

**The Nien Army
and
Their Guerrilla Warfare
1851-1868**

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S. Y. TENG

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THEIR GUERRILLA WARFARE

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To My Parents

whose struggles enabled me
to gain a higher education

Preface

If one is to understand the recent developments in China, he can do so only through a careful scrutiny of Chinese society, of the forces and traditions interacting within its structure.

The present undertaking is a step toward this goal. It is a study of a Chinese rebellion, traditionally known as the *Nien-fei* or Nien-bandits movement; now these rebels are called the *Nien-chün*, or the Nien army. Although the new term is preferable to the old, the historical name is also used occasionally. The members of this movement were active in central and northern China for nearly two decades in the middle of the nineteenth century. The subject is a major social and military phenomenon, of which a thorough examination will help us get a clearer picture of the decline and fall of China in the late nineteenth century. Undoubtedly, as we shall see, the Nien army accelerated the political disintegration of the Manchu empire and served as one of the forerunners of the 1911 revolution.

The research work on this topic started in 1950 with the attempt to collect as many original sources as possible, and to analyze or interpret them as far as facts permit. The first version was completed and accepted for publication in 1953. A few months later, the publication of the six-volume collection of source material entitled the *Nien-chün*, compiled by a number of scholars in Peking, made it necessary for me to take the manuscript out of the publisher's hands for a thorough revision. This revision work, in the midst of other duties, took many months to complete. When I finally returned the manuscript to the publisher who had accepted it before, I had lost the priority of publication. The appearance of my work would have been postponed until other monographs which had been accepted during the meantime could be published, and that would have taken several years for the small press to accomplish.

During the long delay, a few books about the Nien appeared in the English and Chinese languages. The University of Washington, Seattle, published in 1954 Siang-tseh Chiang's *The Nien Rebellion*, which is a good Ph.D. dissertation, but certainly not without shortcomings and

errors.¹ Because of the publication of this book, the publisher refused to issue my manuscript. But no book on the French revolution, for example, or the American Civil War, is final. There are already about a dozen books dealing with Chinese Communism or Sino-Soviet relations around the 1920's. No new publication contains entirely new facts, ideas, and interpretations. Nor is it possible to avoid duplications or overlapping entirely. Furthermore, there is no point to cavil at earlier works in order to justify a new one. Suffice it to say that I used the six-volume source material; Dr. Chiang had no chance to use it. I emphasized the guerrilla warfare of the Nien army; Dr. Chiang did not. I have covered different facets of the Nien and offered varied emphases and interpretations, which sometimes I briefly pointed out in a footnote and often times not, because I do not intend to criticize others unnecessarily.

Then Lo Erh-kang published a revised edition of his *Nien-chün ti yün-t'ung chan*² (The Mobile Warfare of the Nien Army) with a new title called *Tai-p'ing T'ien-kuo hsin-chün ti yün-tung chan* (The Mobile Warfare of the New Army of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom) (Shanghai, 1955). The title of this booklet sounds wonderful. Its contents, however, are the same as the original except that a new preface has been added and all references to the Nien before 1857 have been omitted. As a matter of fact, Mr. Lo ignores Nien's existence of almost half a century before the beginning of the Taiping movement. He makes mistakes such as in his assertion that the Nien and the Taipings had no contact until 1856; I found that they had contact in 1853 during the Taiping northern expedition through Anhwei, Honan and Chihli. He claims that the Nien had no organization; yet I have a chapter dealing with Nien's organization. Mr. Lo admitted that the "great defect in his little book is lack of source material," which is true, for he used but a small fraction of the sources I have quoted. After the fall of Nanking, the Taipings fled southward to Kiangsi, Fukien and Kwangtung where they were wiped out in 1866. The Taiping column on its way from North China to rescue Nanking was intercepted and harassed by the government soldiers. It was the Nien army which saved the Taipings from meeting the same fate in the south. To be sure, Lai Wen-kuang did try to reorganize the Taipings and the Niens, but the name of the long-lived "Nien" should not be entirely erased from all documents by Lo Erh-kang. The new Nien-Taiping

¹ See my review of this book in the *Far Eastern Quarterly*, XIV, 3 (May, 1955), 412-413. Although I hinted the shortcomings in this study, I did not bother to point out the minor errors such as mislocation of footnotes, references, typographical errors, unfinished words (p. 155).

² For Chinese characters please see the bibliography.

allies, as we may call, lasted more than two years (July 1864–Oct. 1867). Thereafter they were split into two separate groups, about which Lo Erh-kang seems to have ignored the fact that while the Eastern Nien, with more Taiping remnants, were under the general command of Lai Wen-kuang, the Western Nien, including mainly Nien veterans, were under the original Nien leader, Chang Tsung-yü. Beginning in October 1866, the two divisions of the Nien forces fought separately; they never met again. Lai Wen-kuang's Eastern Nien were annihilated by government troops in January 1868; Chang's Western Nien survived seven months longer. They might have lived longer in Shensi had they not been urged to return to Shantung to help Lai's Eastern Nien. Thus the Nien rebellion cannot be neglected.

