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## **The Late Ming Rebellions: Peasants and Problems of Interpretation**

*The Peasant Rebellions of the Late Ming Dynasty.* By James Bunyan Parsons (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 1970) 292 pp. \$7.50

*Antifeodal'naia bor'ba kitaiskikh krest'ian v XVII veke.* By Larisa Vasil'evna Simonovskaia (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1966) 342 pp. R. 1.50

*Wan Ming min-pien.* By Li Wen-chih (Hong Kong, Yüan-tung t'u-shu kung-ssu, 1966; 1948, 1st ed.) 225 pp. H.K. \$10.00 (reprint)

In many pre-modern empires, and in some of the more "backward" societies of the modern era, epochs of mass violence—broadly styled "peasant rebellions"—have at times been the spur behind the rise of new but traditional dynastic organizations, or the groundswell lifting new elites into control of modernizing nations. Among the more successful of such quasi-folk movements in pre-modern times were the revolt of Abū Muslim that ultimately made possible the foundation of the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate; the Turkish *ghāzī* movement in Asia Minor, which eventually culminated in the Ottoman Empire; and the Red Turban rebellions, which in time led to the establishment of the Ming Dynasty in China.

Of the leading peasant rebellions of the modern era, Eric Wolf has noted that at some point they usually suffer a takeover by non-peasant elements, mainly army or political party organizations. In such circumstances, the peasant rebel "is an agent of forces larger than himself."<sup>1</sup> In many pre-modern instances, too, successful popular movements, lacking society-wide organization or goals "larger than themselves," were obliged to come to some sort of terms with the existing elite order—the representatives of traditional civilized culture. Sometimes, as in the case of Abū Muslim, other forces first took advantage of the popular disturbances, and then crushed them. At other times, a popular rebel leader opened himself to elite influence, and, as sultan or

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1 *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1969), 301.

emperor, became the founder of a new dynasty rooted in traditional elite values. Yet ordinarily, when a popular leader transformed himself into a sultan or emperor, and, with the adherence and advice of the elite, organized a state, a definite tension developed between his original unruly folk followers eager for plunder (army), and his new elite supporters, who preferred an orderly administration of taxation (bureaucracy). How the ruler managed this tension depended upon many factors, especially the elite view of the proper purpose of war. In the early Ottoman case, the popular warrior element was, according to Wittek, for a while generally pushed to the frontiers to plunder the infidel, while Muslim high culture took over in the ruling center.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the early Ming Dynasty, since Confucian high culture did not tolerate military expansionism in the style of the *jihād*, a more forceful suppression and containment of the military element was necessary in order to frustrate a competing value system and an alternate route to social honor and political power. Whatever the precise resolution of this tension between army and bureaucracy, the historian should be aware of its implications in any study of pre-modern imperial dynastic movements of popular origin. Certainly in order to understand the final phases of the abortive late Ming rebellions of 1628–1644, a careful analysis of this tension and its attempted resolution is crucial.

With regard to the origins of such pre-modern popular movements, another matter presents itself. A particularly vexatious difficulty arises from the all too frequent use of the term “peasant rebellion,” especially in such pre-modern instances as the late Ming cases, where the source materials are not always adequate for social analyses of events at the popular level. Often in studies of pre-modern uprisings, the term is used in a very loose way to designate almost any sort of organized violence below the level of a palace *coup d'état*, or of provincial elite resistance to a ruling center, and sometimes with Marxian overtones of class struggle.<sup>3</sup> Used in this way, the term is perhaps justifiable if one takes the word “peasant” in a holistic, functionally diffuse sense to mean any follower of a sub-elite life-style, any denizen of the world of the “little tradition,” whether or not he happens to work the land. This usage, however, is not always helpful. If the term “peasant rebellion”

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Wittek, “Deux chapitres de l’histoire des Turcs de Roum,” *Byzantion*, XI (1936), 285–319.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough study of the Marxian understanding of the term, see James P. Harrison, *The Communists and Chinese Peasant Rebellions, A Study in the Rewriting of Chinese History* (New York, 1969).

