
UNIT 4 TAIPING UPRISING*

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to explain the:

- origin of the Taiping Uprising as well as its social base;
- programme and activities of the Taiping movement;
- steps taken by the Qing Government to defeat them;
- attitude of the Western powers towards them;
- reasons for the ultimate failure of the uprising; and
- impact of the Taiping Uprising and its overall significance.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The Taiping Uprising, which erupted over most of South and Central China in the middle of the 19th century was not only the greatest rebellion in China prior to the 20th century, but was also one of the greatest peasant rebellions in world history. It lasted for 13 years (from 1851 to 1864), encompassed

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many provinces and a population of a couple of hundred million, and also very nearly brought about the demise of the 200 year old Qing dynasty. So great was its impact at the time, that to the Qing dynasty the defeats, humiliation and threats it faced at the hands of the Western powers in the same period seemed a minor problem in comparison. Ultimately, when the Rebellion was crushed, it had taken a toll of more than 20 million lives, and several of the richest and most populated provinces of China lay devastated and deserted. The Taiping Rebellion was important for another reason as well. Occurring at a most eventful period of Chinese history, it stood at the juncture of two epochs. In its origins, its ideology, its programme, as well as its inherent weaknesses, it contained elements of the old social, political and cultural order as well as of the new China that was in the making. In one sense, it represented the last of the series of great peasant rebellions that had characterized traditional Chinese history, while in another sense, it was a harbinger of the nationalistic, ideologically motivated revolutionary movements of the 20th century.

For all these reasons, an understanding of the Taiping Uprising is essential to understand the dynamics of modern Chinese history.

This Unit begins with a background to the uprising dealing with the various factors which contributed in the eruption of such a massive uprising. Besides discussing about the leadership of the uprising the Unit takes into account the programme adopted by Taiping — particularly the land policy and equal rights for women. The exploits of the Taiping army and the efforts of the Qing government to suppress them have also been dealt with. The Western powers, though initially sympathetic, made armed intervention against the Taiping. Dealing with this aspect along with the struggles waged by the Taiping, the Unit also looks at the weaknesses of the uprising and its impact on China's economy, society and polity. The debate regarding the nature of the uprising has also been briefly discussed.

4.2 BACKGROUND

In the words of Jean Chesneaux “The Taiping Movement was characterized by its triple content: national, religious and social”. It was:

- anti Manchu for it attacked the ruling dynasty as “foreign and barbarous”,
- religious in the sense that it vehemently attacked Confucianism; combined popular Chinese cults and borrowed ideas from Christianity, and
- a social protest movement in the sense that it not only shook the edifice of feudalism in China by offering a programme of changing the agrarian relations but also stood for emancipation of women.

But before we go further let us look at the historicity of the situation which led to the combining of certain factors and generated such a revolutionary upsurge.

After 150 years of Qing rule, symptoms of social and economic crisis and political disorder began to manifest themselves in a significant way in the early 19th century China. A familiar pattern of growing peasant discontent, administrative corruption and ineptitude, natural disasters, uprisings and foreign encroachment — associated

in the traditional Chinese historical consciousness with dynastic decline — began to appear. It must be noted here that anti-Manchu sentiments were not new to South China. Similar was the case in relation to peasant uprisings which had a long history.

In the early 19th century all the conditions which made the life of the common people increasingly hard and insecure were prevalent in South China. In addition, the dislocation caused by the foreign presence and the Opium wars, the tensions generated by the presence of diverse-ethnic communities in this region, and a pattern of chronic lawlessness and anarchic violence, all combined to make the situation in South China and specifically in the provinces of Guangxi and Guangcong particularly explosive.

For the Manchu rulers, South China had always been the most difficult region to control. After their conquest of China in the mid-17th century, it had been the last region to be fully subjugated. Even after the last major centres of resistance to Manchu rule had been snuffed out, the area continued to be difficult to control. Partly, this was so because of its sheer distance from the seat of administration at Peking. This was particularly true of these hilly, semi-barren or border areas, such as in Guangxi, which had been colonized only in the 18th century. In fact the increasing pressure of population on the land had forced people to migrate from the more fertile lowland areas. In general, the presence of the police and administration was much less in such areas than in the earlier settled and more densely populated areas. These newly settled areas, because of migration from different areas, had a more mixed population. This had also generated considerable social friction. The hard conditions of frontier life contributed to a tendency for the different communities to group together in mutually warring, heavily armed groups. This contributed to the growth of secret societies like the Triads (Tian Di Hui) which flourished under such conditions. In Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, a major source of social tension was the centuries long conflict between the people known as the Hakka and the original settlers (known as Bendi). The Hakka were that group of people who had migrated into this region from the North during the 12th and 13th centuries. In spite of their many centuries of residence in the South, they continued to retain many of their distinctive characteristics, and customs as well as their own dialect. Conflicts between them and the other local people were numerous and often violent. A sense of alienation from their surroundings characterized this community from which emerged the founder of the Taiping Movement, Hong Xiuquan. The initial social base of the Taiping was from among the Hakkas.