A third publication is Chiang Ti's *Nien-chiün shih ch'u-t'an* (A preliminary investigation of the history of the Nien army) (Peking, 1956). In Chiang's general survey of the Nien history, with emphasis on the last several years and on the Nien-Moslem relations, he quotes Lo's revised book mentioned above; but he does not follow Lo's new terms and interpretation. Two 1957 publications also ignore Lo's fancy title (see bibliography under Chiang Shih-jung and Ch'en Po-ch'en). This means that Lo's thesis is not accepted by Communist scholars in China working on the Nien rebellion.

It is regrettable that I am obliged to engage in some mental swordplay with my old friend Mr. Lo and other co-workers in the same field. Nevertheless, I am grateful for the study of the Nien by Lo Erh-kang, Chiang Siang-tseh, Chiang Ti and others. In referring to their works I have benefited by the gathering of information, by cross-checking, and by clarification of many doubtful points. A Chinese proverb says that he who goes aboard a small boat first lands last. I am sure this book will not be the last on the Nien army; there will be more to come.

From the enormous amount of collected material, only a brief outline can be presented in the following pages. In tracing the major facets of the Nien army, I have sought to keep a number of questions in mind. What, for example, was the significance of the Nien army to modern Chinese history? Were they merely local gangsters or did they operate as a nationalist movement? If they were the latter, to what extent can they be considered as such a movement? Was theirs a peculiar rebellion, or was it one of many other rebellions in Chinese history? Was it caused by economic depression alone, or by political and social collapse as well? And what was the effect of the Nien army on the fate of the Ch'ing dynasty? This essay attempts to find answers to these questions. A number of suggestions and interpretations concerning the social, economic,

and geographical surroundings of the Nien army are also offered. This study of the Nien movement — including its background, activities, and influence — may thus be of some help in obtaining a better understanding of modern China from backstage, since every society always has long roots in the past which can neither decay nor be changed overnight. I do not presume to predict the course of Chinese rebellion or revolution. However, in the following pages I shall observe some general tendencies.

Perhaps such a small work as this may be of some assistance not only to students of Far Eastern history and of the political and social sciences, but also — because of the importance of guerrilla warfare in the Nien movement — to correspondents or military observers in present-day China. The military tactics of the Nien army, including the surprise raid, the ambush, the night attack, and notably the feint, are still largely used today. The biographies of Chang Tsung-yü, Lai Wen-kuang, and Jen Chu may justifiably be included among those of the principal guerrilla leaders of the world.

This study is prepared for both experts and nonexperts to read. A Sinologist may prefer first to read the conclusion, in which there are some ideas which hitherto seem not to have been expressed by other workers on the Nien army and modern Chinese history. He may then like to skip to chapters V and VII before proceeding to the beginning. At any rate, the material is presented in a simple and yet comprehensive way (as a whole fish is served on a Chinese dinner table); the reader is at liberty to start from any part he likes.

I gratefully acknowledge my many sources of assistance: the American Philosophical Society and Indiana University for grants-in-aid for research; Dr. Charles S. Gardner for his generosity in lending me his valuable collection of very rare illustrations concerning the warfare against the Nien army, some of which are inserted in this volume; Professors Harry Elmer Barnes, Derk Bodde, John K. Fairbank, Chao-ying Fang, Robert H. Ferrell, L. Carrington Goodrich, George Humphrey, Jeremy Ingalls, Ralph L. Powell, G. Nye Steiger, Mary C. Wright, L. S. Yang and others for reading the manuscript and making valuable suggestions. I am indebted to Dr. K'ai-ming Ch'iu and his colleague, Zunvair Yue; Dr. K. T. Woo and his associates; Mr. Howard P. Linton, and especially Mr. Hsü Chia-pi, in the Libraries of Chinese and Japanese at Harvard University, the Library of Congress, and Columbia University, respectively, for their kindness in opening their collections to the writer for his research; and to Nancy Adams, Norma Burns, Marilyn Gibson, Ervin Kapos, Roger

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August, 1960

S. Y. T.

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I. Introduction

Although nineteenth-century Europe enjoyed a period of outstanding peace, nineteenth-century China was convulsed with prolonged and savage warfare. The most widely known of these Chinese conflicts are: the "Opium," or first Anglo-Chinese, war (1839-1842); the second Anglo-Chinese war (1858-1860); the Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895); and the Boxer Uprising (1900). In addition, there occurred the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864); the Nien Rebellion (1851-1868); the Southwest Moslem Rebellion in Yünnan (1855-1873); the Northwest Moslem Rebellion in Shensi and Kansu (1862-1878); and the Miao Rebellion in Kweichow and Hunan (1855-1873). There were many other uprisings led by secret societies and by poverty-stricken peasants. The "Opium war" and other international wars, as well as the Taiping Rebellion, have been studied by Chinese and Western scholars.¹ The other wars listed here have been largely or entirely neglected.

Of these various wars, the Nien Rebellion has long been over-shadowed by the Taiping movement. Nevertheless, it is important, and a treatise on the Nien can shed considerable light on the Taiping revolt; the two movements were closely associated, and stemmed from the same socio-political background. All these wars and rebellions contributed signally, of course, to the fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1911.

A survey of the background and an analysis of the causes of the Nien movement can help social scientists in tracing the pattern of Chinese rebellion or revolution for the purpose of comparison with similar movements in such other parts of the world as Poland and France.² And since

¹ See the bibliography of Eugene P. Boardman's *Christian Influence Upon the Ideology of the Taiping Rebellion* (Madison, Wisc., 1952), pp. 155-170.

