

# From the Western Inspired Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) to the Hong Kong Protest Movement

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*The Taiping Rebellion was a terrible Chinese civil war between the central power of the north and the south of the country which lasted from 1850 to 1864 and dwarfs in number of victims all the conflicts experienced by Europe until that time. Leaving aside the massive displacements of population, conservative estimates speak of 20 to 30 million dead, most of them caused by hunger and epidemics.*

By way of comparison, the number of casualties in the American Civil War (1861-1865) was just over six hundred thousand.

Despite the magnitude of this tragedy, which sank in chaos and darkness the Middle Kingdom after a long downward trajectory, historians have not been too inclined to delve into the more than dubious circumstances of its origins, which even such an Anglo-Saxon medium as Wikipedia does not bother to disguise.

The story goes that Hong Xiuquan, an aspiring unsuccessful civil servant, proclaimed himself Heavenly King, son of God and younger brother of Jesus Christ, and with this brilliant resume he managed to put nearly half the population of the Empire on his side.

Coincidentally, Hong had been studying in 1847 with the American Baptist missionary Issachar Jacobus Roberts, at a time when missionaries were seen as barely disguised intelligence agents, though forcibly tolerated by the humiliating treatise of Nanking's in 1842 at the end of the First Opium War.

Roberts remained in Canton during much of the civil war to return to the capital of the new kingdom of Taiping, which was none other than Nanking, in 1860, where he would again serve as counselor to the distant relative and right-hand man of Xiuquan, the prime minister and later foreign minister Hong Rengan.

By chance again, it turns out that Rengan, too, had been working closely with the diligent envoys of the London Missionary Society in Hong Kong in the midst of the civil war between 1855 and 1858, and his intervention from then on was decisive in keeping the rebels armed until the end the Second Opium War (1856-1860), in which the British, now seconded by the French, obtained the desired access to the interior of the vast country.

After these new concessions London no longer had much interest in prolonging the conflict, and it was clear that they preferred to deal with an extremely weakened emperor in Beijing rather than with such a huge people in arms. No time to waste, and the talented Rengan, whose measures had been so providential for the survival of the movement shortly before, was inexplicably ousted in 1861, as soon as the new treaty was signed.

The First Opium War had taken the Qing dynasty completely by surprise, but once that factor was lost it was required a much larger deployment in order to reach the next list of objectives. Without the tremendous wear and tear of Beijing's fight with the rebels, even with the Western coalition's overwhelming armament advantage, everything would have been much more costly and complicated.

After the ratification of the treaty of Tientsin and the mysterious cessation of Rengan the rebels quickly began to lose ground. The British, who had adopted an official position of neutrality, ultimately intervened on Beijing's behalf to finally decide the war. Until then, the King of Taiping and his followers were always led to think that the Westerners were sympathetic to the uprising. After many years unscathed, Hong appeared unexpectedly poisoned in 1864 and shortly afterwards Nanking fell under the instrumental intervention of English troops. It was also in an English gunboat that Reverend Issachar Roberts had escaped from the city two years earlier.

Characteristically, the English press was sympathetic to the rebellion until the ratification of the hoped-for treaty; then they began to spread stories in which Taiping leaders cut children's heads and smashed them against the wall. Sounds familiar.

Hong's creed sounds incoherently millenarian, puritanical and "modern", if you think that the bulk of the target audience were illiterate Chinese peasants in the middle of the nineteenth century. Abolition of private property, suppression of the cue imposed under death penalty by the Manchus, strict equality and separation of sexes, prohibition of life in common and sexual intercourse even between marriages, separates armies of men and women, substitution of Confucian texts by the Bible as the main subject for civil service examinations.

Think about it. Marx elaborating on the long historical process that mediated between the medieval peasantry and the class consciousness of the industrial proletariat, and it turns out that in China these same peasants had already embraced the most radical extremism at the first opportunity.

There was talk of the suppression of "Confucian idol worship", though everyone knew that Confucianism long predated the Manchus and was the foundation of society. It's unthinkable: an autochthonous Chinese ideology betting on Christianity at the expense of its own culture and roots.

It is a commonplace that rebellion could not have spread like wildfire without the inevitable Chinese triads or mafias and their deep penetration into the fabric of rural life. Triads had existed for many centuries, but it was only at this time, with the massive influx of opium and the new rules of trade, that a legendary subculture of the underworld was forged, with its networks of spies, cambalaches, dens and slums.

The murky became the norm. Rebel leaders anathematized drug use, prostitution and everything else, while corruption among them became rampant. "Do what I say, not what I do". Western powers claimed to be neutral while their arms traffickers made a killing.