is used in a more precise way, in which by "peasant" one specifically understands a person whose main occupation and commitment is subsistence (or semi-subsistence) agriculture, then "peasant rebellion" would mean a protest made by peasants against injustices which affect the normal pursuit of that occupation.<sup>4</sup> Many of the peasant troubles (*ikki*) in Tokugawa Japan were rebellious demonstrations of just this sort; and Jansen has used the term "peasant rebellion" to describe the organized protests made by the peasants of the domain of Tosa in the eighteenth century against clearly articulated economic grievances for which they held the local authorities responsible.<sup>5</sup> Since the term is so elastic, it should be incumbent upon any historian using it to define what he means by it, especially where, as in the case of the late Ming rebellions, the *specific* peasant role is not immediately evident.

Three works, recently published or reissued, concern the great seventeenth century rebellions in west and central China which brought the Ming Dynasty to its knees, only to collapse themselves in the face of the Manchu invasion of 1644. Parsons' *The Peasant Rebellions of the Late Ming Dynasty* is a precise and orderly narrative history buttressed by restrained and cautious observations. It tries mainly to show how the Ming Dynasty, for all of its military superiority at the earlier stages, was unable to contain or to quell the outbreaks; and how the rebels, despite their military superiority in the later stages, were unable to establish a new successor dynasty to the Ming. Simonovskaia's *Antifeodal'naia bor'ba kitaiskikh krest'ian v XVII veke* [Anti-feudal Struggle of the Chinese Peasants in the Seventeenth Century] argues that the rebels made a real but unavailing attempt to establish not just another dynasty, but a fundamentally new system of government, monarchical in form but peasant in content, catering to peasant class interests. She attributes its failure to a lack of an intellectual leadership capable of translating vague peasant desires into systematic ideology and concrete policy. This lack eventually permitted the victory of class counterrevolution by the "feudal" elite. Li's *Wan Ming min-pien* [Late Ming Popular Rebellions], mildly sympathetic to the rebels, is of value chiefly for the enthusiastic detail and precise documentation that is less

4 For a discussion of functional diffuseness vs. functional specificity, see Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Boston, 1966), 145 ff.

5 Marius B. Jansen, "Tosa during the Last Century of Tokugawa Rule," in John W. Hall and Marius B. Jansen (eds.), *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan* (Princeton, 1968), 333 ff. The classic work in English on the subject is Hugh Borton, *Peasant Uprisings in Japan of the Tokugawa Period* (New York, 1968).

noticeable in Parsons or Simonovskaia. It should be pointed out that Parsons has not read Simonovskaia, nor has Simonovskaia read Li. Li's factual information is useful in assessing the other two works.

In what sense were the late Ming rebellions peasant rebellions? Simonovskaia provides more help than does Parsons, who fails to define the term despite its prominent appearance in the title of his book. It seems clear enough, however, that the late Ming rebel leadership was never specifically peasant in composition. The rebellions began not in any of the core areas of agrarian China, but on the Inner Asian frontier in northern Shensi province, an area agriculturally marginal and traditionally highly militarized, owing to the necessity of maintaining the permanent defenses against the Mongols to the north. Economically depressed and politically anarchic by late Ming times, northern Shensi served as an asylum for "local bandits" (*t'u-tsei*) and, especially, outlaw Ming troops (*p'ien-tsei*), who, for lack of rations or other bad treatment, and owing to the defeats they suffered in Manchuria, either deserted their units singly or mutinied against their officers in groups, taking their horses and weapons with them (Li, 15-20, 25-32). It was in northern Shensi that, according to Parsons, "the peasant movement began and gained the momentum which the Ming authorities never succeeded in halting completely" (1). Yet it was the military deserters and freebooters gathered along the northern frontier, not the local peasants, who took charge of the rebellions that began there. Throughout the period 1631-1641, which Parsons terms the "disorganized raiding phase," the rebellions were really loosely organized congeries of raiding bands, their men fully mounted on horseback, increasingly capable of using advanced military technology (cannons and gunpowder), and so extremely mobile in their mode of operations that one suspects them of having adapted some of the nomadic traditions of the Mongols on the other side of the Great Wall frontier. That the rebels considered themselves politically autonomous at this early stage, and did not aim to redress grievances within the Ming system, may be seen in their adoption of titles of authority; this the peasant rebels of Tokugawa Japan, who did not consider themselves self-ruling entities, apparently never attempted.

