

The Taiping Rebellion

Source 1: *"The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom."*(1853)

In the 1840s a young man from Guangdong named Hong Xiuquan (1813-1864) created his own version of Christianity and made converts in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. Hong believed that he was the Younger Brother of Jesus and that his mission, and that of his followers, was to cleanse China of the Manchus and others who stood in their way and "return" the Chinese people to the worship of the Biblical God. Led by Hong, the "Godworshippers" in rural Guangxi rose in rebellion in 1856 in hopes of creating a new "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" (Taiping Tianguo). Their movement is known in English as the Taiping movement ("taiping" meaning "great peace" in Chinese). The rebels swept through southern China and up to the Yangzi River, and then down the Yangzi to Nanjing, where they made their capital. Attempts to take northern China were unsuccessful, and the Taiping were eventually crushed in 1864. By that time, the Taiping Rebellion had caused devastation ranging over sixteen provinces with tremendous loss of life and the destruction of more than 600 cities. In the document below, unknown authors lay forth parts of the Taiping economic program. This program was not carried out in practice (the Taipings were not known for their administrative capabilities), but it does represent the publicly stated ideals and goals of the movement.

The distribution of all land is to be based on the number of persons in each family, regardless of sex. A large family is entitled to more land, a small one to less. The land distributed should not be all of one grade but mixed. Thus for a family of six, for instance, three are to have fertile land and three barren land — half and half of each. All the land in the country is to be cultivated by the whole population together. If there is an insufficiency [of land] in this place, move some of the people to another place. If there is an insufficiency in another place, move them to this one.

All lands in the country are also to be mutually supporting with respect to abundance and scarcity. If this place has a drought, then draw upon the abundant harvest elsewhere in order to relieve the distress here. If there is a drought there, draw upon the abundant harvest here in order to relieve the distress there. Thus all the people of the country may enjoy the great blessings of the Heavenly Father, Supreme Ruler and Lord God-on-High. The land is for all to till, the food for all to eat, the clothes for all to wear, and money for all to spend. Inequality shall exist nowhere; none shall suffer from hunger or cold. ...

Mulberry trees are to be planted along the walls [of villages] throughout the country. All women are required to grow silkworms, to do weaving, and to make clothes. Every family of the country is required to raise five hens and two hogs, in keeping with the proper breeding seasons

During the harvest season, the Group Officer³ should direct [the grain collection by] the sergeants. Deducting the amount needed to feed the twenty-five families until next harvest season, he should collect the rest of the produce for storage in state granaries. The same method of collection is applicable to other kinds of

products, such as barley, beans, ramie fiber, cotton clothes, silk, domestic animals, silver and copper cash, and so on, for all people under Heaven are of one family belonging to the Heavenly Father, the Supreme Ruler, the Lord God-on-High. Nobody should keep private property. All things should be presented to the Supreme Ruler, so that He will be enabled to make use of them and distribute them equally to all members of his great world-family. Thus all will be sufficiently fed and clothed. ...

The Group Officer must keep a record of the amount of grain and cash he has collected and report them to the Treasurers and Receiving and Disbursing Tellers. A state treasury and a church are to be established among every twenty-five families, under the direct administration of the Group Officer. All expenditures of the twenty-five families for weddings, births, or other festival occasions are to be paid for out of the state treasury. But there is to be a fixed limit; not a penny is to be spent beyond that. ... Thus, throughout the land in the contracting of marriages, wealth need be no consideration.

In the twenty-five family units pottery-making, metalworking, carpentry, masonry, and other such skilled work should be performed by the sergeants and militiamen in the off-seasons from farming and military service. In conducting the different kinds of festival ceremonies for the twenty-five families under his administration, the Group Officer should hold religious services to pray to the Heavenly Father, the Supreme Ruler and Lord God-on-High. All the bad customs of the past must be completely abolished.

Source 2

While the Chinese entered into conflict with Europe and European culture during the Opium War and after, it was also convulsed by a number of rebellions in mid-century. With rebellion in Nien (1853-1868), several Muslim rebellions in the southwest (1855-1873) and northwest (1862-1877), and, especially, the Taiping rebellion, the consequences for China during this period were devastating. In the Taiping rebellion alone, which lasted for twenty years, almost twenty to thirty million died as a direct result of the conflict. In fact, the period from 1850 to 1873 saw, as a result of rebellion, drought, and famine, the population of China drop by over sixty million people. Along with humiliating defeats at the hands of European powers, the mid-nineteenth century in China was truly tragic.

