

Seeds of Unrest: The Taiping Movement

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At the same time efforts of reform were under way in Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, China remained under the same dynasty that had ruled for more than 200 years. Qing rule, led by the ethnic minority Manchu people, were struggling to maintain China's wealth and prestige in East Asia.

The first emperor in power after the opium wars was Emperor Tongzhi (r. 1861–1875). At the age of five he had little power and instead, his mother, Empress Dowager Cixi, largely controlled the reigns. She promoted a movement called the Tongzhi Restoration to halt any further decline of Qing power by restoring the traditional sociopolitical order and strengthening Confucian culture. The damaging defeats by the British in the opium wars were partially a cause of domestic instability, but also partially a consequence. Although Qing leaders did not passively submit to Western imperialism, they held power when Western colonial powers gained an economic and political foothold in China. As a result, the legitimacy and effectiveness of their rule and the rule of the Manchu people was shaken, contributing to the further weakening of the Chinese nation.

While opium addiction and subsequent conflict over its trade continued, clashes between tradition and modernity also confronted China's imperial court. This set the stage for one of the bloodiest civil wars ever in world history, the Taiping War from the early 1850s up to 1864.^[1] Until China's loss to Britain in the opium wars, Western traders were permitted to conduct trade and business only through an association of Chinese merchants known as cohong, 13 authorized merchants approved by the Chinese central government. The Treaty of Nanking, signed after China's defeat in the opium wars, ended this system and opened up new opportunities for European and American traders. This shifted the majority of China's economic activity from south to north. Massive job losses followed in the south, causing famine and severe economic depression. In the aftermath, the Chinese looked for a leader to guide them out of the crisis.

Hong Xiuquan (1813–1864) emerged as a leader under these conditions. Born into a peasant family, Hong received a strong classical education and was exposed to translated Christian tracts through foreign missionaries. Hong tried four times to pass the imperial examination. These formal imperial examinations were part of the great tradition of upward mobility in imperial China. If you were part of the very small percentage of people who succeeded in passing these very tough and very lengthy exams, you would have the opportunity of joining the bureaucracy and maybe even end up working at the imperial court and serving the emperor.

After his four unsuccessful attempts, Hong fell ill and into a coma in 1837. He reawakened several months later with a vision; he believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ, and his mission, and that of his followers, was to cleanse China of the Manchus and anyone else who stood in their way of creating a "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" (Taiping Tianguo). In order to reach this desired place, the vision told him, the mantle of the Mandate of Heaven—the ancient Chinese philosophy determining the virtue of the emperor—must be removed from the emperor through the use of military power.

For the next 10 years Hong continued to study Christian texts, teaching in village schools, and sharing his knowledge with family and friends. For the most part his message was not well received. But in southern China, he found himself among the *Hakka*, a subethnicity of Chinese people who had traditionally been discriminated against by the ethnic majority. Possibly because the Hakka had always been economically marginalized, they proved more receptive to his message. Suddenly he found himself the leader of the “God Worshippers,” a band of rebels who shared his political, economic, and religious beliefs. His number of followers grew, and eventually his band of followers not only wanted to hear his message but also helped him form an army. They called their new religion the Taiping, or “Great Peace” faith. It was based on Christianity and missionary teachings, but it was an unusual interpretation of Christianity based upon recognizing Hong as the younger brother of Jesus Christ. It soon developed into a religion whose idea of a sovereign deity challenged the existing Qing rule.

The Taipings used their religious zeal to exploit the insecurity caused by the social and economic conditions at the time. In their early years, the Taipings built their own militia and continued to indoctrinate others into their cause. Eventually, they formed a full army, forged alliances, recruited families, and joined together peasants and intellectuals who believed the Qing were weak and the cause of China’s decline. Their militia had amazing success. When the Taipings put their swords together they discovered that in fact the Qing dynasty armies were not as strong and not as well organized as they had imagined. In 1850, after withstanding a large-scale assault by government troops, Hong publically proclaimed himself the King of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (Taiping Tianguo Tianwang) and launched the Taiping Rebellion the following year.

The Taiping cause had sweeping appeal. Politically and economically the movement appealed to the climate of anti-Manchu rule and to destitute peasants. Quickly they managed to occupy a great deal of desirable land including Nanjing, the former capital of China, which they made their capital. As one Taiping leader would recount:

Each year they [the Manchus] transform tens of millions of China’s gold and silver into opium and extract several millions from the fat and marrow of the Chinese people and turn it into rouge and powder. . . . How could the rich not become poor? How could the poor abide by the law?[2]

The Taiping movement also gained strength by spreading their religious and political messages through the printed page. Borrowing from practices of Christian missionaries, Hong and other Taiping leaders published upward of 44 books and numerous other policy proposals and political and religious tracts. The documents range in scope from treatises such as *The Ten Heavenly Commandments* to economic platforms outlining the blueprint for their entire society as well as social ideas such as the separation of men and women. The Taiping social program, the idea that land and property should be made collective, is one of the ideas that got a young man named Mao Zedong very inspired years later.

Despite this early success, the Taiping Rebellion was eventually beset by internal strife, lack of cohesion, autocratic leadership, and extreme religious dogma. The final battle, the third battle for the city of Nanjing, was particularly bloody with hundreds of thousands killed. The rebellion

finally collapsed in 1864, when it was defeated by provincial Qing armies, known as the new armies, which had been given permission to be assembled by the dynasty to defeat the Taipings. These new armies, led by their provincial leadership, would eventually lead to a phenomenon critical for twentieth-century China that is often called warlordism.^[3]

While there is no definitive death toll for the entire 13-year conflict, the estimated carnage is upward of 20 million Chinese killed during the years of the Taiping Rebellion.^[4] In the end, the Taiping threat was finally ended, but at a great cost. The veneer of power held by the Qing began to fall apart as it became more clear that the central government no longer had the power to control things from Beijing (Peking).

^[1] Rana Mitter (professor, Oxford University), interview with the author, March 11, 2014.

^[2] Franz Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), 3.

^[3] Warlordism is based on the idea that each province of China might have its own strong man in charge with his own independent army who would pay very little attention to the central government. Zeng Guofan was one such new army leader. He drew upon Western learning to train the new armies, but also believed in the idea of a Chinese spirit and essence to build morale.

^[4] Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 14.