² Some similarities may be found between Polish and Chinese peasants. In the famous work of William Isaac Thomas, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (New York, 1927), I find the following statement: "The Polish peasant community has developed during many centuries complicated systems of beliefs and rules of behavior sufficient to control social life under ordinary circumstances." (vol. I, p. 2). This may be applied to Chinese society, too. The French Revolution showed "traces of having originated at a time when the land was almost the only form of wealth and when the possessors of the land were the masters of those who needed it to work and to live." Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton,

the Nien army were guerrilla fighters, and their fame spread quickly into north China,³ their history may also interest those who wish to know a little of the forerunners of present-day guerrilla tactics.

1. *A Bird's-eye View of the Nien Army*

The "Nien-fei" or the Nien army is also referred to in other books as the "Nien Party" (Nien-t'ang), the "mounted bandits" or "troops of mounted robbers."⁴ In the nineteenth century, they overran several provinces in Central and Northern China, causing anarchy for seventeen years. Though they were considered to have no higher aim than brigandage, they defeated more than twenty imperial commanders, including those of very substantial military reputation at the time. For a short period, they became a real source of danger to the Manchu regime.

The Nien army owed their strength and endurance principally to their mobility and to their guerrilla tactics. They seldom fought a pitched battle, but retreated before an imperial army until its soldiers were worn out with fatigue; then they turned upon their pursuers and dealt them severe blows. The Nien army made alliances not only with the Taipings but also with other local bandits and members of secret societies to combat the imperial army and the local militia. The Manchu government tried various means to suppress them: it sent imperial troops, to no avail; it trained local militia, again to no avail, since many of the militia became bandits and turned against the imperial government.

1947), p. 1. "Before the eve of 1789, the great majority of Frenchmen — from 20 to 22 million out of 26 million — were engaged in agriculture. There was a disgruntled but ineffective minority of farmer nobles and other privileged people, a mass of land-hungry and ignorant peasants with no definite political aims. The wheat crop of 1788 had been poor." C. Crane Brinton, *A Decade of Revolution* (New York, 1934), 8-9, 22, and 29.

³ Having wrought such great havoc in North China, the Nien army left an indelible impression on the people. Some of the Nien documents entitled *Ch'ung-chia hang*, or *Poor Families' Songs*, were recently discovered by Jung Meng-yüan during his investigations in Shantung, and the new materials thus obtained are now kept in the Division of Modern History Studies in Chung-kuo ko-hsüeh yen-chiu yüan, the Research Institute of Science, in China. See *T'ai-p'ing T'ien-kuo ko-ming yün-tung lun-wen-chi*, 121 and 127.

⁴ The term, "Nien-t'ang," is used in Li Ting-sheng's *Chung-kuo chin-tai shih*, and in Chang Wen-ch'ing's *Nien-t'ang ch'i-i*, a popular account of the Nien movement. The first mention of "Nien-fei" and "Nien-t'ang" in an official source was in the years 1832 and 1851, respectively (CSL-TK 222.19 and HF 36.16). "Nien-ping" (Nien soldiers or army) was used in Han Shih-shih's *Man-ch'ing hsing-wang shih* (Shanghai, 1913), 2.8b. — Complete titles for CSL and other abbreviations are given in the bibliography.

After the Nien army killed the famous Mongolian general, Seng-ko-lin-ch'in, in 1865, no other outstanding Manchu or Mongolian soldier comparable to Seng appeared during the rest of the dynasty. The Manchu emperor again had to rely on the Chinese forces of Tseng Kuo-fan and Li Hung-chang, the great Chinese generals who had already crushed the Taiping Rebellion, to suppress the Nien army. It thus was during the fighting against the Nien that military power in China shifted from the hands of the Manchus to the hands of the Chinese.

The good leadership of Tseng and Li, and the better pay and superior arms of their troops, compelled the Nien army to split into two parts and to develop in different directions. One part was known as Tung-nien, or the Nien army of the East (i.e., Shantung, etc.), while the other part, known as Hsi-nien, or the Nien army of the West, was active in Shensi. The Eastern Nien were suppressed in January, 1868, and the Western Nien in August of the same year. According to official sources,⁵ this long campaign cost the central government 17,972,000 taels of silver, 8,491,000 strings of cash and 700,009,000 taels of paper currency, while the cost to the local people in defense measures, militia, and devastation was incalculable. Certainly a rebellion of this magnitude, which made such demands on financial and untold human resources, merits careful examination.

2. The Meaning and Nature of "Nien"

Let us start, then, with four problems. What is the meaning of *nien*? When did the Nien-fei arise? Where did they first appear? And what was the nature of the Nien movement?

The Chinese character for *nien* or *nieh* has two or three interchangeable forms.⁶ *Nien*, as a verb, means to nip with the fingers, to take up, to take a pinch, to pursue or to chase; as a noun, it means a twist of paper, a group of people, a band, or a horde. When it is applied to Nien-fei, it has half a dozen meanings according to different interpretations. The word *fei* means bandits or rebels.

