

# The taiping revolution

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



The Taiping movement, an experimental revolution in China that struck a formidable blow to the Manchus in the mid 19th century, is widely debated and questions pertaining to its 'character', whether it was a Rebellion or a Revolution, remain largely unsettled. Some historians regard it as a full-fledged revolution, even to the extent of calling it the harbinger of the Communist Movement; while others believe that the former is a gross over-glorification, and that the Taiping Movement was no more than traditional Chinese peasant rebellion. Further, it is debated whether the Taiping movement was a 'peasant rebellion' at all. While a discussion of the various academic stances is imperative for an objective appraisal of the nature of the Taiping movement, it is first and foremost necessary to elaborate on the milieu that gave birth to the movement, as well as the very consciousness of the movement itself. By the late 1840s the general condition of China was irreversibly conducive to imminent rebellion. The Taiping movement can basically be seen as an immediate reaction of the Chinese peasantry to the First Opium War and later the Second Opium War, and the Unequal Treaties following them. For two thousand years preceding the mid-nineteenth century the social structure and the mode of production in China had scarcely changed. In the mid-19th century, China witnessed severe internal crises and the resultant upheaval created widespread social, economic and political discontent. In the aftermath of the Opium Wars and the Unequal Treaty System, inhuman burdens were inflicted on the Chinese peasantry, as a result of which began in China a 'tradition of peasant rebellions', that were both political and social in character. Peasant movements like the Miao, Yao, Lolo, Moslem and Nin were precursors to the most significant and formidable

peasant movement China had witnessed yet- The Taiping Rebellion, which lasted from 1850 until 1864. Traditionally, Chinese subscribed to the Dynastic Cycle theory that domestic rebellion and foreign invasion were symptomatic of a steadily decaying central power. As for the validity of the Dynastic Cycle theory, Franz Michael treats even the specific events leading to the Taiping movement viz. population increase, administrative inefficiency, military failure, western trade and opium smuggling, the Opium Wars among others, as part of the Dynastic Cycle Theory and does not consider the Taiping uprising as a unique movement in Chinese history. Scholars like Ssu-yu Teng and Chesneau give an analysis similar to that of Michael Ssu-yu Teng bases his analysis on the basic premise that the Manchu Dynasty had entered a stage of decline and the Taiping movement was a symptom of the decline. Most western scholars who favour the dynastic cycle theory believe that the Manchu period was a part of a continuing dynastic cycle and tend to view all socio-economic and political problems of the mid-nineteenth century as typical signs that preceded the fall of earlier dynasties. On the other hand scholars like Tan Chung have completely rejected the Dynastic Cycle Theory. While emphasizing the unique features of the Taiping movement, Tan chung argues that the DCT was based on an oversimplification of facts. It reduced the study of Chinese history to " simple geometry". Further, Tan Chung says that the DCT smacks of the long standing western prejudice about China's historical changelessness. Taiping rebellion was unprecedented in one very important respect, as Tan Chung points out, in that the Taiping army challenged a dynasty which still had a somewhat powerful image and vitality. Hence it

would be correct to say that the Taiping movement was a cause of Manchu degeneration and not the other way round. There was more to the Taiping movement than what the Dynastic Cycle Theory could reckon. The Taiping movement has been categorized variously by scholars to the extent that an academic controversy has emerged regarding the appraisal and characterization of the movement. Many terms have been used to describe the Taiping movement, ranging from 'nothing less than a complete revolution', to 'a typical traditional rebellion'. The two main and opposing schools of thought are those represented by the Western scholars, and those represented by the Chinese communist historians. These two standpoints differ not only in their interpretation of the movement as a rebellion or revolution, but also of other aspects of the nature of the movement, such as whether or not the movement was a peasant movement and anti-feudal, anti-foreign and anti-imperialist or anti-imperialist and pro-foreign, its uniqueness vis-à-vis all other peasant rebellions, and whether it can be considered a precursor to the Communist Revolution. At the, it is essential to first understand what exactly these terms mean in the modern context. A rebellion can be described as an armed struggle, aimed at dethroning a particular dynasty, and substituting another in its place, without attempting to change the existing social, political, and economic order. Or more simply as Kung-chuan Hsiao puts it, rebellion is "open armed opposition to the established government." Whereas revolution symbolizes a mass movement having a concrete ideology and common aims, striving for fundamental change in the social, political and economic order. Its basic aim goes beyond the overthrow of a particular dynasty and its substitution by another. Or as

