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THE NIEN ARMY AND  
THEIR GUERRILLA WARFARE

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Finally, feinting was often used to inveigle the Nien's opponents to pursue them. Sometimes the Nien threw weapons and valuables on the ground to beguile the imperial soldiers to pick them up; enchanted with their gain, the government soldiers were caught off-guard when the Nien grimly counterattacked.

As a defensive method, the Nien frequently kept beacons in the vicinity where they encamped for the night, while the location of their real camp was under strict "black-out" control; no smoke or fire could be seen from a distance.<sup>48</sup> This lighted area was used as a decoy to confuse the government forces as to the rebels' whereabouts.

#### 4. *Patterns of the Nien Guerrilla Warfare*

Since the tactics of the Nien army have already been described, perhaps a few examples will illustrate the effectiveness of their strategy. That there are not many detailed official accounts of Nien's victories should not come as a surprise, because field commanders usually did not tell their emperor the truth unless the failure was so grave that an important general was killed and it could no longer be concealed; the commanders were afraid that a frank report would reveal their incompetence or neglect of duty. Even in such a case the memorial writer would carefully gloss everything over in order to avoid implication of self-inefficiency and subsequent punishment. In reading the collection of writings of Yüan Chia-san, Ting Pao-chen, and others, one would have thought that they were commanders of ever-victorious armies.

One of the most famous battles of the Nien army was at Kao-chuang-chi, Shantung, where Seng-ko-lin-ch'in was killed. The troops under the command of Seng-ko-lin-ch'in were crack cavalry from Mongolia and Manchuria, and infantry recruited from the several provinces of China's northwest. His horses were all carefully selected and his men well trained, so that his cavalry was undoubtedly the finest in the nation at that time. His weapons were inferior to those of the newly organized Huai army, but superior to those of the Nien army. How then could the Nien army survive against such a formidable enemy, to say nothing of defeating him?

The Nien army spent almost four months in early 1865 in exhausting Seng-ko-lin-ch'in's troops. Their commanders, Lai Wen-kuang, the valiant Taiping strategist, and Jen Chu, the daring fighter, led Seng's troops to Honan, with Seng in pursuit from city to city. He pursued them all the

<sup>48</sup> Examples of Nien's feigned retreat are too numerous to be quoted from *Fang-lüeh*, *Huai-chün p'ing Nien-chi*, etc. See also *Nien-chün*, I, 279, and III, 15.

way to Yen-ling in western Honan, intending to take a rest there. Noticing that they were not being pursued, the Nien army continued south and southeast, pretending to attack a city and spreading rumors that they were about to go on to Hupeh. Seng-ko-lin-ch'in was fooled, and on March 5 he ordered his troops from Yen-ling to pursue the Nien army, who soon learned that their enemy was on the way. They went south-eastward, then southwest, and finally east to Hsin-yang and north to Ch'ieh-shan, leaving a small unit at this last city, lest the enemy should lose track of them. A fortnight later Seng's force caught up with the Nien army. The latter returned to central Honan, and after a brief battle continued eastward until they crossed the Yellow River on March 27. Advancing day and night, they rushed directly to Shantung, overrunning Ts'ao-chou and Chi-ning within a few days.

The Nien crossed the Grand Canal in the district of Wen-shang on April 2. Seng-ko-lin-ch'in's force pursued them to Wen-shang, but the Nien fighters were in Ning-yang two days later, and then turned south-eastward. Pursued to Ch'ü-fou, the birthplace of Confucius, the Nien engaged in a skirmish with the government force, feigned defeat, and fled northward. They crossed the river, Wen-ho, on the outskirts of Tsinan, the capital of Shantung, while Seng's force did not cross the river until a few days later.

For two months the Nien army alternately proceeded day and night, covering a long distance in a short time, or circled around within a radius of a hundred *li*. Wherever they went, Seng-ko-lin-ch'in's troops followed two or more days later, rushing here and there, forward and backward, for over three thousand *li* without much rest. So worn out was the entire force that it was virtually at the mercy of the rebels.

