



Where Chiang Kai-shek Lost China: The Liao-Shen Campaign, 1948

by Harold M. Tanner.

Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2015. Pp. xi, 365. ISBN 978-0-253-01692-8.

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In September 1948, the Chinese Communist Northeast Field Army under the command of Gen. Lin Biao began a major operation against Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist (Guomindang) forces in Manchuria. Known to most as the Liao-Shen Campaign, its battles "marked the end of the struggle for control of the key strategic theater of China's Northeast" (3). Historian Harold Tanner (Univ. of North Texas) offers a detailed analysis of this decisive campaign of the Chinese Civil War. *Where Chiang Kai-shek Lost China* nicely complements his earlier work on the 1946 battles over Siping.¹ While others have couched the story of the Civil War in political or ideological terms, Tanner stresses battles and military history. The victory of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Liao-Shen Campaign came not as a result of political or psychological factors, but through hard fought battles and military campaigns.

Tanner portrays the Liao-Shen Campaign as devastating to the Nationalists, most of whose best forces were lost to defeats on the battlefield or defection to the Communists. At the end of the campaign, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controlled all of Manchuria, a resource-rich area that served as the foundation of the Communist war effort. Further, combat actions during the Liao-Shen Campaign marked the CCP's critical military transition from mobile guerrilla attacks to large-scale conventional operations. Tanner highlights the role of Lin Biao, described here as the tactical genius behind the transformation.

At the start of the fighting in Manchuria, a cautious Lin preferred guerrilla actions, doubting his force's ability to assault defended cities. The battles at Yixian, Tashan, Xinkailing, and Linjiang taught him valuable lessons and gave his men practical experience in such operations. Success in this new phase of People's War required Lin and the CCP to develop bases in Manchuria, eradicate bandits, acquire new weapons, establish arsenals, and retrain and indoctrinate soldiers. Through the "Speaking Bitterness" campaigns, Lin assembled soldiers of diverse backgrounds, improved their discipline, and strengthened the military's central command structure. Tanner argues that Lin's work bore fruit in effective assaults on the major Manchurian cities of Shenyang, Jinzhou, and Changchun. For the first time in the Civil War, large Communist forces attacked strongly defended cities with closely coordinated infantry, artillery, and armor in operations based on Mao Zedong's strategic vision of three phases of People's War.

The book unfolds chronologically, the first eight chapters tracing the progress of the war and revealing how the CCP gradually acquired the capabilities needed for larger conventional attacks. The remaining five chapters analyze in detail the decisive battles of the Liao-Shen Campaign. A great strength of the work is the equal attention given to both sides in the conflict, Communist and Nationalist. Tanner reveals the degree to which both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao clashed with their leading generals. Chiang, for example, wanted Gen. Wei Lihuang, commander of Nationalist forces in the Northeast, to fall back to Jinzhou to protect the Nationalist rail line into Manchuria. Wei instead in-

1. *The Battle for Manchuria and the Fate of China: Siping, 1946* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2013).

sisted on defending Shenyang, despite the risk of Communist encirclement. Chiang's failure to impose a coherent strategy among his subordinates badly hampered the Nationalist defense of Manchuria.

At the same time, Mao criticized Biao for hesitating to carry out the aggressive attacks on defended cities that Mao believed would annihilate the enemy. Tanner describes at length Lin's work in Manchuria, transforming a guerrilla force into a professional army able to conduct successful operations against Nationalist positions in major cities. In short, the Communist soldiers who carried out the 1948 Liao-Shen Campaign differed greatly from those who entered Manchuria in 1945 at the start of the Civil War.

Tanner also touches on important issues in Sino-American relations and Chinese military history. For instance, he stresses basic differences in the views of Chiang Kai-Shek and his American allies. Chiang placed moral regeneration at the center of his plan for China's revitalization after the Sino-Japanese War, emphasizing the need for a strong leader instilled with traditional values. This meant crushing any competing visions of China's future and pushed Chiang to seek a military solution to the problem of the CCP. His US advisors were divided on China policy, but most favored American-style political reforms to ensure greater transparency, democratic values, and respect for individual freedoms in Chiang's government. This put him at odds with the Americans and contributed to the fragmentation of the Nationalist war effort.

