

The Taiping Rebellion: Hong Kong Society's Observations of It during That Period

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Abstract. In the mid-19th century, the Taiping Rebellion swept through southern China. Hong Kong, a newly established British colony, emerged as a crucial window for western powers to observe and intervene in the rebellion. This paper focuses on three key groups in Hong Kong society at the time ---British colonial officials, Western missionaries, and local Chinese ---and explores their perspectives on the Taiping Rebellion. With the deepening of academic globalization, more historical archives have been unsealed and shared, and more primary sources have appeared. This paper makes good use of this trend and draws heavily on primary historical materials, aiming to approach the historical truth of the Rebellion. Among the three groups in Hong Kong, differences in the intensity of their motivations led to variations in their observations. Disparity also existed among different observers, and the details and reasons of the perspective divergences are also revealed in the paper. This study is expected to enrich the understanding of the Taiping Rebellion from a transnational perspective and also shed light on Hong Kong's role as a political and cultural interface during China's modern transformation.

Keywords: Taiping Rebellion, Hong Kong Society, Hong Kong Colonial Government, Western Missionaries, Hong Kong Chinese

1. Introduction

The Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) broke out in South China. Sparked by social inequality, persecution over its religious activities and incompetent Qing rule, Hong Xiuquan, inspired by Christian teachings, led peasants to revolt, aiming at establishing a utopian nation. The uprising, though failed at last, proposed equal land and gender ideas challenging the feudal norms, and dealt a heavy blow to the Qing government spurring the latter to launch the self-Strengthening Movement in the immediate later period. It could be regarded, in many aspects, as the "hinge between China's pre-modern and modern histories" [1].

Hong Kong, as a British Colony since 1842, served as a key international despot. Its strategic location and laissez-faire policies made it a vital center for international commerce, linking Chinese markets and the global markets. Politically it served as the base of British influences and was a convenient observation spot witnessing the interactions between the Qing government, the rebels and the western powers during the turmoil of the Rebellion. And different social groups in Hong

Kong had varying observation and responses. It's worth exploring how these differences manifested and what the underlying reasons were.

2. Literature review

The study of the Taiping Rebellion has been extensive. Some publications appearing at a time closer to that of the Rebellion have been reprinted in recent years. And some findings and perspectives add something novel. For instance, Eugene P. Boardman states that the “foreign aid”, one of the factors breaking the stalemate between the Qing Imperial Army and the Taiping Army, is “incidental” [2]. In another account, the foreign mercenary army, one of the main forms of foreign aid, is mentioned. Ward, the commander of the Ever Victorious Army, was actually “most probably accidentally shot” on the back “by one of his own men” while he was going up a breach in a fight against the Taiping troop in September 21, 1862. The next day he died with a fortune of 15,000 pounds left behind, which “fact speaks for itself” [3]. These findings are somewhat unexpected. Even those well-versed in this period of history may not be aware of them.

Some other works have offered groundbreaking evidences and conclusions. Liu Chen argues that the famous Taiping regime's guideline-natured documents, such as “The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom” and “The New Chapter of National Policy”, were actually either circulated in an extremely small clique or actually shelved. In practice, another set of land rules was adopted, depriving of all private land owned by peasants in general, causing the latter's hatred [4].

There was a considerable amount of literature about Hong Kong Society, but mostly in a scattered and fragmented way. The Edge of Empire fills this gap by systematically providing convincing facts to demonstrate the evolution and formation of a harmoniously collaborated Hong Kong Society, discarding the viewpoints of Orientalism and Neo-Colonialism that assume colonial governments always exert unilateral power to oppress the local people, who in turn always suffer and fight back [5].

Other inspirational research findings include that the Taiping Rebellion together with the Red Soldier Uprising in Guangdong and Guangxi, triggered by the former, led to the pouring of immigrants into Hong Kong, tripling the city's population of the city from 1850 to 1860 [6].

An article describes in great details a visit by the British delegation led by then Hong Kong Governor Bonham, to Nanjing, capital of the Taiping regime, and presents different impressions and attitudes of the different British individuals toward the visit [7]. Some original reports written by the British officials and western missionaries stationed in South China during the Taiping period on their observation of the Movement are also reprinted and compiled [8].

