

A study of the military dialectics in Mao Zedong's command of the four crossings of the Chishui River

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Abstract. The Four Crossings of the Chishui River during the Long March stand as one of the finest achievements in Mao Zedong's military command career. Through a series of strategic maneuvers, including repeated flanking movements, feints, and the flexible integration of deception and real operations, Mao led tens of thousands of Red Army soldiers across the Chishui River several times, successfully shaking off the pursuit and encirclement of hundreds of thousands of Kuomintang troops and ultimately breaking through multiple layers of blockade. This campaign is widely regarded as a miracle in both Chinese and world military history. The key to its success lay in Mao's masterful application of materialist dialectics to military command. It represented not only a triumph of tactical leadership but also an exemplary unity of far-sighted strategic thinking and disciplined tactical execution. This paper examines the profound military philosophical ideas embodied in the Four Crossings of the Chishui River from several dimensions of dialectical unity, including strategic retreat and tactical offense, strategic deployment and tactical breakthrough, strategic engagement and tactical maneuver, the concentration and dispersion of military forces, and the combination of deception and surprise attacks. Through this analysis, the study seeks to reveal why the campaign became a crucial model for transforming weakness into strength and danger into security.

Keywords: four crossings of the Chishui River, Mao Zedong, military dialectics, Red Army

1. Introduction

Following the Zunyi Conference in January 1935, the Chinese Communist Party, having just passed through a critical turning point that determined its survival, and Mao Zedong, who had regained military command authority, were confronted with an extremely perilous situation. More than 30,000 soldiers of the Central Red Army were trapped along the border regions of Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan, where they faced relentless pursuit and encirclement by hundreds of thousands of Kuomintang troops. Local warlord forces blocked their advance, while the Central Army pressed closely from behind. Within the narrow area surrounding both banks of the Chishui River, the Red Army demonstrated remarkable flexibility, mobility, and operational secrecy, creating one of the most extraordinary military miracles in world history—the Four Crossings of the Chishui River. The victory of this campaign embodied the dialectical methodology of Mao Zedong's military thought. It highlighted the fundamental objective of warfare—"preserving one's own forces while annihilating the enemy"—and reflected a profound understanding of the principle that "you fight your way, and I fight mine,"

emphasizing the importance of maintaining strategic initiative in warfare. This paper explores several key dialectical relationships embedded in the campaign in order to illuminate the internal logic behind this military miracle.

2. The integration of strategic retreat and tactical offense

Under conditions of overall strategic disadvantage and a vast disparity in military strength, avoiding decisive engagement was the Red Army's only viable option for preserving its effective fighting force. However, the Red Army's retreat was by no means a passive act of flight. Rather, it represented an organic combination of strategic defense and tactical offense. Through strategic withdrawal, the Red Army avoided direct confrontation with superior enemy forces and preserved its strength. At the same time, by employing flexible maneuver warfare, it sought favorable opportunities to strike, break through encirclements, and transform a passive situation into an active one.

2.1. The combination of strategic active retreat and tactical reactive offense

The term "strategic active retreat" refers to the Red Army's deliberate large-scale and directional movements aimed at escaping encirclement and creating opportunities for future operations. The initiative in such movements remained firmly in the hands of the Red Army. By contrast, "tactical reactive offense" refers to the series of attacks launched against pursuing or blocking enemy forces during the retreat process. These operations were not undertaken to seek decisive victory but were necessary measures to ensure the safe and orderly strategic withdrawal of the main force.