The decisive Communist victory in the Liao-Shen Campaign confirmed most American observers' suspicions that Chiang's government and military were hopelessly corrupt, incompetent, and dictatorial. Tanner denies that the United States played a pivotal role in Chiang's defeat either through Gen. George Marshall's June 1946 cease-fire agreement or a lack of American material aid. Both sides in Manchuria suffered from shortages of food, weapons, and ammunition. The author contrasts this with Lin Biao's astute adaptation to changing conditions as the fighting developed. His central question is not why the Nationalists failed, but why the CCP succeeded.

The meticulous treatment of strategy and tactics in the Liao-Shen Campaign provides an opening into the debate over the existence of a distinctive "Chinese way of war" emphasizing "the use of planning, stratagem, deception, and psychological techniques in order to win without fighting" (16). While acknowledging the influence of *The Art of War* on Mao's strategic thinking, Tanner demonstrates that the CCP's shift to large-scale operations violated many of the precepts of Sun Zi and other traditional military thinkers. Certainly, Lin Biao paid great attention to planning, preparation, mobility, and massing overwhelming force against enemy weak points, as prescribed in *The Art of War*. But, in the Liao-Shen Campaign, at Mao's urging, Lin Biao disregarded some of Sun Zi's core tenets by mounting risky attacks against heavily defended fixed positions. Rather than seek a bloodless victory through deception or indirect action in Manchuria, both Lin and Mao sought to trounce their enemy in direct and decisive battles.

Tanner maintains that the tendency to associate Mao Zedong chiefly with guerrilla warfare does not help explain the outcome of the Chinese Civil War. In fact, he writes, it was Lin Biao's "process of army building, professionalization, and learning by trial and error" (23) that ensured victory in both the Liao-Shen Campaign and Mao's larger strategic plan.

A particularly compelling section of the book deals with the siege of Changchun, which Tanner compares to the Manchu massacre of the Han population of Yangzhou in 1645. The CCP constructed multi-layered barriers around the city to cut off the Nationalist forces' access to food and supplies. The Nationalists likewise built defensive fortifications inside the city. Between the two, lay a no man's land—the "checkpoint zone." The CCP intentionally blocked hungry civilians from fleeing the city in order to increase the strain on Nationalist resources. The Nationalists countered by refusing entry to the returning civilians, stranding them in the checkpoint zone,

a band anywhere from fifty to one thousand meters across between Communist and Nationalist lines. It was a dangerous, lawless place. Both Nationalist and Communist troops sent small teams into the area regularly, sometimes in civilian clothing, to collect intelligence. Bandits preyed on refugees, robbing them of food, controlling access to wells (many of which had been poisoned), and guarding fields of grain or other crops. Gunfire could be heard night and day. Starving people stripped the trees of bark and leaves to eat. An American consular report describing the situation as of late summer or early autumn noted: "The area is permeated by the stench of numberless cadavers. These are preyed upon by those dogs which escape the clutches of the hungry refugees." (240)

Lin Biao and the CCP leadership intentionally used starvation as a weapon at Changchun, but, recognizing its deleterious effects on the morale of their own soldiers, they eventually allowed some refugees to pass through and even set up relief camps for them. Tanner nonetheless sees the deaths of some 120,000 refugees as an atrocity "which hardly squared with the Communist Party's carefully constructed image as a force working for the liberation of the common people" (220).

Where Chiang Kai-shek Lost China is more than a fluidly written battle narrative or operational history. By tapping an impressive array of archival materials, published document collections, and memoirs, Harold Tanner has put the Liao-Shen Campaign in the larger context of the Chinese Civil War and significantly advanced our understanding of the military history of modern China.