The presence of the Western traders also contributed to the spreading of a climate of lawlessness along the South China coast and its hinterland, particularly from the early 19th century when opium became a major item of trade. The illicit opium trade generated a complex underground smuggling and distribution network involving thousands of local people. The Opium War itself was particularly disruptive. Following the war and the Treaty of Nanking, much of the foreign trade which was formerly centred in this country shifted north to Shanghai. Thousands of coolies, boatmen and others in the Canton area, who were employed because of trade, were suddenly without jobs. As a source of livelihood, they now turned to banditry. Pirates driven inland by the British navy's piracy suppression campaigns also contributed to the floating population of adventurers and desperadoes ready for any kind of action. It is not without significance that, apart from the Hakka people, the initial adherents of the Taiping

Movement came more from the strata of displaced peddlers, boatmen, coolies and others rather than from the ranks of the peasantry.

The Treaty of Nanking had adversely affected the native handicraft industry. For example foreign textiles now captured the market and the role of native cotton goods declined. Same was the case with handicrafts. A large number of handicraft workers were unemployed.

The Qing government, in order to pay the war indemnity imposed many levies leading to an increased burden on the peasantry and soaring prices. For example by 1846 the price of salt had gone up by more than 100 per cent in certain areas. The landlord class continued to exploit the peasant. Most of the land was concentrated in hands of big landlords. The sufferings of the common people and the anti-ruling class sentiments were best reflected in the proclamation of the Tian Di Hui (Triads) when this secret society rose in revolt:

Throughout the Empire, rapacious officials are worse than bandits, and the corrupt mandarins of the public offices are no better than wolves and tigers. The crimes committed by the rich are left unpunished, and the wrongs of the poor never redressed. Deprived of their means of support, the people are plunged into darkest depths of suffering.

Immediately preceding the Taiping upsurge, during the 1840s, there were a number of uprisings led by peasants or displaced handicraft workers, etc. These struggles were waged against:

- the payment of levies,
- high taxation and rents, and
- corrupt officials, etc.

The leadership was provided by the ranks of secret societies like the Tian Di Hui, etc. Some of the major struggles of the 1840s were:

- the uprising on the Hunan-Guangxi border in 1847 under the leadership of Lei Zaihao of the Tian Di Hui
- The insurrections under the leadership of Zhang Jiaxiang, Zhen Yakuai and Li Yuanfa between 1840-50 in the Guangdong-Guangxi border region and Hunan, etc.

The officials, no doubt, dubbed them as the handiwork of bandits rather than acknowledging the discontent that prevailed among the common people against oppression. "Banditry", in fact, had emerged out of the social misery and it found simple justification to rise in revolt against an oppressive system. For example the following verse is credited to Zhang Jiaxiang:

The upper classes own us money,
The middle classes ought to wake up,
But lower classes follow me!
It beats renting an ox to plough barren land !

But in official language Chang was just a pirate. It was in this background that the Taiping appeared on the scene.

4.3 HONG XIUQUAN AND THE GOD WORSHIPPERS SOCIETY

The founder of the Taiping Movement, Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864) was born in a peasant family of Huaxian, Guangdong province. For some time he worked as a village teacher but had aspirations to become a bureaucrat. Hong appeared unsuccessfully four times over a period of 15 years for the first level of examinations. No doubt these failures must have brought an anti-establishment feeling. Following his second failure, Hong for the first time came into contact with a couple of Protestant missionaries and received a set of Christian tracts (although this did not make any great impression on him initially). Following his third failure, he lapsed into a deep depression in which he experienced hallucinations. These two events together not only proved to be decisive in shaping Hong's life, but also left a profound stamp on what later became the Taiping Movement. Hong was convinced that the visions he saw were a message that he was a son of God and the younger brother of Jesus Christ, who had the mission of spreading God's word and save mankind. He attacked Confucianism as the religion of feudal lords. In his view the devils were "making trouble" as "most of the canons taught by Confucianism are absurd". Following his dismissal from the job of a school teacher for his unorthodox beliefs in 1844, Hong and his devoted friend and convert Feng Yunshan moved to the neighbouring province of Guangxi to carry on with their missionary activities. Within a few years, they had won over thousands of converts, particularly from among the poor peasants, miners and charcoal burners of the Hakka community. These converts were organized into a society of God-Worshippers, (Bai Shang Di Hui). Characterized by fanatical zeal, religious fervour and pro-poor feelings this society was to challenge the basis of Qing rule.