The Taiping rebellion, though, is, as an internal disturbance, and odd compliment to the conflicts with the west. It combined both European and Chinese cultural patterns in a unique and volatile mix. The person in which this strange mix fermented was Hung Hsiu-ch'üan (1813-1864), the leader of the rebellion.

Hung Hsiu-ch'üan

Hung Hsiu-ch'üan was the son of a poor farmer near Canton. He was a promising young student, but repeatedly failed the civil service examination in Canton. After one such failure, he overheard a Christian missionary speaking and brought home several Christian treatises. The next year he again failed the exam and, according to some historians, had a nervous breakdown. Whatever happened, Hung had several visions in which an old man told him that people had stopped worshipping him and were worshipping demons; in another, the man appointed him as a slayer of demons. Hung believed that the man in the visions was God the Father and that a younger, middle aged man that visited him in visions was Jesus Christ, his Elder Brother. He himself was the Younger Brother and had been sent by God to earth in order to eradicate demons and demon worship.

Hung, however, did nothing with these visions until seven years later when he began to study with Issachar J. Roberts, a Southern Baptist minister who taught him everything he would know about Christianity. With the Christianity of Roberts, Hung, some relatives, and some followers formed a new religious sect, the God Worshippers, that dedicated itself to the destruction of idols in the region around Canton.

The movement attracted followers for a variety of reasons. Western historians argue that the famines of the 1840's inspired the Chinese to join various movements that were successfully feeding and taking care of themselves. Chinese historians stress the anti-Manchu rhetoric of Hung's early movement. While the God Worshippers were dedicated to the destruction of idols and the stamping out of demon worship, it's clear that they felt that the Manchu rulers were the primary propagators of demon worship. In Hung's early philosophy, he seems to have arrived at the conclusion that the overthrow of the Manchus would help bring in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

The movement, however, did not become open revolt until the government started to harass the God Worshippers systematically. Combined with his belief that the Kingdom of Heaven would be established on the ruins of the Manchu government, the God Worshippers were also militantly organized to destroy and eliminate demon worship. In the late 1840's, Hung reorganized his movement into a military organization. He and other leaders systematically began to build up a treasury (all believers had to give their property to the movement), consolidate forces, and lay up a store of weapons. In December of 1850,

Hung was attacked by government forces and, since he had spent so much time preparing for war, he successfully turned back the attack. In 1851, Hung declared that a new kingdom had been established, the Kingdom of Heavenly Peace; he himself was the Heavenly King and the era of the Taiping, or "Great Peace," had begun.

The Kingdom of Heavenly Peace was a theocratic state with the Heavenly King as Absolute Ruler. Its objective, as implied by its name, was the achievement of peace and prosperity in China with all people worshipping the one and only one god. It consisted of a single hierarchy which undertook all administrative, religious, and military duties. The movement was founded on a radical economic reform program in which all wealth was equally distributed to all members of society. Taiping society itself would be a classless society with no distinctions between people; all members of Taiping society were "brothers" and "sisters" with all the attendant duties and obligations traditionally associated with those relationships in Chinese society. Women were the social and economic equal of men; many administrative posts in the new Kingdom were assigned to women. This social and economic reform, combined with its passionate anti-Manchu nationalism, made the Kingdom of Heavenly Peace a magnet for all the Chinese suffering under the dislocations and disasters of the mid-century.

The Rebellion

From a military standpoint, the rebellion got off to an impressive start. The army itself was uncannily disciplined; after elaborate initiation rituals, Taiping believers became fanatically disciplined and devoted soldiers, willing to die without hesitation in God's cause against demonic forces. The army of the Taipings roared northward through the central Yangtze valley to Nanking. In many ways, however, this dramatic progress of the Taipings was no progress at all and explains why they lost so easily despite their impressive start. The central reason they advanced so quickly was that they avoided large urban centers and so encountered little resistance. When they conquered a territory, they made no effort to consolidate the conquest by setting up an administrative mechanism, but instead roared on northwards. There was no room for disagreement in the military hierarchy; not only did the Heavenly King gain his authority directly from God, but the military generals themselves claimed to be guided by God the Father in a series of visions. There was little room, then, for serious strategic thinking in this environment.

The Taipings occupied Nanking in March of 1853; they renamed the city, T'ien-ching, or "Heavenly Capital." From T'ien-ching, they attacked Beijing, but their army, after making rapid progress north, was defeated. For the next ten years, the Taipings occupied themselves with conquering Western territories and fighting continuously to maintain their territory in the central Yangtze valley. The rebellion swung from one side to another, now a defeat, now a victory, now a defeat.