In the first place, *nien* — "to light an oiled spill" — was originally a game. From many gazetteers⁷ of Honan and Anhwei, we know that there

⁵ Chiao-p'ing *Nien-fei fang-lüeh*, 320.42b. This will hereafter be cited as *Fang-lüeh*.

⁶ For the Chinese characters, see the index.

⁷ Such as *Shou-kuang hsien-chih* (Shantung), 15-20; *Ch'ien-shan hsien-chih*, 8.11b; *Wo-yang feng-t'u chi* (Anhwei), 15.8; *Lai-yang hsien-chih* (Shantung), the last chapter, p. 6.

was a game called "nien," which consisted of twisting paper into spills, or of burning twists of oiled paper as a kind of "dragon dance." According to the famous work *Hsiang-chün chih* (An Account of the Hunan Army) written by Wang K'ai-yün, the Nien-fei plundered people by holding torchlights which were made of twisted oiled paper.⁸

This statement is too terse, and the same paragraph was revised and explained by Wang Ting-an in a book with a similar title, *Hsiang-chün chi*, in which he says: "We do not know when the trouble of the Nien-fei began. Some say that the countryfolk twisted oiled paper rolls, burned them for dragon processions for the purpose of exercising demons and for driving away pestilence, and this kind of parade was called *nien*. Later on, these people took violent revenges, or threatened others for their money, or kidnapped people to compel ransom; they gradually became robbers. . . ."⁹ Although Wang Ting-an's *Hsiang-chün chi* is inferior to Wang K'ai-yün's *Hsiang-chün chih* in faithful historiography and lucid style, the former's explanation of the meaning of *nien* is, because more cautious, perhaps more trustworthy.

Secondly, *Nien-fei* may be interpreted as meaning "turban bandits." A source book compiled in 1874 supplies us the information that the boatmen and porters along the Grand Canal used *fu*, or turbans to cover their heads. They had organizations and chieftains, and they robbed people in years of dearth. Thus they were called *Fu-fei*, or "turban bandits," and were usually referred to together with the Nien-fei.¹⁰ This account shows that there is obviously a difference between the *Fu-fei* and Nien-fei. One early English editor, however, in 1883, combined the two into one by saying the term Nien-fei is derived from "greased turbans worn by the rebels as a distinctive mark."¹¹ This interpretation also appears in Giles' *Chinese-English Dictionary* for the Nien-fei. The Chinese scholar, Wang K'ai-yün, said approximately the same in 1885, that "The Nien-fei probably began with gatherings of the vagrants and the unemployed of Shan-tung, where some of these people united themselves by wearing turbans as a symbol and some by holding torchlight [processions]."¹²

Thirdly, *nien* means "stuck together like quickly mustered vagabond fighters", like something grasped quickly in a hand, and they disperse quickly, too, as one looses his hand and whatever is held drops and breaks into pieces. This delineation is made by the compilers of the *General*

⁸ Wang K'ai-yün, *Hsiang-chün-chih*, 14.1.

⁹ Wang Ting-an, *Hsiang-chün chi*, 16.1.

¹⁰ *Shan-tung chün-hsing chi-lüeh*, 17.1 ff.

¹¹ See "Notes and inquiries" in *China Review*, XII, no. 3 (1883), 207.

¹² See note 8.

Gazetteer of Hupeh,¹³ which also reveals something of the nature of the Nien-fei, though it is full of imagination.

Fourthly, Nien-fei may mean "Ku-fei." A modern historian, Kuo T'ing-i, said that the *Nien-fei* were similar to the *Ku-fei*, who were bands of robbers during the 1920's.¹⁴ This remark describes the nature of the Nien-fei, and perhaps also indicates the fundamental meaning of the word. Since the Nien were subdivided into *ku*, as seen from frequent reports to the throne mentioning several *ku* or bands of Nien, the Nien-fei and the Ku-fei were, indeed, somewhat similar though not identical.

A semantic or etymological approach to the word *nien* bears little fruit. Further attempts have been made to search for its meaning in local gazetteers, in which some descriptions are not entirely applicable. For instance, one source indicates that the Nien-fei were named after their smuggling of salt by "taking up" (*nien*) small carts;¹⁵ and another one says that since they twisted (*nien*) incense and burned it to gather a crowd of followers, they were called Nien.¹⁶ Such definitions, which may cover one shade of the meaning, are perhaps not comprehensive enough to be useful.

One further proposed meaning of *nien* seems to be that of a *band*, *group*, or *horde*. As Wang Ting-an says: "Sometimes a few persons formed one "nien" [a band], sometimes several dozen or even hundreds formed one. They robbed people in daylight."¹⁷ That is why these were *nien-fei*. This exposition appears often in Chinese source material.¹⁸

Fortunately, however, we may discover the fundamental meaning of *nien* from the important government source, *Ch'ing shih-lu* (*Veritable Records of the Ch'ing Dynasty*), in which one of the early references to this term is made in Censor T'ao Chu's memorial to the throne on January 1, 1815. And whereas the resume of this memorial in the *Ch'ing shih-lu* does not supply a full explanation, we were further fortunate to locate a copy of a collection of T'ao Chu's memorials under the Chinese title, *T'ao Yün-t'ing hsien-sheng tsou-kao*, in which the original document throws much light on the meaning and nature of the Nien.