But the Nien army still feared that Seng's force, though very tired, might yet be too strong to defeat. So they continued their favorite strategy for another month, returning to the river Wen-ho, and running southward to Tsou-hsien, the birthplace of Mencius, then turning eastward and crossing the border to the province of Kiangsu, where they overran several districts before returning to Tsou-hsien again.

Although defensive measures were being taken by the authorities of Chihli, Shantung, Honan, Anhwei, and Kiangsu, only Seng-ko-lin-ch'in's troops were used to pursue the Nien army. After this additional month of pursuit, both his infantry and his cavalry were worn out to the point of being unable to walk or ride. Even Seng's fingers were too sore to hold the reins any longer. Knowing that their enemy was completely exhausted, the Nien returned to Wen-shang in the middle of May, and decided that it was time for a decisive battle. They crossed the Grand Canal and

assembled several hundred thousand of their cavalry and infantry as well as local forces to await their pursuers.<sup>49</sup>

The huge sanguinary battle took place on May 18, 1865, in Kao-chuang-chi in the northwest of Ts'ao-chou, Shantung. When Seng-ko-lin-ch'in's cavalry and infantry reached Kao-chuang-chi, the Nien army was ready for them. Three small columns of cavalry and infantry were left in front of the big village to lure the imperialists to a forest outside the village, where the main Nien force lay in ambush. Seng-ko-lin-ch'in attacked as soon as he arrived. After some skirmishing the Nien army fled to the forest and pretended defeat. Seng-ko-lin-ch'in gave chase and promptly ran into the ambush, suffering a crushing defeat. He finally managed to withdraw to a village, which the Nien army quickly surrounded. The Nien immediately dug a long moat and assembled a large force to prevent the escape of the imperialists. Late that night Seng-ko-lin-ch'in led a desperate attempt to break out of the village. Although surrounded more than once, his forces cut their way out; they were confused, however, by the darkness and ran into more of the omnipresent Nien rebels and other local force. Seng-ko-lin-ch'in was wounded eight times, and was finally killed at Wu-chia-tien,<sup>50</sup> after an all-night battle in which he lost most of his troops, his best generals, and more than 5,000 horses.

This typifies the guerrilla warfare of the Nien army. They maneuvered in all directions for more than five months in the provinces of Honan, Shantung, and Kiangsu, using their highly mobile force to wear out the enemy. When the time seemed ripe they ambushed the enemy, surrounded them, and defeated them in a pitched battle.

The battlefield at Ts'ao-chou, now Ho-tse, Shantung, deserves some

<sup>49</sup> Sources of this battle are *Fang-lüeh*, 231, 5b-6 (very brief); Lo Erh-kang, NCTYTC, 37-41; Wang K'ai-yün, *Hsiang-chün chih*, 14.7; Wang Ting-an, *Hsiang-chün chi*, 16.10; Hsüeh Fu-ch'eng's account of Seng's death, *op. cit.*; HCPNC, 1.3-4; and Seng's biography in *Chung-hsing chiang-shuai pieh-chuan*, 16A.1-5; and Hummel's *Eminent Chinese*, 632-34.

<sup>50</sup> The name of the place where Seng-ko-lin-ch'in was killed varies. (1) Li Chia-chuang, see Seng's biography in CSK, 410.1; (2) Kao-chuang, or Kao-chuang-chi, or Kao-lou-chi, see *Fang-lüeh*, 237.15b-18, and Lo Erh-kang, NCTYTC, 39; (3) Wu-chia-tien, see the memorial of Ch'en Kuo-jui, a right-hand man who fought at the spot with Seng-ko-lin-ch'in; see also *Fang-lüeh*, 237.15b-18, and STCHCL, 4.14, and Kuo Ting-i, 1127. There are other diversified names. The discrepancy seems to come from a number of small villages covered by the great battle, and the pronunciations of the names of these villages being heard or transliterated differently. It is certain, however, that the distance has been invariably given as 15 li west or northwest of Ts'ao-chou. Ch'en Kuo-jui's report should be considered the primary source, and the compiler of the *Shan-tung chün-hsing chi-lüeh* also had first-hand information from Shantung.

attention. Ts'ao-chou had been a turbulent prefecture almost since classical times. It was the home of the great rebel leader, Huang Ch'ao, of the T'ang dynasty. Lying about 120 *li* west of the Grand Canal and 45 *li* southeast of the Yellow River, it is near the borders of Chihli, Anhwei, and Kiangsu. A plain prefecture, it was frequently afflicted by bandits. The famous gangster hideout, Liang-shan-po, was not far away. Moreover it was a rendezvous for local marauders and members of secret societies, and an ideal district for the maneuver of cavalry. This latter reason was probably why the Nien chose Ts'ao-chou for the great onslaught.

