

# A Study on the Images of the Nien Cavalry in the Novel *Star Grass*

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*Star Grass* (first published in the early 1980s) written by Ling Li (1942-2018) is a Chinese historical novel based on the history of the Nien Rebellion (1852-1864) in the 19th century's China. In history, the Nien Army was famous for its flexible cavalry tactics. Its main adversary was also a famous cavalry force. Thus, in the historical novel *Star Grass*, cavalry constitutes a really significant element. Based on historical materials, the author of this novel restored the combat tactics of the Nien cavalry. However, in the specific portrayal of the Nien army's figures, the author incorporated many fictional elements. These fictional elements possess a strong style characteristic of classical Chinese novels. This creative style lends the novel strong readability, but slightly distorts the authenticity of the depiction of war scenes. Nevertheless, for the readers of modern society, this novel still remains a good reference for understanding the war culture of China during the late Qing Dynasty (1840-1912).

*Keywords:* *Star Grass*, the Nien Rebellion, cavalry

## Introduction

Star grass is a kind of plant whose scientific name is *Puccinellia tenuiflora*, owning tenacious vitality. In the novel *Star Grass*, it was a military song of the Nien army, reflecting the tenacity of the Nien army's soldiers (Ling, 1998, Volume 1, p. 72). This is also the origin of the novel's title.

This novel is adapted from the war history of China in the 19th century which was a century marked by frequent wars. The Nien Rebellion was one of the most famous and important ones. During this war, in eastern China, two cavalry forces with sharply contrasting styles fought a life-or-death battle. This is the historical background of this novel.

In history, Tianjing (the capital of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, located in today's Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China) was occupied by the Qing army. This event symbolized the ignominious defeat of the renowned Taiping Rebellion. After the fall of Tianjing, Lai Wenguang (1827-1868), a general of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, led his own troops to join forces with the Nien army, becoming the new leader of the Nien army (Luo, 1991, pp. 2185-2186). With the help of a few generals of the Nien army, such as Ren Huabang (?-1867) and Zhang Zongyu (?-?), Lai completed an important military reform in the Nien army. After this reform, being good at adopting flexible cavalry tactics became the main characteristic of the Nien army (Luo, 1991, pp. 2185-2186). This event is also the plot of the opening section of the novel *Star Grass*.

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In the first nine chapters of the novel, the author devotes much space to depicting the battles between the Nien cavalry and Sengge Rinchen's (1811-1865, one of the most famous cavalry commanders of the 19th century's Qing army) Mongolian cavalry. In history, Sengge Rinchen's troops were annihilated by the Nien cavalry during the battle of Gaolouzhai (located in today's Heze, Shandong Province, China) in 1865 (Zhao, 1977, pp. 11898-11899). This was the greatest victory in the history of the Nien army. As a matter of fact, before this battle, the Nien cavalry and the Mongolian cavalry had fought many times. Many brilliant scenes in the novel are adapted from these battles.

Presently, in China, the novels based on the war history of dynastic China are relatively rare. Certainly, the works based on the war history of dynastic China's cavalry are even rarer. *Star Grass* is an interesting novel on the theme of the war history of dynastic China's cavalry. This paper will be a conclusive study of the images of Nien cavalry in the novel *Star Grass*, integrating history and literature. This study will mainly focus on a comparative analysis of the images of the Nien cavalry in the novel and their historical counterparts.

### **The Cavalrymen of the Nien Army and Their Opponents**

Before analyzing the images of the Nien cavalry, we'd better learn more about the Nien cavalry and their adversaries in history.

As mentioned before, after the military reform of Lai Wenguang, the Nien army adopting flexible cavalry tactics became the main characteristic of the Nien army. Because cavalry was the main force of the Nien army, Lai and other generals of the Nien army always adopted a special kind of tactic. The Nien cavalry frequently drew the enemy into prolonged pursuit; when the pursuers were worn out, the Nien cavalry would attack unexpectedly and totally destroy them (Luo, 1991, pp. 2185-2186). It was with this tactic that the Nien army successfully defeated the troops of Sengge Rinchen during the battle of Gaolouzhai.

As a matter of fact, many of the cavalrymen in the Nien army could be called lancers. According to the records of Wang Ding'an (1833-1898), an official of the Qing Dynasty at that time, the cavalrymen of the Nien army were skilled at using very long lances (some of them were more than six meters in length) (Wang, 1967, p. 846). When facing the arquebusiers of the Qing army, the lancers of the Nien army would charge rapidly, reaching the enemy before they could fire a second shot (Wang, 1967, p. 846).