Before we go further it is worth noting that Hong wrote many articles and poems to propagate his revolutionary ideas. These included:

- Doctrines on Salvation,
- Doctrines on Awakening the World, and
- Doctrines on Arousing the World.

Following are some examples of his writings:

- Attacking the feudal lords and autocracy he wrote: "All under Heaven have the same Heavenly Father and so are of one family What reason is there for the Emperor to grasp everything in his own hands?"
- In the Doctrines on Arousing the World he opposed the torture and injury that was inflicted by the supernatural system — i.e. from the Monster King of Hell to the various demons of the world — on the people. These demons were none else than the Qing Emperor and his subordinates. The people ought to revolt against these sources of evil.
- In one of his poems he gave the message of capturing the demons and suppressing the traitors so that peace could be brought:

Wielding a sword three feet long, to conquer mountains and rivers strong; Within the four seas, home is everywhere; let's drink a cup of common happiness and joy.

All monsters and devils we'll capture and cast into Hell; Traitors and blood-suckers will all be suppressed, caught in the snare of Heaven.

Our land, east, west, north and south firmly consolidated.

The sun, moon and stars all sing in triumphant chorus.

The tigers howl, the dragons snarl — that brightens heaven and earth;

Where peace rules, endless happiness will reign.

It is not easy to pinpoint exactly when the Society of God-Worshippers made the transition from a religious sect to a movement that threw an open challenge to the rule of the Qing Dynasty. The activities of the God-Worshippers, plus the generally high level of militarization in Kwangsi, ensured that very early they had to organize themselves in a semi-military fashion. The militarization of the God-Worshippers reached a new level in July 1850, when a call was issued to all their branches to converge on Hong's headquarters at Jintian and to pool all their possessions in a single 'camp'. Such an organization was naturally a threat to the government. Soon, there were armed clashes between the army of the God-Worshippers and the imperial troops, which ended in victory for the former. This emboldened the God Worshippers to issue a formal declaration on January 11, 1851, of the establishment of their "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" (Taiping Tianguo), with Hong Xiuquan himself as the "Heavenly King" (Tianwang). The rebellion had begun, and for Hong and his followers, there was no turning back thereafter.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write in brief how the presence of Westerners contributed to the miseries of the people in South China.

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- 2) Analyze in about ten lines the views of Hong Xiuquan.

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4.4 THE HEYDAY OF THE TAIPING UPRISING

What initially appeared to be a small skirmish between the rebels and Qing troops soon turned out to be a massive uprising. It was not just a question of defeating the Qing forces or do away with some landlords for the Taiping had in their minds a complete reorganization of the socio-political order. Here we shall discuss the victories of the Taiping and the programmes they adopted

in their areas of influence. They also got support from others like the Tian Di Huiand leaders like Su San-niang who had rebelled elsewhere.

Shortly after the proclamation of the “Heavenly Kingdom”, the Taiping began their march to the north. There began a series of fierce clashes between the Taiping forces and the Qing troops along the route of the march. Both sides suffered heavy losses, but overall, the progress of the Taiping could not be stopped.

The first major victory of the Taiping was the capture of the town of Yongan. There, they accumulated strength, becoming an army of around 37,000. They also developed their apprehensions to being the next rulers of China, by issuing a formal call to all Chinese to rise up and overthrow the alien Manchu rulers, and by adopting a new calendar — traditionally a sign of the coming to power of a new dynasty. The superstitious notions of lucky and unlucky days — as was the case in old calendar — were done away with.

The Qing forces laid siege to the Taiping at Yongan, from which it took the Taiping about 6 months to break out. From Yongan, the Taiping continued to forge northwards, chasing the borders into Hunan province. This was a major political and military step from strategic point of view. It meant that the Taiping Rebellion was no longer a small provincial movement in a remote region of the Empire. It had set its eyes on the capture of the rich, culturally developed and politically important Yangtze River region of Central China.

