

## Item 5.A: Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping Rebellion

The Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) was the largest of several major rebellions that threatened the Qing dynasty in the middle of the nineteenth century. As the Taiping army spread through China, it destroyed more than 600 cities. Historians estimate that between 20 and 30 million people died, either in the fighting or as a result of famines that ensued from the chaos. Professor W. Travis Hanes refers to the rebellion as “the most destructive civil war in the history of humanity.”<sup>1</sup> Today’s government leaders praise the Taiping as “peasant heroes and heroines... [who] under the leadership of Hong Xiuquan, stood up bravely to write a great anti-feudalist and anti-imperial epic with their blood and lives.”<sup>2</sup> However, at the same time, government leaders are also wary of any organized religious movements, which in their view might well have political implications as did the Taiping.

### Hong Xiuquan

Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864) was born in Guangdong Province, the fourth of five children of a rural family. Despite the expense, his parents managed to have him educated, and Hong passed the exams that qualified him to sit for the *shengyuan* degree. He tried four times but was never able to pass the second exam. After his second failed attempt, he moved to Guangzhou<sup>3</sup> where he had contact with Protestant missionaries. Following his third failed attempt, he appears to have had a nervous breakdown and suffered from hallucinations. As a result of his visions, he later concluded that he was Jesus’s younger brother, hence also a “Son of God.” He practiced and preached a kind of Christianity based on his interpretation of a few translated and simplified excerpts from the Bible and other publications distributed by missionaries.

Hong was anti-Confucian, and his destruction of Confucian shrines infuriated many. He was also virulently anti-Manchu. Like Hong himself, most of his early recruits were of the Hakka minority people. The Hakka were originally from Central China and had migrated south to Guangdong and Guangxi provinces during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They were not a part of

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<sup>1</sup> Hanes, W. Travis III, and Frank Sanello. *Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another*. Naperville, Ill: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002. 167.

<sup>2</sup> Caption at the Taiping Rebellion Museum in Zhanyuan, Nanjing. The museum first opened in 1956 and underwent extensive renovations and expansion in 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Formerly known as Canton

mainstream Chinese society, and when numbers of them converted to Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century, they were increasingly marginalized. In late 1847, Hong moved to an area of Guangxi Province called Thistle Mountain. Within two years, his passionate speeches had attracted some 10,000 followers.

### **Taiping beliefs**

The “God-Worshippers,” as they called themselves, followed ten commandments, similar to the Ten Commandments in the Bible. They had strict rules against corruption. All their money and goods (later including what they plundered) were pooled into a treasury and then distributed equally amongst themselves. Gambling and the use of opium, alcohol, and tobacco were prohibited. Men cut off their queues (mandated by the Manchu invaders), and women enjoyed more rights. Prostitution, concubinage, and footbinding were prohibited. So also was sexual intercourse between men and women; even married couples lived in quarters segregated by sex.

### **The rebellion spreads**

Hong’s followers, under his deputy Yang Xiuqing (who proved to be a remarkably intuitive military strategist), began to organize themselves in fighting units, which included women. They also started to make weapons. In December 1850, the Qing government sent troops to destroy the movement; they failed. A month later, the God Worshippers formally announced the start of their revolution. Hong Xiuquan named himself the Heavenly King (*Tianwang*) of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (*Taiping Tianguo*). Soon thereafter, the Taiping began to march northeast, conquering as they went. Several setbacks almost ended the rebellion, but the Taiping pressed on, fortifying themselves with provisions, money, weaponry and new recruits as they went. By the time Hong reached Nanjing, he had an army of 500,000 disaffected Chinese, mostly peasants and laborers. The city quickly fell to the Taiping in March 1853. Approximately 40,000 Manchus lived in Nanjing. The Taiping rounded up all who had survived the battle and killed the men, women, and children by burning, stabbing, or drowning.

### **The Heavenly Kingdom in Nanjing**

The Taiping kingdom was a theocracy ruled by Hong and members of his inner circle. The Taipings’ ascetic lifestyle continued. They organized social units of 25 families each in which

one administrator regulated civil, educational, religious, financial and judicial affairs. Civil service exams were to be held in vernacular Chinese rather than classical Chinese, were to be based on Hong's Christian materials (rather than Confucian texts), and, in keeping with improved gender equality, would be open to both men and women. They put in place support systems for disabled, widowed, or orphaned individuals. Finally, they intended to abolish private land ownership. Property was to be divided according to the number of people in a family. "Nowhere will inequality exist, and no one not be well fed and clothed," proclaimed the Taiping founding document. However, continued instability in rural areas prevented them from successfully implementing land reform.