In history, the main opponents of the Nien cavalry were the mounted troops of the Qing army. During the 19th century, in cavalry battles, the Qing army usually relied on the cavalrymen coming from Mongolia and Northeast China. These cavalrymen came from nomadic and fishing-hunting ethnic groups, skilled in shooting from horseback. Their typical weaponry included Niao Qiang (a kind of Chinese arquebus), bows, and sabers (Guo, 2022, p. 67). As a matter of fact, during the battles, they usually just used arquebuses and bows, seldom engaging in close combat (Guo, 2022, p. 67). Most of the cavalrymen of Sengge Rinchen's army were from the Eastern Three Leagues (Zhelimu League, Zhaowuda League, and Zhuosuotu League) of Mongolia. Many of the cavalrymen in these areas relied on arquebuses during the battles. There's no doubt that they were highly skilled at using arquebuses on horseback (Guo, 2022, pp. 68-69). In the early 1860s, before the military reform of Lai, the Nien army was defeated by the cavalrymen of Sengge Rinchen many times (Guo, 2022, pp. 68-69).

However, as we all know, the arquebus has a fatal flaw. Its rate of fire is really slow. The cavalrymen from Mongolia relying on arquebuses let the generals of the Nien army finally find a way to defeat them. As mentioned before, when facing the arquebusiers of the Qing army, the lancers of the Nien army would charge rapidly,

reaching the enemy before they could fire a second shot. When facing the mounted arquebusiers of Sengge Rinchen, this tactic would also be useful.

During the Qing Dynasty, because of the development of firearms, the soldiers finally gave up their armor. Thus, no matter in history or in the novel, both the Nien cavalry and the Qing cavalry would not wear armor.

The images of the cavalymen of the Qing army in the novel were similar to those in history. In the novel, the cavalymen of the Nien army were also good at those tactics adopted by the Nien cavalry in history. Their most typical weaponry included lances (more than six meters in length) and sabers (Ling, 1998, Volume 1, pp. 159, 164). All in all, the author's portrayal of the Nien cavalry and the Qing cavalry in the novel is based on the Nien cavalry and the Qing Cavalry in history.

### **The Images of the Nien Army's Cavalry Commanders in the Novel *Star Grass***

As mentioned before, the images of the cavalymen of the Nien Army in the novel were similar to those in history. Nevertheless, a novel inevitably contains fictional elements. In the novel *Star Grass*, one of the most important fictional elements is the images of the cavalry commanders.

In the novel, there appeared many cavalry commanders in the Nien army. Some of them really existed in history, such as Lai Wenguang, Zhang Zongyu, and Ren Huabang. In history, all of them were really excellent cavalry commanders. Ren Huabang was even regarded by Li Hongzhang (1823-1901, one of the most famous senior government officials of the late Qing Dynasty) as the most outstanding cavalry commander (Luo, 1991, p. 2194). In history and reality, for a commander, the most important ability is command capability. But in many Chinese novels, proficiency in combat arts is the only standard by which to judge a commander's competence. It is because of the influence of classical Chinese novels which were written during the Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1616-1912) Dynasties, such as *Water Margin*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Romance of the Sui and Tang Dynasties*. In the novel *Star Grass*, the author also adopts this method to portray the images of the Nien army's cavalry commanders.

In a classical Chinese novel, if the author wanted to portray a supremely powerful general, what was the most direct method? The answer is letting the general own a really heavy weapon. For example, in *Water Margin*, Lu Zhishen, one of the most powerful infantry commanders in the whole book, owned a monk's cane which was 62 jin (being equal to modern society's 36.58 kilograms) in weight (Shi, 2005, p. 67). In another classical Chinese novel *Stories of the Tang Dynasty* which was written in the Qing Dynasty, this method was taken to the extreme. For example, Li Yuanba, the most powerful general in the book, owned two short-handle metal mace which were 800 jin (being equal to modern society's 476.8 kilograms) in weight (Yuanhu Yusou, 2010, p. 207).

In Chinese history, the long-handle board swords which were about 50 kilograms in weight really existed. For example, in the Ming Dynasty, a general named Liu Ting (1560-1619) owned such a long-handle board sword (Zhang, 2000, p. 4275). As a matter of fact, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Liu was not the only officer who had the ability to use such a heavy board sword. However, this kind of weapon was just a kind of martial arts training equipment which was not suitable for the real battlefields. According to the records of some Ming Dynasty's martial artists, the most suitable weight of long-handle board sword which was used on horseback during the battles was less than 20 jin (being equal to modern society's 11.8 kilograms) in weight (Ma, 2005, Volume 1, p. 49).

In the novel *Star Grass*, in order to portray Ren Huabang's image as a powerful general, the author also adopted the same method as those ancient Chinese novelists. In the novel, Ren always wielded a long-handle

board sword which was 90 jin (being equal to 45 kilograms) in weight on horseback during the battles (Ling, 1998, Volume 1, p. 55). Besides, like the mighty warriors in classical Chinese novels, Ren Huabang in the novel *Star Grass* is also a reckless warrior.