There are two more things to be noted in this great battle between the Nien and the imperial forces: first, that all of the able leaders among the Nien, the local bandits, and the secret societies participated in the attack on Seng-ko-lin-ch'in, who had killed many of their comrades in previous years; and secondly, that one of Seng's officers, a Major Kuei Hsi-chen, secretly supplied military information to Chang Tsung-yü.<sup>51</sup> These two points may lead us to speculate that successful guerrilla warfare depends, *inter alia*, on the support of the local people, familiarity with the geography and topography, and a good intelligence service. The Nien's eventual victory in crossing the Grand Canal at Tai-miao, Shantung, as we recall, was also helped by the "bandits" at Yün-ch'eng, who supplied the information of the weak spot in the defense line and urged the Nien to attack there.

Now let us investigate briefly another pattern of Nien strategy against the best troops of that time — the Hunan and Anhwei Braves, who were equipped with Western weapons.

The great battle of Yung-lung-ho, Hupeh, of course was preceded by a few other campaigns. In the winter of 1866, Jen Chu, Lai Wen-kuang, Niu Hung, and the other Nien leaders redeployed their crack cavalry and infantry from Honan to Hupeh. They ravaged the area of An-lu, planning to send one branch of their force across the river, Hsiang-ho, to take the territory of Szechwan, to keep one branch in Hupeh to support the Szechwan expedition, and to send another group across the Wu-sheng-kuan pass to make connections with the western Nien under Chang Tsung-yü.<sup>52</sup> Obviously the Nien did not move around aimlessly but according to precise plans.

The governor of Hupeh, Tseng Kuo-ch'üan, took steps to deal with the attempted invasion of the Nien army from Honan. He summoned the

<sup>51</sup> Kuo T'ing-i, *op. cit.*, p. 1127; and *I-shan chih*, 16.6. Other reasons for Seng's failure have been discussed before.

<sup>52</sup> *T'ing chün chi-lüeh* in *Nien-chün*, I, 250-57.

famous general, Kuo Sung-lin, from the border of Honan to bar the Nien entrance to the south; he also called for the best troops of the Anhwei army for the forthcoming war. He requested his brother, Tseng Kuo-fan, to send a strong force to Honan, and ordered the brave general, Pao Ch'ao, to move southward from Honan to Hupeh. His plan was to surround the Nien and annihilate them on the mountainous border between Hupeh and Honan.

Perceiving the government's strategy and finding their southward route barred, the Nien determined to dispose of the crack government troops before the rest of the government forces could gather.

As usual the Nien tried to wear out their enemy, and at the same time they accumulated provisions. The whole fast-moving army of the Nien was divided into four columns, each of which had a vanguard and a rearguard. When they met enemies, the vanguards advanced while the rearguards foraged; when they were being chased by the enemy, the rearguards would stay to fight while the vanguards could run for safety. When there was no enemy near, they searched for food and other booty at their leisure. They kept the government forces guessing their destinations and vainly pursuing them here and there.