The Northern march saw a phenomenal increase in the forces and resources available to the Taiping. The severely exploited masses of South-central China enthusiastically responded to the Taiping’ egalitarian social message. This swelled the Taiping ranks to several lakhs by the time they reached the major towns along the Yangtse River. For example they were joined by the coal miners of the Daozhou and Zhenzhou. They also added to their resources hoards of silver and grain seized along the way from state treasuries as well as ammunition and ships. With these enormous reserves, they continued their march capturing many towns and adding to their ranks. In March 1853 they swept into the great city of Nanjing, the old capital of the Chinese Empire, which they renamed Tianjing i.e. the Heavenly Capital of their own “Heavenly Kingdom”.

4.5 THE TAIPIING ORGANIZATION AND PROGRAMME

The transition in the character of the Taiping Movement was indeed remarkable. From a small band of converts to an alien religion it had emerged as a formidable political military power with a vision of conquering all of China and transforming the entire social order. Now the original messianic vision and appeal of its founders became more programmatic and geared to changing the social and economic order.

The main leadership of the movement remained in the hands of the most prominent early converts. Hong Xiuquan, of course, was the “Heavenly King”, but power was shared between him and the other “kings” (wang), all of whom were part of the original circle. There were 5 Kings — 4 of them named after the different directions (East, West, North and South), while the fifth was known as the “Assistant King”.

The Taiping followers were organized into a combined civil and military structure. The family was the basic unit of this structure, with groups of families being organized into military divisions. However, these military detachments not only fought, they also cultivated land, and constructed public works, etc. Every member of the family contributed in his own way. For example the older people made bamboo spikes or cooked meals and the children helped the adults in battle. Their leaders not only led them in battle, but were also civil administrators responsible for all economic, administrative, judicial as well as social and religious functions.

Although the family remained the basic unit of organization, the emphasis among the Taiping was on communal ownership of all resources and communal living, with an element of the segregation of the sexes as well. All property, as well as the products of the people's labour, were considered to be the property of the state (The sacred treasury), to be enjoyed by all as equally as possible. The Taiping did try to implement such measures in those areas which remained relatively firmly under their control. Here we are not going into each and every detail of the Taiping programme. We shall be discussing only some of the major aspects related to it.

4.5.1 The Land System

The basic programme of the "Heavenly Kingdom" was contained in a remarkable document called "The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom" (*tianchaotianmu zhidu*). This document contained much more than just regulations relating to land.

It was based on the radical idea that all land was to be owned in common and its fruits were to be used for the sustenance of all. Thus, the Taiping abolished all private property. This in fact was a proclamation to abolish the feudal system. They divided all land into 9 categories according to quality. Every man and woman over 16 years was to receive a share for cultivation, and the distribution was to be such that no family received a disproportionate share of good or bad land. The land, thus distributed was not to be the property of the individual. It was to be used only for the purpose of production. Any produce of the land beyond what was necessary to meet the basic needs of the family was to be surrendered to the collective pool. The doctrine of communal use of land was not a new one to China. It could be traced back to the ancient text *The Rites of Zhou* or during the short rule of Wang Mang of the Xin dynasty (c. 9-23 AD). This idealistic programme, however, could not be implemented in actual practice except in a few pockets. We cannot say whether the exigencies of war or the difficulties of implementation were the obstructions in the way. Yet, we find that in the Taiping areas the power of the landlords was partly destroyed and many fled to other areas. For example in Yangzhou, peasants paid no rent for three years and in areas around Nanjing tenants stopped paying rents to landlords. Similarly, in many areas rent reduction upto 50 per cent took place.

4.5.2 The Position of Women

An important feature of the land system, as well as of the social policy of the Taiping as a whole, was the idea of the equality of men and women — something fundamentally alien to the Confucian order. Women formed a part of the Taiping armies, and even held positions of responsibility. Hong's sister herself commanded

the women soldiers. *Nüguan* (women's residential halls) were opened for young girls and widows of those killed in war.

The measure to abolish the practice of foot-binding as well as prostitution and polygamy, were also important indications of the Taiping attitude towards women. W. Muirhead, a British missionary, after visiting the Heavenly Capital described the changed position of women as thus:

“While walking along the streets, the number of females that are seen on the way is rather a novelty. They are in general well-dressed, and of very respectable appearance. Many are riding on horse-back, others are walking and most of them have large feet. Not a few stop to hear our preaching, and always conduct themselves with perfect propriety. This is new as compared with the former course of things and the whole reminds one partly of home life.”

Apart from these practices which they regarded as degenerate, the Taiping also abolished slavery, gambling, the consumption of tobacco and wine, and opium smoking.