In this document, T'ao said that in Ju-nan and Kuang-chou, Honan, and Ying-chou, Anhwei, there were Red-beard bandits (*Hung-hu-fei*).

The Red-beard bandits were former members of the White Lotus Society who

¹³ *Hu-p'ei tung-chih*, 73.1.

¹⁴ Kuo Ting-i, *T'ai-ping T'ien-kuo shih-shih jih-chih*, II, Supplement, 120.

¹⁵ *San-hsü yeh-hsien-chih*, 3.4.

¹⁶ *Nien-chün*, III, 470.

¹⁷ Wang Ting-an, *Hsiang-chün chi*, 16.1.

¹⁸ *Ch'ing shih-lu*, *Chia-ch'ing*, 299, 21-22; and *T'ao yün-t'ing hsien-sheng tsou-kao*, 8.15, 17, 18, 22b-23. See also *Shan-tung chin-tai shih tzu-liao*, 209.

had escaped government punishment. Occasionally they went out to rob, carrying small knives for self-protection. Because of their fierce manners, people called them the Red-beards, after the fierce-looking men on the stage who wore red beards and liked to challenge others. At first the bandits were enraged when they heard this nickname, but now [1815] they accept it as their proper name without hesitation.

They formed groups and acted in daylight. Each group of such bandits was called a *nien-tzu* and consisted of a few men or of several score; a large *nien-tzu* might even comprise over two hundred men. They pillaged openly, seizing property and taking other people's wives and daughters, and their actions were directed by chieftains.¹⁹

This report supports a new thesis that the *nien-tzu* was a branch of the Red-beard bandits, who were former members of the White Lotus Society. In other words, the Nien was a branch of the secret White Lotus Society. This information is confirmed by two other authors whose works are collected in the publication, *Nien Army*.²⁰ According to the latter source, the Red-beard bandits were so called because of the fact that at first the timid robbers painted their beards red and faces black in order to hide their identities from their local people. This seems to be a more plausible interpretation.

It is to be noted that the government documents do not stress the idea of twisted rolls of oil-paper, and that *nien* was first referred to as *nien-tzu* in the sense of a group, a band, or a unit.

The first active Nien movement is dated 1851, but Nien had existed in North China long before. The question of their earliest appearance has been answered by Wang K'ai-yün as follows: "They probably appeared during the K'ang-hsi period (1662-1722);" and, by Wang Ting-an, as in the Chia-ch'ing period (1796-1820). The editors of the General Gazetteer of Anhwei" frankly admitted that no one knew the exact date of their origin.²¹ In a number of local gazetteers and government documents, such as *Ch'ing shih-lu* and *Tung-hua-lu*, no reference to the Nien-fei has yet been found in the K'ang-hsi period.²² Probably nobody tried to keep

¹⁹ *T'ao Yün-ting hsien-sheng tsou-kao*, 8.15.

²⁰ CSL-CC., 164.3. The Red-beard-bandits were also referred to in CSL-CC, 310.19, 319.15, 325.9b, etc. Their connection with the White Lotus Society is confirmed in *Nien-chün*, 1. 309, 377-78.

²¹ *An-hui t'ung-chih kao*, the section on great events, 1.1.

²² The K'ang hsi period was relatively peaceful. The rebellion of Wu San-kuei and others (1674-1681) was suppressed in seven years. After that rebellion, the Chinese on the whole enjoyed peace until 1717, when bandits inspired by members of the White Lotus Society, appeared in Honan, but they were soon suppressed (CSL-KH, 274.15; 275.3; 278.28). In 1721, there was a revolt, led by Chu I-kuei, in Formosa — an obvious attempt to restore the imperial Chu family of the Ming dynasty — but this was also ruthlessly suppressed (*Ibid.*, 293.1b, 21b; 295.6; 296.15b-16 and *passim*).

a record of their existence until after they had caused serious trouble, and it may therefore be difficult to find a source which dates their inception precisely.

Nor are the Nien mentioned in the 1806 edition of the *Ta-ch'ing lü-li* (*The Laws and Precedents of the Ch'ing Dynasty*).²³ This also indicates that, about the year 1800, the Nien did not cause the government enough anxiety to elicit special laws to control them. We are inclined to think that Wang K'ai-yün's speculation of the commencement of the Nien in the K'ang-hsi period may not be true; Wang Ting-an's dating in the Chia-ch'ing period is probably more reliable. January 1, 1815, of the Chia-ch'ing reign is the first occasion when *Nien-tzu* was reported by Censor T'ao Chu as mentioned above. A private source stated that from 1814 on, the Nien actions continued.²⁴ A Japanese scholar, Sano Manabu, also reached the same conclusion, that Nien began in 1814. Sano Manabu based his argument on the Sacred Instruction [*Sheng-hsün*].²⁵ One might be satisfied with this date.

Further research, however, puts the date still earlier. In September, 1815, the emperor noted that Ju-ning and Kuang-chou, Honan, were infested with the Red-beard bandits. In April, more than a hundred *Nien-tzu-shou* had carried long spears through markets and towns, and the people had to dodge along byways. The *Nien-tzu-shou* killed many people, but the government paid no attention to them.²⁶ In 1811, it was again reported that the Red-beard bandits were claiming to "rob the rich in order to help the poor."²⁷ That seems to betoken some slight tinge of social revolution.