"The original objective at Qinggangpo was to annihilate Guo Xunqi's 'Model Division' of the Sichuan Army, which was pursuing our rear, thereby clearing the way for our advance into Sichuan and our planned crossing of the Yangtze River. However, the battle did not go well, primarily because the enemy situation was misjudged. We initially believed the enemy consisted of two brigades and four regiments, and therefore concentrated the Third and Fifth Corps with full confidence of destroying them. As the battle progressed, however, enemy forces continued to increase, and we eventually discovered that the enemy actually consisted of four brigades and eight regiments. Consequently, the battle turned into a protracted war of attrition. Although more than 3,000 enemy troops were eliminated, our army also suffered heavy casualties. According to Mao Zedong, the Battle of Tucheng (the Qinggangpo Campaign) was, in fact, a defeat. Before the engagement, after suffering repeated setbacks, the Red Army was eager for victory and somewhat underestimated the enemy, assuming that the Sichuan Army would be no stronger than the Guizhou forces. In reality, the combat effectiveness of Liu Xiang's Sichuan Army was far superior to that of Wang Jialie's Guizhou troops. That evening, Mao proposed convening a meeting of several leaders of the Central Political Bureau. Based on the prevailing circumstances, the participants concluded that the original plan of crossing northward over the Yangtze River between Luzhou and Yibin was no longer feasible. Instead, they decided to cross the Chishui River westward from Tucheng in order to disrupt the enemy's encirclement plans. This decision marked the beginning of the First Crossing of the Chishui River." [1]

Prior to the First Crossing, the Red Army had intended to cross the Yangtze River and link up with the Fourth Front Army. However, the stubborn resistance encountered during the Battle of Tucheng led to an unfavorable outcome in the initial engagement. Rather than rigidly adhering to the original operational plan, Mao decisively abandoned the northward crossing strategy and chose instead to move west across the Chishui River into southern Sichuan.

"In the early morning of January 29, with only a small number of troops remaining to block the advancing Sichuan forces, the main force of the Central Red Army crossed the Chishui River in three columns from Yuanhouchang (present-day Yuanhou) and areas north and south of Tucheng (the First Crossing of the Chishui River), entering the Gulin and Xuyong regions of southern Sichuan in search of an opportunity to cross the Yangtze River." [2]

This decision exemplified a strategy of active retreat, enabling the Red Army to avoid costly direct confrontation with a stronger enemy and thereby preserve its combat effectiveness. During the river-crossing operation, defensive actions and counterattacks were organized against pursuing enemy forces to ensure the safe passage of the main force. Such engagements were undertaken not because the Red Army sought battle for its own sake, but because the strategic objective of "moving" necessitated limited and carefully controlled "fighting" when pressured by the enemy. The execution of these operations was both resolute and disciplined. Within the broader framework of strategic maneuver and withdrawal, tactical offensives were conducted as necessary instruments to facilitate successful movement. The organic integration of strategic active retreat and tactical reactive offense ensured the orderly and secure completion of the First Crossing of the Chishui River, laying the foundation for subsequent operations and demonstrating Mao Zedong's flexible application of military dialectics in practice.

2.2. The combination of strategic passive retreat and tactical active offense

"Strategic passive retreat" refers to the overall situation in which the Red Army was compelled to relocate under the pressure of large-scale encirclement and suppression campaigns launched by the Kuomintang forces. "Tactical active offense," by contrast, refers to the Red Army's ability to identify favorable opportunities during this retreat, launching localized counterattacks and offensive operations at advantageous times and locations in order to alter the immediate battlefield situation and, ultimately, influence the broader strategic environment.

As Mao Zedong stated: "The next operational guideline should be for the Red Army to immediately disengage from the pursuing forces in Sichuan and concentrate at Zhaxi. Since the original plan of crossing the Yangtze River can no longer be realized, the Red Army must open up a new situation through military victories and strive to develop eastward from western Guizhou." [3]

After arriving in Zhaxi, the Red Army obtained a brief period of rest and reorganization. During this time, recruitment efforts were carried out, resulting in an expansion of its ranks and a partial restoration of its combat capability. "Chiang Kai-shek believed that the Central Red Army was still lingering around Zhaxi because it was continuing to seek an opportunity to cross the Yangtze River to the north. This was a delicate moment before the Red Army's sudden eastward movement had been exposed. To the north, the Sichuan Army was steadily approaching Zhaxi; to the southwest, the Yunnan Army, having drawn close to Zhaxi, advanced cautiously and tentatively; to the south, the Central Army of the Nationalist Government was marching northward day and night; and to the east, in the direction of the Red Army's potential advance, the Guizhou forces had already concentrated their main troops at key strategic locations within their own territory." [4]

