

## Taiping Rebellion, 1851–1864

*Amit Bhattacharyya*

One of the greatest Chinese peasant rebellions, the Taiping (Great Peace) Rebellion was directed primarily against the feudal rule of the Manchu dynasty and secondarily against foreign capitalism, which had been making steady inroads into the economy, society, and politics of China ever since the country's defeat in the first Opium War and the signing of the Treaty of Nanking.

### Crises of the Manchu Rule (1644–1911)

Manchu rule was the rule of a conquering dynasty named the Ch'ing or Qing that had overthrown the indigenous Ming dynasty. They were a Tungusic people, considered foreigners by the mainland Chinese. Manchu rule was torn by crises, mismanagement, and corruption in the late eighteenth century, at both the central and provincial levels. Government encouragement of the sale of official positions created a vicious cycle of corruption. Taxes were arbitrarily enhanced by local officials and landlords, who also acted as tax collectors. Political decline led to economic failure. The great majority of the peasants had no protection against exploitation by officials and various feudal elements. As in all feudal societies, land was concentrated in the hands of a handful of gentry officials and the peasants were subjected to all forms of oppression and exploitation. Factors such as these caused peasant rebellions in the earlier periods of the history of China. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, social crisis assumed a new dimension by the unexpected population explosion. In fact, China's population increased from 180 million in 1751 to 430 million in 1851 without any corresponding expansion of the area of arable land. In the absence of any industry to absorb the surplus population and territory to which they could migrate, land was further fragmented. This not only disrupted the balance of the rural economic sector but also crippled the peasantry by lowering their standard of living.

### Advent of Western Imperialism

The scenario was aggravated by the entry of western capitalism. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the import of goods from abroad, especially opium, had risen steeply compared to exports. Thus the balance of trade went against China. The import hike was met by the export of large quantities of silver from China to other countries. Before the beginning of the nineteenth century, *tael* (1 ounce of silver) was equal to 1,000 copper coins; in 1835, the rate of exchange was 1 ounce to 2,000 coins. The great majority of the population usually used copper coins to pay for goods including agricultural products. But the problem was that peasants had to pay their taxes not in copper but in silver. Therefore, for the peasants, taxes were doubled simply by the alteration in the rate of exchange. Moreover, a series of natural disasters from 1826 to 1850 drove the peasants below subsistence level and they were no longer in a position to pay taxes.

The political and social crises were accelerated by the First Opium War (1840–2) and the Treaty of Nanking (1842), the first in a series of unequal treaties that, along with subsequent developments, transformed China from a feudal country into a semi-feudal and semi-colonial one. The Manchu state became totally discredited, politically weak and subservient to foreign powers. Before the Opium War, foreign trade was limited to the port city of Canton. A great number of porters were regularly employed in transporting goods between Canton and the Yangzi provinces. After the war, the British intruders demanded that other ports such as Amoy, Shanghai, Ningpo, and Foochow also be opened to trade. Decline in the importance of the Cantonese monopoly threw hundreds of thousands of boatmen and porters in central and southern China out of work. These unemployed masses swelled the ranks of the Taiping and furnished many of their leaders. The influx of cheap foreign textiles ruined millions of weavers and other handicraftsmen through direct competition in the market. This was known as deindustrialization, a phenomenon noticeable also in contemporary colonial India. Indigenous merchants and moneylenders, who used to finance artisans, now invested in foreign goods.

Proto-nationalist feelings gave these long-standing and diverse socioeconomic grievances a

## 2 *Taiping Rebellion, 1851-1864*

common vocabulary of protest. Followers of the Ming dynasty, overthrown by the Manchus, had prepared a literary battle against the foreign rulers at the end of the seventeenth century that profoundly inspired the leaders of the Taiping Rebellion and other risings. Supporters of the Ming dynasty formed a secret society called the Heaven and Earth Society, whose slogan was "Overthrow the Ch'ing and restore the Ming."

### Hong Xiuquan

The beginning of the Taiping Rebellion almost coincided with the revolutionary outbreaks that shook Europe in 1848. Starting off in Tzu-chin shan in the province of Kwangsi, near the Vietnam border, it cut across China like a sword, approaching Peking in the north, Shanghai in the east, and the Tibetan mountains in the west. The rebels made Nanking their capital and set up the revolutionary state of the oppressed people known as the Taiping Tien-kuo or the Heavenly Kingdom of the Great Peace.

