

## **What were the causes of the various rebellions of mid-nineteenth century China, and why did the Ch'ing government survive them?**

The course of the nineteenth century saw China grappling with several major and chronic structural problems, and ones which had a considerable bearing on the capacity for the country to project the power which had always traditionally lain with the Imperial Throne. The rapid growth of population throughout the nineteenth century compared impressively with the limited growth of food production to feed this population. Yet it meant that the Chinese population was gradually being impoverished even by the actions of fertility, let alone by other economic factors acting upon China in this period. Government finances were also under considerable pressure, a factor only aggravated by the military ventures needed to suppress the Uighurs, the Taiping rebels and most tellingly the conduct and indemnities following the Opium Wars with the Western powers. The increasing population pressure can be most clearly seen by comparing the 1753 census with that of 1833. In the middle of the eighteenth century, China contained 184.7m people, and had 708m *mou* of land in cultivation - thus producing an average figure of 3.8*mou* per capita. The 1833 census reports a population of 398.9m people and a total of 738m *mou* of land in cultivation. Therefore the population had gone up by 116% while the land in cultivation had only increased by 5% - making the average amount of land per capita 1.8*mou*.<sup>1</sup> Worse still, due to natural calamities, the area of land under cultivation between 1812-33 actually fell from 791m *mou* to 737m *mou*, despite the fact that the population increased from 361m to 398m.<sup>2</sup> This small land base also was inadequate as a tax-base to support the spiralling government revenue requirements. Overtaxation led to some farmers being forced to sell. Since land bought by officials was privileged, the remaining tax burden was forced even further onto the shoulders of farmers. It also increased the concentration of land in the hands of the rich while excluding the poorer sections of society. For example, the Ho family of Chihli possessed 1m *mou* in 1766, equal to 1/700th of the total arable land in China. By a quarter of the way through the nineteenth century, 50-60% of Chinese land was in the hands of rich families; 10% belonged to the bannermen - leaving 60-90% of the population landless, forced to rely on usurers, since there was no industrial enterprises to soak up the surplus population.<sup>3</sup> Added to this, the shifting of trade from Canton to the Treaty Ports disrupted the economic patterns in the south of China - and removed the need for thousands of inland porters to transport export crops to Canton. By this action, more unskilled and landless peasants found themselves economically unproductive despite their need to feed their families.

It is not surprising that given this level of economic dislocation that there should be a trend for the development of banditry by those forced off their land. This was especially marked in the very poor state of law and order in the areas which would come to be dominated by the Taipings. As a Chinese local official noted in Fukien 'the militiamen are bandits and the local people are bandits too... they start as militiamen and end up as bandits.'<sup>4</sup> By this we can see that there was also a strong trend of official corruption in the coastal areas most of all, thanks to the immense profits that could be made out of infractions against the law. Most important of all was the immense profits that could be made from involvement or at least connivance in the opium trade. The catastrophe of the Opium Wars resulted in the trade increasing from 33,000 chests in 1842, to 46,000 chests in 1848, to 52,929 chests by 1850 - an increase of 60% on the pre-war figures. Aside from the devastating effects on the Chinese population - and 20% of central government officials and 30% of local government officials counted among the 4-10m addicts -

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<sup>1</sup> Michael *The Taiping Rebellion* p.15

<sup>2</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 222

<sup>3</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 223

<sup>4</sup> Curwen *Taiping Rebel* p.3

it also had a devastating effect on the Chinese economic outlook. Previously China had a policy as stated by the Emperor Ch'ien-lung that 'We possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures.'<sup>5</sup> This self-sufficiency, combined with the Canton system of trading by barter, had ensured a net inflow of treasure. With opium, the illegality of the trade forced it to be concluded for cash, and outside government supervision - resulting in a net outflow of treasure. Such was the quantities of opium demanded by Chinese addicts, that by 1848, the annual outflow had reached 10m taels of silver, and went up further throughout the course of the century. This in turn dislocated the copper-silver exchange rate on which all Chinese peasants relied for the payment of their taxes from the eighteenth century figure of 1000-1 to 2000-1 by 1845.<sup>6</sup> One of the Taipings' easiest arguments for the incompetence of the Manchus came from this official (and Treaty-dictated) toleration of the opium trade. As Hung Hsiu-ch'üan said, 'Each year they [the Manchus] transform tens of millions of China's silver and gold into opium and extract several millions from the fat and marrow of the Chinese people and turn it into rouge and powder.'<sup>7</sup>