Under the pressures of war and an inefficient administration, the Heavenly Kingdom of Peace slowly began to unravel. The leaders of the Kingdom failed to consolidate their authority in conquered territories, preferring instead to rule over major cities. In reality, then, Taiping rule only extended over major cities in the conquered territories rather than the territories themselves. The Taipings had very few competent officials; efforts to recruit scholar-officials were usually unsuccessful since most educated Chinese were deeply disturbed by the theocratic nature of the state and the lack of education among its leaders.

Most significantly, the Taiping administration began to disintegrate when Hung himself withdrew from active participation in administrative and military affairs. Believing that the Heavenly King should rule only by his divine virtue and not by active engagement in politics, Hung seems, in reality, to have grown steadily more unbalanced. Rather than dedicating himself to divine virtue, he plunged into the sensual pleasures of the palace and the sexual pleasures of the harem of women he had collected around himself. Hung's withdrawal from Taiping administration sent cracks all through the Taiping administration.

By 1864, the Kingdom of Heavenly Peace was coming to an end. Chinese forces had threatened T'ien-ching for months when Hung's central general fled to the south. Hung himself believed that God would defend the Taipings, but in June, 1864, he seems to have lost his certainty of God's protection and poisoned himself. The imperial forces discovered his body, wrapped in the color of the emperor, yellow, wallowing in a sewer beneath the city. At a cost of nearly thirty million lives over a period of twenty years, the Heavenly Peace had come to an end.

Source 3 _

Source: Franz Michael. 1971. The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents. University of Washington Press.

Yang the Comforter, Wind of the Holy Ghost, Ho-nai Teacher, Redeemer from Sickness, Assistant on the Left, Chief of Staff, and Tung Wang of the true Heavenly -ordained T'ai-p'ing T'ien-kuo, issues this proclamation for the information of the brothers and sisters inside and outside the city walls:

Whereas I, the chief of staff, having respectfully received the heavenly decree commanding me to aid the true Sovereign in sweeping clean the whole universe, did, in the spring of last year, lead a million brave warriors and arrive here at Chien-yeh. On the day when the city was taken, I, the chief of staff, gave strict orders to the troops under my command they they might slay the demons' officers and soldiers, but must not lawlessly slay a single honest inhabitant. At that time the troops obeyed the heavenly orders, and you brothers and sisters, to the amount of several hundreds of thousands, both within and without the walls to the city, have had your lives spared. This was because I, the chief of staff, looking up, embodied the feeling of our Heavenly Father, who loves to cherish human life, as well as the liberality of our Sovereign, which is boundless as the ocean. In this way we marched our righteous troops to exterminate the fiends and preserve honest men alive. Afterwards, we, looking up, discovered the heavenly will that we were to separate the sexes into male and female quarters, in order to prevent any beginning of impropriety in conduct. But this was only intended as a temporary arrangement, and when Tsui-li province is subdued, families are to be allowed to be together again. In the estimation of you people, you imagined that we were wasting your patrimony and separating you from your relations, so you were apprehensive lest all your goods be annihilated and your wives and children scattered; indeed, the lamentations on this account have not yet ceased. But you do not consider that from old tyo the present time, whenever dynasties have been changed, the troops which have been employed to punish offenders have, when cities were taken, killed all whom they found therein, burning all without distinguishing pebbles from precious stones, so that blood has flowed in torrents, and neither dog nor fowl has been left alive. How different from our Heavenly Dynasty, which has not unnecessarily deprived a single person of life, but on the contrary has fed and clothed you as if you had been part of ourselves. If you do not believe this statement, ask those who are acquainted with history, or inquire of the gray-haired fathers and elders around you, who have themselves seen or heard of such things, and who might enlighten you on the subject. Now, being apprehensive lest you should still remain in ignorance, we have issued this proclamation. From the time of its appearance, therefore, do you with one mind acknowledge the favor of our Heavenly Father and Heavenly Elder Brother in fostering human

life, which has induced us to spare your lives. Since your lives have been spared to you there will certainly come a time when you will enjoy their comforts. Upon the whole, if you will only study the periods of chaos in the history of bygone ages, you will soon come to appreciate the benevolence and kindness of the Heavenly Dynasty, which would never think of slaying the innocent, but which, having left you this body in the present life, has also afforded you an opportunity of attaining the glories and favors of the heavenly world. You should all of you rouse yourselves, and not be deluded by mistakes. Let this information be communicated to all. A special proclamation. Do not oppose.

Given in the fourth month of the fourth year, chia-yin, of the T'aip'ing T'ien-kuo [May, 1854].