4.5.3 Handicrafts and Trade

The Taiping encouraged handicraft workers to work in specialized workshops related to their products. These workshops were supervised by Taiping officials. However, the needs of the army were kept in mind and the products were mainly used by the army.

Initially attempts were made to abolish trade and commerce. It was proclaimed that:

Everything is granted by Heavenly Father. It is not necessary to purchase things with money.

But soon it was realized that this was an unrealistic position. Now attempts were made to regulate commerce through the central authority. A free market was allowed outside the capital where goods were bought and sold. The merchants, in order to carry on trade, had to buy a license. The rate of tax on trade was definitely low under the Taiping when compared to the Qing ruled areas.

In many ways, the Taiping Movement retained vital elements from its origins. It never lost its profoundly religious character, which was based on a form of Christianity (although interpreted in a unique way by Hong Xiquan and the other leaders of the movement). Many of the elements of its programme also owed their inspiration to the communal type of life practised by the early converts among the Hakka communities in Kwangsi.

By any standards, including those of our own time, the programme of the Taiping could be considered truly revolutionary. This assessment, however, has to be tempered with the knowledge that the Taiping, perpetually fighting or under siege, had little time or opportunity to fully implement their measures. The Taiping followed two different standards — one for the leaders and the other for the masses. Nevertheless, it is this deeply idealistic programme of the Taiping which distinguished them most from other peasant rebellions and anti-dynastic uprisings, and which possibly inspired the fanatical enthusiasm and loyalty of its followers right to the end.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss in about ten lines the land programme of Taiping.

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- 2) What was the attitude of Taiping towards women? Answer in five lines.

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4.6 THE DOWNFALL OF THE TAIPING

The capture of Nanjing in 1853 in one sense showed the boundless ambition and potential of the Taiping Rebellion. But in another sense, this victory marked the limitation of the movement, because just after it was achieved, the Taiping leadership made the crucial decision not to push forward with all their force towards Peking. They decided to consolidate their hold at Nanjing and the Yangtze River region, and to send only one part of their force to Peking. This decision virtually saved the Qing dynasty. The weak Taiping northern expedition was routed by the spring of 1855, leaving intact the headquarters and rallying centre of the Qing Government at Beijing. Although it took another nine years for the Taiping to be completely crushed, the Yangtze River valley remained the northernmost limit of the “Heavenly Kingdom”, leaving the Qing with a sizeable part of its empire intact.

4.6.1 Tseng Kuo-fan and the Qing Efforts to Crush the Taiping

After the capture of Nanjing, the Taiping concentrated their military efforts on securing the major towns and cities along the Yangtze River, from Wuchang in the west to Jinjiang in the east. Initially, the Qing military response was entirely defensive. The Imperial troops set up two camps outside Nanjing, one each on the north and south of the Yangtze River. But they could not prevent the Taiping troops from overrunning the rich prefectures on both the sides of the river. The demoralized imperial troops with their antiquated organization were no match for the supremely motivated, crusading army of the Taiping.

When the Qing Government finally woke up to this fact, they resorted to desperate measures. This included in 1853 calling on an important official, Zeng Guofan, who was on leave in his native Hunan province, to raise a militia force to challenge the Taiping rebels who were on an offensive there. Zeng loyally responded to the call, but he had his own ideas how to go about implementing it.

Zeng set about raising a force (known as the Hunan Army) that would be as tightly organized and as committed as the enemies it was to face. He carefully selected able scholar-officials as commanders, and they in turn recruited soldiers from among the local peasantry who would be loyal to them. In comparison

with the soldiers of the regular army, these recruits were well-paid and thoroughly trained. They were indoctrinated to believe that they were defending their villages, their lands, their temples and the security of their lives from the marauding “bandit” armies. At the same time, Zeng Guofan issued public appeals to the local population of all classes to assist in the rebel-suppression campaign.

Zeng Guofan’s carefully thought out and executed strategy yielded dividends. Initially, the result of the encounters between the Taiping troops and the new Hunan Army did not significantly favour either side. Both sides won or lost major engagements. However, the crushing defeat of the regular imperial forces camping outside Nanjing in mid-1856 ensured that there was no other force thereafter to challenge the Taiping other than the new troops of Zeng Guofan. In recognition of this, the Qing Court enhanced the authority and responsibilities vested in Zeng Guofan. By 1860 Zeng, now given the exalted position of Imperial Commissioner and the complete command of all operations against the Taiping, commanded a fine army of 120,000 men and a galaxy of able commanders and strategists.

