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Scene from [The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom](#) tv series 2000 CCTV


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## **Introduction** **The Taiping Rebellion 1850-1871**



The Taiping Rebellion referred to as the Tai Ping Tian Guo in Chinese 太平天国 (太 *Tāi*-'Great', 平 *Ping*- 'Peace', 天 *Tian*-'Heaven', 国 *Guo*-'Country or Kingdom') the 'Kingdom of Heavenly Peace', was one of the bloodiest civil wars in history between the [Qing Dynasty](#) and the Chinese 'Christian' rebels, led by Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (old spelling Hung Hsiuch'uan) a village teacher and unsuccessful imperial examination candidate. Hong formulated an eclectic ideology combining the ideals of pre-Confucian utopianism with Protestant beliefs. He soon had a following in the thousands who were heavily anti-Manchu and anti-establishment. On January 11, 1851, on his 38th birthday, Hong Xiuquan initiated a peasant uprising in [Jintian](#) (金田) Village, Guiping County (桂平縣), in the present-day [Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region](#) (廣西壯族自治區), and declared the establishment of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and the Taiping Dynasty. Hong's followers formed a military organization to protect against bandits and recruited troops not only among believers but also from among other armed peasant groups and [secret societies](#). Hong believed he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ, chosen by God to establish a heavenly kingdom upon earth and replace the corrupt Manchu Qing dynasty. How was this failed member of the scholar gentry, who believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ and, thus, "God's Chinese Son" able to gather armies and challenge the Qing Mandate of Heaven? Previous Christian missions had been rewarded with little success. Yet, Hong's version of the gospel was indigenous and was introduced during a period of enormous population growth, goading poverty, and extreme economic dislocation.

In 1851 Hong Xiuquan and others launched an uprising in [Guizhou](#) Province. Hong proclaimed the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (Taiping Tianguo) with himself as king. The new order was to reconstitute a legendary ancient slate, in which the peasantry owned and tilled the land in common; slavery, concubinage, arranged marriage, opium smoking, footbinding, judicial torture, and the worship of idols were all to be eliminated. The Taiping tolerance of the esoteric rituals and quasi-religious societies of south China — themselves a threat to Qing stability — and their relentless attacks on [Confucianism](#), still widely

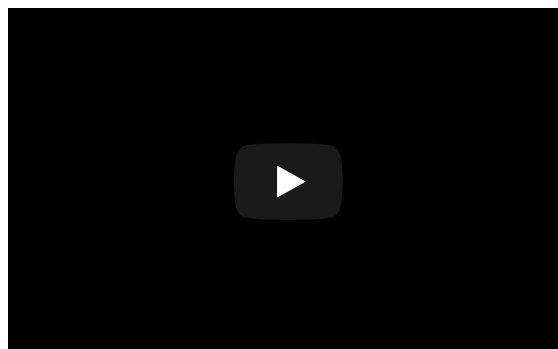
accepted as the moral foundation of Chinese behavior, contributed to the ultimate defeat of the rebellion. Its advocacy of radical social reforms alienated the Han Chinese scholar-gentry class. The Taiping army, although it had captured [Nanjing](#) (The Taiping changed the name of Nanjing to TianJing (天京) 'Heavenly Capital' after their capture) and driven as far north as [Tianjin](#). The Taipings failed to establish stable base areas. The movement's leaders found themselves in a net of internal feuds, defections, and corruption. Additionally, British and French forces, being more willing to deal with the weak Qing administration than contend with the uncertainties of a Taiping regime, came to the assistance of the imperial army. The Taipings banned opium in areas under their control, which worried the British with their large opium trade. There was an initial feeling of foreign missionary and general Western sympathy for the Taiping cause. But by 1856, the tide of opinion had turned against the Taipings. Their Christianity began to be widely denounced as an imposture and heresy.

The conflict, which took place mostly in south China, the Yangtze valley and in the Shanghai and Nanjing area, killed an estimated from 20,000,000 to 100,000,000 people killed (largely due to famine and wholesale slaughter of captured armies and cities which resisted). According to the census of 1851 there were 432 million in China. The next census of 1911 shows 375 to 400 million, which shows the staggering impact of the rebellions and natural disasters that beset China. There were other rebellions against the Qing such as the Nian and Muslim rebellions, but the Taiping rebellion was the largest in scale and came closest to toppling the Qing Dynasty.



