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# *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom*

by Stephen R. Platt



"The Battle Before Tong-Cheou," circa 1860. Historical Picture Archive/CORBIS

By the time Qing imperial forces caught and dismembered Hong Rengan in late 1864, an estimated 20 million to 70 million people had perished in the turmoil of the Taiping rebellion. Hong, once a bookish assistant to European preachers, ended up the “prime minister” of a Chinese movement that almost deposed the Qing dynasty of the Manchus, who had conquered China more than two centuries earlier.

Hong, also known as “the Shield King” to the multitude of Taiping rebels, was the younger cousin of Hong Xiuquan, an unpromising character who had failed imperial exams four times. In 1837, the elder Hong had, over the course of 40 days, been gripped by visions in which he ascended to a “beautiful and luminous place” where he was given a sword to kill demons. Six years later, after reading a tract on Christianity, Hong realized that the place he had visited in his dreams was heaven, that the Bible was explicitly written for him and that he was in fact the younger brother of Jesus Christ.

Soon, he converted his cousin Hong Rengan, established the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and plunged his country into a war of liberation from foreign rulers. In “Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom,” Stephen R. Platt describes the conflict that began in 1851 as an uprising, a rebellion and “simply a descent into anarchy.” It was, in all probability, the bloodiest civil war in history.

Hong Xiuquan, the unsuccessful exam-taker, was from a Hakka minority community and an unlikely leader, but China in the middle of the 19th century was in ferment. For one thing, the Manchus, once fierce warriors on horseback, had grown too used to the sedentary ways of the Chinese they had conquered. When Hong mounted his challenge, the young emperor, Xianfeng, was living a life of debauchery in the magnificent Summer Palace instead of working with his ministers in the center of the Chinese capital.

And for many Chinese, Xianfeng was also a hated foreigner, so it is not surprising that Hong Xiuquan's fast-growing brand of Christianity soon turned political, in other words, anti-Manchu. And destructive as well. For almost 14 years, two forces skirmished and battled and laid siege to each other's fortresses and cities, with most of the fighting along the country's longest river, the Yangtze, China's "serpent." "The glow of the fires illuminates the sky," exclaimed one Chinese observer near Shanghai in the spring of 1860, "and the cries of the people shake the earth." As Platt, a historian at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, observes, the conflict ended not by surrender but through annihilation.

After destroying its enemy, the tottering Qing dynasty lasted for almost five decades, until another uprising, again led by Chinese nationalists, would bring an end to two millenniums of imperial rule. In one sense, the earlier challenge to the Manchus never ended. The leader of the 1911 revolution was Sun Yat-sen, a Christian doctor inspired by tales of the Taiping and known to his friends as "Hong Xiuquan."

Platt's fine work is not a comprehensive history. Instead, it is, as he writes, an attempt to relay what it was like to live through the tumultuous events. He does this by concentrating on a handful of central figures, especially the Shield King, Hong Rengan, and the commander of the Qing dynasty's armies, Zeng Guofan, a Confucian scholar turned general. Platt also devotes pages to colorful foreigners who affected the outcome, especially the British Bruce brothers, one of whom led troops that ransacked the Qing Summer Palace while the other helped save the failing dynasty. A wily American soldier of fortune, Frederick Townsend Ward, is another of the book's major characters.

The emphasis on individuals permits Platt to give us an engaging narrative, which begins with Hong Rengan's perilous escape to Hong Kong in 1852, but he has written more than just a history of personalities. "Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom" hints at broad themes, putting the Taiping upheaval in the context of events outside the sprawling Qing empire. "Europe had been through its own upheavals just five years earlier with the revolutions of 1848," Platt writes, "and the events in China seemed a remarkable parallel: the downtrodden people of China, oppressed by their Manchu overlords, had, it seemed, risen up to demand satisfaction."

This is the beginning of an explanation for why the rebellion spread remarkably fast. Karl Marx, then writing for *The New-York Daily Tribune*, attributed the rebels' quick advances to globalization, namely, Britain's forcing the opening of China to trade after the First Opium War, which ended in 1842. Dissolution of the imperial order, Marx said, "must follow as surely as that of any mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin, whenever it is brought into contact with the open air."

Platt suggests that Marx was right and that the Taiping rebellion was aided by the links tying China to an international industrial economy. Qing China was not as closed as historians have made it appear, he notes. Globalization was already at work destabilizing the country.

The British and French, for instance, were conducting military campaigns against the Qing to further open the empire to trade, and though they did not intend to support the Taiping, their actions in late 1860 — at the height of the uprising — nonetheless inspired the Chinese rebels. After all, the Europeans were able to force the young Manchu emperor from his capital, Peking, with a relatively small force.

Eventually, however, Britain threw its full support to the Qing, after deciding that the commercial advantage lay with them rather than with the rebel Taiping. In what is perhaps the most suggestive passage in the book, Platt persuasively argues that the civil war was an international affair because both sides were "so intractably balanced that the final outcome was to a large degree determined by the diplomatic and military interventions of outsiders in the early 1860s."

The tragedy is that the British government probably chose the wrong side. The Taiping were not, as *The Times of London* wrote in May 1862, "the Thug of China, the desolator of cities, the provider of human carrion to the wild dogs, the pitiless exterminator, the useless butcher." The rebels were modernizers, and Hong Rengan was perhaps the first in his country to set forth, "in a Chinese context, a vision of the country

as a modern industrial power.” As Platt demonstrates, the Taiping were in favor of international commerce, unlike the Manchus, who resisted contact with others.

Of course, we will never know whether Hong Rengan and his cousin would have ruled better than the debauched Qing, but China today is, as in the pre-Taiping era, volatile, plagued by widespread protests, strikes and insurrections (and, as then, the instability follows a period of intense globalization). Unfortunately, the country has not yet broken what one Western commentator in the mid-1850s called “a natural cycle” of rebellion.

Perhaps instability is ingrained in China’s political culture, but a century and a half ago there seemed to be a moment when the Chinese might have changed that pattern. As Platt notes, the Taiping movement came close to overwhelming traditional ways and bringing China into the modern world.

***Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War***

By Stephen R. Platt

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