Hong Xiuquan, the supreme leader of the rebellion, was a poverty-stricken schoolteacher who had been ill treated by the corrupt Confucian scholar gentry that served the Manchus. He was born in the province of Kwangtung (capital Canton), which gave birth to many a Chinese revolutionary including Sun Yat-sen. Witnessing the persecution of his own people by the landlords, Hong was deeply influenced by the heroic battles of the Cantonese peasant detachments against the British invaders during the Opium War. At the same time, he came into contact with the Christianity preached, but rarely practiced, by the missionaries.

This rebellion brought within its fold a number of people from different walks of life. In fact, Hong's earliest colleagues such as Yang (charcoal-burner), Feng (village schoolteacher), Hsiao (poor peasant and woodcutter), Wei (trader), and Shih (rich peasant) reflected the class basis of the movement. There were also representatives of small sections of relatively well-to-do scholar gentry who were opposed to the Manchus for national, not social, reasons. Their followers consisted of the Hakka, Yao, and Miao tribes, several hundred charcoal-burners, a large number of miners, and former pirates who had been driven from the seashores by foreign warships. Moreover, there were a few traders and well-to-do peasants as well as deserters from the government troops and

porters from Canton. The peasantry constituted the main fighting force of the movement.

### Dynamics and Defeat

As the revolutionary situation was conducive to their growth, the Taiping rebels quickly grew in strength. In the summer of 1852, they left their original base in Kwangsi and marched northwards toward Hunan, where they were joined by a huge body of rebels from other movements. From Hunan they proceeded through Hupei and then occupied Nanking, the southern capital of the Ming dynasty in the spring of 1853. Nanking became the seat of rebel power and Hong Xiuquan set up his court there. An army was dispatched northwards with the aim of capturing Peking. However, because of inadequate military preparations and the inability of the southern soldiers to adjust to the northern food habits and cold winter climate, the thrust to the north came to nothing.

The rebels could not keep their revolutionary fervor intact for long for a number of reasons. In 1856, the rebels fell out among themselves in the city of Nanking itself, and the treachery of a commander named Wei Chang-hui resulted in a confrontation in which some of the most important leaders lost their lives. This brought the revolutionary offensive to an end and its continuance in the following years turned out to be purely defensive. Along with this, other internal contradictions developed within the rebel order. The Taipings began by conducting mobile warfare, all the way from the mountains of Kwangsi to the rebel capital of Nanking. Undoubtedly this was a spontaneous people's war against the feudal order. However, as Chesneaux (1973) points out, after establishing a government and a state in Nanking, the leaders soon became a privileged class. In order to make the governmental machinery work, they had to make increasing demands on the peasantry. This marked the transition point for the peasantry, who were transformed from active agents participating in the decision to create a new political formation to passive subjects of a government. They had to pay taxes, suffer requisitions, and supply unpaid labor: the system they had sought to change. This was why the peasantry became increasingly disaffected in the last years of the Heavenly Kingdom. The rebel state was thus in the process of being weakened by these internal contradictions.

The defeat of the Taipings can be attributed not only to internal factors, but also to external ones. The foreign powers played a major role in this. At the beginning, the rebellion received much praise in the western press and even in government circles. The fact that the rebels were Christian and stood against Manchu corruption and backwardness was much acclaimed. That is why the western powers maintained neutrality in the initial years of the revolt. They wanted to utilize the revolt to further their own gains by exploiting the internal contradictions within China. Some foreign leaders sought to transform the rebel leaders into their stooges, who would help them capture political power and gain control over China. Others wanted to see China exhausted by internal turmoil and cease to exist. However, the Taipings were never prepared to allow foreigners to use them as they wished. Through their revolutionary activities and their program of action, they made it clear that the civil war in China was the internal affair of the Chinese people and that any offer from foreigners to mediate between the rebels and the Manchu state was unacceptable to them. At the same time, by imposing a ban on the opium trade in areas controlled by the Taiping rebels, they made their anti-western position perfectly clear.

