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978-0-521-10486-9 - Taiping Rebel: The Deposition of Li Hsiu-ch'eng

C. A. Curwen

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The Opium War, the first major clash between China and the expanding West, is usually considered to mark the beginning of the modern period of Chinese history, the era of China on the defensive against imperialist intrusion and control, which only ended in 1949. It marked the beginning of a period during which the effects of imperialism interacted with tensions in China produced by changes of such moment that the traditional institutions and social structures seemed incapable of containing them. The Opium War itself, although we see it with hindsight as signalling the beginning of this historical age, and the first two decades of imperialist advance which followed it, attracted far less attention and gave less anxiety to the Chinese ruling class than the Taiping Rebellion, which broke out in 1851 and was not suppressed until 1864. Indeed the term 'Taiping Rebellion', although it is common usage in the West, hardly does justice to the revolutionary aspects of the movement. Denying the legitimacy of China's rulers, opposing the dominant ideology and replacing it with something totally heterodox, challenging the very basis of Chinese society and economy, the Taipings promised a far more profound revolution than any other popular movement in Chinese history. No wonder that Chinese statesmen tended to regard the foreign threat, then only dimly perceived, as a 'disease of the limbs', while the Taiping rebels were regarded as a 'disease of the heart'. Chinese historians, at least after the end of the Empire in 1912, have on the whole, whether on the left or the right, preferred to call it the T'ai-p'ing T'ien-kuo Revolution – *ke-ming*; but *ke-ming*, of course, meant a cutting-off of the Mandate of Heaven long before it was borrowed to translate 'revolution'. However, it was not a successful 'revolution', nor in my opinion (though the point may be hotly contested), were the revolutionary elements very coherent or very actively pursued for the most part; so rather than call it an abortive revolution, which it probably was, I have chosen to follow Western usage and call it the Taiping Rebellion, reminding those who think that the word 'rebellion' has a pejorative sense of Mao Tse-tung's dictum that 'to rebel is right'.

By the treaty of Nanking in 1842, the Ch'ing rulers hoped that they had

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put an end, at least temporarily, to 'external troubles'; but 'internal disorder' – the other twin in that dreadful combination which had haunted Chinese rulers for centuries – reached a point of crisis only eight years later. A period of stability after the completion of the Manchu conquest in 1683, frugal government, tax remissions and reforms, together with favourable economic conditions, produced considerable economic growth and prosperity. 'After recuperating and growing stronger for a century and several decades under our reigning dynasty the people have not only achieved self-sufficiency but have attained such a high level of wealth and prosperity as is unparalleled in history. In addition there have been repeated remissions of taxes . . . How fortunate people are to be living in this age!'¹ These words, perhaps presenting too rosy a picture, were written in 1779. But forces began to work in Chinese society which produced a steady deterioration of administration and a general decay of Chinese society. The staggering growth of population, which apparently trebled between the middle of the seventeenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries, the increasing circulation of money and the growth of the market unleashed forces which the Chinese polity could neither understand nor adapt to. The regime began to show the characteristic symptoms of dynastic decline: increased expenditure and declining revenue, administrative inertia and widespread, almost institutionalised, corruption and extortion. 'When the officials oppress the people rebel' – this had long been the principal slogan of popular risings, and from 1896 onwards there were incessant peasant revolts. The Opium War and the intrusion of imperialism exacerbated the strain on the state, damaged the prestige of the dynasty and made deeper and more complex the crisis of the economy.

The most immediate influence of the West was felt in the two provinces of Kwangtung and Kwangsi. No other region of China had quite the same coincidence of favourable circumstances with combustible material: distance from the capital (often resulting in administrative vacuums), increasing land concentration (therefore increasing tenancy), economic and social troubles connected with the disruption of trade after the Opium War and, in addition, famine, flood and plague, from which Kwangsi in particular was rarely free. There was moreover, in this region, a long tradition of anti-Manchu sentiment.

As a result of these factors Kwangtung and Kwangsi in the decade which preceded the Taiping rising were seething with banditry in all its forms, spreading and flourishing under the eyes of a corrupt and pusillanimous local administration.² A life of banditry was often the only means of survival for destitute peasants and for unemployed porters; pirates from the Canton delta, displaced by the policing action of British naval vessels, turned their attention to inland waterways;³ soldiers and mercenaries found the transition to banditry an easy and even natural one.

