

An Analysis of the Death Mystery of Huo Qubing, a Famous Cavalry General in the Western Han Dynasty

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Abstract: Throughout his whole lifetime, Huo Qubing created a myth of ancient war, and left an indelible mark in history. But, pitifully, he suddenly died during young age. His whole life was very short, and it seemed that Huo was born for war and died at the end of war. Although he implemented his great words and aspirations “What could be applied to get married, since the Huns haven’t been eliminated?”, and had no regrets for life, still, his mysterious death caused endless questions and intriguing reveries for later generations.

1. Introduction

Huo Qubing, with a humble origin, was born in 140 B.C. in a single-parent family in Pingyang, Hedong County, which belongs to Linfen City, Shanxi Province now. He was an illegitimate child of Wei Shaoer, a female slave of Princess Pingyang Mansion, and Huo Zhongru, an inferior official. Also, he was a nephew-in-mother of Wei Qing, who was General-in-chief Serving as Commander-in-chief in the Western Han Dynasty. Huo Qubing was greatly influenced by his uncle Wei Qing.

He was a famous military strategist and national hero during the period of Emperor Wudi of the Western Han Dynasty. He was fond of horse-riding and archery. He was good at long-distance raids and rapid assault, and pioneered the blitzkrieg war. With flexible tactics, he used large detour and large penetration combat mode, and was not constrained by rules and regulations. He was able to adapt to the battlefield environment, and defeated the Huns for many times, leaving the Huns become terror-stricken just at the name of “Cavalry General Huo Qubing”. He left the story of “offering sacrifices on Langjuxu Mountain”, but also left the lofty ambition “What could be applied to get married, since the Huns haven’t been eliminated?”. Huo Qubing suddenly died in 117 B.C..

2. The Contribution of Huo Qubing

(1) Two Wars in the Monan (South of the Great Desert^[1])

In Yuanshuo Sixth Year, namely 123 B.C., seventeen-year-old Huo Qubing, a Piaoyao General, followed Wei Qing to attack South Desert Hun. He led 800 cavalry, and looked for fighting chance in grassland hinterlands of the Mongolian Plateau, which is a few hundred miles away from Wei Qing’s troops. He killed two thousand and twenty-eight enemies, including Hun officials as well as Chanyu’s grandparent Jiruo Marquis Chan, and uncle Luo Gubi. Huo Qubing was awarded the title

of Champion Marquis by Emperor Wudi.

(2) The Spring Hexi Battle

In the spring of Yuanshou Second Year, namely 121 B.C., nineteen-year-old Huo Qubing was appointed to be Hussars Grand General by Emperor Wudi. He led ten thousand cavalries. He adopted high-speed maneuver and fast impact combat mode. He led his cavalries to keep high-speed all the way, and only killed the enemies' effective strength, without plundering everything valuable. He killed the Zhelan King, and Luhu King, annihilated more than eight thousand Huns, and captured The Golden Pepple Statue, which is used for sacrifice to Heaven by Huns.

(3) The Summer Hexi Battle

In the summer of Yuanshou Second Year, namely 121 B.C., nineteen-year-old Huo Qubing led again ten thousand cavalries to fight against the Hun. He crossed the Juyan Swamp Area and came to the Qilian Mountains. He galloped back and forth in Hun country's hinterland, and killed thirty thousand and two hundred enemies. Meanwhile the number of Han Dynasty troops decreased about three over ten.

(4) Acceptance of Surrender at Hexi Area

After Huo Qubing's successive military attacks, the Huns' internal division appeared. The Hun's Hunye King surrendered to Han Dynasty. Emperor Wudi feared that the Hun would surrender treacherously and sent Huo Qubing to hold surrender ceremony with Han Dynasty's troops. In the process of surrender, the Xiutu King of Hun went back on his word and was no longer willing to surrender, resulting in mutiny. Huo Qubing attacked decisively, and killed eight thousand Huns. He successfully pacified this incident.