By the time of the Taiping rebellion and the various other regional rebellions of the mid-nineteenth century, conditions in China mirrored exactly all the symptoms of dynastic decline - high rents, corrupt government, desertion of land by peasants, increasing importance of secret societies and increased banditry. In some cases the strength of the rebellious movements owed themselves simply to these conditions of lawlessness and parochial defence. However, the traditional and unifying focus of China as a whole often tended to mean that separatist protests were not seriously considered, even by groups that were not ethnically Chinese. The pattern for this response can be seen in the reaction of the Emperor T'ang to the Governor of Annam, when he asked for independence - 'What possible wrong can your people have done that they be excluded from the Empire?' Thus the Muslim rebellions of north-western China in the 1860s were caused not through a desire for genuine separatism, but through the aggravation of existing local tensions by the need to raise local armies against the Taipings - Chinese leaders raised Chinese armies, while Muslim leaders raised Muslim armies. Quarrels between them sparked off riots in May 1862 - e.g. sacking of Muslim town of Hui-ch'u-pao. The attitude of the Manchus towards the further provinces, acquired by the early Ch'ing emperors such as Ch'ien-lung was primarily strategic, since Sinkiang in NW China offered a natural protective frontier in the shape of the T'ien Shan mountains. As an official, Wei Yüan said in 1842 'The annual payroll [of Chinese troops] amounts to a little more than 678,900 taels, which would have to be paid to them if they were in their original posts. In an Imperial decree in 1772, Emperor Ch'ien Lung claimed "Since we took over Sinkiang, it has become possible to demobilise a part of the frontier forces as well as the inland garrisons. Besides taking care of expenses in Sinkiang, the empire saves more than 900,000 taels of silver every year."<sup>8</sup> The acquisition therefore of a large proportion of new non-Chinese subjects therefore mattered very little to a dynasty that was itself consciously not Chinese. The Manchus claimed to be impartial over ethnic differences, and a slogan of their policy ran 'We do not discriminate against either Moslems or Chinese, but we do discriminate against people who are evil.'<sup>9</sup> However by the mid nineteenth century this was patently becoming a fiction as the Manchu court was Sinicised, and the Manchu banner system gradually corrupted as a fighting force in favour of the easy life as Chinese landlords. The officials nominally presiding over a multi-ethnic empire were instead inevitably drawn into supporting the Chinese community in almost every instance - a fact resented by the Chinese Muslim population - and especially that of Yunnan which had outwardly Sinicised itself in dress

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<sup>5</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 161

<sup>6</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 224

<sup>7</sup> Michael *The Taiping Rebellion* p.23

<sup>8</sup> Wen-Diang Chu *The Moslem Rebellion in Northwest China* p.5

<sup>9</sup> Wen-Diang Chu *The Moslem Rebellion in Northwest China* p.7

and habit. The rebellions of the Muslim population, once left unchecked for a while by the temporising of the local officials, did indeed pose a considerable threat to the existing power of the Imperial authorities, such that the Army commander, Sheng-pao said in 1862 'There are no less than one hundred thousand rebels... purely military action seems impossible to dissolve them. Political reconciliation to a certain extent is necessary.'<sup>10</sup> However, to underline the limited nature of the Muslim protest in western China, Sheng found it difficult to negotiate since there was no recognised leaders of the rebellion, nor was there anything approaching an organised governmental structure which might have posed a lasting threat to Imperial rule. The Muslim rebels were also extremely local in their protests, and Sheng's successor Tso Tsung-t'ang was able to outline an accurate policy regarding their danger to the Imperial régime. As he said 'The Moslems are cunning, but the Nien bandits are strong... The Muslims' aim is to disturb Shensi; the Nien's aim is to break into Honan. That is the reason why these two groups of rebels have never really merged together. We shall destroy the Nien before the Muslims. In the first place the Nien bandits are stronger than the Muslims. Once we destroy the former, the latter's morale will decline. In the second place, once the Nien are confined to Shensi, they will disturb only Shensi, but once the Nien sneak into Honan they will destroy the interior. Comparing the two evils, the disturbance of Shensi is certainly the lesser.'<sup>11</sup>

