RIVER STRATEGY: A PHASE OF THE TAIPINGS’ MILITARY DEVELOPMENT ¹

by

Laai Yi-saai

The Taiping Insurrection which lasted for fifteen years (1850-1865) is one of the most significant rebellions in the history of modern China; its military activities extended almost through the entire area of China Proper. As claimed by one author, 20,000,000 persons perished ². Its influence upon the Imperial government was profound and far-reaching. The predominance of the Chinese in the administration of the Empire, the reorganization of the tax and finance systems, and the establishment of the new military system, are some of the consequences of the rebellion ³. So important was the Taiping Insurrection that many authorities have recently devoted study to the various aspects of the period in which it developed. Few authorities, however, have emphasized the significance of the control of river communications by the Taipings in their military activities. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the important bearing of controlling water communications on the rise and fall of the movement.

In discussing the Taipings’ naval strategy, one should not be misled by the idea that the Taipings possessed the type of modern fleet which could bombard a city from a distance. It was only after 1854 that the Taipings had a fleet which consisted of different types of fighting vessels for appropriate functions during naval operations. The Taipings’ river fleet consisted merely of boats—passenger and freight—seized from the owners during the course of the military campaigns ⁴.

¹ This is only a part of the author’s study on the later period of the Taiping Rebellion. His work of the earlier period will soon be published by the Far Eastern and Russian Institute of the University of Washington, Seattle, Washington.


⁴ Chang Teh-chien, Tse Ch’ing Hui Chuan 貓情彙纂, 12 chs. in 6 vols, prefaced by the author in 1855, (1932), chap. 5, [pp. 1b-2a].
Although the boats were of different sizes and were built for commercial instead of war purposes, yet they may be considered as a fighting fleet since they functioned as an organized unit to carry out the mission of war, especially serving as a means of massing troops for an attack; they also served as a place of refuge in case of retreat, as a means of supply and storage, and as fortresses mounted with guns to attack the enemy or to protect or cover a retreat.

The employment of a river fleet to carry out the mission of war was particularly essential to the Taipings. The success of the Taipings depended on an important factor: using their force to maximum efficiency, which could only be attained by the swift mobility of their force. By these tactics the Taipings could employ their small force to match the overwhelming force of the Imperialists. The Taipings, being mostly Hakka people who were excellent mountain climbers, were especially adapted for these tactics of mobility in the mountainous topography of the region of Kwangsi. Although the mountainous nature of Kwangsi province favored the Taipings, the region of the center of activities was delimited by the Meng River in the east, the Ch’ien River in the west, and the broad and deep Hsün and Yü rivers in the south. It was only in the mountainous region of the north that they could employ the tactics of mobility. Furthermore, beyond the Hsün and Yü rivers were located members of the Taipings. They had to be concentrated at the north bank of the Hsün River before they could be effectively used in the military operations. The control of the rivers was a matter of necessity, and was one of the reasons that the Taipings desired an understanding with the river pirates. But the understanding lasted only a short time. As a result of this, a majority of the Taiping units in the southern and western parts of Kwangtung were isolated and

1 The Hakka people are a group of Chinese whose origin can be traced to the fourth century when the barbarians invaded and occupied northern China, especially the province of Honan. They migrated to Kwangtung during the end of Sung Dynasty (960-1280), from which they migrated again to Kwangsi and other provinces during the early part of the Ching dynasty (1644-1912). They are different from other Chinese in the matter of dialect, in their treatment of women, and in their social organization.

2 *Hsün Chou Fu Chih* 襄州府志, compiled by Wei Tu 魏篤 in 1874, 38 plus 1 chs., chap. 27, p. 30b.

3 *T’ien Ch’ing Tao Li Shu* 天情道理書 (1854), reprinted in Hsiao I-shan 蕭一山, *Tai Ping T’ien Kuo Tsung shu* 太平天國叢書, 10 vols., (Shanghai, 1936), vol. 5.