

# On the Reasons for the Failure of the Northern Expedition of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom

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## Abstract

In 1853, after the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom officially established its capital in Nanjing, in order to expand the revolution throughout the country, completely defeat the Qing government, and establish a national political power, it successively carried out major strategic military operations such as the Northern Expedition and the Western Expedition. However, the highly anticipated Northern Expedition stopped at Tianjin and ultimately failed, leaving a tragic scene in the history of the Taiping Rebellion, which made future generations lament. The main reason for this is due to the mistakes in the military strategic guidance of the Taiping Army and the insufficient logistical support for food and other supplies caused by the deepening of the Northern Expedition. The Northern Expedition is certainly worthy of recognition, but its experiences and lessons are even more worthy of profound summary and reflection by future generations.

## Keywords

Taiping Heavenly Kingdom; Northern Expedition; Guiding ideology; A lone army delves deep; fail.

## 1. Introduction

After the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom established its capital in Nanjing, in order to completely destroy the rule of the Qing Dynasty, it dispatched troops to the west. At the same time, the Heavenly King Hong Xiuquan and the Eastern King Yang Xiuqing appointed Lin Fengxiang, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Heavenly Officials, and Li Kaifang, the Prime Minister of the Earth Officials, as the main generals, leading 20000 soldiers to launch a northern expedition from Yangzhou. The Taiping Army commander drove Zhili, causing Beijing to shake. Even on the side of the Qing army, the ministers of the Qing court petitioned one after another, "Due to the urgent military situation, it is urgent to send ministers to select elite troops to face the suppression and defend the capital." [1] The emperor himself is also prepared to flee Beijing and head to Rehe. "The bureaucratic landlords in Beijing saw that the Qing dynasty's rule was about to collapse, and no less than 30000 families fled Beijing." [2] At that time, the capital of the Qing Dynasty, Beijing, was in a state of chaos and chaos. However, the strategic attempt of the Taiping Rebellion's Northern Expedition to break through Beijing ultimately came to a halt and was ultimately defeated by the pursuit and interception of the Qing army, which made many scholars in later generations sigh with regret. Therefore, the academic community explores from a broad perspective the multiple factors that constrain the Northern Expedition and the many impacts it has produced. In terms of the reasons for the failure of the Northern Expedition, it mainly focuses on political immaturity, insufficient military strength, difficulties in logistics supply, and poor communication. This article focuses on the strategic guidance errors of the Taiping Army and the lack of logistical support such as food due to the deepening of military operations, in order to explore the reasons for the ultimate failure of the Northern Expedition Army and make relevant supplements and improvements in the research of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's Northern Expedition.

## 2. Mistakes in strategic guiding ideology

The Taiping Army adopted a mobile warfare approach, disregarding the gains and losses of each city and pool along the way. They only focused on the speed of advancement and did not establish a stable base in the areas they passed through. Therefore, when the Taiping Army left, almost all the occupied prefectures and cities were reoccupied by the Qing army, which could not be considered areas under the jurisdiction of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. In the view of scholar Luo Ergang, this mobile warfare tactic is the guiding ideology of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's strategy. From its entire war history, it is to strive for the initiative of war and to master the flexibility of war. Because in war, only by being proactive and flexible can one achieve victory in a hundred battles.[3] Under the guidance of such strategic thinking, the Taiping Army did indeed bring great advantages in the initial stage of development, leaving the Qing army exhausted. Since the Jintian Uprising, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom has always prioritized seeking initiative. The Qing Dynasty mobilized troops from various provinces to gather and annihilate them in the Zijing Mountain area. It broke through the siege, attacked Yong'an Prefecture, and entered the city. If it did not fall into Guilin, it took the initiative to withdraw and advance towards Hunan. If it did not fall into Changsha, there was a large army of the Qing Dynasty surrounding it. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's army was about to be trapped in the fortified city of Dunbing, and when the situation was bleak, it took the initiative to withdraw and advance towards Hubei, causing the Qing army to retreat and advance towards Hubei. Trapped in passivity everywhere, exhausted from running for life, but in just over two years, it swept from the mountainous areas of Guangxi to the Yangtze River, sweeping across Jiangnan and establishing its capital in Jinling, resulting in great revolutionary achievements.[4] The Taiping Army used this strategic tactic to strive for initiative on the battlefield and put the enemy in a passive position, leaving behind numerous brilliant achievements. Therefore, this strategic guiding ideology that only focuses on flexibly advancing the strategy of using war to sustain war holds a dominant position in the Taiping Army. So the Heavenly King Hong Xiuquan warned Lin Fengxiang, "Learn from the Dao of the Middle School, hurry towards the capital of Yan, and do not be greedy for attacking the city for too long." [5] Yang Xiuqing also demanded that they "be particularly bold and flexible during the Northern Expedition, and act quickly." [6] The orders of Hong Xiuquan and Yang Xiuqing were very clear, requiring the Northern Expeditionary Army led by Lin Fengxiang and Li Kaifang to launch a lightning fast attack on the heart of the Qing army, not to engage in positional warfare with the Qing army. This still adopted the war strategy of "seizing castles and abandoning important areas" from Guangxi to Nanjing, capturing cities and territories, and directly taking Beijing, the ruling center of the Qing dynasty, to complete the revolutionary cause.[7]