The Second Crossing of the Chishui River, during which the Red Army returned to northern Guizhou, recaptured Zunyi, and seized Loushan Pass, provides perhaps the clearest illustration of this dialectical relationship. From a strategic perspective, the Red Army was still operating under conditions of enforced withdrawal. Faced with tightening enemy encirclement, it was compelled to cross the Chishui River once again and seek a route of survival within the enemy's surrounding forces. In this sense, the maneuver remained a form of strategic passive retreat. However, Mao Zedong keenly recognized a fleeting opportunity created by the weakness of enemy deployments in northern Guizhou. He correctly judged that the Guizhou forces

commanded by Wang Jialie—often derisively referred to as the "double-gun soldiers" because of their limited combat effectiveness—were incapable of mounting effective resistance. Concentrating superior forces at the decisive point, the Red Army launched a vigorous offensive against Zunyi and Loushan Pass. The campaign succeeded in capturing both objectives and destroying the greater part of two divisions of the Nationalist Central Army. This constituted a classic example of tactical active offense. The significance of this victory extended far beyond the immediate battlefield. Militarily, it inflicted substantial losses on the pursuing enemy forces and yielded large quantities of captured supplies. More importantly, it became the Red Army's most significant victory since the beginning of the Long March. The success greatly boosted troop morale, dispelled rumors that the Red Army was merely fleeing from battle, and demonstrated its continued offensive capability. At the same time, the defeat forced the Nationalist forces to reassess and redeploy their troops, thereby providing the Red Army with valuable time for recuperation and additional strategic room for maneuver. This episode vividly demonstrates how, under conditions of strategic passivity, the Red Army employed proactive tactical offensives to seize local initiative, disrupt enemy plans, and create favorable conditions for altering the broader strategic balance. It exemplifies Mao Zedong's dialectical understanding that even in an overall unfavorable situation, carefully chosen offensive actions can transform local advantages into strategic opportunities and pave the way for reversing an adverse overall position.

3. The integration of strategic planning and tactical breakthrough

The Four Crossings of the Chishui River can be regarded as a vast strategic chess game. Mao Zedong, as the overall commander, functioned as the "player," focusing both on the overall strategic layout and on breaking through localized operational deadlocks.

3.1. The combination of strategic design and tactical entry

"Strategic setup" refers to the overall operational blueprint and intent formulated by a commander based on an assessment of the overall situation. "Tactical entry" refers to the initial stage in which troops enter and implement the strategic framework through concrete combat actions.

"On February 2, Chiang Kai-shek readjusted his deployment. He reorganized the First Corps of the 'pursuit and suppression' forces into the First Route Army, with He Jian as commander-in-chief. Its mission was to deploy part of its forces along the eastern bank of the Wu River in areas such as Yanhe and Yinjiang to prevent the Central Red Army from advancing eastward, while the main force remained in western Hunan to suppress the Second and Sixth Red Army Corps. The Second Corps of the 'pursuit and suppression' forces, together with the Yunnan and Guizhou armies, formed the Second Route Army under Long Yun as commander-in-chief and Xue Yue as front-line commander. It consisted of four columns under Wu Qiwei, Zhou Hunyuan, Sun Du, and Wang Jialie. Its mission was to focus on pursuing the Central Red Army, with the intention of cooperating with Sichuan forces to encircle it in the region west of Xuyong, south of the Yangtze River, and east of the Heng River." [5]

Before the Second Crossing of the Chishui River, Mao Zedong had already conceived a strategic plan to return to northern Guizhou and, through mobile warfare, maneuver and destroy enemy forces. This "game" was based on his assessment of the divisions and contradictions between the Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Central Army forces, as well as his judgment that northern Guizhou was weakly defended. The key to "entering the game" was the Second Crossing of the Chishui River itself. The Red Army rapidly crossed the river at locations such as Taiping Ferry and Erlangtan, defeated the Guizhou forces, and advanced toward Zunyi. This decisive and rapid tactical action successfully brought the Red Army into the "game." It was

precisely such highly unified and disciplined action that ensured the efficient implementation of the strategic plan.