Kung-chuan Hsiao puts it, revolution is " aimed not merely at a change of rulers but at an alteration of the form of government together with the principles on which it rests." Chinese communist historians regard the Taiping uprising as " the first great tide of revolution in the history of modern China". The Taiping movement according to Mao was one of the eight major events in China's one hundred year history before the communist revolution. Communist historians emphasize the originality of the Taiping programme. Even though much of their theoretical programme wasn't fully implemented , the very fact that it was envisaged should, according to them merit the Taipings with the label of a " revolution". Karl Marx called it a " formidable Revolution" and The Times hailed Taiping as " the greatest revolution the world as yet seen" and " one of the most important and remarkable movements of mass protest in modern history". The main argument in support of the Taiping being a peasant revolution was that it battered the superstructure of feudal society; the Taipings sought to transform the feudal society by building an ideal society where people were equal. The western historians, however, focus not on the theoretical aspect but the practical dimensions of the Taiping uprising which ended in complete failure and hence term it a " rebellion". According to them any movement, to be called a revolution in the modern sense, must be successful in its final aims; whereas even after the Taiping movement, the Manchus, the prevailing political, social & economic order and the traditional Confucian system remained in place. According to Barrington Moore Jr. the Chinese peasant rebellions were not revolutions because they did not alter the basic structure of the society. Some other scholars seem to prefer to avoid joining either of the

aforementioned schools of thought. Prominent among them is Ssu Yu Teng, according to whom " the first half of the Taiping rebellion", lasting from 1851 to 1856, " marked a proletarian revolutionary movement to overthrow the Manchu regime and replace it by a new rationalist government with a radical economic, social, and cultural programme." Then came the " internal dissension of 1856"- the leadership's betrayal of its peasant origin, the change to corrupt and luxurious life; after which " the later part of the Taiping Rebellion resembled more a traditional Chinese ' peasant' insurrection than a modern revolution." However as Tan Chung says, it is difficult to conceive of the Taiping movement's degeneration into a traditional rebellion in the second stage, once it had reached a certain level (of revolution) far ahead of a peasant rebellion in the first stage. Also, Teng's judgment of the Taiping revolutionaries does not include the Taipings' serious attempt to build an egalitarian society, whereas its failure is regarded as a contributing factor for downgrading it. As Vincent Shih affirms, " For a movement to be called a revolution, not only must violence be the means for bringing about change, but the leaders must show a desire to make changes in the nature of the society. In case of the Taiping leadership no such desire seems to have existed, as the leaders merely wished to take over the reins of the government and showed no real revolutionary spirit. He goes on to say, " Certain ideals were borrowed from Christianity and the West which held a genuine possibility of bringing a real revolution but these ideals were diluted due to the mixing of native Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhist principles." This view is criticized by Tan Chung, who points out that there is no evidence to show that the existence of native cultural aspirations

in the Taiping ideology diluted its revolutionary character; and that to say that only Western ideas can form a revolution is not correct. Wolfgang Frank calls the Taiping movement a "revolution" while accepting the shortcomings of the movement. He highlights the limited achievement of the movement as the uniqueness of its theoretical programme. Chinese Communist historians are clear in their singular characterization of the Taiping movement as a "peasant movement" and a peasant war against the ancient regime. This perspective defines peasant war on the basis of a broad historical and sociological analysis, irrespective of the fact that some leaders and a section of followers of a particular uprising might not be peasants. In the words of Chesneaux, the Taiping movement was "a social crusade expressing the poor peasants' desire for equality, a national campaign against the foreign dynasty occupying the throne in Peking, and a modernist trend that developed in response to the challenge presented by the West through the Opium Wars. The Taiping movement has been hailed by historians as the "highest form of peasant wars" and a "very good beginning of modern revolution". According to George Taylor the Taiping movement must first be understood as an agrarian movement, secondly as a moral and religious movement and thirdly as a dynastic rebellion. Kang argues that the peasants were indeed the chief architects of the Taiping movement. The Heavenly Land System most completely reflected the class interest of the peasantry in the feudal society. It was clearly aimed at demolishing the feudal system and privilege of the landlords. He goes further and calls it a revolt by poor farmers, unemployed miners, vagabonds, charcoal workers, and scholars; i. e. all belonged to the displaced peasantry. Vincent Shih enumerates two