Either way, the Peking government was also prepared to enforce control over their rebellious domains in whichever manner was required. The death toll for the various rebellions was immense, yet did not deflect the central government from carrying out its policy goal. Tso Tsung-t'ang mournfully described the results of his suppression of the Muslim revolts in north-west China, by noting that 'With the exception of the 2,000 or more Muslims who fled with Pai Yen-hu, there are no more than 60,000 out of the original 700-800,000 Shensi Muslims who have survived to be rehabilitated in Kansu.'<sup>12</sup> Its generals were able to create armies of staggering size and discipline, such as Tseng kuo-fan's Hunan army, which had reached 120,000 men by 1861. Li Hung-change soon created the Anwei army along the same model, while Tso Tsung-t'ang also managed to create an army of 80,000 from the Shensi province. All three armies were entirely novel affairs in that the soldiers were imbued with a sense of *esprit de corps* from their similar provincial backgrounds, and more importantly their sense of mission in defending Confucian Chinese culture against the threats it faced from the rebel movements, whether this was true or not. However, most importantly of all, they were well-resourced despite the very difficult financial position of the Manchu Court. As Tso Tsung-t'ang made abundantly clear, proper resourcing for the army was essential if it either wanted to achieve its strategic goals or even stay in being - 'Therefore it would be much better to borrow a good amount of money and carry out my programme on schedule than to enter Shensi without funds and to be involved in all kinds of trouble and lose the campaign.'<sup>13</sup> His solution to the fact that 'the tax revenues of eastern China may take over a hundred days to reach here, while face many troubles in the mean time' was to fund the army ventures by means of loans raised from Chinese banks. In actual fact, the Chinese banks were not as large contributors to government coffers as was the sizeable body of foreign investors, via foreign banks such as the Hong Kong & Shanghai Banking Corporation. In this way it can be seen that foreign enterprise took a considerable role in shoring up the power of the Manchu rulers - in return nevertheless for concessions elsewhere.

Most involved in supporting the maintenance of Manchu power was the Russian government, who saw their own strategic future depending on the predominance of North China politics over the richer yet more rebellious South. Thus the Russian ambassador at Peking, Nikolai Ignatiev,

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<sup>10</sup> Wen-Diang Chu *The Moslem Rebellion in Northwest China* p.36

<sup>11</sup> Wen-Diang Chu *The Moslem Rebellion in Northwest China* p.96

<sup>12</sup> Wen-Diang Chu *The Moslem Rebellion in Northwest China*

<sup>13</sup> Wen-Diang Chu *The Moslem Rebellion in Northwest China* p.115

reacted with horror when Elgin considered deposing the Manchu emperor in 1860, but the French and Russian negotiators managed to restrain him.<sup>14</sup> In fact, while the Emperor was still able to grant concessions and expect to see them enforced, it actually suited the western powers more to see a continuation of Imperial control. The emergence of the Taipings only became tempting to the Europeans because of the creation of a new court structure based on Nanking with all the trappings of statehood which augured well for the continuation of profitable trade - and not through the fact that they apparently shared the same religion. Sir George Bonham's advice in 1853 was that 'The only policy that appears at present advisable, is to keep ourselves from being involved any further in the quarrel, and to avoid all Government connection with either party.'<sup>15</sup> Europeans quickly grew disillusioned with the Taiping society since in the words of Alexander Mitchie in 1861 'I have no hope of any good ever coming of the rebel movement. No decent Chinaman will have anything to do with it. They do nothing but burn, murder and destroy... I cannot see any elements of stability about them, nor anything which can claim our sympathy.'<sup>16</sup> The relative stability of the Manchu court - even despite the stability of the admittedly less productive areas - seemed to guarantee a greater trading advantage. This was certainly the case when the Taipings attempted to take Shanghai by military means, and therefore jeopardise valuable European trading interests. The creation of the 'Ever-Victorious Army' was a direct response to Taiping threats, and its makeup with a body of Western officers and generals showed clearly foreign attitudes to the Taiping government. Instead, the foreign community was inclining increasingly to back the Peking government, especially after the palace coup of 1861. As the British minister Sir Frederick Bruce gloated in 1861 'it is no small achievement within twelve months to have *created a party* inclined to, and believing in the possibility of friendly intercourse, to *have effectually aided that party to power*. To have established satisfactory relations at Peking and become in some degree the advisors of a government with which eighteen months since we were at war.'<sup>17</sup>

It was undoubtedly the case that of the various rebellions that occurred during the middle of the nineteenth century, only the Taiping Rebellion ever seriously shook the continuation of the Ch'ing dynasty, because it was only this one which attempted to create an alternative form of permanent government in the place of the Ch'ing. Its appeal to the Chinese people was by no means founded on this hope, and indeed in his deposition, Li Hsiu-ch'eng the Loyal King made it explicitly clear that during the early part of the rebellion 'Apart from these six men no-one else knew about the T'ien Wang wanting to establish his rule over the country. The others did not know and really followed for the sake of food.'<sup>18</sup> In this way, the Taipings can be seen as a manifestation of protest at the failure of the Ch'ing policies to deliver prosperity to the populace, and indeed of their failure to even ensure sufficient food. Yet it was the manner in which the Taipings attempted to solve these questions, as well as the fact that they became an alternative government centre, which seriously questioned the legitimacy of the Manchu rule. The Taiping Rebellion was 'in retrospect the first internal manifestation of the effect of an outer and inner crisis in Chinese traditional society.'<sup>19</sup> Taiping ruling style was a direct contrast with almost all of the social norms which China had kept dear for thousands of years. The fanatical religious zeal of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan contrasted with traditional Chinese society based on reverence of the ancestors and respect for scholarship. Some aspects of Taiping government were truly revolutionary, the foremost being primitive equality and a social organisation intended to be more egalitarian than the existing Ch'ing administration. The ideas of common ownership of