Chang Shu-shan caught the Nien in Te-an, Hupeh, on December 27, 1866. He was eager to fight the rebels after this long hunt. He beat his drums and ordered the six battalions of his cavalry and infantry to rush ahead. They killed and wounded an uncounted number of enemies. Chang Shu-shan urged his soldiers to chase the defeated Nien persistently. But the Nien knew that General Chang's troops had been fighting and marching continually for a whole day without reinforcements. Therefore, near dusk, the pursuers were broken into two parts and each was encircled by the retreaters in ambush. Then the Nien cavalrymen showed themselves to be real butchers. In the deep of night several hundreds of Chang's bodyguards were killed, and finally Chang Shu-shan lost his life. Chang since 1854 had been an able general under Li Hung-chang and had built a good reputation during numerous combats against the Taipings.<sup>53</sup>

Yet this was still a minor victory leading to the great battle at Yung-lung-ho or Yin-lung-ho. On January 11, 1867, General Kuo Sung-lin of the Huai army challenged the Nien at Lo-chia-chi, east of An-lu, Hupeh. The Nien cavalry was hidden in a forest, and only a few hundred infantrymen appeared around the small town. Kuo divided his five battalions into three columns for destroying the rebels. After a decoy force retreated before government troops to a hilly and forested area, the concealed Nien

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.142-43.

attacked the pursuing army from all directions. Kuo was surrounded, wounded, and his young brother was killed. Four of his five battalions suffered heavy casualties.

The remnants of these battalions and provincial troops were reorganized to pursue the Nien, who continued to move in circles, confusing and wearying their pursuers to the extreme. A small rearguard of Nien was assigned daily to entice the enemy on, lest they should lose the track.

In the middle of February government reinforcements under Pao Ch'ao and Liu Ming-ch'uan reached the front. Pao Ch'ao's force, the T'ing-chün (a part of the Hunan army), consisted of approximately sixteen thousand men who were ordered to cooperate with Liu Ming-ch'uan's Ming-chün, which numbered about ten thousand. These two units formed the best forces of the Chinese army. The two leaders agreed to launch an all-out attack on the Nien at a fixed hour in the early morning of February 19, 1867.

Unfortunately Liu Ming-ch'uan and Pao Ch'ao were jealous of each other. Liu Ming-ch'uan personally led his cavalry and infantry across the Yung-lung-ho about two hours before the agreed time to attack the Nien. After a brief contact the Nien pretended to be defeated and ran away. While Liu was chasing the Nien about a mile or two away, shock troops came near Liu's provisions and ammunition which had been left at the other bank of the river. Liu realized that undoubtedly the attackers must be a concealed Nien force. He quickly ordered six battalions of half infantry and half cavalry to hurry back to the rear. Seeing that the Huai army was about to cross the river, the Nien launched a strong counter-attack.

Jen Chu ordered his cavalry to attack the left wing of Liu's forces; Niu Hung engaged the right wing; Lai Wen-kuang and Li Yün struck at the center. Liu's crack troops were badly routed, his assistant commanders were killed, and his soldiers fled at top speed, greatly encouraging the Nien. The latter crossed the river in pursuit of the broken government force, and Liu Ming-ch'uan suffered a crushing defeat, losing several hundred of his European-made rifles, and even the red button and peacock feathers from his official uniform.

The Nien army again gained success by the famous tactics of keeping the enemy on the move until exhausted, and then attacking with all their might. On this occasion, however, the Nien did not have the luck that they had had in cleaning up Seng-ko-lin-ch'in's force. While they were pursuing the enemy, Pao Ch'ao's T'ing-chün came to the front, in keeping with the pre-arranged time-table. His rapidly advancing force and the remnants of Liu's defeated troops made a pincer attack on the Nien that

cost the latter over one thousand veterans captured, "more than ten thousand killed, and over five thousand horses and mules lost" (according to governments reports). Official sources added that Jen Chu was seriously wounded, and Lai Wen-kuang had disappeared.

