

THE TAIPING REBELLION

The Taiping Rebellion lasted from 1850 to 1864; it spread to all of China's eighteen provinces and resulted in the loss of an estimated 20 million lives. The charismatic founder of the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" (*Taiping tianguo*) — a brilliant but erratic Chinese scholar named Hong Xiuquan — claimed to be the younger brother of Jesus. Exposed to Protestant missionary tracts at a formative period in his tumultuous life, Hong developed an eclectic ideology that combined certain elements of Confucian utopianism (expressed in the concept of Taiping or "Great Peace") and Christianity (the idea of a "Heavenly Kingdom"). In the first years of the rebel movement, this virulently anti-Manchu ideology proved attractive to millions of peasants who were dissatisfied with Qing rule.



ABOVE: Zeng Guofan (1811–72) was the principal architect of the Taiping defeat. He and his talented protégés, Li Hongzhang (1823–1901) and Zuo Zongtang (1812–85), not only suppressed the rebels but also led China's "self-strengthening" movement during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

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Hong's appeal rested on two primary claims. One was theological: that the Manchus were the Devil incarnate, whom God had commanded him to destroy. The other was practical: that Taiping rule would bring a new era of peace and



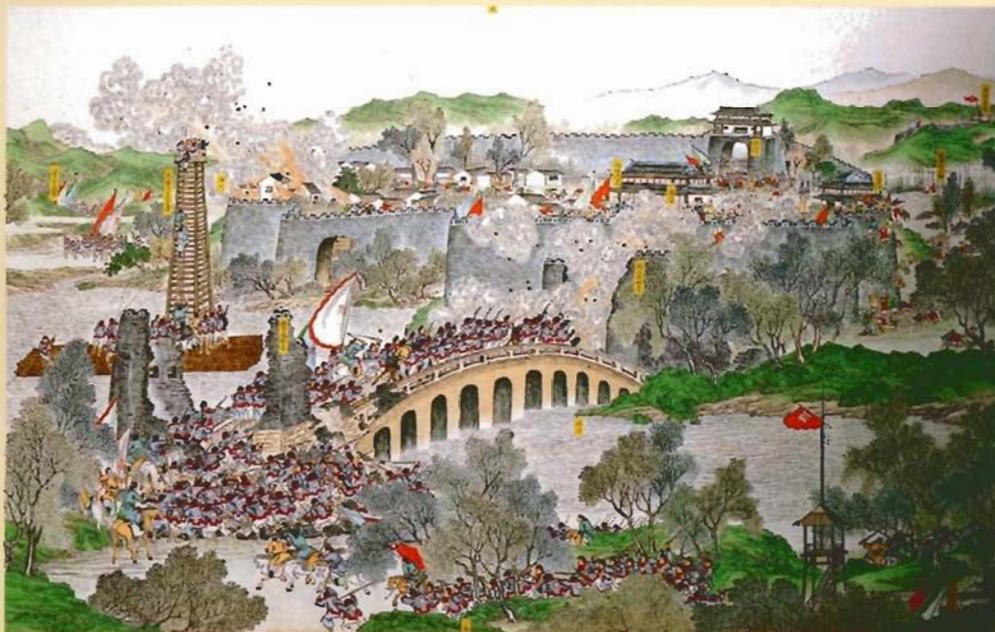
ABOVE (RIGHT): This Taiping decorative pouch (*wai fubao*), used as a clothing accessory, is emblazoned with a five-clawed dragon — symbol of imperial power. Despite their iconoclastic, Western-influenced ideology, the Taipings employed many such traditional Chinese symbols.

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prosperity to China. Toward this latter end, the rebels tried to implement a number of specific policies designed to distribute wealth and land more equitably to the Chinese people. Their Sacred Treasury system, based on a primitive form of communalism, achieved some early success; but the Taipings were never able to implement their highly idealistic Heavenly Land system.

In the end, the Taiping movement succumbed to its own internal weaknesses as well as to outside forces. In addition to unstable leadership, the intolerance and iconoclasm of the rebels had alienated members of the Chinese scholarly elite. The Taipings also made a series of military mistakes and foreign policy miscalculations during the period from 1856 to 1860. Although the Taipings referred to Westerners as their foreign brothers (*wai xiongdi*) and sought to establish a fruitful alliance with them at Shanghai, they ultimately left a decidedly negative impression. Their Christianity appeared strange to foreign missionaries; their anti-opium policies gave significant pause to British merchants; and their half-hearted efforts to bring the treaty port of Shanghai to submission in 1860 and 1862 produced a vigorous Western counterattack. Finally, the rise of new-style armies under Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, and others gave the Qing dynasty a potent and ultimately decisive weapon against the Taipings.

LEFT: This illustration depicts the recovery of Ruizhou in Jiangxi province by Zeng Guofan's forces late in the summer of 1857. The beleaguered Taiping garrison abandoned the city after fourteen months of relentless siege. NATIONAL PALACE MUSEUM, TAIPEI, TAIWAN, REPUBLIC OF CHINA



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ANCIENT CULTURE , MODERN LAND

General Editor: Robert E. Murowchick



University of Oklahoma Press
Norman, Oklahoma