### Foreign Intervention

The Opium War and the treaties signed thereafter paved the way for the control of China's internal affairs by the foreign powers. Britain's declaration of war on China was followed by that of France, culminating in the Second Opium War in 1857-8 which also ended in China's defeat and the signing of another unequal and humiliating treaty, known as the Treaty of Tientsin (1858). By this treaty, the Manchus had to concede a tremendous war indemnity, the legalization of both opium and missionary activities, and the perpetuation of foreign control of customs and tariffs. The toiling people of China were transferred to different colonies to serve in Malay, US, and New Caledonian plantations and mines as nothing better than slaves. This marked the beginning of the infamous "coolie trade" whereby Chinese workers were forced to work in abysmal, unhygienic conditions. Britain and France were to provide military help to the Manchu government to fight the Taiping rebels. Opium was legalized by the treaty and the Taipings, who had

banned opium, were regarded as "international law-breakers" in their own motherland.

The attitude of the foreign governments and the press toward the rebels soon changed. They were no longer regarded as religious brethren but as "anarchists" and "blasphemers." The Manchu government, regarded previously as reactionary, was now hailed as the guardian of trade and legality and a force for stability. In fact, by 1861-2, British and French troops started participating in the armed conflicts on the side of the Manchus in Shanghai.

Many progressive people in the western world raised their voices against unwarranted western interference in the internal affairs of China. Marx and Engels denounced such aggression in a series of articles. A number of foreigners fought directly for the Taipings. Augustus Lindlay, a British citizen, not only took up arms on the side of the Taipings but also wrote a moving eyewitness account of the rising. Moreover, several former officials of the French army and at least one Italian named Major Moreno played an active part in it.

The last phase of the battle was the bloodiest of all. The combined attacks of the Manchu and foreign troops finally put an end to this greatest peasant revolt in the history of modern China. In the summer of 1864, the capital Nanking fell to the Manchus.

### Revolutionary Measures

The military successes of the Taiping were based on the overwhelming support of the people. It was truly a people's war that unleashed the initiative and creativity of the masses. The social and political program they adopted reflected the aspirations of the masses. In fact, many of the principles of the Taiping Rebellion served as an inspiration and model for Sun Yat-sen and the Kuomintang (National People's Party) he founded, as well as for the May 4 movement of 1919 and the communists. Franke writes that the Taiping took the idea of equality from Christianity. This idea combined with many ancient ideas and did much to strengthen their revolutionary social program.

- *Common property:* Under the Taipings, unlike in previous regimes, there were no private possessions. They established a common treasury and granary from which provision was made

4 *Taiping Rebellion, 1851-1864*

for individual weddings, births, funerals, and so on.