In the official account of Pao Ch'ao's *T'ing-chün chi-lüeh*, no casualties were mentioned at all. Instead Pao Ch'ao killed "more than ten thousand and arrested four thousand Nien-fei" in a few days' pursuit toward Honan. But later in the *T'ing-chün chi-lüeh*, General Pao begged leave to recover from his wounds. These wounds were said to have been received during previous fighting. After a ten day leave, which had been granted, he asked permanent leave. The emperor's kind words of "loyalty" and "filial piety" failed to persuade him to resume his duty and be sent to Shensi, or to pursue the Nien continually at Honan. The inside story of Pao's retirement was not simply illness from wounds, but rather the result of a great quarrel with Liu Ming-ch'üan. The guns and official costumes which had been captured by the Nien from Liu Ming-ch'üan's force were recaptured by Pao Ch'ao and sent to Liu's headquarters the next morning, the day of the battle at Yung-lung-ho. Liu was so embarrassed by the victory of his rival, General Pao Ch'ao, that he falsely reported to Li Hung-chang that Pao Ch'ao had failed to keep the time designated for the general attack on the bandits, and that it was later suddenly reported that a strong bandit unit was active in the rear of Liu's army and this affected the morale of his force. It was actually Pao Ch'ao's force, and not the Nien's. Thus, Pao Ch'ao was blamed for the failure, although he had been victorious. Dismayed by severe criticism from the court, he became ill and insisted on retiring from the army, despite the mediation of Tseng Kuo-fan, who was the superior of both Pao Ch'ao and Li Hung-chang. Pao Ch'ao retired and died at his home in 1886. Liu Ming-ch'üan, however, continued to fight against the Nien until the very end,<sup>54</sup> but his stubborn and courageous fighting may have been stimulated by the necessity of keeping up his reputation as a fighter after he sent in that report in which he whitewashed himself and shifted the blame to Pao Ch'ao.

Pao Ch'ao's report of victory was greatly exaggerated, for before long (March 23, 1867), the Nien were able to win another great battle, in which Tseng Kuo-ch'üan's relative, P'eng Yü-chü, was killed. P'eng was

<sup>54</sup> *T'ing-chün chi-lüeh* reproduced in *Nien-chün*, I, 250-268; see Hsüeh Fu-ch'eng's description of the Yin-lung-ho battle in his *Yung-an hai-wai wen-pien*, 4.25-27; Tseng Kuo-fan, *Tseng Wen-cheng-kung tsou-i*, 1 & 2; Wang K'ai-yün, *Hsiang-chün chih*, 14.12; *Huai-chün p'ing Nien chi*, 3.9b; *Nien-chün ti yün-tung chan*, 42-44; and Pao Ch'ao's biography in Hummel, *op. cit.* 610. Note Yung-lung-ho is also written in some sources as Yin-lung-ho.



a lieutenant governor of Hupeh and deputy commander of Tseng Kuo-ch'üan; he and Tseng had fought side by side in recovering Nanking. The Nien were compelled to return from T'ai-hu, Anhwei, to Te-an, Hupeh. To combat them P'eng — it was recorded — commanded more than ten thousand troops of the army in Hupeh. After losing about 300 lives, the Nien ran away and crossed a river. P'eng very proudly chased them for more than ten *li*, in order to uphold his glorious record in fighting the Taipings. Suddenly he found his force trapped by the Nien's cavalry. He was killed, and his force crushed. The local authority of Te-an buried 2,812 of P'eng's officers and soldiers in the battlefield. This great failure was also a blow to the prestige of the governor of Hupeh, Tseng Kuo-ch'üan, who said the total mortality of his men in this battle was more than 3,000, including perhaps subsequent deaths from wounds.<sup>55</sup>

Another illustration was a battle at Shih-tzu-p'o near Sian, Shensi. The main force of about 14,000 government troops originally posted in that province to fight the Moslem rebels was commanded by Liu Jung, one of the top generals in Tseng Kuo-fan's Hunan Army. General Liu's poorly-fed and ill-clad troops marched in biting cold winter weather for several hundred *li* from the west toward the provincial capital. Before they drew near to the destination, the Nien excited them to a chase, moving from Hua-yin to Wei-nan, Lan-t'ien, and Pa-ch'ao; this lasted for nearly a month. Since Liu's governorship of Shensi had been taken by another man, he was in a low mood; his troops were commanded by a deputy, and their morale was also very low. When Liu's army reached the suburb of Sian on January 22, a general attack against the Nien was ordered on the following day. Knowing the condition of the exhausted and starving government soldiers, the Nien sent 30,000 cavalry to lie in ambush at Shih-li-p'o near the bridge, Pa-ch'iao, 25 *li* east of Sian, with a vanguard to lure the enemy to the spot. The Hunan army was then encircled many times and was cut into small groups. While confused hand-to-hand fighting was going on, a heavy snow was falling. Because the firearms were affected by the wet weather, the shivering and starving soldiers could hardly fire their guns. Within half a day, Liu Jung's whole army of more than thirty battalions, about 15,000 soldiers, and a squadron of Mongolian cavalry were "almost annihilated," as reported by official sources; two provincial commanders and a large number of officers were killed.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>55</sup> *Nien-chün*, I, 56, and V, 326, 348, 356-57.