Meanwhile south and west the great Indian Rebellion of 1857 took place which led to an overall administrative change in the main colony. Faced with the challenge that China posed after 1842, there were all sorts of doubts about which was the most profitable model of penetration and exploitation. For Rothschild, Elgin, Disraeli and company, the Chinese civil

war was also a great testing ground to “wait and see” how far the resistance of the central power and the whole people could go.

For the rest of it, the “divide and rule”, the determined and systematic interference under the guise of false neutrality, was always the supreme principle of the British abroad and was applied with expert hand every time there was a favorable juncture. The split between the north and the south was a recurring theme in the history of the great power of the Far East, and of course the people had a thousand motives for embracing the rebellion against the oppressive Manchu. To open such a large melon all it took was a good knife.

Despite the telling accumulation of coincidences in the where, when, what, how and to whom the rebellion benefited, I still have not found a Western version of the facts that points to British responsibility in the origin and development of the revolt, which I find simply incredible. It can be assumed that Chinese historiography will have a different opinion, but if that is the case, it has not managed to make itself heard among us. The fact that Taiping is considered to have inspired the subsequent revolutionary movements of Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese Communist Party should not cloud the judgment in the face of what seems so obvious.

Needless to say, by now we are not going to find any smoking gun, as even Chinese historians have to rely on the testimonies of Reverend Roberts to the English press, missionaries and other Western diplomats since they are almost the only thing available, even when their own co-religionists admitted his erratic behavior and the unreliability of his accounts. After all, who could give Roberts credit? We are further told that the missionary had suffered from leprosy since the 1830s, which seems very convenient to keep the curious away, though not quite a seeker of truth like Hong Xiuquan.

The whole story sucks from beginning to end. But if we still have some doubt, we only need to see what is happening at this very moment, all distances saved. Today we see how the United States, Great Britain and Atlanticism not even hide that they do everything they can to destabilize China and introduce as deep a wedge as possible to break her apart—for Hong Kong is only the handiest cleft to open well the cracks in Taiwan, Tibet or Xinjiang.

If we are now witnessing such a effort to introduce chaos in a world where interdependence multiplies consequences, what could not happen in 1850 when for these countries impunity was almost absolute and the only thing to fear was that excessive Chinese bleeding would reduce profits too much.

Of course, today’s China has nothing to do with that dark era. However, the strategy of the Atlantic powers has hardly changed over time, and where it once used missionaries, it now employs devoted pro-democracy and human rights foundations such as the NED funded by the relevant government agencies.

But democracy has little to do with the real problems of today’s Hong Kong. Hong Kong never had democracy with the British, who made it a condition for retrocession so that the fox could keep putting her foot in the henhouse —so not much nostalgia in that regard. What really squeezes the shoes of the Hong Kong people are the economic hardships, the foolish price of housing and the property crisis, coupled with the lack of prospects in the face of the loss of status of the former colony. It’s all about the decline in the standard of living and how to get ahead in life.

This is the only thing that can mobilize people for months and months. Ironically, at heart the main discontent is against the turbo-capitalism that Hong Kong, Britain and the United States have championed, a model that only cares of speculators and oligarchs. How can it be then that this discontent has been deflected against the Beijing government? It is repeatedly stated that the rulers of the capital have made a deal with the local oligarchy in exchange for their political support.

Now, this is what happens routinely in the US client states scattered all over the world including Euroland itself, although here there is another hierarchy in subservience that passes through Brussels and Berlin. And when it comes to autonomy and sovereignty, we can ask the Greeks, for example, what degree of self-determination they enjoy. And they are certainly not the only ones, as the Spaniards know very well. In fact, elections only serve to make us forget a little about it.

As for depressed environment and precariousness, it is becoming more and more widespread, also in affluent Europe and even in Germany itself; but in Hong Kong it stings much more because the rest of China grows as much as they shrink. Nor does one want to remember that her welfare was built on the enormous inequality with mainland China, from which it benefited in every sense.

One would even say that the Hongkongers have been respected much more than the Greeks. The local oligarchies sell us everywhere, the only difference being the ultimate power centre. Washington is obviously the global capital of the oligarchy and they don't want to lose clients anywhere.

So we can hardly see the conflict in Hong Kong as a struggle between liberalism and autocracy. The "really existing neo-liberalism" is an oligarchy that only uses elections as an excuse, and there is little more to talk about. It is true, however, that this is a "complicated" issue, and not just because a few have taken on the task of complicating it.