3. Research rationale and selection of groups

Against the backdrop of the Taiping Rebellion and Hong Kong's unique colonial status as a window for western powers, this study identifies a research gap: while existing literature has explored the Rebellion from various angles and touched upon Hong Kong's role, there remains a lack of systematic analysis focusing on the divergent perspectives of specific social groups in Hong Kong---British colonial officials, western missionaries, and local Chinese.

These three groups are chosen for their representativeness and significance. British colonial officials in Hong Kong were pivotal in collecting ongoing facts, forming opinions and reporting to the British Her Majesty's Government to help the latter determine the attitudes and policies toward the Rebellion forces and the Qing government. Western missionaries, developing in tandem with the colonial government, were a vital force in their joint endeavor to expand into China. Meanwhile, the

local Chinese in Hong Kong, who made up the absolute majority of Hong Kong's population, to a large extent, were representative of the views of Hong Kong society.

4. Methodology

This study will employ a document-based historical research method to explore the observation of the three target social groups (government officials, missionaries and the locals) in Hong Kong on the Taiping Rebellion.

First, original records are to be extracted from the selected literatures and the reference materials discovered during the writing process. Key statements will be identified and transcribed. Second, source consistency check is to be carried out when conflicting accounts are found out across literatures. Reliability of information will be prioritized by cross-verification to ensure that there are no major discrepancies. Finally, causal analysis is to be implemented. By synthesizing the verified original records, the study is to deduce the reasons for varied viewpoints among the three groups, linking their social roles, core interests, and experiences to their observations.

5. Viewpoints of different social groups in Hong Kong toward TaiPing Rebellion

To unravel the heterogeneous viewpoints toward the Taiping Rebellions in Hong Kong society, the section examines how the three social groups--each with distinct roles, interests, and experiences--formed divergent observations and stances. The subsequent subsections will dissect their perspectives, from the colonial government's diplomatic and informational pursuits, missionaries' religious and cultural engagements, to the local Chinese's concerns of personal safety and communal governance.

5.1. The observations from the colonial government in Hong Kong

This subsection dissects the British colonial government's multifaceted engagement with the Taiping Rebellion: from Governor Bonham and his delegates' initial on-the-ground-information gathering and diplomatic overtures, to Governor Bowering's son's subsequent mission and written accounts of the Taiping regime. These efforts involved assessing not only the Rebellion's military strength and ideological nature, but also its perceived lack of constructive governance, all of which fed into Britain's broader calculations toward the regime and the Qing government.

The report line of the then British colonial government was from British officials such as the Chinese Interpreters or Secretaries, to the Governor of Hong Kong, then to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in London.

George Stauton Bonham (1803-1863), then Governor of Hong Kong, led a delegation during late April and early May in 1853 to visit Nanjing, which had just been captured by the Taiping force a month before and served as the capital city. He intended to gather and offer reliable information for the subsequent decision making (on whether establishing diplomatic ties with it) by the British government on a solid foundation, where, as what he stated in a report to Clarendon, then British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, "speculations should not be indulged in" [8]. The visit was generally not satisfactory to Bonham as he felt humiliated by the condescending tones of the reply letters from the Taiping side, which treated Britain as a vassal state [7]. However, the meeting and conversation with Lai Hanying, the Navy Commander of Taiping, brother-in-law of Hong Xiuquan, greatly eased Bonham's irritation. Lai spoke and behaved appropriately and also apologized for the rudeness of the previous letter written by Yang Xiuqing, the Eastern Prince. Afraid of the chance of

being treated in an embarrassing ritual way, Bonham decided not to land in Nanjing himself and spent all the days in his own ship and finally found the excuse of weather leaving for Shanghai ending the journey.