Parsons does not analyze carefully the specific peasant contribution to this early phase of the rebellions. Simonovskaia does. She draws a clear distinction between a permanent rebel leadership and a temporary, or seasonal, peasant following. During the 1620s, the rebel leaders, who were completely cut off from the land, maintained themselves in back-

woods hideouts. From them they made sudden raids on the walled towns and outposts of northern Shensi. The local peasants, suffering the effects of the increasing impoverishment of the countryside, lent their support to these raids. In 1628, however, rebel activity, hitherto sporadic, assumed an open and permanent character owing to the outbreak of a severe famine which drove so many peasants to the rebel side that the hideouts could no longer hold them all. Consequently, the old tactic of raid and retreat was no longer possible; the rebel leaders were obliged to coordinate their activities and open a broader front. Simonovskaia maintains that the dissident peasants consistently chose to rally behind the permanent rebels as their leaders, and did not try to organize themselves independently (116-118).

The rebel leaders were soon victimized by the inconstancy of their peasant following. Owing to the realization of their immediate demands, or to the severe defeats inflicted upon them by the Ming forces, many northern Shensi peasants deserted their leaders and returned to the villages. Meanwhile, the leadership had not only accumulated battle experience, but had also grown in size, having absorbed new men who were entirely divorced from ordinary peasant life. No longer able to operate in Shensi, the rebels moved east into Shansi in 1632. There they elaborated a more definite organizational framework. Wang Tzu-yung, their leader, divided them into thirty-six "camps" (*ying*), a strategy designed to spread the rebellion out over the province in order to minimize supply problems and maximize peasant adherence. They failed, however, to secure Shansi as a permanent base. Parsons suggests this was largely because no famine was at hand to produce the requisite support (32); Simonovskaia contends that the rebels really received more popular support than the sources admit, and that they were driven out by the Ming armies, whose large numbers and policy of terror succeeded in breaking up rebel-peasant alliances (139).

In December 1633, the rebels moved from Shansi south into the agricultural flatlands of Honan province. It was here, according to Simonovskaia, that the rebel movement showed its limitations most strongly. Although the rebels again attracted a large following of local peasant youth, they were unable to penetrate and loot the stoutly defended walled cities. Forced to confine their operations to the countryside, they eventually wrecked the rural economy, and thus alienated the peasantry upon whose support they were closely dependent for success (140-141). Despite their attempt to reorganize themselves at Ying-yang (Parsons reads it "Jung-yang") in 1635, the rebels were

pressed by this circumstance into mutual fragmentation and perpetual migration. This situation, as Simonovskaia imaginatively puts it:

could only satisfy the utterly pauperized part of the peasantry, which could do nothing but lead a wandering life in any case. But those peasants still tied to the land, and the military deserters who still remembered their ancestral farms, yearned to return to their own homes. The time they had spent under the free skies erased their memories of previous bondage and fruitless toil. Their hopes for organizing an independent economy, which the rebels' victories aroused; the destruction of their immediate enemies; the killing of local oppressors; and finally their acquisition of a certain amount of property—all this led many peasants to leave their armies and return to the land. [170]

By 1636, the rebellions appeared to be seriously waning; it was chiefly the onset of a major new famine, this time in Honan province late in 1640, that permitted their revival behind a recently emerged leader, Li Tzu-ch'eng (Parsons, 66, 81).