reasons to reject the description of Taiping as a "peasant" revolution or war. Firstly the leaders did not identify themselves with the interests of the peasantry. Secondly, the Taiping following did not reflect "peasant consciousness". He says that the Taiping leaders did not attempt to do away with the landlords and give land to the tillers and at times even sided with the landlord. However, this amounts to a total negation of the positive elements of the Taiping programme. Shih has been criticized for his unclear use of the term "peasant consciousness". A series of decrees were passed to attack the feudal elite, such as orders to surrender grains, precious stones and metals, etc. to the Taiping storehouses during the Taiping movement. Though the land programme couldn't be implemented, in certain areas private property was clearly abolished. According to Franz Michael, in the hierarchy of rank which the Taipings established, the worker in the field occupied the lowest rung. However, according to Tan Chung, both Shih and Michael confuse the hierarchical structure of the Taiping military formation with the social hierarchy. In the ultimate analysis, it cannot be overlooked that in a country where peasants formed a majority, it is but obvious that the peasantry dominated any rebellion. At the same time it should be noted that people from other occupational groups also joined the rebellion in large numbers, thereby making the reinforcement of the "peasant" character of the movement futile, as it amounts to overlooking the reality that suffering indeed cuts across divisions like class and occupation. Factors contributing to the rise of the Taiping movement were synonymous with internal and external crises that had afflicted China from the time it opened its doors to Western penetration. Among the factors particularly responsible for the



Taiping Movement were the staggering rise in China's population due to a prolonged period of peace and prosperity given by the Manchus. For two thousand years preceding the mid-nineteenth century, the social structure and mode of production in china had scarcely changed. The population rose from 143 million in 1741 to 430 million in 1850 ( a rise of 200 percent). On the other hand, availability of land increased by only 35%, culminating in the virtual exhaustion of the supply of new land by the time of the Taiping movement. Between 1812 and 1833 not only was there no increase in available land, there was actually a decrease in arable land due to severe natural calamities. Further, there was continuous fragmentation of individual landholdings, along with the concentration of land in the hands of a few elite landlords. 50 – 60% of the land was in the hands of rich families, while another 10 percent was possessed by Manchu bannermen and official villas, leaving only 30% for the population of 400 million. The relentless rise in commodity prices and the ruin of small land-holders by fragmentation of inheritance led to tremendous debt and tenancy among the peasantry. 60-90% of the people had no land at all, leading to widespread unemployment, migration to cities and general haplessness. It was this floating population, a source of social unrest, which proved to be a ready, volatile material for the uprising. Deterioration of administration was also responsible for breeding misery and fury throughout the empire. Little attention was paid to people's welfare and the government officials were characterized by superficiality, temporization and irresponsibility. Rampant selling of offices and extorted contributions, reflected all this. Since it was difficult to advance within the system that couldn't expand , Officials chose to improve their position at the

expense of others or by imposing greater tax burden on the tax-paying population. Heavy taxes and high rent added to lack of protection from corrupt officialdom caused many farmers to leave their land and join roving groups disposed people who became bandits. The Imperial government's ultimate inefficiency was exposed as public works deteriorated. In 1852-53, neglected dikes caused the Huanghe to burst its banks in the region of Kaifeng. The river changed course to flow into the sea north of the Shangdong peninsula, 800 kms from its mouth, devastating and flooding vast areas. Subsequently, the government's failure to handle the consequences of a series of natural calamities that afflicted China in this period, added to the growing feeling of insecurity and discontent. There were famines in Henan in 1847, in the middle Yangtzi basin in 1849, and in Hunan around 1850. Further, displeasure with the Imperial dynasty was caused by the stagnation, corruption and demoralization of the Manchu administration and army. Since the corrupt officialdom and the equally corrupt military forces no longer provided protection, the public was forced to use local militia. The people of the villages and towns began to establish their own defense units. These military units thereon became the most important political forces of their localities. Official authority declined and local leadership arose, one that controlled its own local forces as well as funds to maintain its authority over a submissive area. China suffered unprecedented humiliation after her defeat in the First Opium War aggravating a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the Manchus. Besides the huge war indemnity, the newly liberated opium trade drained out 20, 000, 000 to 30, 000, 000 taels of silver from China each year. The Manchu government ruthlessly

