his army could march 700 km into steppe lands without starving.

*That's why the Wuhuan campaign was feasible at all, and why later historians admired his foresight and planning.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 231-232.*

**(Strategy Logistics, Strategy Building)**

## The Lulong Deception

Tadun, the Wuhuan chief, was camped in the Songling Mountains near the Daling River. Normally, the route into his territory ran along the coast, but in summer the rains turned those roads into swamps, too shallow for boats and too deep for carts or cavalry—making a direct advance impossible. Cao Cao's ally Tian Chou suggested an alternative: an ancient inland road running from Pinggang through Lulong to Liucheng. Though it had fallen into disuse for nearly two centuries, remnants of the path still existed. If Cao Cao took this approach, he could bypass enemy defenses entirely and strike Tadun's rear by surprise.

*Cao Cao and his strategist Guo Jia approved the strategy.*

To make the Strategy work, Cao Cao employed deception:

He left behind a placard announcing he was suspending the campaign until autumn. The Wuhuan, believing the message, lowered their guard. Meanwhile, guided by Tian Chou, Cao Cao led his troops through the ruined mountain road. Soldiers filled gullies, cleared paths, and forced their way through the rough terrain. They circled around Pinggang and pressed east toward the Daling River, slipping past all Wuhuan defenses unnoticed.

*The ruse succeeded. Tadun was taken completely by surprise.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 235.*

**(Bluffing>Misdirection)**

## The Battle of White Wolf Mountain

At the Battle of White Wolf Mountain, Cao Cao's forces were heavily outnumbered, but the Wuhuan troops panicked at the sudden appearance of his army. From a high vantage point, Cao Cao personally spotted a flaw in the enemy formation and issued precise orders. He dispatched his vanguard general, Zhang Liao, to spearhead the assault. The Wuhuan lines collapsed, Tadun was killed, and Cao Cao achieved a decisive victory.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 235.*

**(Observation>Tactics)**

After the defeat, the Wuhuan confederacy scattered, and Yuan Shang sought refuge with Gongsun Kang, the ruler of Liaodong. Cao Cao made no move against them. Why? He anticipated that tensions would arise between them. Sure enough, Kang executed Yuan Shang,

the Wuhuan leader Supuyan, and their followers, sending their heads to Cao Cao. In this way, Cao eliminated his rivals without taking further action. The Yuan clan was destroyed, the Wuhuan shattered, and the northern frontier firmly secured.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 235-236.*

**(Emotional Understanding, Prediction)**

To secure land and sustain his armies, Cao Cao expanded tuntian farms (state-run colonies worked by soldiers, settlers, or surrendered enemies). These were both farms and defensive outposts, ensuring food production while guarding the frontier. They also helped absorb refugees and stabilize newly conquered territories.

*This system became a backbone of Cao Cao's regime, supplementing traditional government structures.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 236.*

**(Strategy Logistics>Strategy Building)**

*After the campaign, Cao Cao composed a series of poems—Guan canghai (觀滄海, "To gaze on the sea"), Winter, the Tenth Month (冬十月), North of the Yellow River is Cold (河朔寒), and Though the Sacred Tortoise Lives Long (神龜雖壽).*

In these works, he reflects on his own existence, recognizing both his success and his relative smallness within a greater cosmic order. He presents himself as part of a broader system beyond individual control. At the same time, he confronts the inevitability of death, yet affirms that as long as he lives, his ambition endures. This reveals a belief in self-determination within limits—an understanding that while fate cannot be escaped, one's will and purpose remain decisive until the very end.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 237-240.*

**(Abstract Reasoning>Perseverance>Emotional Realization>Emotional Engagement)**

# Red Cliffs



Here comes the hardest war Cao Cao will fight. He seems to understand this, and correctly predicts that the war will be significantly influenced by naval power. That is why, for the first time, he builds his own navy — the Xuanwu — and trains his troops accordingly. Cao Cao already has the Yangzi River region in mind and understands its strategic importance.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 237-240.*