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In face of this widespread lawlessness in the countryside and the 'barbarian' threat from without, and in view of the obvious uselessness of the regular armies, there were many officials who thought the solution lay in the raising of local militia.⁴ Most provincial governors, however, feared the consequences of recruiting and arming rural riffraff. The famous incident at San-yuan-li in May 1841 had filled them with foreboding,⁵ and thereafter, for a few years at least, there were no official encouragement for local militia.⁶ But local elites, faced with an immediate threat, had fewer qualms. Dozens of local community militia bands were raised in Kwangtung and Kwangsi (and elsewhere) on the initiative of local gentry for the defence of their own interests and the maintenance of rural *status quo*, which they tended to interpret fairly narrowly: they saw a threat to their property but not yet to the society as a whole. They dared not fight against large outlaw bands and considered their work well done if they managed to get their enemies to move into other districts.

An increasing proportion of the population was armed, more often with swords and spears than with guns. For some, assembly was now more or less legal, and not always easily controlled; for others it was illegal and uncontrollable. As the social and economic crisis deepened, especially with the famine of 1856–7 in Kwangsi, antagonistic groups and those with grievances resorted increasingly to armed force: destitute peasants against landlords, the oppressed against venal officials and their underlings, the law-abiding against outlaws, clan against clan, village against village, one ethnic group against another.⁷ The socio-economic crisis brought latent hostility between the local people (*punti*) and the later settlers from the North (*hakka*) to the surface, and armed clashes became frequent.⁸ As the local elites came to depend more and more on raising militia for the protection of their interests, secret societies found ready recruits amongst the disaffected – landless peasants, unemployed miners, boatmen and porters. But the distinction between militia and bandits tended to become fainter. Not only in the sense that in agrarian societies there are often 'landlords' bandits' as well as peasant bandits,⁹ but also because, inevitably in such times, the age-old affinity between soldier and bandit asserted itself. Moreover, by an easy extension of their permitted means of raising funds, the militia groups could encroach upon the traditional preserves of the secret societies and exact illegal levies upon trade, gambling, prostitution and so on. In 1847 in Kwangsi, wrote a contemporary plaintively, 'the militiamen and bandits (*tsei*) and the local people are bandits too . . . they start as militiamen and end up as bandits'.¹⁰ Bandit leaders, on the other hand, frequently threw in their lot with the government in return for an official post and legal recognition for the very military power which had forced the officials to come to terms with them.

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From this hotbed of banditry in South China rebellious movements gradually emerged. Although there are, not surprisingly, enormous gaps in our knowledge about this shadowy aspect of Chinese political and social life, it seems reasonable to assume that the secret societies had a fairly powerful influence on the transformation of popular *insoumission*, from simple banditry into rebellion.¹¹

The secret societies of South China 'shared a common set of traditions and a common ideological predisposition',¹² which were those of the Triads.¹³ It would be wrong however, to think of them as forming a single organisation: it is unlikely that lodges had, as a rule, more than very tenuous links, if any, with other lodges. Nor is it at all certain to what extent bandit or rebel groups, which took names reminiscent of secret society lodges (*t'ang*), in fact shared Triad traditions and ideology. But assuming that most lodges adhered to some extent to Triad ritual, then it is true to say that the tradition of anti-Manchu sentiment was kept alive by the secret societies, if only by repetition of the slogan *fan-Ch'ing fu-Ming* (Oppose the Ch'ing and restore the Ming!). Clearly this slogan must have had a new appeal, particularly to people in the area of Canton, who had been in the front row, so to speak, to watch the ignoble spectacle of China's defeat in the first conflict with the West, in which the famous Manchu military machine was shown up as a paper tiger,¹⁴ and who, after the war, were convinced that the hated officials were selling out to the foreigners.¹⁵ It had an increasing appeal at a time when there was widespread feeling in China that the Mandate of Heaven had run out.¹⁶

In spite of the emotive, if somewhat out-dated, political slogan calling for the overthrow of the Ch'ing and the restoration of the Ming, the Triads were never able to curb adequately the indiscipline and destructiveness of their members, although some leaders undoubtedly made an effort to do so. They were unlikely to win the kind of following they needed to further a political aim as long as they were burdened with the stigma of banditry, and could not convincingly promise something better than the present chaos. The only organisation which proved able to do this was a new kind of secret society.

