Harold M. Tanner


When Harold Tanner published his well-received monograph *The Battle for Manchuria and the Fate of China* (Indiana University Press, 2013), some reviewers praised its detailed account of the first phase of the Chinese Civil War, but hoped that the author might move on to a discussion of the war years from 1946 to 1949. With his new work, Tanner has responded to that request. It is a superb piece of historical scholarship which gives a detailed and plausible account of the Liao-Shen campaign of the Chinese Civil War, showing its pivotal nature in securing victory for the Communists over the Nationalists.

The book is immensely detailed, the product of careful examination of a wide range of archival and published material in Chinese which give the reader invaluable insights into the major campaigns of the Chinese civil war in Northeast China during 1947-48. The scale of the war was immense, with some 550,000 Nationalist (Guomindang) troops versus at least 700,000 Communist. Tanner takes us through the learning process of the Communist armies, and the lack of learning that afflicted the Nationalists. Even as late as mid-1947, it was not absolutely obvious that the Communists would win the war, or that they would be able to hold the Northeast, their base area, securely. Chiang's troops were given false hope by events such as the defeat of the CCP troops under Li Tianyun near Siping in July 1947, but changing tactics as well as social conditions in the Northeast weakened the Nationalist position considerably. The Communists began to learn from their mistakes, drawing on stockpiles of Japanese arms, supplied by the USSR and from their own hidden stores, and working on creating genuine bonding among the troops through *suku* ("speaking bitterness") sessions. One of the refreshing elements of Tanner’s work is that he takes ideology seriously, arguing that it had “real operational significance” (155) and showing that class conflict in the northeastern countryside was crucial to changing attitudes among the wider population.

The central chapters of the book give a detailed, painstaking account of growing Communist success and Nationalist strategic weakness. The defeat of Nationalist general Fan Hanjie at Jinzhou in September 1948 saw the collapse of one of the Northeast's major cities. The siege of Changchun, which became notorious because the civilian population trapped in the city starved and froze in their thousands, was nonetheless a major military victory for the Communist armies. Finally, Wei Lihuang, the Nationalist defender of Shenyang, the major industrial city of the region, had to abandon his task. Although some 140,000 Nationalist troops were evacuated from the region, the Nationalists were
routed from the Northeast and the Communists’ well-trained troops were now in pole position for the ultimate conquest of China. By the end of the next year, Mao (and Lin Biao) would be in Beijing and Chiang would be in Taiwan, never to return.

The major argument of the book is that the Communist armies transitioned from the techniques of guerrilla warfare to conventional tactics, which enabled them eventually to overwhelm their opponents. “New ways of fighting” (15), Tanner emphasizes, were central to creating the eventual victory in 1949. Lin Biao, long acknowledged as a military strategist of genius, is central to Tanner’s explanation, and the latter takes the reader through Lin’s thinking in detail, showing that Lin argued against the “human wave” (58) tactics that many soldiers would have encountered during the warlord era, and worked instead toward a “protracted war of strategy” that would stress attacks on “one point, two flanks,” as well as “a 3-3 system” that would involve platoons being organized into three groups of three men (or four, on occasion) (60). One of the many failures of Chiang Kai-shek’s military planning was his lack of understanding, shared by his generals, of the way in which CCP forces had adapted their tactics. On one occasion in 1948, Nationalist intelligence declared that the CCP were repairing railroads; the 93rd Army headquarters promptly replied: “The Communists only destroy railroads, they don’t repair them. This intelligence is faulty” (180). (One area where it might have been useful to have more information in the book is detail on the transition from the tactics used by CCP armies during the Sino-Japanese war.) Tanner also busts various myths, including the longstanding Cold War complaint that it was lack of US military support that doomed Chiang’s regime; he notes that it is hard to say exactly what the effect of that support was, but notes that nonetheless the US had given the Nationalists a substantial US$1 billion in assistance between 1945 and 1949. In the end, the Americans judged that the endless demands for further assistance were simply not worth it, particularly when Greece, Germany, Japan, and Korea all loomed as areas of crisis that needed to be dealt with.

The title of the book is stimulating and slightly provocative. Was it really the Liao-Shen campaign where Chiang lost China? Tanner makes a strong case that the events of 1948 did spell the death-knell for Nationalist China in military terms. There is less focus on the political and social context and much of the material on these topics draws from US sources that, understandably, stress a seemingly inevitable unravelling of the Nationalist regime, for instance by reporting that the 1946-47 constitutional changes were little more than a “complete farce” (146-47). Political change in late Nationalist China can hardly be portrayed as a success. However, the wider problem of how to reconstruct