As is well known, Liu Bang had control over Guanzhong and thus had the world under his control. One important success condition was the prosperous Guanzhong region, which could continuously transport personnel and materials to the front line, playing a crucial role in the Chu Han War. Another famous peasant emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, adopted the strategy proposed by Chizhou scholar Zhu Sheng of "building high walls, accumulating abundant grain, and slowly proclaiming himself king". He ordered Kang Maocai to be appointed as the field commander, first restoring agricultural production and ensuring the supply of military food, preparing favorable and necessary prerequisites for long-term warfare, eliminating various separatist forces, and fighting against the Yuan Dynasty. All of these were thanks to the stable revolutionary base established by Liu Bang and Zhu Yuanzhang's group, so a stable and sufficient supply of food and the issue of supplementing soldiers were able to support the success of their revolution.

However, the leadership of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom did not draw on the successful experiences of Liu Bang and Zhu Yuanzhang, and it was unrealistic to rely on this "dragonfly

like" tactic to overthrow the Qing court and establish a national political power. And it is precisely "this guiding ideology for fighting for initiative" Guiding the military struggle of the Taiping Army, it ultimately caused great harm to the Taiping Army. Under the guidance of this erroneous strategic thinking, the Northern Expedition Army went deep alone, directly leading to the defeat of the Northern Expedition Army.

### **3. Lack of logistical support such as materials and manpower**

Apart from the erroneous military guidance strategy adopted by the Taiping Army during military operations, which had an impact on the Northern Expedition Army, the main reason for its failure was that the Taiping Army "advanced alone and penetrated deep into the Central Plains, without the effectiveness of mutual assistance between the two wings or the need for further reinforcements. The future and fate were entirely under the control of Marquis Li, Lin, Ji, and Zhu." [8] This lone army of the Northern Expedition was far from the rear of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom from the beginning, and no stable base areas were established along the revolutionary route, resulting in a lack of logistical support materials, As recorded in the "Preface to the Northern Expedition Report of Lin Fengxiang, Li Kaifang, Ji Wenyuan, Zhu Xikun", "From Linhuai to here, we have seen all the wheat on the slope, but not a single field. The food supply is very difficult, and the soldiers are increasing day by day. We have seen many people riding horses. However, at this time, all the gatherings are abundant, but there is a shortage of grain and rice. From Linhuai to here, we have sent people back to the court several times, but it is unknown whether it is true or not? With such distant mountains and rivers, it is difficult to communicate." [9] It can be seen that during the Northern Expedition, the originally planned strategy of relying on war to support the enemy faced many difficulties in the face of reality. At the same time, due to being far away from the Tianjing headquarters, food, grass, and soldiers could not be replenished in a timely manner, and they had to send letters to Tianjing several times to seek help.

Later, when the Taiping Army stopped at Tianjin, just one step away from Beijing, there were a total of 40000 soldiers. "At this time, the bandits had run out of food, and the internal collapse was imminent. Although they searched and looted the food in various villages in the west of the river, they did not gain much. In the blink of an eye, the spring thawed and the sea was vast." [10] According to the records of the Qing army, "After hearing that the thief had been defeated, he was exhausted and lay on a stiff bed along the way." [11] At this time, the Qing army was heavily armed, and the Taiping army had to strategically retreat southward. In the end, Lin Fengxiang and others retreated to Dongguanglian Town, waiting for reinforcements. "By September, the grain and rice had run out, and black beans were used to satisfy hunger. The soldiers were all hungry, so the Qing army dared to advance." [12] It can be said that at this time, the Northern Expedition Army was in a state of extreme poverty due to a lack of stable and timely logistics materials and personnel replenishment [13] the situation.