squeezed the people to pay the indemnity, and with foreign capitalism setting in, the native economy was impaired and rural properties devaluated. The crisis was also accentuated by the currency and fiscal problems of the kingdom, due to the impact of foreign entry. Throughout the nineteenth century, foreign imports, especially of Opium, in China kept increasing, causing a huge outflow of silver bullion. This resulted in a change in the internal value of silver to copper from 1: 2 to 1: 3. This further aggravated the burden on the Chinese peasantry whose rent and tax payments were calculated in silver, but income was based on devalued copper. The general influx of foreign goods in the treaty port areas swallowed up the local household industries and the self sufficient agrarian economy was dislocated. Those who were affected became the potential source of trouble. Canton was particularly hard hit because of its long subjection to foreign trade. After the war, the port of Shanghai was opened and became the new commercial hub, which was accompanied by the sudden economic ruin of thousands of boatmen and coolies. It was these groups that supplied the Taiping with some of their strongest recruits. The British navy's operation against piracy on the coasts of China drove many pirates inland, who along with their underworld confederates also swelled the troops of secret societies and other movements germinating to challenge the established order. Additionally, some scholars also regard increasingly aggressive Christian conversions and ethnic rivalries, as contributory factors for the Taiping movement. For an objective appraisal of the Taiping movement one must consider four fundamental aspects of the movement. These include its objectives, their implementation, participation in the movement, and lastly

its legacy. In wake of the afformentioned duress, there were well over 100 uprisings in a span of ten years, ranging from struggles against taxes and rents to assaults on cities and the occupation of territories. Most of these uprisings were initiated and organized by the popular and anti-dynastic secret societies, such as the White Lotus Society and Heavenly Reason Sect. One of the main centers of disorder in the late 1840s gathered in South China- Kwangtung, Kwangsi and southern Hunan. The Taiping movement originated in the Lian-Kuang region of South China, specifically in the provinces of Kwangtung and Kwangsi. J. K Fairbank points to two factors due to which imperial control weakened in this region during the 1840s. Firstly, it was the part of China conquered last and least dominated. Secondly, it included the region (Canton was the principal city of Kwangtung) that had been longest subjected to the disturbing influences of foreign trade, which made it the epicenter of opium traffic and the war with Britain. After the Opium war, thousands were rendered unemployed as all foreign trade shifted to Shanghai e. g. former transportation workers connected with the shipment of tea and silk were thrown out of work . Another major cause of social and economic unrest was the sharp divide between the natives or original settlers of the region and the Hakka or guest settlers ho had migrated from central China during the 12th and 13th centuries. Their major occupations were small farming, charcoal making and mining, and as Immanuel Hsu points out, it was from among these, that the potential leaders recruited their followers. The leader of the Taiping movement was from the Hakka community - Hong Xiu-quan (1813-1861) who began a religious society in the 1840s, which subsequently assumed a larger political

orientation. Xiu-quan believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus, an arguably baseless claim that nonetheless lent a flavour of divinity to his authority. Around 1845, his followers established the Society of God Worshipers, which attracted vast sections of the hapless population, including landless peasants, pirates, members of secret societies etc. The Worshipers of God were known as the 'Taiping' and after eliminating rival groups, merged with anti-Manchu secret societies like the Triad, to constitute a bold, if not mammoth opposition. Xiu-quan's doctrine was a synthesis between Christian and traditional Chinese values, also imbued with Buddhist and Taoist influences. The Taipings envisaged a utopian totalitarian theocracy, or the Taiping Tin Kuo - 'The Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace'. Although the Taiping movement had a very strong religious base, its true aim was to establish a new complete and integrated society, where the religious and temporal orders, and the military and civilian worlds, were merged into one, making it a true theocracy. It began essentially as a religious movement, and challenged Confucian views in various aspects. Around 1845 the movement founded by Hung grew larger and became the highly pugnacious Society of God worshippers which began fighting the private militia of the landowners. The group attracted all the rebellious and discontent sections of Chinese society, viz. miners, charcoal burners, landless peasants, underprivileged Hakka among others. Hung's order of Christianity was primarily protestant, rather than Catholic because Protestantism fitted better the nature of the Taiping movement, which was basically "a protest" against the existing order. The rebellion started in Eastern Kwangsi in 1850 and soon the troops destroyed dwellings, and