After making this useful distinction between rebel leaders and peasant followers, however, Simonovskaia then goes on to blur these lines in order to advance the dubious thesis that leaders and followers were, after all, united in their basic interests, and that the whole movement constituted peasant class war against landlords and government. This twist in part rests upon a convenient semantic confusion of the diffuse and specific connotations of the word peasant, particularly as they apply to Li Tzu-ch'eng, the rebel leader whose biography is best known. Although the sources for Li's early life are various and partly conflicting, all generally agree (1) that Li came from a peasant family in northern Shensi; and (2) that he neither desired to belong to, nor did he identify his interests with, local peasant society. On the contrary, after holding a series of petty jobs, none of them connected with agriculture, he ran away from home to join a Ming army unit. He deserted that unit in 1630, and returned to northern Shensi as an outlaw in command of a group of fellow deserters (Parsons, 19–20). He put himself first under Wang Chia-yin, a former soldier and early rebel leader (Li, 29); then under Kao Ying-hsiang, a professional mounted bandit (Li, 52; Simonovskaia, 119, thinks Kao and his men were originally animal herders; Parsons, 8, considers him an army deserter). By all indications, none of the rebel leaders were peasants specifically rebelling *as* peasants; their rebellion was not a peasant rebellion in the specific sense that the Tokugawa *ikki* were.

As ex-soldiers and permanent outlaws, the late Ming rebels evolved a predatory and highly militarized ethos, one quite at variance with the passive life-style of ordinary peasants. To a striking degree, they appear to fit Hobsbawm's generalized "haiduk" model. The Haiduks, a kind of outlaw organization once found in Hungary and southeastern Europe along the Ottoman frontiers, typify for Hobsbawm "the highest form of primitive banditry, the one which comes closest to being a permanent and conscious focus of peasant insurrection."<sup>6</sup> A typical "haiduk" band seems to have been a militarized, more or less permanent group of outlaws, usually cut off from land, village, or kin ties. Their membership consisted of military deserters, fugitives, and individual village heroes who were simply unwilling to submit to peasant routine, or elements from that manpower surplus which marginal peasant societies, according to Hobsbawm, always produce. Such groups ordinarily lacked ideology or class consciousness and had an ambivalent (rather than permanently hostile) attitude toward outside authority; although they shared certain peasant values, such as a hatred and distrust of cities, they also tended to be contemptuous of the "inert and passive" peasant mass, except in times of rebellion, when "the roving bands of outlaw raiders and cossacks on the turbulent frontier . . . would coalesce to inspire and lead the gigantic peasant risings. . . ."<sup>7</sup> Yet it would appear that neither the Haiduks, nor the late Ming rebels, possessed any special understanding of peasant needs or grievances, nor did either champion any sort of agrarian reform on their own initiative. Although peasants flocked to the late Ming rebels periodically in times of distress, there is little indication that the rebels were able effectively to lead the peasants or to champion their interests. Rather, the dynamic of this first phase of the rebellions seems to have required that the peasantry uproot itself and adopt the predatory and quasi-nomadic rebel style of life. Few peasants, it appears, were willing to do this for very long. As cavalymen, the rebels tended to be contemptuous of their peasant recruits, whom they mainly attached as infantry; in some cases they had to go so far as to compel peasant recruitment by force and brand their conscripts in order to discourage their desertion (Parsons, 229-230). To call the whole movement "peasant rebellion" demands, to say the least, serious qualification.

6 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London, 1969), 62.

7 *Ibid.*, 71.



Between 1641 and 1644, the rebellions in central and west China underwent a transformation from an essentially sub-political raiding operation into a dynastic movement ultimately aimed at replacing the Ming. Yet it was so weakly developed that although Li Tzu-ch'eng's forces captured Peking in April 1644, forcing the imperial court to evacuate, his whole movement collapsed under outside pressure only two months later. Parsons advances two general reasons for this sudden collapse. He first states that the rebellions lacked the popular base that a messianic religious message might have given them:

Viewed entirely as a phenomenon of peasant unrest, the greatest weakness of the late Ming rebellions was the lack of any esprit-building and charisma-providing factors, such as a messianic belief with roots in a folk religion. Consequently, the late Ming rebellions, possessing relatively unimportant religious overtones, lacked the strength of the peasant movement at the end of the Yüan when the White Lotus doctrine provided a dynamic impetus and a foundation. [259]

Here a few dissenting remarks may be in order. There is no reason to believe that the messianic religious ideology that inspired the riots of 1351-1354 was any more effective in mobilizing permanent peasant support than the non-religious "haiduk" ethos of the late Ming rebels. Late Yüan religious messianism was not specifically a peasant manifestation; it was developed and most strongly espoused among heretic monks, artisans, peddlers, and people on the fringes of legitimate society. Its hold on the legitimate peasantry proved to be of short duration. Moreover, Chu Yüan-chang, the Ming founder, did not emerge into the limelight of power as a prospective dynast until well after the messianic riots had run their course. His military power was not built on the fervor of former messianic rebels, but grew mainly by the recruitment and amalgamation of gentry-led and peasant-manned village self-defense systems.<sup>8</sup>

Parsons's second answer is more promising, and, unlike the first, is derived from the overall argumentation of his book. His conclusion is that an unintelligent rebel leadership neglected to establish a secure base area and, moreover, dominated a movement which had only minimal backing from the gentry elite:

Viewed more generally, the most fundamental reasons for the defeat of the rebellions were their failure to attract gentry support, and closely

<sup>8</sup> Cf. John W. Dardess, "The Transformations of Messianic Revolt and the Founding of the Ming Dynasty," *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXIX (1970), 539-558.

related, their neglect to develop secure strength in a base area before attempting to seize national power. The failure to attract gentry support was mainly due to the limited and lowly backgrounds of the rebel leaders, as well as their relative lack of native ability, which made it impossible for them to display the political wisdom necessary to gain a following. The late Ming rebellions had no peasant genius like Chu Yüan-chang. Furthermore, the long-surviving rebel leaders, mostly natives of northern Shensi, who monopolized the top positions of leadership . . . had a vested interest in maintaining a firm grasp on the dominant positions and could not bring themselves to share power with a gentry group. Had rebel leadership been more diverse, it would have been possible for a gentry faction to have exerted influence. Also, if Li had been able to maintain his position in Peking for a longer period than he did, he would have had more success in building up a gentry following.

This conclusion is carefully put, yet it is more descriptive than analytical. Of the numerous analytical problems which it raises, one of the simpler asks why, from the point of view of its basic internal relationships, Li Tzu-ch'eng's dynastic effort failed.

Li's emergence as an aspiring ruler hinged on three main factors: famine and ruin in Honan province; the disintegration of the Ming armies; and, in these circumstances, Li's ability to penetrate major walled cities for the first time. In the view of a few fringe members of the Honan gentry, the prevailing conditions of anarchy and desolation held the possibility that the rebel movement might be transformed from an engine of destruction into an agent of pacification and order. Acting on this assumption, a few gentry first made contact with Li in 1641 when he temporarily captured the city of Lo-yang.

It is important to note, however, that it was gentry dissidents, not men of the social or political mainstream, that came to the rebel chief Li Tzu-ch'eng. They were not men in firm control of their local villages or districts. For example, Li's leading gentry adherent, Li Yen, was highly unpopular among his peers in his home county in Honan, in part because his father had been a high court adherent of the notorious eunuch dictator Wei Chung-hsien (fl. 1620-1627), and probably even more because he supplied free grain to the destitute peasantry. It was Li Yen who, as Parsons puts it, "started a deliberate campaign to circulate popular slogans which would create for Li Tzu-ch'eng a new image and win him widespread support" (93). The slogans included demands for land equalization, tax cancellation, and fair prices. If only

on a verbal level, Li Tzu-ch'eng's movement began in 1641 to shift from a sophisticated form of banditry into something resembling *bona fide* peasant rebellion. The shift was, however, more apparent than real, for it appears that the major part of the Honan gentry was unwilling to commit itself and its peasant clients to Li Tzu-ch'eng and consolidated village self-defense systems instead (cf. Li, 103-104, 144n.).