**(Strategy Forecasting>Prediction>Anticipation)**

Crespigny clarifies that at this point, Cao Cao had everything secured and was in a near-perfect strategic situation:

- North: Secured after defeating Yuan Shao's sons
- Southeast (Huai region): Stabilized through agricultural colonies
- West (Guanzhong): Pacified via diplomacy (Zhong Yao, Du Ji)

The biggest remaining threat came from Ma Teng. Cao Cao moves to neutralize him by ordering his officials to lure Ma Teng to court at Xu City, effectively turning him into an indirect hostage, as his official would manipulate his son Ma Chao to remain behind with the army, while the rest of the family is relocated to Xu as leverage.

With Jing Province also experiencing internal instability, the moment was perfect.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 258-259.*

**(Strategy Fortitude>Strategy Building)**

There was another reason Cao Cao had to intervene. Liu Bei was present inside Jing, and Liu Biao had just died. Cao Cao knew Liu Bei well, he was ambitious, militarily capable, and politically legitimate through his Han lineage claim. The real danger was this: if Liu Qi and Liu Zong fell into civil war, Liu Bei could step in as mediator and ultimately emerge as ruler, delivering Jing Province into his hands. Cao Cao could not allow that.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, p 264.*

**(Prediction>Emotional Understanding>Field Envisioning>Abductive Reasoning)**

Cao Cao launches an invasion of Jing Province. Many of Liu Bei's potential allies surrendered, given how thoroughly Cao Cao had consolidated his position. Liu Zong, for instance, faced pressure on every side:

- A rival brother (Liu Qi)
- Sun Quan threatening from the east
- Liu Bei operating within his own territory
- Cao Cao advancing with the main army

Once Cao Cao arrives, Liu Bei is forced to retreat. Cao Cao deploys 5,000 light cavalry on a rapid forced march of roughly 120 km in 24 hours, catching Liu Bei at Changban (Chang Slope). Liu Bei suffers a decisive defeat. As a result, Cao Cao captures Jing's territory, seizes the fleet at Jiangling and gains control of access to the Yangzi River.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 265-269.*

**(Tactical Response>Demoralization)**

Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang actually give an interesting insight on why Cao Cao might actually lose the War. It was because, he was not as strong as he looked:

- his northern troops are tired from marching and fighting;
- they are unfamiliar with rivers, marshes, and naval warfare;
- Jing troops who surrendered to Cao Cao are not loyal to him;
- Liu Bei and Liu Qi still have around 20,000 men;
- if Sun Quan adds 30,000 men, they can stop Cao Cao.

***Context: Cao Cao's army advanced to the Yangzi, intending a rapid breakthrough rather than a prolonged siege. But then, suddenly, everything went wrong for Cao Cao. Plague and sickness swept through his army, already a serious blow, given how badly fatigued his troops were from the prolonged marching. On top of this, the newly acquired Jing troops began conspiring, and Cao Cao struggled to coordinate his river and land forces effectively.***

At the Battle of Red Cliffs, Cao Cao camped along the Yangzi near Wulin and attempted to force a crossing, but was blocked by the allied forces. The turning point came when Huang Gai feigned defection and sent ships loaded with flammable materials toward Cao Cao's fleet; believing him to be surrendering, Cao Cao's forces allowed them to approach, only for Huang Gai to ignite them, triggering a massive fire that spread rapidly due to wind and the tightly packed ships and camps, causing destruction and chaos. Zhou Yu then launched a follow-up attack, turning the disaster into a full rout. Cao Cao's retreat along the Huarong Road became equally catastrophic, as mud, marshes, poor roads, and illness crippled his army, with soldiers forced to lay brushwood to pass while many were trampled or lost in the terrain.

