

What really happened during the Disaster of Yongjia

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The research to date on the Disaster of Yongjia 永嘉 (311 CE) which occurred during the last years of the Western Jin has been conducted from the perspective of the history of the sixteen non-Han kingdoms and the prehistory of the Northern Wei, and while there have been many studies that have focused on the independent statements and actions of the five non-Han Chinese peoples of those kingdoms, what has been lacking is a perspective that seeks to understand their actions in relative terms by taking into account their rivalry with the Jin forces with whom they were then at war. The aim of this article is to reconstruct the course of the conflict between the five non-Han Chinese peoples and the Jin forces on the basis of a precise chronology and textual criticism of source materials with a view to elucidating what really happened during the Disaster of Yongjia.

Liu Yuan 劉淵, Shi Le 石勒 and the other non-Han Chinese generals who fought against the Western Jin were at the start of the uprising overwhelmed by the Jin forces, and in particular, Liu Kun 劉琨 of the Western Jin, the regional inspector (*cishi* 刺史) of Bingzhou 并州, put continuous pressure on Liu Yuan in the south, compelling him to relocate his capital southwards, and when it became inevitable that if he were to continue moving south, he would eventually reach the Western Jin capital of Luoyang 洛陽, Liu Yuan proclaimed himself king of the Han and made clear his intention to overthrow the Western Jin by attacking Luoyang. However, Liu's forces was repulsed by those of Prince Yue 越 of Donghai 東海, who happened to be returning to Luoyang at that particular time. Then Liu Yuan's death presented Liu Kun and Prince Yue with the unexpected opportunity of launching a pincer operation against the Han. Thereafter the defeat of this pincer operation became the main challenge facing that kingdom.

From around this time, unrest had also been building up on the Jin side, with

Jin forces defecting from Prince Yue. There was also a continuous exodus of military forces from Luoyang, including Prince Yue's departure and death. This resulted in a weakening of the pincer movement, and in 311 (Yongjia 5) Luoyang fell to the Han. Liu Kun in the north was also defeated in a Han attack, and this led to the collapse of the pincer operation.

In view of the above train of events, it is evident that the Disaster of Yongjia did not necessarily come about as a result of the independent strategy of Liu Yuan and other non-Han generals or their consistent ascendancy over the Western Jin. Rather, it was an outcome that was influenced by the military and political environment both within and without their own sphere of influence.