<sup>56</sup> The two provincial commanders-in-chief (*i-tu*) were Hsiao Te-yang and Yang Te-shen. See Liu Jung, *Yang-hui-t'ang wen-chi*, reproduced in *Nien-chün*, VI, 157-160. See also *Nien-chün*, I, 53; and Lo Erh-kang, *Nien-chün te yün-tung chan*, 45-46.

From these illustrations one can perhaps see the pattern of the Nien's guerrilla tactics. Cleverly using all the above-mentioned tricks, they kept running to weary their opponents, then selected a good time and place to battle them, and finally ambushed, surrounded, and annihilated them. They counterattacked only when their enemies were worn out; they seldom challenged well-rested soldiers in military camps. The Nien's final attack was very vehement but short, lasting not more than one day and night. They either won a great victory or retreated quickly for safety. Thus with poor weapons they could defeat the experienced and well-equipped government troops whose proud generals — until they had learned bitter lessons — usually despised the Nien's military efficiency. Liu Jung admitted this failing in a private letter to Tso Tsung-t'ang; Tso, as well as Liu Ming-ch'uan, *et al*, had the same attitude toward the rebels.<sup>57</sup>

### 5. Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Guerrilla Warfare

When the enemy advances, we retreat;  
 When the enemy encamps, we harass;  
 When the enemy is tired, we attack;  
 When the enemy retreats, we pursue.<sup>58</sup>

As we examine the guerrilla warfare of the Nien in the mid-nineteenth century, we cannot but think that the same tactics, called "yü-chi-chan" (literally, "roving-attack warfare"), were used by the Chinese Communists in the 1940's, and their early methods are partly summed up in the short verse quoted above. Mao Tse-tung has written a great deal about "The Chinese revolutionary war and the problems of tactics," and "Strategic problems of guerrilla warfare in resistance against Japan."<sup>59</sup> In these

<sup>57</sup> Seng-ko-lin-ch'in's death may have been caused by his contempt of the Nien; hence he kept chasing them daringly and ceaselessly. See *Nien-chün*, VI, 160. Tso Tsung-t'ang "thought the Nien-fei would not amount to much" — Beal, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>58</sup> *Mao Tse-tung hsüan-chi* (1952 ed.) I, 203-204.

<sup>59</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *Chung-kuo ko-ming chan-cheng ti chan-lüeh wen-t'i*; "Kang-Jih yu-chi chan-cheng ti chan-lüeh wen-t'i"; Shen-ma shih yu-chi chan; Lun yu chi chan; "Lun ch'ih-chiu chan" in *Chiu-kuo yen-lun hsüan-chi*, pp. 73-158. Most of these pamphlets are now collected in *Mao Tse-tung hsüan-chi*. — There are a number of writings on guerrilla warfare by other Communist leaders: Chang Yun-i, "Yu-chi chan yü min-chung yün-tung"; Chu Te, *K'ang-Jih yu-chi chan-cheng*; Lin Piao, "Lun Hua-pei cheng-kuei chün ti ken-pen chiaio-hsün yü yu-chi chan-cheng fa-chan ti t'iao-chien" in *Chien-jiang*, no. 43 (July, 1938), 54-59; Liu Po-ch'eng, "Kuan-yü p'ing-yüan yu-chi chan chu wen-t'i" in *Ch'ün-chung*, III, no. 11 (August, 1939), 299-302; P'eng Te-huai, "Yu-chi chan shu" (Guerrilla tactics) in *Pai-lu-chün-ti chan-lüeh ho chan-shu*; and Yeh Chien-ying, "Yu-chi-chan shang mu-chien chün-shih wen-t'i" in *Ch'ün-chung*, III.10 (July, 1939), 276-277.