There is some debate over what actually occurred at the Battle of Red Cliffs, as later the battle became romanticized, and many myths and fake feats started arising. No, the wind was NOT planned, and NO, Zhuge Liang did not lead this battle. There are even some sources suggesting that Cao Cao's troops were already suffering from illness, prompting him to burn his own ships and withdraw. This raises the possibility that his retreat was driven more by logistical strain and the harsh conditions of the campaign than by enemy action. Regardless of whether he was decisively defeated or not, withdrawing was likely the most rational decision for Cao Cao, since sustaining such a prolonged and distant campaign under those conditions would have been extremely difficult.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 273-274.*

**(Risk Assesments)**

Zhou Yu seized the opportunity and pressed the assault, besieging Jiangling until Cao Ren was forced to abandon it. Liu Bei and Zhuge Liang then moved to reclaim Jing Province, effectively stripping Cao Cao of his southern influence.

Recognizing the situation was deteriorating, Cao Cao made the sound decision to withdraw north before further damage could be done.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–128 AD, pp 276-277.*

**(Risk Assesments)**

## My personal defense on the Red Cliff Situation

I would argue that his southern campaign of 208, often reduced to the outcome of the Battle of Red Cliffs, actually reflected coherent and rational decisions made from Cao Cao, rather than recklessness. As Crespigny shows, Cao Cao entered this campaign from a position of near-complete strategic security, the north had been consolidated after the defeat of the Yuan family, the Huai region stabilized through agricultural colonies, and the west pacified through

diplomacy, while even potential threats like Ma Teng were neutralized through political maneuver rather than costly warfare. Within this context, his intervention in Jing Province was not optional but necessary, because the death of Liu Biao created a volatile succession crisis in which Liu Bei, an ambitious and legitimate figure, could have unified the region and formed a powerful southern bloc. Cao Cao's rapid advance therefore reflects rationality. The results initially vindicated him, Jing collapsed with minimal resistance, Liu Zong surrendered, and Cao Cao secured Jiangling and access to the Yangzi, even demonstrating foresight by constructing a navy for the campaign, even before this war started (Contingency). And his pursuit of Liu Bei at Changban further shows he did want to end Liu Bei. The later setback at Red Cliffs must be understood within the constraints of the situation: Cao Cao's largely northern army was operating in unfamiliar riverine terrain, suffering from fatigue, disease, and the integration of unreliable newly surrendered troops, while facing a coordinated coalition under figures like Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang. The famous fire attack by Huang Gai exploited these structural weaknesses, and some traditions even suggest Cao Cao withdrew due to illness and logistical strain regardless, indicating that retreat was already a rational necessity. In this light, his withdrawal was not a failure but a good risk assessment, preserving his core power base rather than wasting it in an unsustainable campaign. **Ultimately, the campaign did not destroy Cao Cao's position, it merely checked his expansion.**

**(Risk Assessments>Contingency>Critical Thinking>Deductive Reasoning)**

# Three Kingdoms



***Context: After his defeat, Cao Cao is in his mid-50s, and instead of declining, he becomes extremely active on multiple fronts: Military campaigns (south and west), political consolidation, administrative development, court culture, etc.***

Sun Quan attacked Hefei, one of Cao Cao's territories. Cao Cao personally marched southeast to deal with the threat,  and before he even reached Hefei, false reports spread that he was close. Sun Quan, demoralized by the news, withdrew without engaging.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, p. 288.*

**(Demoralization)**

Upon relieving Hefei, rather than pursuing Sun Quan, Cao Cao chose to fortify the city. building military colonies through the tuntian (屯田) system and strengthening both logistics and defenses.

*He played it with extreme caution, knowing that from this stronghold he could launch a future invasion against Sun Quan whenever the time was right.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, p. 289.*

**(Strategy Forecasting>Field Envisioning>Strategy Fortitude>Strategy Building)**

***Context: After The Battle of Red Cliffs, the political landscape of China underwent a profound transformation. The decisive defeat shattered the possibility of immediate unification and instead led to the fragmentation of power among three dominant factions. This division marked the formal emergence of a prolonged tripartite rivalry known as the Three Kingdoms period.***

Cao Cao publicly announced he was marching against Zhang Lu in Hanzhong, but this was a deception. His real objective was to pressure the northwest warlords, particularly Ma Chao and Han Sui, into revealing where their loyalties truly lay.

