ABSTRACT

The origin and meaning of the Nien are problems which remain obscure, since all the sources provide different explanations. Some sources say that the name of "Nien" originated from "Pai-Nien", a custom for displaying dragon lanterns and driving away demons; whereas others claim that "Nien" means a group or a band of people, regardless of its size. The first explanation seems more reliable and acceptable because this can be proved not only by its origins of venue and time, but also by its early organization and primary nature.

Some scholars, including Professor S.Y. Teng, assert that the Nien first appeared in 1797 or the Chia-Ch'ing period (1796-1820). This assertion, I think, is still questionable due to the fact that all the records or documents concerning the origin and meaning of the Nien are at variance with one another, and virtually no one knows the exact date of its origin. The earliest appearance of the Nien ought to be traced prior to the Chia-Ch'ing period, and most probably in the late K'ang-hsi period (1662-1722). In other words, early in the eighteenth century, the Nien organization was formed on the border between the provinces of Shangtung, Honan, Anhwei and Kiangsu where "Pai Nien" was prevalent, but the Nien did not openly rise in arms against the Manchu government until 1797.

The organization of the Nien changed from time to time during its long history. In its earlier stage the Nien organization, mostly comprising unemployed peasants, was simple, scattered and decentralized. Since "Nien" was also a basic unit of its organization, leaders with various titles were chosen for every unit. Five years after the Taiping Revolution (1851) the Nien
leaders called a meeting at Woyang, Anhwei, during which Chang Lo-
hsing was elected the Nien chief entitled "Lord of the Great Han (Chinese) Alliance ", and a banner system was adopted so that the
term "banner" replaced "Nien" as the basic unit of the
organization. It was indicated that many bands of Nien, largely
stimulated by national consciousness, had united together and
formed a powerful anti-government force, although shortly after
Chang Lo-hsing died in 1861 the Nien leadership had split up into
two groups. Latter were led by Chang Zhong-yu and Zen Chu respect-
ively. Subsequently one of the Taiping lords, Lai Wen-kwang tried
to succeed the Nien chief by joining the Nien with his Taiping
remnants in 1863; but this was in vain and led to the multi-
leadership of the Nien organization. In short, the Nien did not
have its supreme leader during its whole history except for a
short period when Chang Lo-hsing was the Nien chief.

The Nien were neither bandits nor revolutionaries. The
movement was merely a peasant-uprising which had the following
special features: (1) It was a natural product of the economic
depression and political bankruptcy in China during the eighteenth
century; (2) As a peasant-uprising it was a spontaneous trend
without any political aim or aspiration in its early stage, so
the struggle of the Nien was a struggle for survival; (3) The war
between the Nien and the government might be considered as a
"peasant-war", largely similar to other peasant-wars in the
history of China before the Ch'ing dynasty; (4) The early Nien was
organized according to blood-relationship, since most people
involved came from the same families, clans or villages.

The military strategy and tactics of the Nien were developed
on the changes of the situations, especially the balance of power
between the Nien and the government. Generally speaking, the Nien
did not permanently occupy the earthwalled villages and utilize them
as footholds before 1857, since they were not strong enough to do
so. At this stage, the strategy adopted by the Nien should be
called "guerrilla strategy". From 1857 to 1862 the Nien tried very hard to capture numerous earthwalled villages for the strategic defensive purpose, and their strategy can be named as "defensive strategy" or "positional strategy". Once again the Nien changed their strategy immediately after their main base Chih-ho Chi (Woyang) was recaptured and their chief Chang Lo-hsing was killed by the government troops in 1863. They gave up the earthwalled villages and then fled as fast as possible from one area to another or were merely wandering about in one area. The mobility of the Nien was uncertain, varied and in very high speed by using their cavalry, therefore the government troops were forced to pursue, exhausted with moving, and sometimes might be counter-attacked, defeated or eliminated by the Nien. This is called "mobile strategy" which was developed from their guerrilla strategy in the first stage.

Under the guidance of this strategy, the Nien utilized their wise tactics to fight against the enemies. For instance, they avoided fullscale battle unless the enemies were weak, exhausted and isolated; they made a noise in the east while they were attacking in the west; they combated the enemies with both cavalry and infantry simultaneously; they attacked the enemies when they were preparing for marching or just stopping after a long journey; they liked to use long spears in a hand-to-hand combat; they pretended to go down to the south if their intention was to go to the north. Basically the above-mentioned tactics of the Nien were in line with the principles of war produced by Sun Tze, a famous military theorist in ancient China.

The government policy dealing with the Nien was also revised accordingly. In the beginning the government paid less attention on the Nien and no definite policy was presented, until Sengkolin-chin, a Mongal prince, was appointed as Imperial Commissioner to suppress the Nien in 1861, and a "pursuit-policy" against the Nien was adopted. Prince Sengkolinchin failed and was killed by the
Nien in 1865, so that Tseng Kuo-fan, who had suppressed the Taiping Revolution, was summoned to succeed the commander. According to Tseng's view, the government should have a long-range policy to deal with the Nien, therefore he attempted to investigate the villages, reorganize the people and control them directly by the militia. Moreover, he tried his best to encircle the Nien by setting up four operation bases in the provinces of Anhwei, Kiangsu, Shantung and Honan respectively. It is obvious that Tseng's policy was wise although he was obliged to resign and did not succeed due to several reasons. Li Hung-chang, Tseng's successor, followed the same policy on the whole, but only revised it in certain aspects. He emphasized on the slogan "to encircle the Nien by means of rivers", which was raised by Tseng, and new measures were carried out to blockade the Nien in a small area. Once the Nien lost their vast battlefield, they might not be able to launch the mobile warfare and were subsequently eliminated by Li Hung-chang in 1868.