proceeded to the confiscation of and sharing of estates. After a confrontation with Manchu officials in 1850, the movement seriously armed itself and began military operations, taking control of prominent areas in southern China. In 1852 they declared war on the Manchus and appealed to nationalist sentiments to gain support. Following several victories over the imperial troops, the Taipings spread to the middle and lower Yangtze. Early in 1851 Xiu-quan proclaimed the Taiping State and called himself the Heavenly King. In September 1851 the Taipings took their first fortified city, Yung-an. Besieged at Yung-an by imperial forces, the Taipings broke out in April 1853 and marched north. Soon Nanking was captured and declared the Heavenly Capital. The Taipings had not set up administrative control over all the regions they had traversed from Kwangsi northwards. They lacked qualified personnel to install as officials in the local magistracies. Having entered 16 of the 18 provinces and captured some 600 walled cities, they failed to administer what they had conquered. Leaving both south and north China as secondary areas, they established themselves in the productive heartland along the Yangtze. They set up the traditional Six Boards of Ministries of central government at their capital, but in the countryside their regime was little more than a military administration. There is no doubt about the fact that the movement was imbued with a definite anti-Manchu character, a motivation which in the first place lent the Taipings their foremost political concern and orientation. The Taipings were primarily distinguished by their hairstyle- they discarded the pigtail, the traditional sign of enslavement to the Manchus. Regarding the anti-foreign character of the Taipings, there is no consensus, due to a fundamental dichotomy; on one hand, the Taipings

firmly resented 'barbaric' invasions; on the other hand, foreigners were well-received in the Taiping zones, all abusive terms were abolished, and missionaries were also welcomed. Foreigners were given the title "foreign brothers". Hong stressed that equality exists between nations as it does between men and the Taipings' policy of free trade applied to foreigners as well. However, the foreigners ultimately joined on the side of the Imperial government to crush the revolution. The Taipings on their part were fascinated by various aspects of foreign thought, and welcomed foreigners to learn from them whatever was positive; they wanted reform in Chinese polity, society and economy through this learning from the West. Therefore it seems likely that the Taipings were certainly not xenophobic, but were simply reasonable in their conditional acceptance of foreign influence - fruitful mutual exchange, facilitated by openness, while maintaining a stand of intolerance towards foreign attempts at domination. The objectives of the movement were a composite of social, political, economic, moral, and military concerns. The Taiping rebellion itself and its goals were basically different from former dynastic upheavals in that they attacked not only the ruling dynasty but the traditional social order itself. This ideal was missing in preceding rebellions which never sought to radically transform the social fabric. The Taipings openly challenged the very bedrock of Chinese thought, Confucianism - its ethics and the society they sustained. The Taipings passionately endorsed Egalitarianism as their foremost social ideal, and in this way posed a challenge to the very basics of the Confucian hierarchical system. In the Taiping social model, the family was regarded as a basic and sacrosanct unit, wherein there was no disparity between the sexes. A strict

moral and ethical code was prescribed and this discipline was proclaimed inviolable. It included abstinence from opium smoking, gambling, adultery, prostitution etc. The fundamental document of the Taipings, a kind of manifesto was the 'Land Programme' or the 'Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom' which not only contained the details of the prescribed land system, but also the military, civil, judicial and administrative workings of the Taiping state. Private ownership was abolished. The entire land was to be owned by the Taiping Commune. Land was classified on the basis of fertility and redistributed according to the number of members in each family. No family was allowed to keep a surplus -which was required to be surrendered to the public storehouse. The Taipings' idea of communal utilization was inspired by the ancient Chinese work The Rites of Zhou, which was also the source behind the Taiping organization of individuals, families and military institutions. A group of 25 families was placed under a civil and military leader who was in charge of distribution from and collection for the common Treasury out of which expenses for public functions were met. Five men formed a squad, five squads a patrol, four patrols a battalion and so on, up to the divisions of 2500 men corresponding to groups of 13, 516 families and armies. No tariff was imposed on trade; a kind of laissez-faire trade policy was followed, which encouraged traders. The position of women was greatly elevated; they participated in military campaigns and labour, sat for examinations, held military and bureaucratic posts etc. The Taiping state was a totalitarian theocracy, which combined civil, religious and military aspects of administration, leaving no area of individual and social life excluded from its authority. The civil service examinations similar to