3.2. The combination of strategic deception and tactical escape from encirclement

"Strategic deception" refers to creating a series of feints and deceptive actions that lead the enemy to make misjudgments and become trapped in the fog of war deliberately created by our side. "Tactical breakout" refers to our army's rapid withdrawal from a dangerous battlefield situation when the enemy, having been deceived, exposes weaknesses during the process of redeployment.

The Third Crossing of the Chishui River was a typical example of the combination of strategic deception and tactical breakout. After the Battle of Zunyi, in order to further maneuver the enemy, the Red Army suddenly advanced northward, crossed the Chishui River at Maotai Town, and entered southern Sichuan, feigning an attempt to cross the Yangtze River and move deeper into Sichuan. This highly publicized movement successfully deceived Chiang Kai-shek, who hurriedly mobilized forces from various directions to concentrate in southern Sichuan with the intention of surrounding and annihilating the Red Army along the Sichuan–Guizhou border. However, while enemy forces were concentrating in southern Sichuan, the main force of the Red Army secretly assembled. Once large numbers of enemy troops had gathered in the area, the Red Army suddenly turned eastward, crossed the Chishui River for the fourth time at locations such as Taiping Ferry and Erlangtan, quietly crossed the Wu River to the south, and advanced toward Guiyang. Chiang Kai-shek, who was directing operations from Guiyang at the time, was caught by surprise and urgently ordered pursuing forces from various directions to move to the defense of the city. This act of "tactical breakout" employed the strategy of making a feint in one direction while striking in another. It enabled the Red Army to break out of the multiple encirclements established by the enemy in the Sichuan–Guizhou region and leave hundreds of thousands of enemy troops behind. This success was made possible by the "strategic deception" created during the Third Crossing of the Chishui River, which gave the impression that the Red Army intended to cross the Yangtze River to the north. It was precisely this strategic deception that created the conditions for the subsequent tactical breakout and the advance toward Guiyang.

4. The integration of strategic "fighting" and tactical "running"

"Fighting" and "running" are the core elements of mobile warfare. In the Four Crossings of the Chishui River campaign, "running" was the norm and "fighting" was secondary; however, "running" served to enable better "fighting," and "fighting" in turn served to enable better "running." The two were mutually reinforcing and interdependent. Only through "running" could better opportunities for "fighting" emerge, and only by achieving battlefield results through "fighting" and forcing the enemy to redeploy could more space for "running" be created.

4.1. The combination of effective "running" and accurate "fighting"

"Running well" refers to a high degree of mobility and concealment, enabling the Red Army to effectively evade the enemy and preserve its strength. "Fighting accurately" refers to concentrating superior forces at critical moments to deliver a decisive strike against selected strategic targets.

"The Red Army spent four months in Guizhou. During this period, it destroyed five enemy divisions, occupied Wang Jialie's headquarters and residences, recruited 20,000 new soldiers, and held mass meetings in many villages, training young people as Communist cadres. As a result, the Red Army's losses were not very serious. However, the biggest problem was that it could not cross the Yangtze River. Enemy forces were

stationed along the Sichuan–Guizhou border, blocking all routes to the Yangtze River. Chiang Kai-shek believed that as long as the Red Army was prevented from crossing the river, it could either be annihilated along the riverbank or forced into the southwest or the remote region of Tibet. He sent a telegram stating that the fate of the Nationalist Party and the country depended on whether the Red Army could be intercepted south of the Yangtze River." [6]

Throughout the Four Crossings of the Chishui River campaign, the Red Army spent most of its time in rapid movement, covering extraordinary distances; forced marches of over 100 li in a single day were common. However, this "running" was not a purposeless flight. On the contrary, it was aimed at containing the enemy, avoiding its main forces, and exhausting it through constant movement. The accuracy of "fighting" was best reflected in the Zunyi campaign, in the Red Army's attacks on the Guizhou Army and the Central Army units under Wu Qiwei. In this battle, Mao Zedong precisely identified the weakest and most critical link in the enemy's command chain, seized the opportunity, and delivered a decisive strike, achieving significant results. It was precisely because "running" was well executed that the Red Army was able to maintain battlefield initiative and create the preconditions for effective "fighting." Conversely, accurate "fighting" eliminated enemy effective strength and forced the enemy to adjust its deployment, thereby clearing obstacles for subsequent "running" and creating space and time for further maneuver.