4.6.2 Attitude of the Western Powers

Initially, the attitude of the Western powers in the treaty ports to the Taiping Rebellion was one of mild sympathy. The 1850s was a period of rising tensions between the Western powers and the Qing government and there was no compelling reason for the foreigners to rush to the defence of the Qing. Moreover, the fact that the Taiping ostensibly followed a form of Christianity was a factor in their favour.

Officially, however, the Western stance and particularly that of the British, was one of strict neutrality or wait-and-see. As long as their treaty rights, the treaty ports and the commerce were left untouched, the Westerners saw no reason to intervene.

From about 1860, this attitude began to change and the Westerners became increasingly hostile to the Taiping. There were several reasons for this:

- i) One was that the long-drawn out anarchy and violence in the Yangtze region and near the coast did not favour the interests of commerce, and the foreigners held the Taiping responsible for failing to establish a stable effective administration in the areas under their control.
- ii) Another reason was the strict Taiping opposition to opium, the commodity over which the British had gone to war with the Qing.
- iii) The Westerners began to get disenchanted with the Taiping brand of Christianity, and even began to regard it as somewhat blasphemous.
- iv) Perhaps a more important reason was the change in the Qing attitude to the Western powers and their demands, which was in turn related to the inner court politics of the Qing dynasty. With the signing of the new round of treaties after the Second Opium War, by 1860, the Westerners had a greater stake in the survival of Qing rule as the guarantor of these treaty rights. However, the fact that they were now allowed diplomatic representation in Peking, meant that some of the leading Western representatives became more familiar with leading Qing officials and even identified among them a ‘moderate’ faction which was favourable to the idea of closer ties with

the West. The ascendancy of this faction, headed by the brother of the former Emperor, Prince Gong, after 1861 made the Western policy makers more sympathetic to the Qing.

Western official neutrality turned to active intervention against the Taiping only when they launched an assault on Shanghai in 1860. Initially it took the form of a private foreign detachment commanded by an American, F.T. Ward, and financed by wealthy businessmen of Shanghai. The successes of this force were soon recognized by the Emperor in the form of the title "Ever-Victorious Army" bestowed upon it. Under the leadership of the British, Charles Gordon, the "Ever-Victorious Army" soon expanded its operations from merely the defence of Shanghai and the surrounding region to joint expeditions with the Chinese troops under the official Li-Hongzhang against the Taiping strongholds. But more important than this direct intervention by foreigners in the war against the Taiping was their supply of arms, which played a major role in giving the pro-Qing forces superiority over the Taiping. In fact, officials like Li Hongzhang, while not averse to taking Western help in limited spheres, were very much against their direct participation in the fighting, fearing that this would eventually lead to greater Western interference in Chinese affairs.

4.6.3 Internal Problems of the Taiping

The year 1856 which marked a high tide of the Taiping fortunes with the defeat of the imperial troops encircling Nanjing, also saw a major crisis within the movement. Factional infighting among the top leaders dealt a blow from which it never recovered.

The East King, Yang Xiuqing, had for some years sought to elevate his own position at the expense of his rival kings. Because of his undoubted military ability and skillful manipulation of spiritual matters (e.g. by lapsing into trances) he had by 1856 acquired a position second only to Hong Xiuquan himself.

However, Yang aspired to replace Hong himself as the chief leader. He started making moves in that direction which were, however, quickly understood by Hong. Hong summoned the two other remaining kings, the North King and the Assistant King, to his rescue (the South and West Kings both having been killed in earlier campaigns). They killed the East King and butchered over 20,000 of his followers. But in the process, they fell out with each other, leading to the North King's slaughter of the Assistant King's entire family and followers. Disgusted with the North King's actions, Hong had himself executed barely three months after Yang. Hong also fell out with the Assistant King, leading to the latter's desertion with a huge number of followers.

At the end of it there was none of the original group of leaders left except Hong himself. Hong increasingly disassociated himself from official matters. Were it not for the efforts of one of his last remaining lieutenants, Li Xiucheng, it was quite likely that the Taiping cause would not have lingered on for the seven more years that it did.

4.6.4 The Defeat of the Taiping

The end came on a 3-pronged movement under the overall direction of Zeng Guofan. Zeng's brother was given charge of encircling Nanjing. Li Hongzhang was in charge of pacifying the Jiangsu region, while another commander Zuo

Zongtang, was in charge of the fighting in Zhejiang province. Prior to this, the last major offensive campaign of the Taiping to the west was defeated in 1861.