En-ch'ang reported to the throne in 1809, saying that on the border between Hupeh and Honan there were Red-beards, and Bare-fist-fighters (*Pai-ch'üan-shou*), and on the frontier between Anhwei and Shantung there was a Sword-wielders' society (*I-tao-hui*).²⁸ In the same year a censor memorialized that the Red-beard had been intercepting travelers in Honan for "a long time."²⁹ In the preceding year a supervising censor, Chou Ting-shen, also memorialized that in Ying-chou, Po-chou, and

²³ There is no mention of the Nien-fei in the "Ta Tsing Leu Lee," tr. by George Thomas Staunton (London, 1810). But in the *Ta-Ch'ing lü-li an-yü*, by Huang En-t'ung, 1870 edition, the Nien were mentioned in *chüan* 23, pp. 21-22.

²⁴ *Nien-chün*, I. 376.

²⁵ See Sano Manabu, *Seicho shakai shi* (*A History of Chinese Society*), Part III, 56.

²⁶ CSL-CC, 308.16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 246-1b-2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 217. 35-36.

Hsü-chou of Kiangnan, in Kuei-te of Honan, Ts'ao-chou, I-chou of Shantung, there were many loafers or rascals who carried knives and gathered together in establishing various clubs, as Boxers (I-ho ch'üan), the Eight Diagram sect (Pa-kua-chiao), the Tiger-tail-whip (Hu-wei-pien), etc. They behaved outrageously in the countryside in oppressing the honest people. They engaged in public gambling for which they bribed government officials to serve as their "eyes and ears." The name, Boxers, so familiar in 1900, had already appeared in a Chinese document of 1808.³⁰

The Red-beard bandits had been mentioned in 1806, when Emperor Chia-ch'ing pointed out that such bandits were on the increase in Honan. At first only a few score such people had gathered to gamble and fight, but the local government had connived at their existence, and they gradually became more numerous.³¹

In the Communist publication concerning the Nien Army, there is cited an incontestable source which says explicitly that the Nien-fei began in 1797.³² Although the reference to Nien cannot be found in the *Veritable Records* for the same year, the latter source supplies the information that whenever the Religious bandits (*Chiao-fei*) entered a village in Honan, they coerced the robust peasants to join and forced them to fight in the front against government forces.³³ This may be used as additional evidence to support the preceding version. Thus documentary materials help trace the beginnings of the Nien from 1814 back to 1797. It appears safe to say, then, that this horde of bandits originated near the end of the eighteenth century.

Although Wang K'ai-yün and Wang Ting-an failed to mention the connections between the Nien and the White Lotus Society, the revolutionary activities of the latter help to elucidate the initial stage of the Nien movement. From 1793 for more than a decade, the members of the secret societies, especially the White Lotus Society, had been engaged in revolutionary efforts to extinguish the Manchu regime, whose political domination had already entered a stage of troubled decline. In 1803 there was an attempt to assassinate Emperor Chia-ch'ing.³⁴ At the same time, the emperor warned his officials against corrupt local administration which began by irritating the people, then antagonizing them and finally

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.1b. Professor G. Nye Steiger, in a letter to this writer, courteously granted that he did not know the existence of the Boxers in 1808, while working on the Boxer Uprising in relation to his *China and the Occident*; otherwise his conclusion must have been different.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 164.3.

³² *Nien-chün*, I, 309.

³³ CSC-CC 22.17b; 91.7b.

³⁴ CSC-CC 109.12b-14b; 110.24-29b.

causing them to refuse to pay the land tax. Economic pressure also impelled many groups of people to fight among themselves.³⁵

Emperor Chia-ch'ing was deeply concerned about the activities of the secret religious organizations, especially the White Lotus Society.³⁶ The rebellion of the so-called "Religious bandits" had broken out in 1796 in Hupeh and had spread to Honan, Szechwan, Shensi, and Kansu, and it was not suppressed until eight years later. In 1813 another secret religious society, T'ien-li chiao, started a rebellion from Hua-hsien, Honan, where the leader, Li Wen-ch'ing, allied himself with Lin Ch'ing, a villager from near Peking. Suddenly, on October 8, 1813, an abortive attempt was made by Lin's group to take the life of the emperor and to overthrow the Manchu government. Assisted by eunuchs they managed to get inside the palace grounds of the Forbidden City, but two of the rebels were cut down by Prince Min-nin, who later became Emperor Tao-kuang.³⁷

Against this background, the Nien thus appeared in 1797, when many militia had been recruited from famine areas of Ying-chou, Anhwei and Ju-ning, Honan, to suppress the riots of the White Lotus Society in Hupeh and other provinces. After the campaign the disbanded militiamen, who had been spoiled by undisciplined life in the service and were probably also affected by the ideas of their erstwhile enemies — members of secret societies — did not resume farm work. They devoted their time to drinking and gambling and were joined by many local idlers. In daytime they were rowdy in markets and towns; at night they robbed people in rural regions. The local officials ignored the reports of their victims.