4.2. The combination of genuine "fighting" and stable "running"

Genuine "fighting" means that once a decision to engage is made, it must be real, rapid, fierce, and precise. It aims to annihilate or severely damage enemy effective strength, rather than serving as a feint or symbolic attack. Stable "running" refers to maintaining strict organization and order during movement and withdrawal, avoiding collapse of the rear units under enemy pursuit.

The attack on Zhou Hunyuan's forces at Lubanchang was a typical example of genuine "fighting." Although the objective of annihilating the enemy was not achieved due to strong defensive fortifications, the operation aimed to force enemy troops around Guiyang into reactive movement and to test the depth and coverage of enemy defensive firepower. After the attack failed to achieve its intended breakthrough, the Red Army did not continue fighting, but quickly disengaged to avoid further casualties and prepared for the Third Crossing of the Chishui River. Throughout this process, the Red Army "ran steadily," conducting an orderly withdrawal and leaving no opportunity for the enemy to exploit.

Such "genuine fighting," even when not fully successful, still sent a strong signal to the enemy and disrupted its judgment and deployment. Meanwhile, "stable running" ensured that the Red Army maintained organizational integrity and combat effectiveness under all operational conditions, reflecting a very high level of military discipline and professionalism.

5. The combination of "dispersing into parts and reassembling into a whole"

Faced with tight blockade and encirclement, the Red Army flexibly applied the principle of force dispersion and concentration. It did not rigidly adhere to large-scale group operations. Instead, it was adept at sending out small units to "disperse a whole into parts," thereby diverting enemy attention, conducting strategic reconnaissance, achieving strategic deception, and carrying out feints to lure the enemy. For example, during preparations for the Fourth Crossing of the Chishui River, a unit was dispatched to the Gulin direction to conduct guerrilla operations and disguise itself as the main force, successfully attracting enemy troops. When the opportunity for decisive action emerged, dispersed Red Army units were able to rapidly "reassemble dispersed parts into a whole," concentrating small units into superior forces and forming a single powerful fist

capable of breaking through enemy positions. The Zunyi Campaign is a typical example of "reassembling dispersed forces." At that time, the First, Third, Fifth, and Ninth Corps were concentrated for joint operations, achieving the greatest victory since the beginning of the Long March. This flexible alternation between dispersion and concentration highlights the Red Army's high level of organizational discipline and the commanders' precise control over troop deployment.

6. The combination of "feinting east and striking west" and "feinting west and striking east"

This was one of the most frequently used tactical deception methods throughout the Four Crossings of the Chishui River campaign. The Third Crossing of the Chishui River marked a typical prelude to "feinting west and striking east." The Red Army openly crossed westward over the Chishui River into Gulin, presenting the appearance of preparing to cross the Yangtze River again. This was the "feint west," while the real intention was "striking east"—crossing south over the Wu River and launching an attack toward Guiyang. Prior to this, the Second Crossing of the Chishui River and the return to northern Guizhou represented a classic case of "feinting east and striking west." Through a sharp offensive in the east (northern Guizhou), the Red Army concealed the possibility of future westward movement (toward southern Sichuan), thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent operations. This combination of real and false movements made it difficult for enemy forces to determine the Red Army's true strategic intentions, leaving them constantly reacting and being led by the Red Army's maneuvers.