In the novel, the author devotes considerable space to shaping the image of Luo Wanmei, a female cavalry commander coming from the veterans of the Taiping army. Unlike Lai Wenguang, Ren Huabang, and Zhang Zongyu, Luo Wanmei is an entirely fictitious character. Being different from those cavalymen from the Nien army, Luo always adopted double board swords as her weapon instead of a lance during the battles. In history, as a kind of military martial arts, wielding double board swords on horseback had been adopted by ancient Chinese warriors as early as the Song Dynasty (960-1279) (Toghto, 2000, p. 9580).

As a matter of fact, the image of Luo also draws inspiration from the female warriors of classical Chinese novels. In classical Chinese novels, it is quite common to see female warriors fighting with twin swords, appearing many classic images such as Hu Sanniang in *Water Margin* and Deng Chanyu in *Investiture of the Gods* (Shi, 2005, p. 643; Xu, 2010, p. 379).

In summary, in portraying the images of the cavalry generals of the Nien Army, the author mainly adopted the technique of imitating classical Chinese novels. Thus, sometimes, when reading this novel, you will feel as if you are reading a classic Chinese novel.

### **The Cavalry Combat in the Novel *Star Grass***

In the novel, the author devotes considerable space to describing the battles between the Nien cavalry and the Qing cavalry. However, it is a fictional work. Thus, the portrayal of cavalry battles in the book blends historical reality with fictional elements. In this part, I will take the battle of Lushan as an example, analyzing the cavalry combat in the novel *Star Grass* in detail. In history, this battle happened on January 1865 (Chen, 1992, p. 278). Lai Wenguang and Zhang Zongyu led the combined Nien and Taiping forces back to Lushan (located in today's Lushan County, Henan Province, China) (Chen, 1992, p. 278). Sengge Rinchen led his army in pursuit. The Nien army feigned defeat to lure the enemy across the Zhi River (today's Sha River), and then turned back and launched a fierce attack (Chen, 1992, p. 278). Sengge Rinchen's forces were defeated. Two generals of the Qing army named Hengling (?-1865) and Shulunbao (?-1865) were killed in this battle (Chen, 1992, p. 278).

In most of the classical Chinese novels, the process of the cavalry combat is as follows. After the two sides formed their battle lines face to face, each side sent out one officer to engage in single combat. Once the outcome was decided, the victorious side would pursue the enemy taking advantage of the momentum. This pattern of cavalry combat in classical Chinese novels is completely different from actual historical cavalry battles.

Compared with the classical Chinese novels, this novel *Star Grass*'s depiction of cavalry warfare is much closer to historical reality. Taking the battle of Lushan as an example, during the battle, the Qing cavalry was lured into an encirclement by the Nien cavalry (Ling, 1998, Volume 1, pp. 156-157). After firing a round of shots, the cavalymen of the Qing army had to engage in close combat with the cavalymen of the Nien army because of the charge tactics of the latter (Ling, 1998, Volume 1, p. 158). In the melee, Shulunbao fought a one-on-one duel with Luo Wanmei and emerged victorious, but was killed by Zhang Zongyu's bow and arrow (Ling, 1998, Volume 1, pp. 162-163). Hengling, meanwhile, was killed by Lai Wenguang while fleeing (Ling, 1998, Volume 1, p. 165).

From the plot of the novel, we can see that, compared with classical Chinese novels, *Star Grass* presents a more realistic depiction of cavalry battles. Nevertheless, it still retains some elements which are commonly seen

in classical Chinese novels, such as one-on-one duels between senior officers from both sides in cavalry combat. Such one-on-one duels between officers from both sides appear many times throughout the novel. For example, during the battle of Gaolouzhai, wielding his long-handle board sword on horse back, Ren Huabang easily gained victory during a one-on-one duel with Ma Jiaju, a trusted subordinate of Sengge Rinchen (Ling, 1998, Volume 1, p. 319).

In summary, the depiction of cavalry battles in the novel *Star Grass* is more realistic than in classical Chinese novels, showing the readers many cavalry tactics adopted by the Nien army and the Qing army in history. However, it has not completely escaped being influenced by classic Chinese novels.

### Conclusion

The novel *Star Grass* successfully restores the images and tactics of the Nien cavalry. Although in the portrayal of some characters and the depiction of war scenes, this novel is still inevitably influenced by classical Chinese novels, it still represents a considerable improvement in the descriptions of the wars of dynastic China compared with classical works. Furthermore, the novel has another unique feature: It is one of the few historical novels that take China's cold-weapon cavalymen as its protagonists. This novel brings the images of the Nien cavalry out of the dull narratives in history books and makes them become vivid. For the readers interested in the war history and war culture of dynastic China, this novel serves as a really good reference.

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