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<sup>14</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 215

<sup>15</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 237

<sup>16</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 245

<sup>17</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 264

<sup>18</sup> Curwen *Taiping Rebel* p.80

<sup>19</sup> Michael *The Taiping Rebellion* p.3

land, hearkened back to ideas foreseen by Wang Mang (AD.8-23), as well as a common treasury for all expenses. The army was brought fully into the heart of Taiping life, and a unity created between the military and civil administration. For example an army was drawn from each 13,156 families, and the basic social unit was of 25 families, with a public storehouse under the charge of a master sergeant. It is not surprising that this motivated and well-resourced army performed so well against the poor and corrupted banner-forces arrayed against them, even without the military brilliance of Li Hsiu-ch'eng - who almost single-handedly kept the Taiping state in being for eight years. Civil service examinations on the traditional model were conducted, yet in plain language not the courtly and literary style which had always been insisted on. The topics were not from the old Confucian classics, but on selected religious tracts, such as 'God our Lord is the Only True Spirit.' However, such was the Taiping need for officials and so small were the numbers of applicants that the exams were far easier than the Ch'ing versions - 80% of candidates passed them, much to the delight of the local population but to the detriment of administrative quality. Nevertheless, there were considerable merits in Taiping efforts, at least according to the initial opinion of Sir George Bonham who said in 1853 'It would be sad to see Christian nations engaged in putting down the movement, as the insurgents possess an energy, and a tendency to improvement and general reform which the Imperialists have never exhibited, and never can be expected to display.'<sup>20</sup>

Yet there were also considerable inconsistencies in the Taiping style of government which weakened its ability to constitute a genuine and lasting challenge to the Ch'ing dynasty. Firstly, there was the entire failure ever to link their anti-Manchu activities with those of other aggrieved parties such as the Muslims in the west or the Nien bandits in central China. The T'ien Wang even explicitly refused to support the Secret Sword Triad in their uprising in the city of Shanghai - which was still a major source of revenue for the Manchu government. The Taipings took Nanking with relative ease, yet only ever sent a half-hearted mission to depose the Imperial Court in Peking - a thing which was eminently possible as the British and French expeditions almost succeeded in doing in 1860, contenting themselves with the torching of the Summer Palace. Even in their own territories, the Taiping leaders did not themselves maintain the lifestyle of the religious frugality they preached. Although there was a common treasury for the followers, this contrasted with almost absolute power for the leadership. More obviously, the separation of the sexes and complete chastity which Hung Hsiu-ch'üan prescribed for his followers was in direct confrontation with the harems which were allowed for the leaders. Hung himself kept 88 concubines, the East King 36, the North King 14 and the Assistant King 7. The prohibition on the reading of the 'bogey books' of Confucius and Mencius applied only to the rank and file, while Hung liberally illustrated his tracts with ideas from the *Rites of Chou* and used Confucian terms to describe his Christianity. Sir George Bonham commented wisely on the Taiping leadership that 'There are some things of which we most highly disapprove, not least of which are the pretensions to new and immediate communications from the Divine Being...made to serve the end of personal aggrandisement and ambition.'<sup>21</sup>

However, most crucially, the style of almost all of the anti-Manchu rebellions could be easily painted as a direct attack on the Confucian philosophy which had underpinned Chinese civilisation, and in this way demanded the opposition of those members of Chinese society who supported them. In defending the social order against the Taiping attack, the Confucian gentry had no choice but to defend the dynasty as well, whether or not it was according to the principles of Confucius to defend a dynasty once the Mandate of Heaven had been withdrawn. Such was the need to preserve the social stability that practically all the scholar-officials remained loyal to the Manchus, while Tseng Kuo-fan disbanded the Hunan Army seventeen days after the

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<sup>20</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 237

<sup>21</sup> Hsü *A History of China* p. 237

fall of Nanking, to show his loyalty to the Manchu court although the army could easily have allowed him to depose the dynasty himself. The Ch'ing dynasty was ultimately protected not because it was popular or indeed particularly competent, but rather that it managed to maintain the loyalty of enough people to avoid military collapse - a factor helped not inconsiderably by the willingness of the European public to invest in the Ch'ing's own future.