Led by Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864), a frustrated candidate in the civil service examinations and the self-proclaimed younger brother of Christ, the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864) seriously challenged China’s Qing dynasty and was the largest rebellion in Chinese history. Millions of lives were lost in the ensuing chaos.

The Taiping rebellion occurred in a period of unprecedented crisis, when the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) was plagued by an exploding population (the population tripled in two centuries to exceed 430 million by the 1850s) and challenges from Western powers that it could not meet, as evidenced in its defeat in the First Opium War (1839–1842).

Origins

From a peasant family of the Hakka ethnic group in a village close to Guangzhou (Canton) in southern China, Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864) was raised to pursue a career as a scholar-official. Having repeatedly failed to pass the civil service examinations in Guangzhou, Hong suffered an hallucinatory episode in 1837. A few years later, upon reading a set of Christian tracts, Quanshi Liangyan (Good Words for Exhorting the Age), which was compiled by a Chinese Christian, Hong made connections between Christian theology and his visions and was convinced that he was actually God’s second son, Jesus’s younger brother, and that he was sent to earth to expel devils, namely the Manchus (who ruled China during the Qing dynasty), from China.

Having baptized himself and a few friends and relatives, Hong began his evangelical mission in his hometown. Later, along with one of his converts, Feng Yunshan (1822–1852), Hong went to Guangxi after having lost his teaching post at the village school because of his Christian convictions. In the poverty-stricken Zijing Mountain area, Hong and Feng found enthusiastic adherents among poor peasants. A religious community was formed, which began secretly preparing for an armed uprising.

Early Stage (1851–1856)

In late 1850, Hong called for a rebellion against the Qing dynasty. He proclaimed the establishment of Taiping Tianguo (the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace) in January 1851 and declared himself the Heavenly King shortly after. The Taipings, as they become known in English, set up an elaborate military system in which men and women were segregated and submitted all their properties to a public treasury. They began to march north to the Yangzi (Chang) River valley in 1852. The Qing armies, which had not encountered such a fierce enemy for decades, failed to stop the advances of the spirited Taipings. In the spring of 1853, the Taipings, then in the hundreds of thousands, took Nanjing, a political and economic center in southeastern China. Hong made Nanjing his capital and renamed it Tianjing (Heavenly Capital).
After taking Nanjing, the Taipings moved quickly to expand their military victories. A northern expedition was dispatched to take Beijing, the capital of the Qing dynasty, and a western expedition was sent to take control of the middle Yangzi River valley and the areas surrounding Nanjing. Although the northern expedition failed, the Taipings were successful in expanding their territories in the middle and lower Yangzi River valleys. Administrative apparatuses were set up on the conquered territories, which combined military and civil functions. A utopian land program blueprinting equal distribution of land was promulgated. Many social and cultural reforms—including banning opium smoking, foot binding, and prostitution—were carried out. Repudiating Confucianism as the devil’s teaching, the Taipings adopted Hong’s version of Christianity as their official religion and used it as the basis for their civil service examinations, in which both men and women were encouraged to participate.

Intrigued by the Christian dimensions of the Taiping rebellion, Britain, France, and the United States sent envoys to Nanjing to investigate the new regime. Although the Westerners were deeply disappointed by the Taiping religion, which they thought was a great distortion of Christianity, and by the rebels’ lack of commitment to order and construction, the Western powers decided not to act against the Taipings immediately because they had not settled their conflicts with the Qing government. As a result, they adopted temporary neutrality toward the rebellion.

When the Taiping Rebellion reached its peak in 1856, fatal infighting occurred. Threatened by the swelling power of Yang Xiuqing (d. 1856), the de facto prime minister of the Taiping regime, Hong had him killed by another leader, Wei Changhui (1823–1856). Later Hong also had Wei killed. Tens of thousands of Taiping followers were slain in the incident. Feeling that he was no longer trusted, Shi Dakai (1831–1863), a talented general, led his army out of Nanjing and carried on an independent campaign against the Qing.

Late Stage (1856–1864)

The Taiping Rebellion was greatly weakened by the events of 1856 and the losing of much territory to the Qing armies in the wake of the infighting. Meanwhile, the Qing dynasty found a powerful force in suppressing the rebellion, the Xiang (Hunan) army led by Zeng Guofan.
Zeng commanded strong support among the gentry class by upholding Confucian values in countering the Taipings' form of Christianity. Recruited exclusively from Zeng's hometown in Hunan Province and highly paid and well trained, the soldiers of the Xiang army pushed the Taipings into a defensive position. Two new leaders and outstanding generals of the Taipings, Li Xiucheng (1823–1864) and Chen Yucheng (1837–1862), orchestrated a series of successful campaigns to break the impasse, advanced to eastern Jiangnan, and approached Shanghai, an important treaty port since the end of the First Opium War (1839–1842). Hong Xiuquan's cousin, Hong Ren'gan (1822–1864), arrived in Nanjing after having stayed in Hong Kong for years, breathing new life into the waning regime by attempting to reform the Taiping political and economic systems by using Western models.

From 1856 to 1860, the Qing dynasty was engaged in the Second Opium War (also known as the Arrow War) with Britain and France. The conclusion of the war coincided with a change of leadership within the Qing dynasty. The new leaders, the Empress Dowager Cixi (1853–1908) and Prince Gong Yixin (1833–1898), effected a radical turn in foreign policy, becoming cooperative with the West, which encouraged the Western powers to side with the Qing dynasty in China's civil war. In early 1862 Li Xiucheng attacked Shanghai again, triggering Western intervention. A foreign mercenary army, the “Ever-Victorious army,” headed first by Frederick Townsend Wade (1831–1862) of the United States and then by Charles George Gordon (1833–1885) of Britain, became the major agent of the Western intervention. After 1862, the Taipings retreated city by city under the joint attack of the Xiang army and the Ever-Victorious army. In June 1864 Hong Xiuquan died of illness. One month later the Xiang army captured Nanjing, which ended the Taiping Rebellion, even though the remaining Taiping forces continued to fight until 1868.

About 20 million lives were lost in the extensive warfare associated with the Taiping Rebellion and other rebellions of the period. One consequence of the rebellion was that the Qing government lost much of its power to the provincial authorities. Although Taiping Christianity failed to leave any lasting impact on Chinese society, its anti-Manchu nationalism was inherited by the anti-Qing revolutionaries, and its utopian egalitarianism was echoed in the Chinese Communist revolution in the twentieth century.

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Further Reading