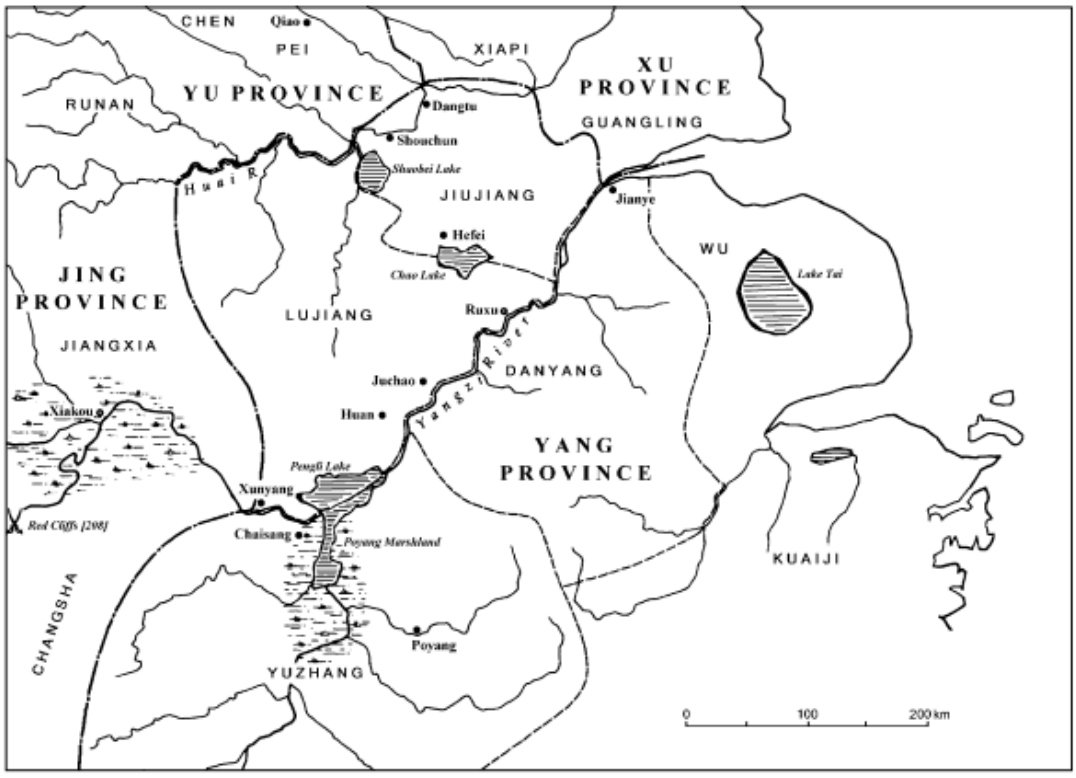
The announcement created an inescapable dilemma. The most practical route to Hanzhong passed through the northwest, near Chang'an and the Wei River valley — territory controlled by semi-independent warlords. If they allowed Cao Cao's army to pass, they would effectively surrender their autonomy. If they refused, they would openly expose themselves as rebels.

*They chose rebellion,  which was precisely what Cao Cao wanted, manipulating them into revealing themselves without direct confrontation.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, p. 295.*

**(Trap Setting>Indirect Manipulation)**

## The Battle of Tong Pass-Huayin




Map 16. *The Lower Yangzi and the Huai*

Cao Cao now faced a coalition led by Ma Chao and Han Sui, positioned at Tong Pass.  a natural chokepoint, extremely favorable for defense. Knowing a frontal assault risked defeat, Cao Cao devised a plan.

**Phase 1 — Pinning Force:** He kept his main army stationed in front of Tong Pass. This fixed the enemy in place, led them to expect the main attack there, and prevented them from redeploying elsewhere.