The original Taiping organisation, the Pai Shang-ti Hui or Association of God-worshippers, was created by Hung Hsiu-ch'üan (1814–64) and Feng Yun-shan (1822–52) in Kwangsi in this period of widespread unrest. The story, which is related in part in Li Hsiu-ch'eng's *Deposition*,¹⁷ is fairly well known and need not be repeated here. Though neither Hung Hsiu-ch'üan nor Feng Yun-shan are known to have been members of the Triads, it was inevitable that their association should be profoundly influenced by the secret societies of the South. Like them, the God-worshippers sought recruits among the disaffected sections of the community, often providing mutual security and protection against other groups; like them the Association could

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only attract a following by expressing to some extent their collective aspirations, dreams or complaints. So both the secret societies and the God-worshippers emphasised the brotherhood of the oppressed. Although nothing is known about the early relations between the two, partly because the Taipings were very reticent on the subject once they had established their state, it is certain that the God-worshippers were influenced by the secret societies in certain respects and possibly that the two groups at least reached a *modus vivendi*.¹⁸

But the Association of God-worshippers was not just another secret society. What distinguished it more than anything else from the traditional organisations of popular revolt was the particular brand of Christianity which gave it much of its original dynamism.¹⁹ Hung Hsiu-ch'üan was a disappointed intellectual, whose failure in the examinations frustrated his ambition to rise out of rural poverty into a career of honour and wealth. This personal setback led him to reject many of the values of the society which seemed to have rejected him. In the past such men had taken to mystical Taoism or to salvationist Buddhism as an expression of their alienation: Hung Hsiu-ch'üan would perhaps have done the same if he had been born at another time and in another place. But he sat his examinations at Canton and lived only 50 kilometres or so from the point of impact in the first collision between China and the West. It was the religion of the West, whose representatives had just humiliated the Manchu empire, which attracted his attention. This was perhaps the first time that Christianity served in Asia to arm a revolutionary movement; it was not to be the last. But before this foreign religion could be harnessed to the service of rebellion it had to be adapted to the psychological needs, not only of frustrated intellectuals, but of others who had no vested interest in the preservation of the Confucian order.²⁰ It was the unstable genius of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan which effected this transformation.

The God-worshippers may have started, overtly at least, as a purely religious organisation, apparently without political intent.²¹ But the response of officials and gentry (first by judicial harassment, later by military action) to the growth of the Association, which increasingly stood for the oppressed poor and for *hakka* against *punti* and consequently became involved in armed clashes, the active iconoclasm of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan and other leaders and their growing ambition – all these factors led the God-worshippers more and more into political, rebellious activity. This culminated in the rising at Chin-t'ien (Kwangsi) in January 1851.

Such was the vigour of the movement that in the twenty-seven months which followed the rising the Taipings had broken out of Kwangsi, passed through Hunan and Kiangsi into Hupeh, and after a rapid descent of the Yangtse had captured Nanking in March 1853 and made it their capital.

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In 1853 and at several other moments in the decade which followed, it seemed unlikely that the Ch'ing dynasty would survive the combined onslaught of the Taipings and other rebels. There is little doubt that in establishing their capital at Nanking in 1853 at the expense of an all-out effort to seize Peking, the Taipings sacrificed their first and best opportunity of overthrowing the dynasty.²²

The temptation to set up a court with all the trappings of imperial splendour in the second city of the empire was evidently too much for them, and if opposition was expressed it was over-ruled.²³ Although two armies, under Li K'ai-fang and Lin Feng-hsiang, were sent north from Nanking in May 1853 to take Peking, a vital year had already been lost; the main Taiping armies were needed for the defence of the rebel capital and only comparatively small armies under junior commanders could be spared for the North. By the time the Northern Expedition reached Chihli (the metropolitan province) its strength had been exhausted by an arduous campaign and the winter cold; relief was sent, but too little and too late. By March the following year the northern armies had been wiped out and their commanders captured.