Taiping soldiers, male and female, outside Shanghai  
From: *Twelve years in China; the people, the rebels, and the mandarins*  
John Scarth 1860

The Taiping Rebellion arose from the general discontent of the Chinese population against their Manchu conquerors, who were seen as corrupt and ineffective against the 'foreign devils' and the opium they imported into China and the growth of lawlessness and secret societies in the countryside. Foreign contact also added a new catalyst, an alien religion, Christianity.

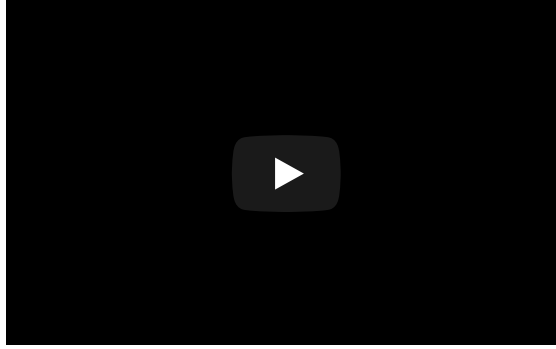


The Taiping Rebellion and why it failed to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. The Taipings were also able to make great progress in the interior as the Manchus concentrated most of their forces against the invading British and French during the [second Opium War](#) of 1856-60. Karl Marx had published his manifesto in 1848, but the proto-Communism of the Taipings comes from such ancient sources as the *Rites of Chou's* 'common well' system' their own interpretation of how a 'Heaven Kingdom' where God owns all should work and the egalitarian ideas of the secret societies. The Taipings might not have heard of Karl Marx, but he heard of them, saying

*Perhaps the next uprising in Europe may depend more on what is now taking place in the Celestial Empire than any other existing political cause.*

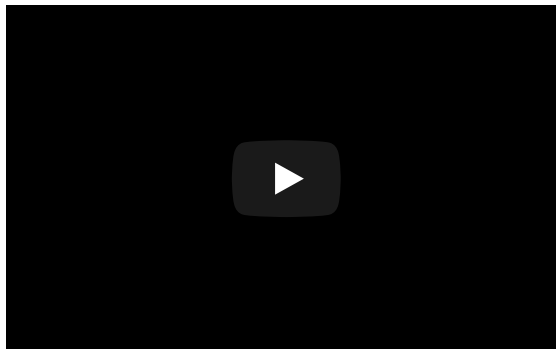
In theory, all Taiping lands were to be shared in common, by 1850 members turned over all funds to the public treasury. In practice, the Taipings were too hard pressed to put this system into effect, and relied

on the old landlord-tenant system There was a strict, puritanical morality, opium, tobacco, gambling and foot binding were prohibited . In theory women were placed on an equal basis and to a remarkable extent in fact, with female soldiers and administrators . Women were also allowed to take civil service exams, unheard of in the Qing system.



#### Taiping Rebellion: Modern East Asia

In the early 1850s, the God worshipping society cut off their queues, a sign of subjugation to the Manchus, and declared themselves in rebellion . They refused to shave their foreheads as well and were referred to as 'chang mao' long hair rebels by the Qing .The millenarian beliefs, utopian egalitarianism, anti-Manchu message and moral righteousness were a powerful combination when combined with the good organization and administration provided by Yang Xiuqing and other early Taipings .



#### Stephen Platt on the Taiping Rebellion

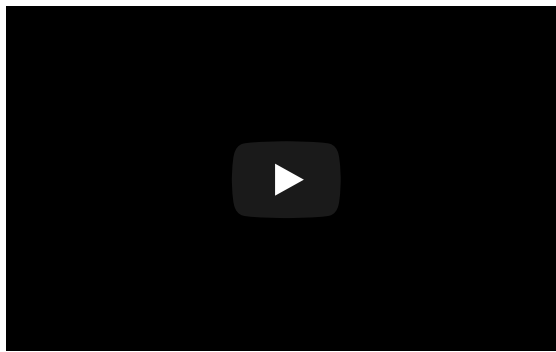
Dr. Stephen R. Platt, a 2008-2010 fellow in the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations' Public Intellectuals Program, discusses his latest book, Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War, at the Luce Foundation office in New York. The book is a military history of the nineteenth-century Taiping Rebellion,



Stamp by the People's Republic of China on the 151 centenary of the start of the Taiping Rebellion .