**Phase 2 — Maneuver Force (the real attack):** He dispatched a detached force under Xu Huang and Zhu Ling with orders to cross the river at a different point, move north, cross again at Puban, and establish a bridgehead behind enemy lines.

**Once this position was secured, Cao Cao moved his main army to join them and began advancing south again, now effectively outflanking the coalition.)**

*Note: Cao Cao later explained, if he had attempted to maneuver elsewhere immediately, the enemy would have guarded every crossing and prevented his movement. By threatening the obvious route, he controlled enemy expectations.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, p. 296*

**(Planning Formulation>Misdirection)**

As he started maneuvering across, the enemy reacted faster than expected and attacked before the plan was complete. Cao Cao did not lose his composure. He boarded a boat with Xu Chu and withdrew, while soldiers released animals to distract the pursuing enemy. He reached the other bank and rejoined his army.

**The plan changed. Where before he had been pinned in front of the enemy, he was now maneuvering around them and regaining the initiative.**

He soon encountered another obstacle, a second river crossing, blocked by the enemy. This time, Cao Cao feigned an assault at one location to hold the enemy's attention, while quietly constructing a bridge elsewhere under cover of night. When the enemy struck, believing they could stop him, they walked into a prepared trap and were repulsed. Then Cao Cao crossed successfully.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, p. 298.*

**(Adaptability>Trap Setting>Misdirection>Bluffing>Mental Fortitude)**

Now came one of the most important moves, and it relied more on psychology than direct fighting. The opposing coalition was not a unified force, but a loose alliance of warlords who already had reasons to distrust one another. Cao Cao understood this and chose to exploit it.

He met Han Sui openly and spoke with him in a warm, familiar way, in full view of the others. This alone was enough to raise suspicion. Shortly afterward, he sent Han Sui a letter that appeared to have been altered or corrected in several places, making it look as though something had been hidden.

The content of the letter mattered less than its appearance. When Ma Chao and the other leaders saw it, the natural reaction was to question Han Sui's loyalty: *What was being concealed? Was there a private agreement?*

*Without making any direct accusation, Cao Cao had planted doubt within the coalition.*

At the same time, Cao Cao started bluffing:

- Adopting a defensive posture
- Constructed fortified camps
- Even engaged in negotiations that appeared conciliatory.

As recorded in historical accounts, this display of apparent weakness encouraged the enemy to believe they held the advantage

Now Cao Cao having manipulated the enemy into distrusting each other, which made coordination more difficult, but also making them overconfident by feigning weakness, he chose this perfect moment to attack, not when the enemy was at full strength and unity, but when they were already under pressure and uncertainty. He sent light troops forward to engage and distract them, then struck decisively at their flanks with his best forces, contributing to the collapse of their resistance.

*The coalition broke. Several leaders were killed; others fled. Cao Cao secured control of the entire region, including the strategically vital city of Chang'an.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, pp. 299-300.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, pp. 300-306.*
*(Crespigny here gives a very detailed analysis on this battle, important to read)*

**(Indirect Manipulation>Strategy Fortitude>Fabrication>Emotional Understanding>Sophistry>Tactics>Trap Setting>Emotional Manipulation>Abusing Insecurities)**

***Context: . The alliance between Liu Bei and Sun Quan was never built on trust, only on shared fear of Cao Cao, and both men ultimately wanted the same territory. When Liu Zhang, ruler of the rich and defensible Yi Province, panicked at Cao Cao's northwestern advance and invited Liu Bei in as a military ally, he handed Liu Bei exactly the opportunity he needed. Rather than acting as a loyal contractor, Liu Bei spent years quietly building political support among local elites and officers, delaying actual fighting, and waiting for the right moment. When tensions finally broke into open conflict, Liu Bei with Zhuge Liang, Zhang Fei, and the defecting Ma Chao, forced Liu Zhang's surrender. With Yi secured, Liu Bei was no longer dependent on anyone, he had become a true third power. Sun Quan, having watched Liu Bei block his own western ambitions and then claim Yi while still holding Jing, turned hostile.***