During Bonham's stay on the ship anchored beside Nanjing, several other British officials, at his request, went ashore in Nanjing and stayed there for three days, meeting and communicating with Taiping officials and soldiers. These British officials, all youngsters, generally, had good impression of what they experienced in the city [7]. For instance, E.G. Fishbourne, the captain of the warship by which the delegation led by Bonham was carried, pointed out in his book "Impressions of China and the Present revolution", which was published in London in 1855, that the Taiping people in Nanjing and neighboring areas he met were better than the previous Chinese he knew in terms of morality, diligence, good judgement and frankness [8]. But in a report to Bonham from T.T. Meadows, the Chinese Secretary, one of the young officials also landing in Nanjing, the details of his interacting with the Northern Prince and some other chiefs of Taiping army in Nanjing was described, with a calm and serious, but not very positive tone. The report demonstrated how he withstood the pressure of being asked to kneel down before the Taiping generals who were receiving him, and how he repeatedly claimed the British Government's position of neutrality between the Qing force and the Taiping regime, when talking to different Taiping people on different occasions [8].

In 1854, John Bowring succeeded to George Bonham to take the office of Hong Kong Governor. He sent a mission comprising Lewin Bowering, his son, and W. H. Medhurst (another young British official) to Zhenjiang and Nanjing to inquiry into "the resources and designs of the rebels, for whom considerable sympathy had been excited in England, under a mistaken idea that they had adopted a pure form of Christianity". The instant report brought back by the two youngsters, which was never published, demonstrated that the whole Taiping system was a "gigantic imposture" [9].

After the journey they filed another detailed report to John Bowring, who enclosed it to Clarendon, then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. This report, on the whole, gave a negative assessment of both the current situation and future development of the regime. The only two positive indicators of the Taiping were that its soldiers were more ardent and flexible than the passive, rigid, fearful Qing troops (who lacked combat confidence), and that the Taiping banned opium, alcohol and tobacco. All other indicators were negative. First, the areas the Taiping force captured were in a state of "devastation and desolation". They failed to bring benefits to the people there as promised, so the people fled. Second, some of their military leaders were "haughty and supercilious", and there was Yang Xiuqing (the Eastern Prince) 's assumption of Holy Spirit, which was ridiculous and repellant. Third, they offended the literary class, the "bulwark of the whole Chinese social system" by invalidating the latter's honorary titles and denouncing their ancient classics. Fourth, they distrusted and looked down on foreigners, so there were few opportunities for commerce and missionary work for westerners [8]. The report actually strongly heralded the dark prospect of the Taiping movement. Over 20 years later, Lewin Bowring continued his negative appraisal about the Taiping by stating that "it was not until many years afterwards that the fraud was fully exposed, and the Taiping power annihilated by Colonel Gorden" [9].

5.2. The observations from the missionaries in Hong Kong

This part unpacks the divided perceptions of the Taiping movement of western missionaries: some initially viewed it as a potential Christian reform movement and documented its ideology enthusiastically, while others grew disillusioned by its deviations from orthodox Christian tenets and the facts of how the Taiping leaders behaved and how the Taiping forces intolerantly acted toward other religions.

The earliest influx of Christianity into China happened in 635, marked by the arrival of the first missionary group led by Allopen, which received Chinese Emperor's recognition. But they were Nestorians from Syria, a branch of Christianity, the rival of Roman Catholicism. In Yuan Dynasty, the Nestorian Christianity revived alongside the Mongol rule. In late Ming and early Qing period (1550-1700), Jesuit missionaries from Spain and Portugal came to China and they were allowed to carry out religious activities. From 1724 to 1840 the Christianity was banned in China as "Xie Jiao", or "Heterodox or Evil Sect". The outbreak of Opium War and the signing of the Nanjing Treaty made it possible that the western Catholic and Protestant missionaries could legally act and "gained access to Chinese unbelievers or those who were astray" [10].