In the Greek case we have already seen openly how decisions emanates from central banks, not from the ballot boxes; but central banks are not really public entities but the coordinating body of private banks. And so the world of private interests puts its foot directly in the shoes of the public policy without going through the slightest democratic control. This breaks any symmetry and balance of powers from the outset, and makes the opposition between effective liberalism and central power completely misleading.

The Federal Reserve is as centralist in its structure as a power can be, with the difference that its absolute priority is the interest of an extractive and speculative oligarchy. It is centralist and hierarchical, not at all decentralized. Neoliberalism has nothing to do with decentralization.

In China, by comparison, there is a "changed foot reality", so to speak: one of the feet of political power gets into one of the shoes of economic power, while in the West the banks not only put one foot directly in one of the shoes of politics, but take the helm too.

The Chinese system still has more room for maneuver to regain the balance than the Western system, since the line between private and public banking was always unclear; it could take advantage of this clearance to look decisively at the future and take in-depth measures. Of course, we know all too well that "politics" is not synonymous with transparency or the priority of the common good.

In any case, this system does have room to break out of the vicious circle of public and private debt, while in the West ending the fractional reserve system that make it possible threatens to destroy the axis and lever of plutocratic power—in the end our only, truly reference.

China and Hong Kong could even engage in a monetary decompression chamber experiment in relation to international markets, which would still maintain continuity with the dynamics operating since 1949. And since reality shows a slow-motion turning point, the challenge would be to lead the change of sign: from money as debt pumping upwards and towards speculative interests, of which the Hong Kong skyline is the most eloquent manifestation, to public money transferring monetary sovereignty downwards to the citizens, not to another monetary authority at the service of private banks.

This would change the economic and political landscape top to bottom; today economic democracy, public sovereign money, is a hundred times more important than polls. Even the Governor of the Bank of England pondered at the last meeting in Jackson Hole the convenience of ending the Federal Reserve system—and he was talking side by side with its current Chair Jerome Powell. But the aim of this change would be to grab still more power through the new options that electronic money and cryptocurrencies allow. More plutocracy and more impunity, as they only would set the rules.

But, so they say, it seems that the Chinese government also has plans in this regard.

An island within an island: such is the ideogram, the emblem of the current situation. But which two islands? There are several metaphorical and literal candidates, and a number of surprising combinations. As always, reality keeps winking at us, even if we don't know what to think about it.

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In contrast with Opportunity, reigning supreme as blinders in politics, there are glimpses of Synchronicity in events that escape whatever machination; they are often noticed by those most alien to power, even by historians at the end of the day when they stop working and pursuing their theses. Thus, for example, the Taiping rebellion preceded and coexisted in time with the American civil war. So what?

For me it is full of meaning that China acquired its maximum territorial expansion with the Qing around 1800, only a few years before its ruin and darkest stage began. These things happen all too often, and we don't need to say that external expansion has nothing to do with the welfare of the people or even with the consolidation of power.

The American Civil War had an almost diametrically opposite sign. The historical moment that presides over it is certainly not the liberation of the oppressed, in this case the black slaves, but the expansion of the Union and of the future empire, with the concentration of powers of the federal government. In short, it was the first great shock of an unstoppable expansive wave.

Now, if we keep thinking in terms of maximums and minimums, things seem to return the other way back to describe a semicircle. The Anglo-Saxon influence has reached its peak, and one would say that since 2016—Brexit and Trump in the polls—has begun a certain decline, and if it is more or less pronounced only time will tell.

This really matters as the centrifugal tendencies that exist in any state also depend to a great extent on the evolution of its sphere of influence. The European Union itself, after a rushed expansion, soon began to experience melancholy and the effect of disintegrating forces, and that's the current state of affairs. The United States of America seemed immune to these ailments until now only because the increase of its influence grew unstoppable, but since Trump the forces of discord take command, no longer at the party level, but between "business models" for the empire or in the internecine wars between the multiple bodies and agencies. No doubt there is a great potential for fission, just as there are plenty of cracks to exploit it.

As the ultimate expression of capitalism, the United States finds in expansion its *raison d'être*, and the day it reaches the limit, its impatient internal elements, so used to growth, can come to a boil. As for the disintegrating horizon of the current Britain or of a European Union incapable of approaching Russia, what can be said? There's all kind of signs that the fate of the West is reaching a limit in respect to its expansion, and and that will profoundly affect its internal dynamics.

At such a delicate juncture it is not very intelligent to sow seeds of discord in the ground of your neighbor and ally with centrifugal forces, even if that is what you have been doing all your life, because everything is entering a new dynamic. While you are so attentive to their opponent's face, you could be getting a pimple in your ass, or even at the very tip of your nose. There are more reasons for concern than those we have indicated here, but since they are so astute, let them worry about finding them.

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