

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Chinese Perspectives on the Nien Rebellion

Edited by
Elizabeth J. Perry



CHINESE
PERSPECTIVES
ON
THE
Nien Rebellion



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Edited with an introduction
by Elizabeth J. Perry

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Preface

The study of peasant rebellion constitutes a major research field among contemporary Chinese historians. This book brings together translated excerpts of primary and secondary materials dealing with one of the largest rebellions in Chinese history: the Nien Rebellion of 1851-1868. The selections have been made with two main purposes in mind. First, they have been chosen with an eye toward introducing some new types of source materials for the study of Chinese peasant rebellion. Original field research conducted by Chinese scholars in the late 1950s uncovered important information not contained in official documentary collections. Second, the selections offer a sample of the nature of historiographical debate within Chinese academic circles. It is hoped that the selections will prove of interest not only to students of the Nien, but also to others curious about the lines of scholarly controversy within the People's Republic of China.

The selection of items was made by me; the translations were done jointly by Dr. Sun-ming Wong (a specialist in T'ang history) and myself. Although we have of course attempted in our translations to be faithful to the originals, in some cases we have omitted repetitive or extraneous phrases.

In addition to Dr. Wong, a number of other people deserve thanks for their help in compiling this volume. Professors Kyung-Sook Park and Linda Grove kindly located the originals of several of the selections in Japanese libraries. Arlene

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E. J. P.

Seattle,
May 1981

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Introduction

Following the demise of the "Gang of Four" and subsequent academic liberalization in China, a new outpouring of historical scholarship has commenced. As with historiography in the days before the Cultural Revolution, much attention continues to be focused on the subject of peasant rebellion. Now, however, along with the nationwide emphasis on productive forces rather than on class struggle as the primary motive force of history, there is room for a less positive appraisal of the role of peasant uprisings. As the perceived importance of class struggle recedes into the background, so too does the need to portray China's peasant rebellions as a glorious protorevolutionary tradition, leading inexorably toward Communist victory in 1949. Quite the contrary, in tune with the current dictum that China remains in large part "feudal," historians have set about the task of reevaluating the character of various peasant uprisings — stressing the many "backward" aspects of the movements.¹

In part because this new trend stands in such marked contrast to earlier approaches, and in part because a comparatively open style of academic discussion now prevails in China, conferences and writings on the topic of peasant rebellion often reflect an exciting spirit of controversy. This is perhaps most evident for the Taiping Rebellion. The cornerstone of earlier claims for the "revolutionary" character of Chinese peasant uprisings, the Taipings constitute the most complex case for testing out the current stress on "feudal" remnants. In January

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of 1980, I was fortunate to be invited to participate in a colloquium on the Taiping Rebellion held at Nanjing University, a major center of Taiping studies.² Focused on the question of the Taiping land program, the colloquium was memorable for its lively debate over whether Taiping land policy represented the "feudal" interests of an entrenched landlord-bureaucratic class, rather than the "revolutionary" interests of a conscious peasantry. Opinions were far from uniform, and discussion evidenced a serious and sophisticated effort to come to grips with issues that vex students of peasant rebellion around the globe. Glib statements about the "progressive" nature of rural insurrection could no longer go unchallenged; now rebel leadership, ideology, and organization must all be carefully scrutinized in order to arrive at a more balanced assessment.

If this new trend has had a sobering influence on Taiping studies, its implications for the study of more typical Chinese peasant rebellions are no less important. The previous tendency to exaggerate the revolutionary nature of any instance of popular resistance was particularly distorting in the many cases of movements that, unlike the Taipings, offered scant evidence of any political program. Perhaps the most notable such example is the Nien Rebellion, a massive insurgency that gripped North China at the same time that the Taipings were active in the South. In marked contrast to their southern contemporaries, the Nien lacked any detailed land policy, religious belief system, or administrative structure. The movement was in many respects a reflection, rather than a supersedure, of parochial peasant circumstances. While these limitations previously rendered the Nien a troublesome topic of study for Chinese scholars, present trends open the way for a rekindling of interest in this exemplar of a so-called "feudal" rebellion.