By 1864, the troops loyal to the Qing had met one success after another, and the position of the Taiping holed up at Nanjing became untenable. Nevertheless, the defenders of Nanjing fought down to the last man, with no one surrendering. The final taking of Nanjing by Zeng Guofan's troops on 19 July, 1864 was extremely bloody, as were the subsequent mapping in campaigns. The armies of Zeng Guofan were merciless in their victory, taking a toll of several hundred thousand people just in the last phase of the campaign.

At one time, it had seemed possible that the Taiping would overthrow the Qing and succeed in conquering all of China. But their decline and fall was rapid. The eruption of fierce rivalry among the Taiping leadership, leading to its virtual decimation in mutual fighting, was undoubtedly a key factor in its defeat. In the last phase of the rebellion, the Taiping were virtually without a centralized command structure. They were also deprived of the most talented commanders and organizers who had built up the movement from scratch.

The deteriorating quality of the Taiping leadership coincided with the revival and strengthening of the leadership of the Qing forces. The formation of the new armies under the leadership of Zeng Guofan and his protégées by passing the old and ineffective military apparatus of the imperial troops, was decisive in the defeat of the Taiping. The leaders of these forces had been carefully selected by Tseng himself on the basis of their talent, ability and personal loyalty to him.

Another reason for the failure of the Taiping Movement was some of the glaring inconsistencies between what they preached and what they practiced. The Taiping leaders propagated and imposed on their followers a communal, Spartan kind of life. But, particularly after they established themselves at Nanjing, they did not follow this pattern themselves. On the contrary they led most ostentatious luxurious lives.

The Taiping projected themselves as leaders of all the Chinese, against the alien Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty. But this nationalistic appeal was mixed with their religious teachings and practices, which were not equally acceptable to all Chinese. Their rejection of Confucianism and ideas of egalitarianism alienated the gentry, while the destruction of temples and shrines alienated even the lower classes. Their suspicion and intolerance of non-Christian creeds made it harder for them to effect long-term co-operation with the other numerous secret societies and rebel groups of the time.

Ultimately, perhaps it was the failure of the Taiping to win a quick decisive victory over the Qing that went against their interests. Their failure to try to march on to Beijing, and their failure to destroy the encirclement of Nanjing early, were both military blunders which ensured the prolongation of the fighting which ruined normal life and economic activity in the region. The Taiping as the rebel force, rather than the Qing, were blamed for the disorder by the people. There is also evidence that this was the main factor which turned the attitude of the foreigners decisively against the Taiping. When it was clear that the Taiping could not show proof of their ability to establish a stable and consistent administration and to ensure peace in their region, the foreign trading community turned hostile to the rebels. Though this was not the major factor in the Taiping defeat, but it was by no means unimportant.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What was the attitude of Western powers towards the Taiping? Answer in ten lines.

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- 2) What were the steps taken by the Qing Court to crush the Taiping? Answer in about ten lines.

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4.7 THE NATURE AND IMPACT OF THE TAIPING UPRISING

There has been a considerable debate over the nature of the Taiping Uprising and the impact it had on China. Let us examine some of the aspects related to this debate.

4.7.1 Rebellion or Social Revolution

In the long history of imperial China, peasant rebellions of great sweep and power were periodic occurrences. In that sense, the Taiping Rebellion could legitimately be seen as the last in a long series of such rebellions.

However, in various ways, the Taiping Rebellion was not a 'typical' Chinese peasant rebellion. It occurred in a region (South China) at a time (the mid-19th century) which had felt the impact of an entirely new phenomenon — the presence of the West. This fact profoundly affected the Taiping Rebellion in various ways.

Most obviously, the Western impact affected the ideology of the Taiping Rebellion through the beliefs of its founder, Hong Xiuquan. The religious ideology of the Taiping was never a minor factor in their actions. Rather it was something always at the forefront. It is true that many other peasant rebellions in Chinese history were anti-Confucian and egalitarian in their overtones. But the Christian beliefs of the Taiping leaders gave their anti-Confucian egalitarian views a more strident, insistent character.

No other peasant rebellion had embodied the idea of equality and brotherhood of all men in such a concrete programme of land redistribution, of communal ownership, etc. None had given such a high status to women. None had taken up with such a passion the eradication of the major social evils of the time, such as opium-smoking, gambling, prostitution and so on. Moreover, the Taiping

were also conscious of the problem of the Westerners at their doorstep and tried to address this problem, without descending into blind anti-foreignism.