At the city of Hsiang-yang in 1643, Li Tzu-ch'eng strengthened his military leadership and established his first civilian bureaucracy, both with gentry aid. The politicization of the rebel movement and its surface commitment to peace and order at this time may be seen in Li Tzu-ch'eng's assumption of royal title and in his publicly announced goal of rescuing the people from their suffering under Ming misrule.<sup>9</sup> His army, he now asserted, had been "farming for ten generations" and was "altogether good" (Parsons, 219). A particularly telling symbol of Li's new order was his honorific and benevolent treatment of the local Ming princes—previously a favorite target of rebel rapine and cruelty (Li, 120). The new order failed, however, to attract massive gentry support and was exceedingly unstable. The restructuring of the rebel army into a centralized organ responsive to directives from the top generated resentment, for old ties of loyalty between leaders and men were partly ruptured in the process, and the rebels were resistant to centralized discipline and control (cf. Parsons, 106-113, 226; Li, 113-120). It may have been military restlessness that prompted the plan, argued out entirely by Li's gentry advisers, to evacuate Hsiang-yang and make an attack on the Ming capital of Peking by way of Shensi and Shansi (cf. Parsons, 112; Li, 124-125).

After leaving Hsiang-yang, Li's army and government made a temporary stop in the Shensi provincial capital of Sian (November 1643-February 1644). Li was more successful here in gaining further gentry support and in establishing administrative control at the local level. At Sian, Li paid well-publicized calls on the aged, issued coinage, and held his own civil service examinations, thus further identifying his movement with the elite traditions of government and morality. This trend was capped by the formal declaration of a dynasty, the Ta

9 Li earlier succeeded to the rebel title *ch'uang wang* after the decease of a superior who held it before him. Often translated "Dashing Prince," the title carries a strong overtone of violent action. It did not imply a claim to political rule over society, but rather to leadership within the rebel group. In 1643, Li took the title *Hsin-shun wang*, which did have political implications of a wider sort. This title may perhaps be translated: "Prince Who is Renovated and Compliant" (i.e., compliant with the will of Heaven and the desires of the people).

Shun. The rebel military, which had no part in this dynastic movement, was in part mollified by the grant of noble titles and even more by the institution of legalized plunder—a device initiated here and fully worked out in Peking a few months later (cf. Parsons, 120–123).

Li Tzu-ch'eng's march on Peking met little opposition, and Peking itself fell to him in April 1644. On the march, the tensions within Li's movement were not fully evident, for the common goal of taking Peking seems to have served as a binding influence. The troops were well-behaved along the way, no doubt restrained by the greater prospects of loot in the capital city. Li's civilian supporters may have hoped that the last Ming emperor, seeing that all was lost, might abdicate (*shan-jang*) his dynasty and the Mandate of Heaven to Li and thus give an incalculable boon to the elite-oriented bureaucratic element within Li's movement.<sup>10</sup> If that were their hope, they were cheated by the last Ming emperor's dramatic suicide. In any event, the latent internal dichotomy between the civilian officials and the rebel military widened not long after Peking was taken.

Weak as it was, the civilian side tried to divert the rebellion into traditional bureaucratic channels with Li Tzu-ch'eng as Confucian emperor and supreme bureaucrat. The military side, though itself internally divided, pushed in the opposite direction and struggled to preserve the original "haiduk" goals of predation and rape, with Li Tzu-ch'eng as bandit king and supreme war leader. Circumstances dictated that the military side should prevail, and that the civilian side yield.

The civilian side in Li's movement was not powerful enough to reinstitute the traditional tax-collecting apparatus, which required local gentry cooperation. Wealth was, nonetheless, gathered, and it is important to note how it was done. In central and northern China, over which Li Tzu-ch'eng exerted some semblance of control from his new capital in Peking, various former Ming officials were sent out to serve as magistrates in the walled administrative cities. In conjunction with detachments of Li's army, these magistrates forcibly extracted money and supplies from the local rich, mainly gentry and other former officials (Li, 143). It was precisely this latter group that the traditional Ming tax regime had overlooked, refused to tax heavily despite its pressing need for finances (cf. Parsons, 56), and all along had been a favored victim of rebel plunder.