***Context: By this point, Cao Cao had stabilized most of his northern and northwestern frontiers, which allowed him to shift his attention toward one of the most important strategic regions of the age: Hanzhong***

Hanzhong was not just another territory. For Cao Cao it was the gateway between the north and the Sichuan basin, which had recently fallen under Liu Bei's control. Whoever controlled Hanzhong could either defend against invasion from the north or use it as a launch point into Yi province.

**(Strategy Forecasting>Deductive Reasoning)**

Getting to Hanzhong, however, was difficult. The army had to move through the Qin Ling mountains. Cao Cao therefore avoided the most obvious route and chose the old Lianyun Road, or "Linked Cloud Road." This was smart as instead of striking directly at the strongest line of defense, he attempted to approach from an unexpected direction.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, p. 313.*

**(Unpredictability>Abusing Insecurities)**

But when Cao Cao arrived, he found that Zhang Wei had fortified the pass with walls and picket lines and had around ten thousand defenders.

*His first attack failed badly, with heavy losses, and Cao Cao even prepared to abandon the field and find another approach.*

But some of Cao Cao's soldiers, while being recalled from the front, lost their way and unexpectedly came upon one of Zhang Wei's guard positions. The defenders panicked and fled. When Xiahou Dun reported this, Cao Cao inferred correctly that this was a weak point and resumed the offensive. The defenses collapsed in a night engagement, Zhang Wei was killed while fleeing, and the road into Hanzhong opened.

*Zhang Lu later surrendered.*

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, pp. 313-314.*

**(Abusing Insecurities>Inductive Reasoning)**

After the capture of Hanzhong, there was the question of whether Cao Cao should immediately invade Liu Bei's Yi province. Sima Yi advised him to do exactly that.

But Cao Cao refused. He replied with: **"A man who cannot be satisfied will get Long and look to Shu."** In other words, after gaining one major prize, a greedy man immediately desires the next. Cao Cao was warning against overextension. He had just taken Hanzhong, but pushing deeper into Sichuan would have meant marching into difficult terrain, far from his bases, against an enemy who could fight (Lets not also forget Cao Cao had suffered losses.)

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, p. 314.*

**(Risk Assessments>Impulse Management)**

## My personal defense on the Yi Situation

A lot of people criticize Cao Cao for not attacking Liu Bei. But if Cao Cao failed to win quickly, his main army could become trapped deep in the west, far from its base and other frontiers. Withdrawal through the mountains could have become disastrous. Crespigny explicitly compares this danger to Red Cliffs: Cao Cao had already seen what happened when an overambitious southern campaign stretched beyond its practical limits. A failure in Yi province, the author argues, would have been even worse. So Cao Cao chose consolidation over ambition. This was not cowardice. It was strategic restraint. He secured Hanzhong and withdrew north, returning to Ye by early 216. However, his advanced position remained vulnerable. Liu Bei's men quickly counterattacked in the surrounding regions. Huang Quan defeated the tribal leaders who had submitted to Cao Cao, and Zhang Fei surprised Zhang He in Ba commandery, driving him back to Nanzheng. This showed that Cao Cao's conquest of Hanzhong did not automatically translate into control over the broader approaches to Yi. Liu Bei was already recovering and restoring the frontier.

**(Risk Assesments)**

While Cao Cao was still campaigning in the northwest, Sun Quan seized the opportunity and attacked Hefei once more, reportedly bringing 100,000 men against a garrison of just seven thousand, commanded by Zhang Liao, Li Dian, and Yue Jin.