traditional Chinese type were held for the selection of officers who ran the administration. In these, the Confucian canons were replaced by Taipings' sacred texts. Modern education was encouraged, while the use of plain language as medium of instruction sought to make a statement. Abandoned temples in the Taiping zones were converted into schools. Footbinding and slavery were abolished and a new calendar, resembling the western solar type was introduced. As regards the religious character of the movement, historians are in disagreement over the inspiration behind the Taipings' religious ideology. Was it inspired by Christian doctrines or did it largely work around traditional Chinese thought? Historians like Chesneaux believe that Taiping ideology was eclectic in nature, it was a synthesis of multiple influences from Christianity, ancient Chinese traditions, popular religion etc. The eclectic synthesis was a composite of Monotheism, the Ten Commandments, the divinity of Christ, duality of heaven and earth, existence of Satan among others. The Taipings believed in the 18 hells and 33 heavens of Buddhist mythology. At the same time, when Xiu-quan proclaimed himself to be the brother of Jesus Christ, he followed the footsteps of other rebel leaders who had been regarded as incarnations of Maitreya, the saviour Buddha. Buddhism, Taoism and the classical traditions of Meng-tzu and the Zhou-li were foremost influences on Taipings' theological complexity. The question regarding the implementation of Taiping objectives is not a simple one, since the entire Taiping system itself was too complex, and its programmes got carried away by unrealistic utopia. This, coupled with its theological complexity and attention to detail made the Taiping system an idyll propagated in order to arouse and mobilize the masses, and not so

much a plan or model which could be applied to concrete situations; the system therefore failed to be translated judiciously in action. They required stability and peace to be implemented; neither of which the Taipings had as frequent clashes and inconsistent boundaries made stability difficult. Due to wars and frequent moves, the modernization programme could not be materialized. Also, there was a considerable difference between the original nucleus of the faithful adherents to the Great Peace and the population of the lower Yangtze over whom the leaders assumed authority. The fusion between the two remained incomplete, while the division between the leaders and the led widened rapidly in Nanking. The effectiveness of the programmes also became doubtful as differences in aspirations, motives and ideology between the original nucleus of the leadership, and the mass base of the movement made commitments uncertain. The political customs of the Taiping court drew further and further away from the original principles of the movement. The Kingdom of Heavenly Peace was weakened eventually by the internal dissensions among its leaders. To begin with, the Taipings as mentioned earlier, couldn't manage to set up an organised territorial administration in the countryside. The newly acquired land was not redistributed and the Taiping leaders amassed wealth and themselves often became the new landlords. The leaders did not respect the rules of austerity and instead lived in luxury; harems were maintained where celibacy was advocated. All this, led to negation of the positive elements of the movement, weakened its mass base, contributed to its failure, and eventually resulted in the suppression of Taiping forces at the hands of Imperial troops and foreign powers. In spite of these numerous difficulties,

life in the Taiping zones seemed to show the influence of the Taiping system. Peasants were freed from their heavy obligations to the landowners, and land taxes, though not eliminated, were considerably reduced. No rent was taken from peasants and tax payment was reduced by 50%. Taxes on commerce were simplified and lightened, particularly the inland customs tax, which at least temporarily facilitated trade. The Land Programme was implemented in limited areas, mostly in the southern provinces, like Kwangsi, and in the Taiping capital of Nanking. There is evidence of Landlords from the lower Yangtze valley area fleeing to Shanghai as their precious metal and surplus was confiscated. The emancipation of women, was truly achieved. Women enjoyed the same economic and political opportunities as men and were no longer subordinated or subjugated. The Taiping state constituted an all-women army as well. As put by Chesneaux, "When the Taiping state collapsed in 1864, hundreds of thousands of Heavenly followers preferred death to surrender." The question of participation in the movement is interconnected with the debate about the peasant and anti-feudal nature of the movement. Many Western historians such as Franz Michael and Vincent Shih deny the anti-feudal character of the movement. Shih argues that there is no evidence of peasant consciousness in the minds of the Taiping followers. According to him the Taiping leaders didn't seem to have identified themselves and their ideology with the peasants; many had been sympathetic to the peasants and genuine in their pronouncements, but their real ambitions lay elsewhere. As regards the fall of the Taiping movement, the first tremors were felt due to a serious crisis of leadership, which also became one of the long term causes of its final failure.