7. The combination of "feinting south and striking north" and "feinting north and striking south"

This strategic and tactical approach is essentially similar to "feinting east and striking west." Its essence lies in using feigned attacks to lure the enemy into committing forces, followed by a reverse strike to achieve strategic objectives. The difference lies only in the directional orientation of the maneuvers. The Red Army's movements along the Chishui River itself constituted a form of comprehensive directional deception. The First Crossing moved westward, the Second Crossing moved eastward, and the Third Crossing shifted toward the east and south. Each crossing represented a change in direction, causing the enemy to repeatedly misjudge the Red Army's final destination. In particular, when Chiang Kai-shek believed that the Red Army intended to establish a base in the Sichuan–Guizhou–Yunnan border region, the Red Army instead crossed south over the Wu River. When enemy forces concentrated in Guiyang to block an eastward advance and prevent linkage with the Second and Sixth Corps, the Red Army instead made a feint and advanced southwest into Yunnan. Through such flexible use of "feinting south and striking north" and "feinting north and striking south," uncertainty in warfare was transformed into an advantage for the Red Army.

8. The combination of "using the false to deceive the real" and "using the real to conceal the false"

This represents one of the highest forms of military deception. "Using the false to deceive the real" refers to making false operations appear real through feints, the combined use of radio silence and transmissions, and the dissemination of false information. For example, the Ninth Red Army Corps operated independently on the northern bank of the Wu River, posing as the main force and successfully tying down six enemy divisions.

This is a classic case of "using the false to deceive the real." "Using the real to conceal the false" is even more sophisticated. It refers to using genuine, strategically meaningful operations to conceal deeper intentions. Through repeated shifts between real and deceptive actions, the Red Army made it difficult for Nationalist forces to distinguish between truth and falsehood. For instance, during the pressure on Guiyang, the Red Army attacked surrounding airfields. This was a real military action and the airfields were indeed captured. However, the objective was not to seize Guiyang itself, but to disrupt Chiang Kai-shek's judgment and make him mistakenly believe that Guiyang was the main target, thereby forcing him to urgently deploy Yunnan troops for reinforcement. This strategic move successfully drew out Yunnan forces and opened the route into Yunnan, constituting a case of "using the real to conceal the false."

9. Conclusion

The Four Crossings of the Chishui River campaign represent a brilliant practical application and vivid interpretation of Mao Zedong's military dialectical thought under extremely difficult conditions. It offers a comprehensive illustration of the dialectical unity of a series of opposing categories, including strategy and tactics, offense and defense, "running" and "fighting," the virtual and the real, as well as concentration and dispersion. Mao Zedong was not constrained by temporary gains or losses, nor by rigid preexisting operational plans. Instead, he consistently grounded his command in the rapidly changing realities of the battlefield. Breaking free from tendencies toward escapism, adventurism, and empiricism, he demonstrated extraordinary flexibility, initiative, and creativity in directing the relatively weak Red Army to maneuver through mountainous terrain and river valleys while encircled by hundreds of thousands of enemy troops. Ultimately, he achieved a decisive success in strategic transfer, laying a solid foundation for the subsequent progress of the Long March.

"The Four Crossings of the Chishui River produced extraordinary military maneuvers. After the Zunyi Conference, Mao Zedong exploited contradictions among enemy forces and skillfully directed the Red Army to move across the battlefield with great flexibility, interweaving between large enemy formations. By seizing opportunities and concentrating forces, he inflicted heavy blows on the enemy and gradually gained strategic initiative. The Four Crossings of the Chishui River constitute a brilliant chapter in the history of our military, and Mao himself regarded it as one of his most successful military achievements." [7]

This miracle in the history of human warfare demonstrates that the outcome of war is determined not only by the size of forces or the superiority of weapons, but also by the commander's strategic thinking and philosophical insight. The military dialectics embodied in the Four Crossings of the Chishui River transcend specific temporal and spatial limitations. Its core principles—seeking truth from facts and analyzing concrete problems in light of concrete conditions—remain highly relevant for understanding and studying modern warfare today. It is not merely a military historical miracle, but also an enduring monument to human wisdom and the application of the fundamental principles of Marxism in the field of warfare.

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