- *Land reform program:* The makers of the new order proclaimed an egalitarian Agrarian Law according to which all the land under Heaven was to be collectively cultivated by all the people under Heaven. All land was divided into nine categories according to its quality and was allocated for the use of the population. The peasants retained for themselves only that part of the produce that was needed for their subsistence. Taxes were reduced to a level that was lower than that demanded by the Manchu state. In a manifesto of November 2, 1860, Hong Xiuquan announced a reduction of taxes in the southern counties of Kiangsu. It read: "Now, seeing the suffering of the people, and fulfilling the will of the Most High, I and my youthful heir to the throne intend to govern humanely and to lower taxes in order to lighten the life of the people and bring them relief. . . . As I have learned from the report of Brother Li Hsiucheng, in the past the population of Kiangsu paid onerous taxes and extortionate duties to the Manchu devils, who sucked your blood and rebelled against Heaven" (Anon 1959). The Soviet historian Tikhvinsky (1983) has drawn attention to the limitations of the measures of the Taiping. It is true that the revolutionaries were thoroughly anti-feudal and anti-Manchu and regarded all property, including landed property, as the "property of the Satan." At the same time, as peasant rebels they tended to reproduce structures similar to what had existed before, relying on gentry and bureaucrats for administration. As a result, in many cases landlord-bureaucrats failed to carry out demands for the reduction of sharecroppers' rent and were able to impose practically the whole burden of taxation on the shoulders of the peasantry.
- *Position of women:* In traditional Chinese society, the position of women was subordinate in every respect to that of men. Women did not have any right over property; they were subjected to political, religious, clan-based, and patriarchal exploitation. The Taipings marked a qualitative departure from the past as they sought to create a new society based on gender equality. Their unhesitant declaration to this effect was itself a revolutionary political statement. In a feudal society where women had no rights whatsoever, they forbade prostitution and the purchase and sale of women in marriage. In the rebel order, women could sit for state examinations and occupy the same civil or military positions as men. One unique fact is the presence of women soldiers in special women's contingents in the Taiping army. Monogamy was made obligatory. Rape was punishable by death.
- *Temperance:* Like tobacco and alcohol, opium was also strictly prohibited and this was enforced in practice.
- *Attack on images:* The Taipings were monotheistic and their activities showed signs of their intolerance toward other religious sects. They were influenced by Christianity and destroyed the images, statues, and temples of Buddhism, Taoism, and particularly Confucianism, which served as the ideological basis of the feudal system in China. By directing their attacks against images, the Taipings gave their critics and opponents a powerful weapon to use against them.
- *Treatment of foreigners:* The Taiping Rebellion took place in the context of western capitalist penetration when foreign trade and the opium business had already extended their tentacles. The Taipings recognized none of the privileges the foreign powers extracted from the Manchus through unequal treaties. On the other hand, they were prepared to establish commercial relations with them on the basis of equality. As a result of the Christian influence, they regarded all nations as having equal rights; they did not deride foreigners as "barbarians," nor did they regard the Chinese as people chosen by the Lord on High. They were hostile to Catholics, but fairly friendly to Protestants.
- *Calendar reform:* The traditional lunar Chinese calendar was replaced by a completely new lunisolar calendar with a seven-day week.
- *Literary reform:* The Taipings also introduced important changes in the written language of the people. The Chinese language does not have an alphabet: it is ideographic. Moreover, there was a wide variety in the dialects used by people living in each province. Despite such differences, the written language was the same everywhere and it was this unity that could hold the Chinese nation together, regardless of disunity in other fields. The problem was that the overwhelming majority

of the Chinese did not know the written language and so were not in a position to write. The Taipings relaxed the heavily conventional written style, which was quite different from the spoken language, by approximating it more closely to colloquial speech. In this they were the forerunners of the great literary revolution that took place later on.

- *Other reforms:* Besides these reforms, the Taipings envisaged other modern infrastructural reforms, such as the construction of a network of railways, a postal service, hospitals, and banks. They accepted the Ten Commandments and the divinity of Christ. In their opinion, Hong Xiuquan was the second brother of Christ. They believed in baptism, and the Old and New Testaments were integral parts of their religious canons. It can therefore be argued that the Taipings created a complete politico-religious system which combined spiritual salvation and obedience to the will of God with the political and military defense of the rebel state.

### Nature and Significance

Although the Taipings did attempt to establish an egalitarian utopian society, their reforms were actually such as to pave the way to capitalism. But peasant rebellions without the creation of new productive forces through the participation of an urban bourgeoisie could not achieve capitalist development. In effect, the peasantry was used by the landlords and the nobility as a lever to bring about dynastic changes.

The Taiping Rebellion took place at a time when Chinese society had been undergoing a process of transition from a feudal society to a semi-feudal and semi-colonial one. The process of transition started roughly from the time of the Opium Wars when Britain and other foreign powers had already begun making active encroachments on Chinese soil. Epstein (1956) holds that this rebellion was simultaneously the last of China's old-style peasant wars and the first great democratic fight of its people in the modern period. Chesneau (1973) says that elements of proto-nationalism in the Taiping movement linked it with the peasant revolts of earlier days. The rebels accused the Manchu dynasty of wanting to drain the country of its wealth. It is important to refer in this connection to an interesting feature: they allowed their hair to grow

on the front part of the head – a longstanding practice that was prohibited by the Manchu rulers. It was this nationalistic element that explains the participation of a large number of educated and rich people whose anti-Manchu patriotism gave them some sympathy for the rebel cause.

A number of scholars, both Chinese and western, have written on the nature and significance of the Taiping Rebellion. Mao Zedong (1939) pointed out that peasant risings and wars constituted a unique feature of Chinese history. According to him, class struggles between peasants and feudal forces constituted the dynamic element in the progress of China amidst the changing fortunes of ruling dynasties. He argued that in the absence of “correct leadership” by the proletariat and the Communist Party, peasant wars of the past were unable to liberate the peasantry from the feudal yoke. While speaking of the Taiping Rebellion, Mao said that it was one of the eight major events that occurred in the formative period of China's bourgeois-democratic revolution.