The western missionaries came to Hong Kong in the 1840s following the above-mentioned favorable wave. Among them, Rev. Theodore Hamberg (1819-1854) needs to be firstly mentioned as he baptized and influenced Hong Rengan, who was Hong Xiuquan's younger paternal cousin and served the function of Prime Minister since 1859 for the Taiping regime. Hamberg also, based on Hong Rengan's original verbal accounts, wrote a book describing in great details the life deeds of Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping movement. The book, the first this kind in English for western readers were published in Hong Kong in 1854, the same year when Hamberg unfortunately died of dysentery. According to the book, Hong Xiuquan was one of the descendants of Hong Hao, the Minister of State in Song Dynasty in 12th Century [11]. This book also recorded the entire process of how the hallucinations occurred when Hong Xiuquan was seriously ill and lay in bed in a daze for many days after the failure of his third imperial examination. These hallucinations, centered on how Hong was empowered by the God, a revered old man with "golden beard", were remembered very clearly – they were vivid and lengthy, and every detail of the plots within them is completely retained [11]. Generally speaking, Theodore Hamberg was optimistic about the future of Taiping movement, stating in a report to the Basel Mission, the institution sending him to China, that the current existence and the scale of the Chinese revolution undoubtedly would make it possible the reversion of the people in China to Christianity [12].

But not all western missionaries in Hong Kong shared the same hopeful views as Hamberg did. For instance, his colleagues, Rudolf Lechler (1824-1908) and Philip Wins (1824-1874), two missionaries also sent by the Basel Mission, felt rather disappointed with the Taiping movement as a whole. In a report to the Basel Mission, Philip Wins commented on Hong Xiuquan that "he was as arrogant as Emperor Wu in Han Dynasty and worshipped what Chinese emperors had long embraced, (but in terms of Christianity) he was a fanatic, and his view of God was quite materialistic. As a zealot, he was incorrigible" [12]. In another letter written by the Italian Franciscan Missionary Mgr. Rizzolati in 1853 in Hong Kong, which was published the same year in *Annals of the Propagation of the Faith*, there was a vivid description of how the Taiping Army maintained strict military discipline and achieved invincible victories in Hunan and Hubei provinces, while the Qing troops huddled in the fortresses and dared not sally forth easily. It also described how the Taiping Army destroyed Buddhist temples, held celebratory parades, and used looted Buddhist statues as masks to revel like at a masquerade party. Furthermore, it pointed out that the act violated the norm prevailing in China that all religions, including Confucianism, should not attack or destroy other religions' religious premises. And the act also failed to meet the Christian standard in his mind [8].

5.3. The observations from the local Chinese in Hong Kong

In this subsection we examine the contrasting perspectives of contemporary sojourners and permanent residents in Hong Kong: the former engaged with the Taiping to pursue reform visions,

while the latter prioritized communal self-safety, revealing how their identities and interests dictated their attitudes toward the Rebellion.

The local Chinese can be divided into temporary sojourners and permanent residents. The former group can be exemplified by Yung Wing (1828-1912), who is reputed as “the father of Chinese overseas students”. He came to Hong Kong in 1842, stayed for 5 years, during which he studied, before later going to the United States. He enrolled in Yale University in 1850. After four years he graduated and went back to China. He worked as Interpreter of the Supreme Court in Hong Kong in 1856, when he met Hong Rengan, who had taken refuge there, and they made an appointment to visit Nanjing at an appropriate time in future. In 1860, Yung Wing, together with two western missionaries and another Chinese, visited Nanjing, called on Hong Rengan, who came to Nanjing a year before and had become the prime minister of the Taiping, and submitted his reform proposal. But after a month’s stay and observations there he finally declined the official position offered by Hong and left Nanjing [13]. In 1863, he joined the staff of Zeng Guofan, who was the main force in suppressing the Taiping Rebellion. Eventually he took up an official position in the Qing Dynasty, with his work in sending Chinese students to study overseas becoming a notable part of his career.