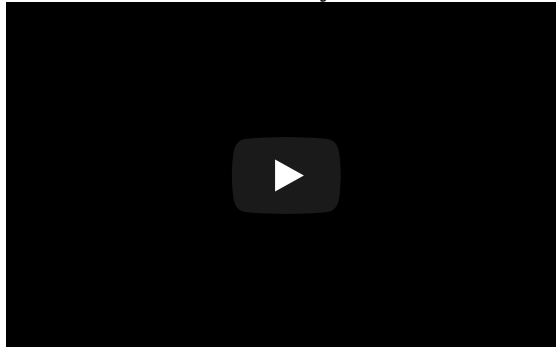
The Taipings are regarded favorably by the mainland Chinese government, seen as a proto communist movement fighting against a corrupt feudal system.

As the Taipings armies marched eastward out of Guangxi, they gained adherents and booty. Many of the early Taipings were coal miners from Guangxi, and they put this talent to use to dig tunnels under city walls . Sometimes double tunnels were used, after the Qing forces rushed to fill in a breach made by a blast and rushed in reinforcement, another explosion went off . It is estimated they reached one million by the time they reached Nanjing in 1853. The Taiping fortunes were at their height in 1856 . After taking Nanjing, they decided to halt and consolidate, instead of trying to topple the Manchus while they were reeling .Only after the conclusion of the second Opium War in 1860 was it possible for the Manchus to gather enough force and make military reforms to effectively fight the Taipings .



Intro to [The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom](#) tv series

While the rebellion failed in the end, due to bloody internal fights for power leading to a purge of the more capable leaders in 1856, poor organization and administration, Hong Xiuquan's retreat into a life of pleasure after capturing Nanjing in 1853, failure to win foreign support and failure to win over the Confucian literati and the wealthier classes, it signaled the imminent collapse of China's traditional order and the readiness of large parts of the common Chinese population to revolt against the traditional order. Where Hong Xiuquan would fail, Mao Zedong would succeed. The Chinese Communists came to regard the Taipings with their egalitarian aspects as heroic revolutionaries fighting against a corrupt feudal system. Mao Zedong and Hong Xiuquan both denounced Confucius. The founder of modern China, [Sun Yat sin](#), was greatly influenced by the Taipings, listened to stories told by the Taiping survivor Lai hang-ying and nicknamed himself Hong Xiuquan the Second as a boy.



The Taiping Rebellion was one of the costliest civil wars in human history. Tens of millions of people lost their lives as Chinese rebels, imperial armies, and local militias clashed across the Yangzi Delta. Although the Rebellion has been studied from a variety of perspectives, we know little about how ordinary people coped with the enormous destruction. In *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in Nineteenth-Century China*, Tobie Meyer-Fong draws on a rich array of primary sources.

A small foreign trained Chinese army was financed by rich Shanghai merchants and bankers, "The Ever Victorious Army." Led by European and American officers and started by the American Frederick Ward, it was kept small. Li HongZhang also started his own foreign trained army, the "Ever-Triumphant Army", led by the Frenchman Prosper Giquel. Li Hongzhang never entirely trusted the "The Ever Victorious Army." there were rumours that Ward planned to carve out his own warlord domain after the Taiping revolt was over. The American, Burgevine, who took over "The Ever Victorious Army" after Ward's death certainly planned to do this. This led the Qing to disband them before the sack of Nanjing in 1864. The "Ever-Triumphant Army" was dissolved in Oct, 1864. While some improvements to the imperial army remained, they were ill prepared to match the Japanese in the coming [Sino Japanese War](#) of 1894-95.

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