In short, instead of being a simple traditionalist rebellion aiming at the replacement of an oppressive ruling house by another, the Taiping Rebellion was a movement with a vision, a social message and a comprehensive programme of reform. It was a product of a unique, transitional phase of Chinese history. It tried to address the problem of that age within certain limits. It is precisely this uniqueness of the Taiping Rebellion that had led to its being termed as a “revolution”. Chinese communist historians have referred to it as the “first great high tide of the revolution in the history of modern China”. They have viewed it as the opening salvo of a century long struggle of the Chinese people for national renewal and social transformation eliminating on the revolution of the Chinese masses led by the Communist Party of China in 1949.

It is tempting to view the Taiping Rebellion as the last of the anti-dynastic rebellions of imperial China or as the first of the series of a revolutionary upheavals in modern Chinese history. However, it would perhaps be more accurate to view the Taiping Rebellion for what it was an uprising. It was the product of a society in the grip of an unprecedented social and economic crisis, in which the discontent and despair of the people had no other outlet than that of a violent uprising against the establishment.

4.7.2 The Aftermath

Not just the Chinese communists, but other visionaries and revolutionaries of the 20th century, like Dr. Sun Yatsen, were inspired by the nationalistic credo of the Taiping, their social programme, and their assault on the establishment. However, this memory or inspiration is virtually all that survived of the Taiping Rebellion after the thorough extermination carried out by the loyalist armies. There remained no distinctive groups or trends associated with the Taiping or upholding its banner even underground. A movement that came into being in the 1840's and rapidly reached a position of fame and power survived not more than 20 years altogether.

Strangely enough, the Taiping Rebellion had a significant impact on the politics of the Qing dynasty which it had set out to destroy. The Qing won the battle against the Taiping, but in the process, they weakened their own undiluted power. The Hunan army of Zeng Guofan, the Huai army of Li Hongzhang and other new forces used to suppress the Taiping were the mainstay of new centres of power that were not wholly dependent on the Qing court. In their desperation to suppress the Rebellion, the Qing ceded important powers to their high Chinese officials — something they had always been careful not to do in the past. They relinquished their monopoly control of all regular troops. They also had to give a great deal of freedom of operation to provincial officers and to local gentry members. All this put together represented a definite shift of powers within the existing political structure.

As long as strict loyalists like Zeng Guofan were at the helm of affairs, this shift of powers was not openly used to challenge the rule of Qing Emperors. But in the long run, this helped to erode the basis of their power and prestige. It is not without significance that in the final revolution that overthrew the Qing in 1911, the key actors were not so much the peasants as the soldiers and officers of the new armies and the local gentry.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Do you consider the Taiping uprising a social revolution? Answer in ten lines.

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- 2) What was the effect of Taiping Rebellion on the Qing rule ? Answer in ten lines.

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4.8 LET US SUM UP

The Taiping Rebellion was a massive popular uprising in the mid-19th century which shook the foundations of the rule of the Qing Dynasty. Born as a religious sect propagating a kind of Christianity in Guangxi in the remote south-western corner of China, it rapidly assumed the dimensions of a broad political and social movement with formidable military power. This was due to the weakness of the Qing dynasty and to the unsettled conditions of the time which led to unrest and disaffection among the masses — of people especially in South China.

In its programme and vision the Taiping Movement showed a boldness and undoubtedly progressive character that distinguished it from earlier peasant rebellions and other rebel groups and movements of the time. However, it was crippled by certain fatal weaknesses, including the dissension and demoralization that set in within its top leadership. Its fate was sealed when the Qing officials succeeded in rallying all the forces in defence of the old order and in creating a new military instrument which was capable of defeating the Taiping.

The Taiping Rebellion was crushed and virtually exterminated, but in the process of its suppression, the Qing Dynasty had to cede vital powers to its Chinese officials and Commanders of the new armies and to the local gentry. In the long run, this undermined the basis of Qing power and hastened its downfall. The Taiping Rebellion itself remained as a vivid memory, which was to inspire later generations of nationalists and revolutionaries.

4.9 KEY WORDS

Decimation: Put to death one in ten of numbers or soldiers.

Exterminate: To destroy completely.

Ostentatious: A pretentious display.

Spartan: Spartans, or people of Sparta, a place in ancient Greece, were famous for leading a very simple and frugal existence. The word denotes frugal and simple living.

Strident: Loud and harsh in sound.

4.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Base your answer on Section 4.2.
- 2) Base your answer on Section 4.3.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 4.5.1.
- 2) See Section 4.5.2.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Base your Answer on Sub-section 4.6.2.
- 2) You have to discuss the role of the Hunan army besides other efforts. See Sub-section 4.6.1.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Base your answer on Section 4.7.
- 2) Base your answer on Section 4.8.

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