Another important, and for the Taipings disastrous, result of the deflection of their forward thrust by the acquisition of Nanking was that it gave time for the transformation of some of the ordinary gentry-led militia from local defence and policing organisations into a striking force which could operate against the Taipings (and other rebels) on more than a purely local scale. Such a development had not been envisaged by the court early in 1853 when orders were sent to some forty officials in the provinces to raise militia. One of these officials was Tseng Kuo-fan.

Tseng Kuo-fan, a junior vice-president of the Board of Ceremonies, was at home in Hsiang-hsiang (Hunan), observing the customary period of mourning for his mother, when he received an imperial order to organise a militia force in his province.²⁴ This was to be done by uniting and reorganising two existing militia groups, under Chiang Chung-yuan and Lo Tse-nan respectively.²⁵ The result was the Hunan Army (Hsiang-chün).²⁶

The first major victory of this army over the Taipings was at Hsiang-t'an in May 1854.²⁷ Thereafter, especially after another disastrous defeat for the Taipings at Yüeh-chou in July 1854, in which they lost a great number of boats, the Hunan Army played an increasingly important role in the fight against the Rebellion. In spite of government pressure Tseng Kuo-fan refused to take his army outside the boundaries of the province of Hunan until he was ready to do so; then in October 1854 he crossed into Hupeh and recovered Wu-ch'ang and Han-yang. In the meantime, regular government armies had established two great camps near Nanking, north and south of the Yangtse, called Chiang-pei Ta-ying (Headquarters of the Chiang-pei Command) and

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Chiang-nan Ta-ying (Headquarters of the Chiang-nan Command). Although they did not represent a very impressive striking force, their presence was a grave threat to the supply lines of the Taiping capital.²⁸ In order to deal with this threat it was necessary for the Taipings to withdraw troops from the western front fighting against the Hunan Army. Once this was done, the Taipings had little difficulty in routing the Chiang-pei and Chiang-nan forces.²⁹

This was done in June 1856. The blockade of their capital was broken, but any hope the Taipings may have had of turning and destroying the Hunan Army vanished when internecine strife broke out in the Taiping leadership.³⁰ As a result of this bloody struggle for power three of the original Taiping leaders, including Yang Hsiu-ch'ing, were killed, and another, Shih Ta-k'ai, defected with his whole army, said to number 200,000 men. There was an immense loss of life and the damage to Taiping morale was incalculable. With the final breakdown of group leadership, such as it was, government was left in the hands of corrupt and incompetent sycophants, at least until the arrival of Hung Jen-kan in 1859. Hung Hsiu-ch'uan himself was incapable of or unwilling to give the movement coherent leadership. The defection of Shih Ta-k'ai, who had recaptured Wu-ch'ang in 1855, allowed Tseng Kuo-fan to consolidate his initial success and allowed the Imperial Commissioner, Ho-ch'un, and his assistant commander, Chang Kuo-liang, to recover from the destruction of the Chiang-nan Command and organise another siege of the Taiping capital in the following year.

After the bloody struggle for power new commanders had to be found. It was then that Ch'en Yü-ch'eng and Li Hsiu-ch'eng were appointed to important military commands; later they came to be thought of as the main pillars of the Taiping regime.

Li Hsiu-ch'eng was born in T'eng-hsien, Kwangsi province, in 1823.³¹ He came of a peasant family, probably *hakka*, which also made charcoal as a subsidiary occupation.³² He did not join the Taipings at Chin-t'ien, where the rising occurred, but did so when the Taipings passed through his village on the way to Yung-an in September 1851. Between this time and the capture of Nanking Li Hsiu-ch'eng served as an ordinary soldier, but subsequently, partly perhaps because he had received some education, he was appointed to an administrative position. Soon afterwards he was given a command of new recruits defending Nanking, rising to the rank of *chien-chün* (army inspector).³³ He left Nanking in the winter of 1853 and held minor commands under Shih Ta-k'ai in Anhwei province.