Mao's observations inspired the historians of modern China to engage in 11 years of debate from 1950 to 1961. In 1952, the Chinese Historical Society published eight volumes of source materials on Taiping from Shanghai. During that period, Chinese journals published 400 research articles. However, as Tan Chung (1985) argues, this important intellectual achievement has hardly been noticed outside China. J. P. Harrison, who followed this debate with interest, was critical of the communist historians' attempts to put the peasant movements of the past on a new pedestal.

Tan Chung argued that in earlier times the gentry had suppressed information about the importance of peasant rebellions in Chinese history, an importance that was recovered only after the aforementioned debates. These debates helped Chinese scholars view their past as a continuous process of social evolution with peasant movements acting as locomotives, having an anti-feudal dynamic. A different view was that the peasants attacked the regime, not feudalism as a class system. Hou Wailu described the Taiping revolt as the highest form of peasant war and a very good beginning for modern revolution. Another writer, Wu Shimo, asserted that Taiping stood for political equality, economic equality, sexual equality, and equality among nations.

6 *Taiping Rebellion, 1851-1864*

Karl Marx and *The Times* (August 30, 1853) hailed the event in identical language. Marx called it a formidable revolution and *The Times* described it as the greatest revolution the world had ever seen. On the other hand, Barrington Moore (1993) and Kung-chuan Hsiao (1979) maintain that it was a rebellion, not a revolution, as it did not alter the basic structure of society. Vincent Shih holds that the Taipings had genuine revolutionary possibilities in borrowing Christian and western ideas. But these possibilities were nullified because the Taipings were only able to perceive Christian ideas through the glass of traditional concepts. It is ridiculous to argue that all revolutionary possibilities should be identified solely with western ideas. While opposing Vincent Shih, Tan Chung argues that the Taiping ideology drew heavily on native cultural aspirations such as folklore, but the trace of continuity does not necessarily dilute its revolutionary character. D. S. Zagoria has made an ecological analysis and argues for the inevitability of the movement. He maintains that a peasant rebellion of the Taiping type was the inevitable outcome of "Monsoon Asia." China, one of the wettest countries in the world, is well known as a "rice economy," highlighted by intensive utilization of farmland, a dense population, hunger for land, elimination of smallholdings, and proletarianization of the peasants, thereby creating the conditions for rural unrest, revolts, and anti-feudal wars. Although old democratic revolutions consisting of the Taiping, Boxer, and the 1911 nationalist revolution failed to free China from the tentacles of feudal and imperialist forces, its successor, the new democratic revolution, from the May 4 movement onwards – when the working class entered the political stage – could bring about the liberation of the country within a short span of 30 years. The Taiping Rebellion was an agrarian revolution, which formed part of the democratic revolution.

SEE ALSO: China, Peasant Revolts in the Empire; Chinese Nationalist Revolution, 1911; Mao Zedong (1893-1976); Sun Yat-Sen (1866-1925); Yi Ho Tuan (Boxer) Rebellion

## References and Suggested Readings

- Anonymous (1959) *Records of the Taiping Era*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.
- Chesneau, J. (1972) *Secret Societies in China in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Chesneau, J. (1973) *Peasant Revolts in China 1840-1949*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Epstein, I. (1956) *From Opium War to Liberation*. Beijing: New World Press.
- Franke, W. (1970) *A Century of the Chinese Revolution 1851-1949*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kung-chuan Hsiao (1979) *A History of Chinese Political Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mao Zedong (1939) *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*. Available at [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2\\_23.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_23.htm) (downloaded May 5, 2008).
- Moore, B., Jr. (1993) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Shih, V. Y. C. (1972) *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Spence, J. D. (1996) *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Tan Chung (1985) *Triton and Dragon: Studies on Nineteenth-Century China and Imperialism*. Delhi: Gian.
- Tikhvinsky, S. L. (Ed.) (1983) *Modern History of China*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Zagoria, D. S. (1974) Asian Tenancy Systems and Communist Mobilization of the Peasantry. In J. Lewis (Ed.), *Peasant Rebellion and Communist Revolution in Asia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.