Cao Cao, however, had anticipated the possibility. He had left a contingency in the form of instructions with the Protector Xue Ti, to be opened only in an emergency. The orders read:

***"If Sun Quan comes, General Zhang and General Li go out to fight, General Yue keeps guard; the Protector does not fight."***

1. **"General Zhang and General Li go out to fight":** It is hard to understand without context, but basically Cao Cao never intended for the initial sortie to win a pitched battle, its purpose was to strike hard enough to shake enemy morale and disrupt their momentum.
2. **"General Yue keeps guard; the Protector does not fight" (Contingency):** But Cao Cao also planned for the possibility that it might not work. Should the bluff fail, Yue Jin and Xue Ti were to hold the city, prevent a breakthrough, and keep the defense from collapsing, buying time until relief could arrive.

After some internal debate, the commanders followed the plan. Zhang Liao led eight hundred volunteers in a sudden, ferocious assault that broke through the enemy lines, and in a remarkable act of improvisation, personally challenged Sun Quan from within his own army. The effect was devastating. Sun Quan, stunned, ordered a withdrawal, and as the Wei forces gave pursuit, he was twice caught in desperate straits at a river crossing, saved only by the fierce loyalty of his personal guard.

What makes this plan impressive is that Cao Cao devised the plan in advance, without being present, and it unfolded almost exactly as he had envisioned, which means somehow he understood Sun Quan would be shocked, stunned and finally humiliated.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, pp. 316-317.*

**(Contingency>Planning Formulation>Bluffing>Emotional Understanding>Field Envisioning>Risk Assessments)**

In 216, Cao Cao took the title King of Wei, marking another step in his formal elevation above ordinary ministers of Han.

**(Influence Building)**

Cao Cao launched one more campaign against Sun Quan, reaching the Ruxu area, Sun Quan took a defensive position near his fortress at Ruxu on the Yangzi. Cao Cao attacked in the second month, but achieved little on land. After only a few weeks, he withdrew his main army.

However, this campaign differed from previous ones. Cao Cao did not simply withdraw completely. Instead, he left Xiahou Dun in command of 26 substantial army corps, including strong commanders such as Cao Ren and Zhang Liao. Cao Cao was not necessarily trying to conquer Sun Quan immediately. Instead, he created a permanent pressure system on the lower Yangzi frontier.

This was effective. Sun Quan's Yangzi defenses meant he did not face immediate destruction, but the presence of such a large Wei force constrained him. He could not freely move west against Liu Bei or into Jing province without risking raids or attack from Cao Cao's forces.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, p. 318.*

**(Strategy Building>Indirect Manipulation)**

***Under this pressure, Sun Quan would later send an embassy to Cao Cao asking for terms. The two sides restored friendly relations and renewed the idea of a marriage alliance. Cao Cao then withdrew his troops and left only garrisons as before.***

Then the Hanzhong campaign would start, where Liu Bei initially fails but adapts by abandoning direct assaults and executing an operational outflanking maneuver through difficult terrain, culminating in the Battle of Mount Dingjun where Xiahou Yuan is killed and Wei's position collapses. Cao Cao, delayed by internal instability and unable to concentrate his forces, arrives too late to restore the situation and simply chooses the best option, which is to withdraw, marking a decisive strategic shift in which he loses the initiative in the west and Liu Bei emerges as a fully independent rival power.

*Rafe de Crespigny, Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 125–228 AD, p. 428.*

**(Risk Assesments)**

***Context: After the Hanzhong setback, Cao Cao no longer pursues major expansion. Instead, he stabilizes his frontiers and maintains pressure on his rival. In 220, Cao Cao dies without taking the imperial title. Shortly after, his son Cao Pi forces the Han emperor to abdicate and formally establishes the state of Wei.***