Some time before 1856 – the exact date is not known – he was appointed *ti-kuan-fu-ch'eng-hsiang* (a junior minister of state), which was the rank he held at the time of the internal strife. For his achievement in enlisting the support of Nien rebels he was promoted, and after the defection of Shih Ta-

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k'ai in 1857 shared with Ch'en Yü-ch'eng virtual control over Taiping military and civil administration. In the spring of 1859, in circumstances which he describes in his Deposition, Li Hsiu-ch'eng was given the title of 'Chung Wang', or Faithful Prince. After the death of Ch'en Yü-ch'eng in 1862 Li Hsiu-ch'eng became the most powerful and famous of the Taiping generals, winning the reputation of an able, cunning and popular commander, and, amongst foreigners at least, of being a benevolent and honest administrator.

Both Ch'en Yü-ch'eng and Li Hsiu-ch'eng were talented military men but they were unable to stem the ebbing tide of Taiping fortunes. Neither was strong enough as a leader to give direction to the whole movement; they did not have the qualities of leadership of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan or Yang Hsiu-ch'ing. When they acted together they achieved impressive military successes, but they were not always able to co-operate. The leadership vacuum at the top and the limited military thinking of these men left the movement without far-sighted strategy or political direction, so in spite of their successes the Taipings remained strategically on the defensive.

Nothing shows this more clearly than the difficulty which they had in dealing both with the siege forces at Nanking and with the Hunan Army in Hunan and Anhwei. The first major campaign under Li Hsiu-ch'eng and Ch'en Yü-ch'eng was an attempt to break the supply-lines of the Hunan Army in Anhwei and to secure those of the capital. But in December 1857 it was necessary for the Taipings to turn back and deal once more with the Ch'ing forces which were threatening Nanking. No sooner had this operation been completed than the advance of the Hunan Army under Li Hsü-pin brought Ch'en Yü-ch'eng and Li Hsiu-ch'eng back into Anhwei in a great pincer movement which culminated in the victory at San-ho in November 1858.³⁴ Again the victory could not be followed up because the Taiping capital was still under pressure from the Chiang-nan Headquarters, the complete destruction of which was not accomplished until after Li Hsiu-ch'eng's remarkable diversionary attack on Hang-chou in 1860.³⁵ In the campaign which defeated the Chiang-nan Headquarters several Taiping commanders acted in unison and achieved a great victory, which enabled Li Hsiu-ch'eng to extend Taiping territory into the Kiangsu delta.

This expansion was probably intended to stabilise their rear in preparation for a major Taiping thrust up the Yangtse in order to gain control over this key waterway in the face of the steady advance of the Hunan Army. It was planned that Ch'en Yü-ch'eng should operate on the north bank of the river and Li Hsiu-ch'eng on the south, and together they would launch a pincer attack on the Hunan Army in Hupeh. Although Li Hsiu-ch'eng agreed, according to Hung Jen-kan,³⁶ on the importance of regaining control of the Yangtse, he did not in the end fulfil his part of the plan. Ch'en Yü-ch'eng

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would have preferred a concentrated effort to relieve An-ch'ing, and Li Shih-hsien wanted to campaign in Fukien and Chekiang. Though the plan for a thrust up the Yangtse was eventually set in motion, in the subsequent actions of Li Hsiu-ch'eng and in the expressed opinions of Ch'en Yü-ch'eng and Li Shih-hsien there is evidence of regional preoccupations in these commanders which led to their unwillingness in the last phase of the Rebellion to co-ordinate their military actions. Ch'en Yü-ch'eng undoubtedly considered Anhwei as his special sphere of activity; Li Shih-hsien looked on Fukien and Chekiang as his. Though Li Hsiu-ch'eng agreed, unwillingly, to the plan, he did not complete his assignment because he already had his own 'empire' in Kiangsu. If Ch'en Yü-ch'eng played the part assigned to him it was perhaps because it did not conflict with his own regional interests; but Li Hsiu-ch'eng's failure to do what he had agreed to do must be considered the main reason for the breakdown of the operation.³⁷