(5) The Battle of Mobei (North of the Great Desert)

In the spring of 119 BC, Huo Qubing led fifty thousand cavalries to attack the Hun. They started off from Dai County, looking for the Hun's main force to conduct a decisive battle. They marched to the north for more than two thousand miles, but did not find out Hun's main troops. Actually, they encountered the Zuoxian King's army, and annihilated seventy thousand and four hundred enemies. They pursued all the way to the Langjuxu Mountain, and held a ceremony of worship to ground. At last, they returned back to the Han Dynasty victoriously. Together with Wei Qing, the offensive war reversed the Han Dynasty's long-term defensive state against Hun, and ensured the northern border security of Han Dynasty. During this war, the Han Dynasty conquered Hun with farthest distance.

3. The Death of Huo Qubing

Huo Qubing, a war god and national hero, suddenly passed away in Yuanshou Sixth Year, namely 117 B.C.. His death was recorded in *The Grand Scribe's Records*, which was written by Sima Qian, as follows: "Cavalry General passed away three years after he attacked the Hun at Yuanshou Fourth Year (119 B.C). That means Huo Qubing died at 117 B.C.".

But *The Grand Scribe's Records*, didn't explain the accurate pathogenesis. But as a national hero and General-in-chief, Huo Qubing's death description was too simple. It seemed there was a big secret behind, which caused a lot of conjecture and doubt.

(1) Plague Theory of Death

According to the literature, it was said that during the process of Han-Hun War, the Han dynasty gradually got military initiative, and caused significant casualties and economic damage to Hun. In order to decrease Han Dynasty's effective strength, the Hun threw cattle with plague into water and pasture. Huo Qubing drank the water containing plague, and died after returning to the Han Dynasty.

In my opinion, there is no basis for this claim. If Huo Qubing drank water with plague, then obviously a mass of soldiers would also drink the same water. It would cause death on a large scale, but there was no such records in history books. In addition, his uncle Wei Qing also led army and would also drink water in the same area. But Wei Qing died in 106 BC, who died 11 years later than Huo Qubing. If a person was infected by plague, he/ she would die quickly without good cure. The plague's incubation period could not last for so long a time.

(2) Overwork Theory of Death

This theory is more orthodox. Huo Qubing began to follow his uncle, Wei Qing when he was 17 years old. At the age of 22, as a commander in chief, he personally led an army to take part in the Mobei War. Years of war, overworked, and together with the wicked battle environment, caused his accumulation of labor disease.

I think there is no evidence for this argument either. Huo Qubing died at the age of 23, which belongs to the prime of life. During this period, a person's physical quality is in his best state, with low risk of health problems. In addition, Huo was in such an important mission, so the Han Dynasty's imperial physicians certainly would check his body carefully before they went out to battle. Also, his uncle Wei Qing, who would certainly be older than him, fought in the battlefield for many year. However, Wei Qing passed away later than Huo Qubing. So in my opinion, this theory's probability is not high.

(3) The Theory of Imperial Power Persecution

In my own opinion, this statement has relatively high reliability. The strength of Hun had been greatly reduced through the Battles of Monan and Mobei during the war of Han-Hun from 140 BC to 117 BC, which removed the military threat of Hun to the Han Dynasty. And the war initiative had been firmly held in Han Dynasty' hands. Due to their military achievements, Wei Qing and Huo Qubing were both in charge of the daily affairs of Han Dynasty's army.

Wei Qing and Huo Qubing were in positions of great power. Also, they were uncle-nephew relationship, and belonged to one kinship group. They had huge common interest, which was a potential threat to the imperial power. This would not be allowed by Emperor Wudi, who had great talent and ambition.

Personally, I think it was Emperor Wudi who created conflict between Wei Qing and Huo Qubing. This conflict eventually led to someone behind the group of Wei and Huo killing Huo Qubing. That is to say, the person who really killed Huo Qubing was Emperor Wudi.

The wheel of history has gone through for over two thousand years, and many historical facts are submerged in the dust of the years, waiting for later generations to search and seek.

4. Note

[1] The Great Desert: It means the Great Desert on the Mongolian Plateau

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