Yung Wing mentioned the reason why he made such a decision of choosing the Qing government instead of the Taiping in his biography many years later. His initial ambitions of integrating his political and educational reform initiatives into the modernization drive of China were dampened by the realities he witnessed during his over one-month stay in Nanjing in 1860. At beginning he cherished earnest hopes for the Taiping regime, but after contact and research he analyzed that the newly enrolled Taiping soldiers in areas other than Guangxi were “riffraff and scum of their populations”, who “knew no discipline, and had no restraining religious power to keep them from pillage, plunder and indiscriminate destruction. It was through such new accessions that the Taiping cause lost its prestige, and was defeated before Tientsin and forced to retreat to Nanking” [14]. And the degeneracy in Taiping Regime was further hastened in later years. Meanwhile, the religious traces within them faded increasingly. And another detrimental factor was that they failed to create any new guidelines or thoughts or measures to constitute a new form of government. It was all these factors that made Yung Wing drew such a conclusion: “I was thoroughly convinced that neither the reformation nor the regeneration of China was to come from the Taipings” [14]. This clearly showed that” in recruiting talent, the Taiping forces were also inferior to Zeng Guofan and his associates” [15].

The permanent Chinese dwellers in Hong Kong, unlike the sojourners who sought cooperative opportunities with the Taipings, prioritized self-safety of their community during the rebellion period. They did not really care about what the pros and cons of the Taiping regime and whether they should liaison with it or not as the colonial officials and western missionaries did. Therefore in 1866, when spread the rumor that under the influence of Taiping Rebellion, the Chinese in Canton planned to burn and loot Hong Kong, some leaders of the Chinese community in Hong Kong “asked Governor MacDonnell for permission to form a group of guards and watchmen” and the latter “was only too happy to agree”. The force would be under direct supervision of the colonial government while it “would be completely funded by the Chinese community” [5]. The practice was actually a continuation of the self-governance the Hong Kong Chinese had adopted since 1847. Back then, institutions ranging from the Man Mo Temple to the later Tung Wah Hospital were all run under their self-governance, serving as venues for deliberation, mediation and justice for the local Chinese [5].

6. Discussion

The intensity of observers' motivations dictated their actions: those with strong motivations went to see things for themselves and stayed to observe for an extended period, while those with weak motivations only observed from a distance, or even paid little heed. Among the different social groups of Hong Kong, the British colonial officials were obviously the most motivated. That's because they were instructed by the British government, who needed to know whether they should establish diplomatic relations with the Taiping or not in case the latter defeated the Qing. To conduct in-depth on-site investigations and submit regular reports back fell within the scope of their official duties. While most of the western missionaries in Hong Kong opted for distant observation as they were moderately motivated. They had already owned missionary jobs in Hong Kong leaving them little sense of urgency to act otherwise. And the local Chinese in Hong Kong focused on their livelihoods – such as working and running businesses. Consequently, they had little motivation to observe and engage with the Taiping Movement. This, however, excluded short-term sojourners like Yung Wing, who harbored personal ambitions and sought to align their own pursuits with the nation's fate.

Among the observers of the Taiping Rebellion, disparities emerged, shaped by factors such as age, life experience and their core concerns. But in general, the majority of observers in Hong Kong Society held a dim view of the Taiping Movement during that period,

7. Conclusion

This study centers on the divergent viewpoints of British colonial officials, western missionaries, and local Chinese in Hong Kong toward the Taiping Rebellion, a topic of great significance as it sheds light on Hong Kong's role as a colonial window and the multi-faceted interactions during the historical period.

Critical findings illustrate that varied motivations and social positions dictated distinct outlook: colonial officials operated within diplomatic and administrative mandates, missionaries are guided by religious agendas and judgement, and local Chinese prioritized survival or individual pursuits. A prevalent skepticism toward the Taiping movement emerged across Hong Kong's social landscape. These takeaways enrich our comprehension of colonial Hong Kong's societal dynamics and how the Taiping Rebellion was interpreted by disparate factions.

However, the study has limitations. Due to inaccessibility to original copies or duplicates of Hong Kong newspapers published between 1850 and 1864 -- materials only available in local institutions and libraries in Hong Kong, the research on the observations of local Chinese in Hong Kong toward the Rebellion is insufficient. It is expected that this gap can be filled in future research conducted in Hong Kong.

For future research directions, based on the current study, efforts might be made to explore whether post-colonialism is inapplicable to Hong Kong society. This is because the Chinese in Hong Kong may have had a high degree of self-governance, with relatively little oppression from the colonial government, which seems inconsistent with the oppressive characteristics of the classical post-colonialism theories.

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