Encouraged by official connivance, these rowdies with torches and weapons ransacked villages, killing men, raping women, and doing all sorts of evil.³⁸ They were still sufficiently wary to act at night; moreover, they painted their faces black and beards red to conceal their identities. Hence they were given the nickname, "Red-beard."³⁹ Each band or gang of them formed a *nien*, and gradually the local people called them *nien-tzu*. They were not called Nien-fei in the early stage, and did not cause the empire any great trouble until the 1850's.

The early home of the Nien-tzu is uncertain. Some sources indicate that they started in the area between Anhwei and Honan. Some locate their beginning in the area between Kiangsu and Honan, and others in the province of Shantung. Wang Ting-an gives the most detailed des-

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.1 ff.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.1b; 273.14b-15 and *passim*. For a detailed record, see *P'ing-ting chiao-fei chih-lüeh*, compiled by Ying-ho and others and published in 1818.

³⁸ CSL-CC 274.1b, 8 and *passim*.

³⁹ *Nien-chün* 1, 309.

cription of their early homes: "In Yen-chou, I-chou, and Ts'ao-chou of Shantung, in Nan-yang, Ju-ning, Kuang-shan, and Kuei-te of Honan, in Hsü-chou and Huai-an of Kiangsu, in Ta-ming of Chihli, and in Lu-chou, Feng-yang, Ying-chou, and Shou-chou of Anhwei, the Nien existed everywhere, even during peacetime."⁴⁰ Obviously, the activities of the Nien at first occurred in Anhwei, Honan, Shantung, Kiangsu, and Chihli — an area between the Yellow River and the Huai River.

Combining this information with the two books of the Wangs, together with the various government documents, we may state that the Nien probably began as small groups of people carrying out a ceremony by lighting oiled paper rolls for a dragon or lion dance, usually in winter after the harvest, to exorcise evil spirits or to drive away pestilence. At first they were harmless players, and nobody paid much attention to them. These young players, however, could easily have become hoodlums when they were not welcomed, or when their processions were barred by the people of another district or clan. Feuds from such causes have ever been common in China. Once fighting has begun between the people of two villages or clans, hatred continues, and each side seizes any opportunity to avenge itself on its enemies. In time, groups or bands originally formed for drinking, gambling, or playing together, or for fighting against others, become adherents or sympathizers of secret organizations. Especially in years of famine and under corrupt governments, these adventurous young people could easily be inspired to become robbers by members of secret societies like the White Lotus.

This seems the probable sequence of events out of which arose a branch of the Red-beard bandits called *nien-tzu* or *nien-tzu-shou*, which are frequently mentioned along with the Bare-fist fighters and the Sword-wielders. In this case, *nien-tzu-shou* may mean kidnappers who hold people for ransom. Finally, probably for the sake of brevity, *nien-tzu-shou* was called Nien-fei or Nien-bandits. The final functional meaning of Nien seems to be simply "group of bandits," or the "Nien" horde of bandits. At first Nien may have been the name of a secret society, with its various possible meanings as traced above, but later on they took open actions.

Whether the Nien were bandits, rebels, or revolutionaries, we must have agreement as to the general significance to be allowed to the words *rebellion* and *revolution*. The words are here taken to mean a concerted movement of the ruled against the rulers or against the forces representing the rulers. Revolution usually refers to an armed struggle for the changing of principles. Rebellion is an uprising of the people against particular authorities. For simplicity, one may say that revolutions are against

⁴⁰ Wang Ting-an, *Hsiang-chün-chi*, 14.1.

principles and rebellions are against personalities. Insurrections are simply local rebellions.⁴¹ The natives of China tend toward rebellion because rebellion or tyrannicide was approved by the Chinese sage, Mencius, and because the individualistic Chinese cannot always meekly obey those in authority.

The classification of the Nien army seems to be unsuited to either revolution or rebellion, according to available material describing it. These guerrilla fighters and food hunters had no definite political program. Because of their plundering, they were called bandits. Since they later had horses, they were conventionally, though inadequately, called "mounted bandits" in English sources. Since some of them were porters and smugglers who wore turbans, they were also occasionally referred to as "turban bandits."

For three reasons, however, we are inclined to think that the Nien were rebels. The first reason is the most obvious of Nien's objections to the existing government. The Manchus had required all subjects to shave their foreheads as a token of loyalty. The Nien, influenced by the Taipings, kept their hair long — an outward display of their rebellious characteristics. Secondly, the Nien chief, Chang Lo-hsing, was elected Leader of the League of the Great Han (*Ta Han meng-chu*). "Han" was the name of a former native Chinese dynasty, and was used for this league as a means of reminiscence of native rule; there is a direct implication of hatred for the alien Manchu dynasty. Our last reason for believing the Nien to be rebels is that they almost habitually sacked government buildings and treasuries and private pawnshops; this is an indication of rebellion against the government and also the moneyed class which charged an exorbitant rate of interest from the penniless people.⁴² A military force which could overrun part of eight provinces for seventeen years should certainly be distinguished from common bandits. Furthermore, there is a proverb in Chinese history: "He who is successful is a king; he who fails, a bandit." Herein we find another distinction between revolution and rebellion: a revolution is a successful rebellion.

The word "fei," or bandits, has been overused and applied variously to enemy countries, political enemies, groups of people, etc. This word should be read with caution when found in Chinese records. We shall doubtless have to classify the Nien as rebels because of their size and their threat to the government.