<sup>10</sup> I have here adapted a suggestion made by Ray Huang in his review of Parson's book in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, XXX (1970), 175–176.

The civilian-military compromise inherent in this arrangement was more strikingly visible at the center, in Peking. There we find that Li Tzu-ch'eng had built a large central bureaucracy, staffed mainly by former Ming officials who were found on investigation to be honest, and more important, relatively poor. But the powerlessness of this bureaucracy is evidenced by the fact that it was put under the direction of one of Li Tzu-ch'eng's generals, who was thereby able to ensure that the overall policy for the regime should reflect basic military interests. This meant that the bureaucracy had to subordinate its own goals to those of the military, and act either as an arm of the military or not at all. As the bridge between the civilian bureaucracy on the one hand and the rebel military on the other, Li Tzu-ch'eng's old gentry adherent, Li Yen, worked mightily to save the situation. His formula for keeping the whole movement in one piece consisted essentially in rationalizing and legalizing the rebel instinct for plunder by drawing up carefully graded schedules designating which persons were to be arrested and what part of their wealth was to be seized (Parsons, 136-137; Li, 141-142). His apparent intent was to put the military under civilian guidance by involving the bureaucracy in its looting operations.

Li Yen's effort was, however, in vain, for he could not compel the military to follow his schedules and refrain from casual and unauthorized plunder. His appeal to Li Tzu-ch'eng in this matter was of no avail. To the rebel military, Li Tzu-ch'eng was merely a Shensi outlaw like themselves; they were profoundly hostile to his imperial pretensions. As one leading general reportedly said, "I'll salute him as one bandit to another, I'll not bend my knee!" (Li, 165). Pressed by Li Yen, Li Tzu-ch'eng urged his generals to observe the norms set down by the bureaucracy. The generals, however, would have none of it. One of them "openly stated to Li Yen . . . that he was chiefly concerned with preventing mutinies among the troops and would not pay any great heed to the people. Even when Li Tzu-ch'eng appealed to . . . the rebel commanders, still suffering from a freebooters' psychology, to restrain their troops, no real results were gained. The commanders frankly told Li that, having gained the empire for him, they should now be allowed to enjoy and enrich themselves" (Parsons, 134).

The proceeds of plunder, thinly legalized by the bureaucrats, passed up the line and into the pockets of privates, sergeants, and generals. After two months of this, the troops had enough and were eager to return to their home areas. Discipline slackened. There was no enthusiasm among them for fighting Wu San-kuei, who, with his

Manchu allies, was approaching Peking in the first step of the Ch'ing conquest of China. They had no desire to defend Peking; defeated by Wu, they made a disorderly evacuation of the capital and scattered homeward, dragging their booty with them. Thus did Li Tzu-ch'eng's empire collapse at its apparent apogee of power.

The unexamined use of the term "peasant rebellion" easily leads to confusion over just who rebels and why. In the late Ming case, the evidence seems to suggest that what actually took place was a kind of military insurrection rather than a peasant rebellion. It might be argued that the inadequate resources of the Ming Dynasty, relative to the size of its army early in the seventeenth century, in effect forced part of that army to turn outlaw and fend for itself.<sup>11</sup> Although the intermittent outbreak of famine (Shensi in 1628, Honan in 1640) provided these ex-soldier rebels with the opportunity, or, perhaps better, necessity of expanding their operations, there is no indication that these expanded operations were in any but the most tenuous way connected with specifically agrarian revolt within peasant society. However, until the social and economic history of northern China in Ming times becomes better known, and until we have a better general idea of the possible forms of peasant-military relationships, particularly in pre-modern times, our understanding of the late Ming rebellions will be incomplete.