# Cao Cao's Tally

1. Battle of Changse
2. Battle of Xihua
3. Battle of Quyang
4. Pacification of Jinan
5. x Battle of Xingyang
6. Longkang Revolt
7. Battle of Puyang
8. Siege of Dongwuyang
9. Siege of Yu Du's mountain base
10. Battle of Neihuang
11. Battle of Shouzhang
12. Battle of Jibei
13. Battle of Gaotang
14. Battle of Pingyuan
15. Battle of Fugan
16. Battle of Kuangting
17. Siege of Fengqiu
18. Siege of Xiangyi
19. Battle of Ningling
20. Battle of Jiujang
21. 2nd Battle of Hua
22. 2nd Battle of Fei
23. 2nd Battle of Rencheng
24. Siege of Pengcheng
25. x Siege of Tancheng
26. Siege of Qiulu
27. Siege of Suiling

28. Siege of Xiaqiu
29. Siege of Langye
30. Siege of Donghai
31. Battle of Tancheng
32. Siege of Xiangfen
33. Siege of Juancheng
34. Siege of Puyang
35. Battle of Chengshi
36. Siege of Juye
37. Battle of Juye
38. 2nd Siege of Dingtao
39. Siege of Yongqiu
40. Siege of Wuping
41. Battle of the Luoyang Passes
42. Battle of Yingchuan
43. Battle of Luoyang
44. Siege of Liang
45. Siege of Xiapi
46. x Battle of Wancheng
47. Battle of Wuyin
48. Battle of Huai River
49. Battle of Chen
50. x Zhangling/Nanyang revolt
51. Battle of Huyang
52. Battle of Wuyin
53. Siege of Rang
54. Battle of Anzhong
55. x Battle of Xiaopei
56. Siege of Pengcheng
57. Siege of Xiapi
58. Battle of Taishan
59. Battle of Quancheng
60. Siege of Shequan
61. Qing Province campaign
62. Xiapi (Yuan Shu death)
63. x Xiapi (Liu Bei rebellion)
64. x Xiapi/Pei
65. Battle of Dushi Ford

66. Xiapi (Liu Bei defeated)
67. Siege of Xiapi
68. Siege of Chang Xi's army
69. Battle of Baima
70. Battle of Yan Ford
71. Battle of Guandu
72. Battle of Yinjiang
73. Battle of Cangting
74. Battle of Runan
75. Seizure of Suiyang
76. x Battle of Bowang
77. Battle of Liyang
78. Battle of Yinan
79. x Siege of Yi
80. x Battle of Nanpi
81. Siege of Pingyuan
82. Battle of Xiping
83. Siege of Ye
84. Battle of Maocheng
85. Battle of Handan
86. Battle of the Qi Hills
87. Battle of Zhongshan
88. Battle of Pingyuan
89. Siege of Nanpi
90. Battle of Zhuo
91. Siege of Guangping
92. Battle of Shangdang
93. Battle of Huguan
94. Battle of Chunyu
95. Battle of White Wolf Mountain
96. Surrender of Xinye
97. Battle of Changban
98. Siege of Hefei
99. x Battle of Red Cliffs
100. x Battle of Yiling
101. x Battle of Jiangling
102. Siege of Daling
103. Hanzhong campaign (initial)

104. Battle of Tongguan
105. Siege of Anding
106. Battle of Lantian
107. x Siege of Jicheng
108. Battle of Ruxu (213)
109. Battle of Lucheng
110. Battle of the Qi Mountains
111. Siege of Xingguo
112. Siege of Hefei/Xiaoyao Ford
113. Battle of Fuhan
114. Battle of Chencang/Wudu
115. Battle of Hechi
116. Battle of Yangping Pass (215)
117. Siege of Hanzhong
118. x Battle of Baxi
119. Battle of Ruxu (217)
120. Xuchang Revolt
121. Battle of Xiabian
122. Battle of Dai
123. Battle of Yangping Pass (218)
124. Siege of Wan
125. x Battle of Mount Dingjun
126. Battle of Yangping Pass (219 reinforcement)
127. Battle of Yangping Pass (219 campaign)
128. Battle of the Han River
129. Siege of Fancheng

**Total battles/events:** 129

**Losses (x):** 16

**Wins / non-loss outcomes:** 113

https://historum.com/t/the-military-career-of-cao-cao.171398/