⁴¹ Dale Yoder, "Current definition of revolution," *American Journal of Sociology*, 32 (1926), 433-441. See also the various terms in the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*.

⁴² For documentation of this statement, please see ch. III, "The Nien Organization and Leadership."

In order to have an adequate understanding of the cause and effect of the Nien rebellion, and to see whether their movement was peculiar or much the same as other rebellions in Chinese history, we must necessarily make a brief survey of major rebellions in China before the nineteenth century and also the general political, economic, and social background.

It is my tentative thesis that these cyclical Chinese rebellions and revolutions were usually caused primarily by corrupt government. Corrupt government implies a loss of its original soundness, integrity, or purity. Instead of working for the welfare of the people, security of the nation, etc., the government neglects its duties, abuses public funds, accepts bribes, weakens the security measures of the nation, causes the people trouble, increases their financial burden, and makes their lives unbearable. Any extreme cases of these examples may result in a disaster. Many people tend to insist upon an economic interpretation of history, but we have observed that an efficient government and good leadership may assist people to overcome economic and other difficulties and galvanize a country into vigorous action; on the other hand, a corrupt government with bad leadership always abuses natural and human resources, and, consequently, is more likely to irritate the people eventually into subversive action. Under this thesis, which is scarcely a novel one, we shall now proceed to investigate the background of the Nien Army from historical, political, and other points of view.

3. *Historical Background*

Rebellions and revolutions in Chinese history, according to Mencius, followed a definite cycle. Mencius had a saying, "Now a period of good order and now a period of confusion," which reflected, even in the third century B.C., a developed theory of evolution.

A revolution represents, *inter alia*, the political failure of a government or the general failure of a social system. A revolution cannot actually occur unless the state has become a barrier to change; it may become such a barrier if its own form fails in some way to adjust to the society it is supposed to serve. The period leading up to a revolution is marked by increasing inability at the top to maintain the *status quo* and by a growing unwillingness at the bottom to tolerate it. Revolutions are often preceded by public calamities, such as famine and wars, which serve to spread and to intensify revolutionary tendencies. The approach of a revolution is heralded by the growing restiveness of the masses and by in-

creasingly frequent outbursts of violence on a local scale. Lack of food is one cause of such riots. Threats to survival, such as arbitrary executions, mass murders, and wars, form another. Restrictions of the people's freedom through political and military pressure lead to outbursts of violence when the government becomes corrupt and its military force disloyal.⁴³

The characteristic pattern of Chinese revolution may be illustrated by a number of historical cases from early times. To begin with, the pattern may be seen in one particular attack upon the government of the tyrannical Emperor Ch'in Shih-huang and his son Erh-shih. This revolution in 209-206 B.C. is always associated with three heroes: Ch'en She, a farmer of southern Honan; Liu Pang, a minor government officer in northern Kiangsu; and Hsiang Yü, a nobleman of K'uai-chi in modern Chekiang. Agitated by these courageous men, the great masses of pauperized peasants killed the local officials of the Ch'in dynasty. When Liu Pang became the founder of the Han dynasty, he and his associates had completed the first successful plebeian revolution in Chinese history. The causes of the revolt, vividly described by the famous classical historians Ssu-ma Ch'ien and Pan Ku, were despotic government, unjust laws, excessive taxation, and incessant corvée.⁴⁴

The above uprising was the prototype for a comparable action in or before A.D. 18 when, after a long period of peace and prosperity, the "Red-Eyebrowed bandits" became active in Shantung and eventually caused the death of Wang Mang, a usurper of the Chinese empire from A.D. 9 to 23. The reason for the Red Eyebrows' rebellion or for Wang Mang's fall has been variously analyzed.⁴⁵ The newest theory is painstakingly formed by Hans Bielenstein, who concludes that "the ultimate

⁴³ *The Works of Mencius* (tr. by James Legge), Bk. 3, 9.2; Pitirim A. Sorokin, *The Sociology of Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1925), 368-369, 412 and *passim*; "Revolution and Counter-Revolution," *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*; Harry E. Barnes, *Sociology and Political Theory*, 179-180; Frank Rawlinson, "A Study of the Rebellions in China," *Chinese Recorder*, 26 (1905); 107-117; J. J. Saunders, *The Age of Revolution* (1947), 15; Robert Hunter, *Revolution, Why, How, When*, p. X; Charles P. Fitzgerald, *Revolution in China*, 1-32.

⁴⁴ *Shih-chi*, Ch. 6, especially pp. 38-44; and *Han-shu*, Ch. 1. (In this article quotations of the *Twenty-four Dynastic Histories* are from the Wu-chou t'ung-wen shu-chü lithographic edition of 1903). Both Ssu-ma Ch'ien and Pan Ku quoted Chia I's (B.C. 200-168) famous essay, "To Blame the Ch'in" as their basis.

⁴⁵ Such as by the modern historian, Lei Hai-tsung, who thinks that overpopulation and the oppression of the people by the local governments were responsible for the revolt of the Red Eyebrows (*China Year Book*, 1936-1937, p. 82), and Wolfram Eberhard who views this movement as "a genuine revolutionary rising of the peasants, whose distress had grown beyond bearing through Wang Mang's ill-judged measures." (*A History of China* [University of California Press, Berkeley, 1950], p. 96).