

The Taiping Rebellion

The Qing Dynasty ruled China for over 250 years, but they were not always strong leaders. The Qing were unable to stop foreigners from taking over parts of the empire. They also had to withstand the Taiping Rebellion, a civil war that cost over twenty million lives and permanently weakened the dynasty.

The rebellion began in southeast China, a region that never fully accepted the Qing, who came from Manchuria in northeast China. Hong Xiuquan, had learned of Christianity from missionaries. In 1843, when he failed his examination for a government job for the fourth time, Hong exploded in rage at the Manchu domination of China. He read a translated version of the Christian Bible, which told the story of how a chosen group of people rebelled against their rulers with God's help. Hong came to believe that he was the Son of God and the younger brother of Jesus. His mission on earth was to rid China of evil influences. They included Manchus, Taoists, Buddhists, and Confucians. Hong's religion combined traditional Chinese ideas with half-understood Christianity.

Many famine-stricken peasants, workers, and miners were attracted to the new faith. The converts believed that God ordered them to destroy Manchu rule and set up a new Christian brotherhood. A small group of believers grew to more than one million disciplined, zealous soldiers. In 1851, Hong proclaimed a new dynasty, the Taiping, which means "Great Peace," and assumed the title "Heavenly King." Two years later, the Taiping army captured Nanking, a large city in central China.

Leadership rivalries weakened the rebellion. Hong's top general, an illiterate former coal burner named Yang, plotted to overthrow him. Hong ordered the general of his northern army, Wei, to assassinate Yang. When Hong decided that Wei had become too powerful, he ordered his assassination as well. The soldiers who killed Wei feared for their own lives, so they abandoned the rebellion and escaped to western China.

The Qing Dynasty was so weakened by the rebellion that they lost control of many parts of China to local warlords. Both the Chinese Nationalists and the Communists, two groups that later ruled the nation, claimed to have been inspired by the Taiping Rebellion.