It was only when the leadership of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom learned about the plight of the Northern Expedition that they finally realized the significant hidden dangers behind the lone army's Northern Expedition in the absence of sufficient logistical supplies. Sending troops for the second Northern Expedition attempted to use important supplies such as reinforcements and food to rescue the Lin and Li Northern Expedition troops from their perilous situation. In order to obtain food, the Northern Expedition reinforcements attacked the "throat of transportation" of Linqing City. Although they captured Linqing City, due to the burning of food by the Qing army, the reinforcements themselves lacked food, and even more so, they did not support the Northern Expedition army's food. In addition, the composition of the reinforcements was complex, and the fierce reinforcements caused a mutiny due to lack of food, resulting in the failure of the plan to reunite. Due to the failure of the Northern Expedition

Army and reinforcements to meet, the Northern Expedition reinforcements were ultimately blocked, and Lin Fengxiang and Li Kaifang, who were alone and deeply penetrated, were completely in a desperate situation. According to the manuscript by Senggelinqin on July 15th, the fourth year of Xianfeng: Since being hit on the 28th of last month, the bandits have been steadfast in their defense and have not been able to break out. This barrier has become even more difficult for our troops to deal with, but they have only managed to lure them and have been executed sporadically, with only a dozen or so people in a day. Fortunately, upon examination, the current situation of the bandits seems to have shifted. Countless bandit corpses have been drifting out of Lianzhen, all of which are those with cracked chests, broken stomachs, broken legs, and broken backs. Upon inspection at any time, they are indeed long haired and rebellious corpses. According to the person throwing them out, the rebels are in urgent need of escape and have thoughts of throwing them out, The rebellious leader killed and threw the fleeing person into Hanoi. Most of the thieves' nests and rice are located in the east of the river, and are often flooded. Rice and wheat are gradually scarce, and now they all eat black beans. Horse grass is particularly scarce, and every time they leave the nest to cut grass, they are shot dead by guns and cannons.[14]

It can be seen that in a state of isolation and helplessness, Lin Fengxiang's troops trapped in Lianzhen could only wait for reinforcements. However, the extreme shortage of military supplies led to internal conflicts within the Taiping Army. At the same time, the Qing army aimed to besiege the Taiping Army, which was waiting to be besieged, and it collapsed without fighting. On the fifth day of the eighth lunar month of the same year, "Those who repeatedly suffered setbacks and still fought fiercely with their lives, actually had very little grain and rice, and were extremely poor. According to the person who threw it, now each person only gave four liang of millet a day, only black beans and mung beans to satisfy their hunger." [15]

In the end, Lin Fengxiang and Li Kaifang's troops failed one after another in the situation where their successors were helpless and had run out of ammunition and food. From the mouths of the refugees captured by the Qing army in the city, it was also learned that "there is no food left in the city, and many have died from hunger." [16] It can be seen that the extreme lack of food supply by the Taiping Army had a significant impact on the failure of the Northern Expedition strategy of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Zhang Dejian, a close confidant of Zeng Guofan, also said, "The root cause of the lives of the three armies depends on food. Those who are defeated with sufficient food often have it; those who are able to maintain constant victory without food have not heard of it." [17] The failure of the Northern Expedition provided further evidence for Zhang Dejian's above remarks.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is precisely because the Northern Expedition Army of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, guided by its strategic guidance in the early stages of the revolution, only focused on advancing speed while neglecting support for the base areas, committing the great taboo of lone soldiers fighting. The logistical supplies such as grain and soldiers of the Northern Expedition Army were severely lacking, and ultimately the entire army was destroyed under the attack of the Qing government, which had a significant negative impact on the Taiping Rebellion. The first summary of "Ten Mistakes of the Heavenly Dynasty" by King Li Xiucheng after his capture is "The First Mistake of the Country, the Great Mistake of Li Kaifang and Lin Fengxiang ordered by the Eastern King to sweep away the northern defeat." [18] It can be seen that the failure of the Northern Expedition had an impact on the ultimate downfall of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom regime. This study aims to explore the impact of the military strategy of the Taiping Army on the Northern Expedition Army, as well as how lone combat led to the failure of the Northern Expedition Army, providing us with corresponding reference experience for future generations.

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