The internecine strife of 1856 depleted the vigor, spirit and solidarity of the Taipings. Hong lost himself to pleasure and indulgence, losing sight of the leadership and priorities at hand. Fortunately for the Taipings, their ultimate demise was delayed because of the brilliant warfare waged by the young and talented General Li Hsiu Cheng. In May 1860, Tseng Kuo-fan was made Imperial Commissioner and Governor General of Lian Kuang – in charge of operations against the Taipings. In June 1862, with a 20, 000 strong army, he began a long siege of the Heavenly Capital at Nanking. The Western powers soon gave up their policy of neutrality, and their long-term political commitment turned in favour of the Manchu regime, which had just promised them new advantages under the Treaty of Tientsin. The loss of support from foreign powers became one of the crucial reasons for the ultimate downfall of the Taipings, as their withdrawal weakened Taiping capacity to tackle Imperial troops. Nanking fell in 1864 and the Taiping movement finally came to an end. Although the Taiping movement was crushed ruthlessly and ended in complete failure, its impact, significance and legacy cannot be underestimated. Lasting for almost fourteen years, the Taiping movement affected 16 out of the 18 provinces of China and destroyed almost 600 cities. Its genesis was vigorous and promising but its end was pitiful and hopeless. Perhaps if after the capture of Nanking, if the Taipings had taken advantage of their impetus and swept the north all the way to Peking, they could have succeeded in dislodging the Manchu court. The Ching court, spared of the Taiping onslaught, was able to continue as the legitimate centre of political power. However, the movement challenged not only Manchu authority but also the traditional Chinese Confucian belief

system which sustained imperial authority. It marked a monumental departure from peasant rebellions that preceded it, in terms of scope, ideology, and impact. It had a solid program backed by a concrete ideology which wasn't limited to narrow political aims of dethroning the existing dynasty alone; it envisaged far-reaching social, religious and economic reconstruction as well. It was furthermore, the only peasant movement that offered a well-laid out alternative to the existing system. The Taiping movement was the first great high tide of the revolutionary changes occurring in the history of modern China. It formed in the course of its struggle, a whole set of political, economic military educational and socio-cultural institutions. There is no doubt that the Taiping movement was far advanced in its vision and approach than all the peasant rebellions that preceded it; Taiping not only challenged traditional feudalism, it even resisted the aggressive forces of foreign capitalism while altogether fighting against all established authority. In its anti-imperialist and anti-feudal role, it prepared the way for the democratic revolution. It even founded its own state power, which struggled for a considerable period against that of the Manchu dynasty, whose rule it managed to shake to the very foundations. In many ways the Taiping movement was the precursor to the Chinese communist movement. For Chinese Communist historians, the Taiping movement was the beginning of ' peoples struggle' in China. The militant experience remained a constant source of inspiration to the Chinese people in their subsequent history of endless revolutionary struggle. The movement hastened the process of dynastic political disintegration. The physical damage was tremendous — hundreds of towns and cites were destroyed,

and between 20 and 40 million people were killed. Power gravitated into the hands of local strong men, particularly provincial governors, leading to the rise of regionalism and warlordism in later years. The movement affected China economically also. It prevented tax collection in many of the richest provinces. New taxes had to be devised to pay the expenses of suppression; of these, likin, the internal transit tax levied on commodities in china was the most important. The movement hastened the process of dynastic political disintegration. The physical damage was tremendous — hundreds of towns and cites were destroyed, and between 20 and 40 million people were killed. Power gravitated into the hands of local strong men, particularly provincial governors, leading to the rise of regionalism in later years. The movement affected China economically also. It prevented tax collection in many of the richest provinces. New taxes had to be devised to pay the expenses of suppression; of these, likin, the internal transit tax levied on commodities in china was the most important. In the beliefs it propagated and the organisation it established, the Taiping movement marked a sharp break from the past. Though unsuccessful in the end, it represented the first internal manifestation of the effect of an all-round crisis in traditional Chinese society. In conclusion, while it is true that the ideology of Taiping was "revolutionary", its intent iconoclastic, and its consciousness communitarian, it is obvious in more ways than one that its ideal failed to be realized and actualized, making Taiping an inspiring martyr but not a hero. In the ultimate analysis, beyond chanting requiems for a dream, it seems apparent that the Taiping endeavour was a failed revolution