Second, the evolution of quasi-military freebooting operations into essentially civilian, elite-oriented dynastic movements, particularly under conditions of anarchy where the largely apolitical freebooters happen to be the only group in effective possession of the means of violence, is not an unknown historical phenomenon. Moreover, a comparative view of such cases suggests that there is every reason for such a transition to fail, especially where, as in the late Ming case, there was so little time in which to carry it through. The evolution of the Ottoman system took generations; and, after a century of development, even it temporarily fell apart when defeated by Tamerlane in 1402.

11 For late Ming problems of military finance and supply, see Ray Huang, "Fiscal Administration during the Ming Dynasty," in Charles O. Hucker (ed.), *Chinese Government in Ming Times* (New York, 1969), 117 ff. Huang has also registered his doubts as to whether the late Ming rebellions were in fact peasant rebellions (126-127).

Just as the Ottoman sultan was the creation of the civilian *'ulamā*, and not of the freebooting *ghāzīs*, Li Tzu-ch'eng's "dynastic aspirations" were fed by his gentry adherents, and not by his rebel comrades. This, incidentally, was also true of Chu Yüan-chang's foundation of the Ming Dynasty in 1368. In each case, the crucial point of tension was reached when civilian elites attempted to take over and reorganize the older movements. An analysis of Li Tzu-ch'eng's movement in these civilian *versus* military terms leads, I think, to a better explanation for the dramatic and sudden collapse of his dynasty than the summary conclusions of Parsons or the Marxian class-counterrevolution hypothesis of Simonovskaia.

There are at least two major ways in which rebel movements may be approached historically. They may be considered as symptoms of dysfunction within the larger social and political order in which they originate and play out their history, or they may be treated as autonomous power-seeking organizations with their own peculiar and unique lines of development. Neither approach can be entirely satisfactory without reference to the other. A historical treatment of a period of rebellion which takes all of society as its canvas may tend to relegate dissident activity to symptom, and from symptom the path first to conceptual typology and then to undynamic stereotype is all too easy to take. Chalmers Johnson's typology of revolutionary behavior, useful though it may be to historical research, has one serious limitation. It sorts out concrete instances of rebellion into idealized types, using the predominant ideological characteristics of the rebellious group as one main means of identification (thus the Jacquerie, the Millenarian Rebellion, etc.), and assumes that all members of a single rebellious group possess a single ideology and remain true to it from the inception of violence until its end.<sup>12</sup> Yet since in fact one finds that rebel movements may at times shift their goals, transform their ideology, take on new and different members, and appeal to new constituencies, one cannot simply assign a plausible typological tag ("peasant rebellion") to an entire rebel movement and go no further. One must also analyze the inner development and consequent inner tensions of the rebellion itself.

The present essay argues the need for a closer study of the internal

<sup>12</sup> See Johnson's *Revolution and the Social System* (Stanford, 1964). An excellent and instructive example of the large-scale historical treatment of rebellion from a comparative point of view is Roland Mousnier, *Fureurs Paysannes. Les Paysans dans les Révoltes du XVIIe Siècle (France, Russie, Chine)* (Paris, 1967). Mousnier's analysis of the late Ming rebellions draws heavily upon Parsons's earlier studies in article form.

dynamic of rebellion, a sharply and indeed narrowly focused approach which the late Ming rebellions, for one, still await. Rebel organizations are, after all, in many ways miniature polities. They have a certain political hierarchy and political goals, control territory, and maintain themselves by various rudimentary fiscal processes. No less than legitimate states, rebel polities may suffer “dysfunctions”; rebel chiefs may find themselves subject to conflicting pressures from below as their goals and strategies shift in response to new situations. One ought to be aware that rebels are not only sociological types, but also men; and that rebel movements, especially those that do not succeed in that ultimate act of self-preservation, the founding of a new and legitimate regime, may still transcend mere *opéra bouffe* and stake a serious claim as history. The sharply focused approach will certainly help elucidate rebel history; it may also open new avenues of understanding to the larger social and political environments in which rebellious movements take place.