The Chiang-nan Command south of the Taiping capital was finally destroyed in 1860, and the following year Tseng Kuo-fan was given an official appointment commensurate with his military power, that of Governor-General of Liang-chiang and Imperial Commissioner in charge of government forces on both sides of the Yangtse.³⁸ He then delegated to Tso Tsung-t'ang the formation of another regional army to operate in Chekiang (of which province Tso was made Governor), and to Li Hung-chang the establishment of the Huai Army, which was transferred from An-ch'ing to Shanghai in 1862 at the urgent appeal of refugee gentry from Su-chou, and began campaigning in Kiangsu.³⁹ By this time the Second Opium War and the treaty settlements of 1858 and 1860 had won for Britain and France important new commercial and political concessions from the Ch'ing government, and they were anxious to see the end of hostilities and the stabilisation of the dynasty. For its part, after the death of the Hsien Feng Emperor, the court adopted a policy of co-operation with the Western powers and abandoned its former attitude of resistance.

Before the Taipings took Nanking in March 1853, Western officials and missionaries knew very little about the rebels and depended to a great extent on government reports, which were of course, essentially hostile to the Rebellion. Some missionaries, as they learned more, developed a sympathy for the reforming zeal of the Taipings; others became less sympathetic with increased knowledge and contact, and as official policies became more hostile. Some missionaries were perhaps prejudiced against a Christian movement which appeared to owe nothing to their efforts, and they increasingly drew attention to what they took to be blasphemous aberrations in the Taiping faith. Western official opinion hardened further against the 'marauding *banditti*' when they established their capital at Nanking – too close for com-

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fort to the Westerners and their commercial interests in Shanghai. Earlier there had been some suggestion that the British might intervene to stem the Taiping advance, mainly as a stick to beat the Ch'ing government with and enable Britain to dictate her own terms in future negotiations.⁴⁰ In the event there was no immediate military intervention, though the Western powers represented at Shanghai agreed on joint defence of the city should it be attacked.

After visiting Nanking in the spring of 1853, Sir George Bonham, the Governor of Hong Kong and British Plenipotentiary, came to the conclusion that the Taipings were unlikely to succeed in overthrowing the Ch'ing dynasty, and, if they did, would not offer more commercial and political advantages to Western powers than their predecessors had done. France and the United States also sent representatives to the Taiping capital, and soon the three powers adopted an official policy of neutrality and non-interference. But this neutrality was of a very hostile nature. Diplomatic relations were maintained with one of the belligerents, the Ch'ing government, whose claims to sovereignty in China were recognised, and neutrality was used 'as a cover for active assistance to the Manchus'.⁴¹ When the Taipings threatened Shanghai in 1862, a little over a year after the signing of the Peking treaties, Britain and France abandoned their pretended neutrality and began to co-operate on a local level with the Ch'ing regime for the defence of the Treaty Ports.⁴² Unofficial Western aid against the Taipings started with the formation in Shanghai of a corps of foreign adventurers in 1860, under the American F. T. Ward.⁴³ On his death in 1862 the British government was sufficiently interested in the potentialities of this corps to allow the release of C. G. Gordon from the army in order to command what was officially called – with more optimism than accuracy – the 'Ever-Victorious Army' (Ch'ang-sheng chün).⁴⁴ The role of this force in the suppression of the Rebellion has probably been exaggerated, not only by Western writers. Hung Jen-kan, cousin of Hung Hsiu-chüan, considered that foreign intervention was 'the cause of all our troubles' – a judgement more based on disappointment at the behaviour of fellow Christians than on a cool appraisal of reality.⁴⁵ The weight of evidence suggests that the Taiping movement was already beyond recovery before this intervention started. It was, however, mainly due to foreign military operations that the Taipings were denied access to Shanghai (and to Ningpo) – the possession of which might have swung the situation in their favour. Foreign-manned artillery was also of considerable help to the government forces in dislodging the Taipings from towns in Kiangsu and pushing them back towards Nanking.

Li Hsiu-ch'eng had a low opinion of both the 'Ever-Victorious Army' and of Li Hung-chang as a commander.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, and thanks to treachery in the Taiping camp, they succeeded in capturing Li Hsiu-ch'eng's 'capital', Suchou, and gradually recovered for the government the rich rice basin of