A major handicap that anyone interested in the Nien, or for that matter most other peasant uprisings, must inevitably face is the unfortunate fact that the rebels themselves left very few documents for scholarly perusal. Here again the Taipings, with their generous array of internal records,³ are the exception rather than the rule. The great majority of peasant uprisings,

their participants seldom literate, bequeathed precious little in the way of written documentation. How then does one go about studying these movements? Through what medium are we to understand the more typical, yet less accessible, peasant uprisings? For some time, the response of many Western scholars was simply to deny the possibility altogether. Of course government and gentry records could be consulted to ascertain the bare outlines of a movement, but one seemed ill-advised to attempt a more penetrating analysis. Today, fortunately, the prognosis for research on Chinese peasant uprisings looks far more promising indeed. Thanks to the work of Susan Naquin⁴ and others, we now know of the availability and value of rebel confessions for movements besides the Taipings. To be sure, the Eight Trigrams Rebellion studied by Naquin was unusual in that its invasion of the Forbidden City itself occasioned an imperial inquisition which elicited an extraordinarily detailed compilation of rebel testimony. Nevertheless, although few other rebellions will offer the same wealth of confessional documentation, this type of source promises to be useful for the study of many other insurrections.

In the case of the Nien, for example, publication of the confession of rebel leader Chang Lo-hsing⁵ has made available an important source for students of that rebellion. Unfortunately, the high number of Nien who died on the battlefield, combined with the Ch'ing government's practice during the later stages of the rebellion of executing Nien chieftains on the spot, has meant that few other confessions from that period have survived. For the early Nien, on the other hand, there are a number of depositions in the Ming-Ch'ing archives of the Palace Museum in Peking.⁶ Heretofore untapped by either Chinese or Western scholars, these materials give an inside perspective on Nien leaders and their activities in the formative years of the movement. In the participants' own words — filtered through official interrogators and scribes, to be sure — the documents provide detail on the family background, organization, and behavior of the early Nien. Reading through the testimony, one begins to grasp a sense of the Nien as flesh and blood people,

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rather than simply as statistics in a summary memorial. Here we find peasants recounting in simple vernacular language the concerns and experiences of themselves, their family, and their friends.

Valuable as the confessions are for understanding rebellion,⁷ one must not overlook the fact that these are nevertheless government documents. Extracted and prepared by state officials, the depositions may be unreliable on several counts. Some of the confessions were quite possibly embroidered by local officials so as to present their own efforts to the throne in the best possible light. Even more likely, detained rebels were probably often persuaded to confess to those things that they knew their interrogators wanted to hear. Torture, a regular feature of the interrogation procedure,⁸ presumably resulted in more than a few embellishments to the testimony. Thus rebel confessional statements — filtered as they were through official channels — may suffer from many of the same biases as other government documents. For this reason, Chinese scholars have adopted a research strategy of trying to move beyond official sources in their study of rural rebellion.

One approach they have undertaken is to conduct field investigations in the local areas where uprisings were centered. Through interviews with descendants of the rebels, the researchers endeavor to expose an underlying peasant perspective that may have been obscured in official accounts. While this method is of course applicable only to rebellions that occurred recently enough in time to be remembered by the local people, the remarkable recall powers of an illiterate populace qualify a surprising number of rebellions for this approach. In the first two decades of the People's Republic of China, historians carried out major field research projects on the Bai Lang uprising (1911-1914), the Boxers (1899-1900), the Taipings 1851-1864), the Nien (1851-1868), and several other rebel movements. For the Nien in particular, the paucity of other reliable documentation gives the investigation data a special significance. Moreover, because the Nien generated an exceptionally rich fund of folksongs and folk stories, field re-