### **Response from the West**

Initially, Western powers, present in five port cities, remained neutral as the Taiping expanded their Heavenly Kingdom. A British interpreter who met with leaders in Nanjing reported back to London on aspects of Hong's Christianity "of which we most highly disapprove; not the least of which are the pretensions to new and immediate communication from the Deity."<sup>4</sup> But he also praised the Taipings' "energy and a tendency to improvement and general reform which the Imperialists [Qing] never have exhibited." Western powers took a wait-and-see attitude.

### **The Taiping collapse from within**

Hong Xiuquan proved to be a more effective leader of a rebellion than of a kingdom. The collective leadership in Nanjing began to collapse as Hong, believing his position threatened, ordered the murder of his talented general Yang Xiuqing. Further infighting so weakened the Heavenly Kingdom that it never recovered. Hong, writes Professor Immanuel Hsü, "indulged in pleasure to forget his miseries," surrounding himself with concubines.<sup>5</sup> (Neither the ban on polygamy nor instructions to abstain from sexual intercourse apparently applied to the Heavenly King.) After visiting Hong in 1861, his former missionary teacher from Guangzhou, the Rev. Issachar J. Roberts wrote, "I believe he [Hong] is crazy, especially in religious matters, nor do I

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas T. Meadows was the interpreter for Britain's plenipotentiary to China. Quoted in Immanuel C.Y. Hsü. *The Rise of Modern China*, 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. 237.

<sup>5</sup> Hsü, 243.

believe him soundly rational about anything... I do not believe they have any organized government; nor do they know enough about government to make one.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Defeat at the hands of Imperial and Western forces**

The Qing court, meanwhile, had not been idle. The emperor summoned Zeng Guofan (1811–1872) to eliminate the Taiping threat. “In statesmanship, in character, and in personal cultivation, Zeng had few equals. He was probably the most respected and the greatest scholar-official of nineteenth-century China.”<sup>7</sup> A strong Confucian, Zeng formed his own army; many of his officers were Confucian scholars, and they fought with a sense of mission. Battles over various cities raged back and forth but eventually the Qing forces prevailed and in June 1862 imperial forces stood outside Nanjing, and a long siege began.

The Taiping never approached Westerners to form any kind of alliance, even though Britain, France, and Russia were exerting significant pressure on the Qing dynasty at this time. Furthermore, by 1860, Western powers had several more treaties and agreements in place with the Qing. Should the Taiping prevail, these would all be worthless. With the Taiping interfering with trade in Shanghai and adamantly opposing the use of opium, wealthy merchants (both Chinese and Western) decided to finance a foreign fighting force initially under the command of mercenary Frederick T. Ward of Salem, Massachusetts. It soon included some 4,000 Chinese soldiers. After several victories, the emperor bestowed the name “Ever-Victorious Army” on them.

By early 1864, residents of Nanjing had no food. What occurred in the summer of 1864 will likely remain a mystery. Sometime in June or early July Hong Xiuquan died, either by committing suicide or from an illness. Shortly thereafter Zeng’s troops stormed Nanjing. Some historians suggest that the soldiers massacred all Taiping followers.

In his report to the emperor Zeng wrote, “Not one of the 100,000 rebels in Nanjing surrendered themselves when the city was taken but in many cases gathered together and burned themselves

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Hsü, 245.

<sup>7</sup> Hsü, p. 248.

and passed away without repentance. Such a formidable band of rebels has been rarely known from ancient times to the present.”<sup>8</sup> Whatever happened, the Qing had control of Nanjing.

The Taiping inspired later revolutionaries. Sun Yat-sen, for example, was born just two years after the Taiping fell. The Chinese Communist Party, from its early years to the present, celebrates the Taiping Rebellion in extensive museum exhibits, noting how peasants were drawn into the revolution and how the Taiping defended “state sovereignty and the national dignity” until it “collapsed under joint suppression of the Qing government and foreign powers.”<sup>9</sup>

Sources:

Hanes, W. Travis III, and Frank Sanello. *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002.

Hsü, Immanuel C. Y. *The Rise of Modern China*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990 (4<sup>th</sup> edition).

Spence, Jonathan D. *In Search of Modern China*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Franz Michael and Chang Chung-li, *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents*, 3 vols. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966-1971, vol. 1 pp. 168 and 174.

<sup>9</sup> Taiping Rebellion Museum, Zhanyuan Garden, Nanjing