AN ANALYSIS OF THE FAILURE OF THE TAIPING REVOLUTION IN CHINA (1850 - 1864)

The Taiping Revolution culminated in the proclamation of the "Taiping Tien Kuo" (太平天国) (the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom) in January 1851, and in 1853, it took Nanking where it established its capital, renaming it "Tiencing" (the Heavenly Capital). This Heavenly Kingdom lasted for 15 years, and it was not until June 1864 that the Ching troops recaptured "Tiencing", leading to its eventual downfall.

Unfortunately, the Taiping leaders missed the opportunity of advancing further to oust the Ching throne in Peking. They did not formulate an over-all encompassing strategy for conquering the whole nation once and for all. As such, the concerted efforts by the Ching to build up their army were much restricted and limited, allowing the Ching army to build up while the Ching court rallied foreign assistance. This was the first serious mistake in the Taiping strategy.

Advantageous though the objective conditions were, the revolutionary movement failed due to various causes, and the following academic exercise is an attempt to analyse the causes of its failure so that we can obtain insights from this historical experience.

Probably, the most important of the various factors rendering the failure of the Taiping Revolution can be attributed to the shortcomings in the leadership. At the outset, the Taiping forces grew rapidly as men and materials were increasingly corrupted and even the reform efforts of Hung Hsiu-chuan (洪秀全) were insufficient administrators. The government became a.
amassed after each successful military conquest. Except for
a few hard-on resistances and military campaigns, the Ching
troops had lost their will to fight, most of them surrendering
themselves or fleeing. This is why only about two years since
the formal proclamation of the establishment of the Taiping
Heavenly Kingdom, the revolutionary forces captured the
strategically important city of Nanking in the lower Yangtze
region.

Unfortunately, the Taiping leaders missed the opportunity
of advancing further to oust the Ching throne in Peking.
Instead they took the defence of Nanking as the key task for
the time being. They did not formulate an over-all encompassing
strategy for conquering the whole nation once and for all. As
such, the concerted efforts of the Taipings in their fighting
were much restricted and limited, allowing the Hunan Army
to build up while the Ching court rallied foreign assistance.

This was the first serious mistake in the Taiping strategy.

The fatal blow upon the Taiping Revolution came from the
internal strife. The East King and the brave North King of the
Kingdom were sacrificed in the internecine battles. Subsequent
to this was the emergence of a trend of disintegration.

Thousands of good soldiers under the leadership of the Assistant
King, Shih Ta-kai (石達开) left Nanking in defiance. The
power was then rested in the hands of some relatives of Hung's
who were incompetent administrators. The government became a
corrupted quagmire and even the reform efforts of Hung Jen-kan
one of the later leaders whom Hung Hsiu-chuan relied upon, could not help.

Another mistake in Taiping strategy was that their revolution consisted of political and religious elements which were not in conformity with the contemporaneous political and social conditions of the times. The Taiping leaders intended to revamp Chinese political and religious structures by violent means and thus, drove the local Han ethnic classes to form the Hunan Army in favour of the Ching court.

At the same time, foreign forces provided full support to the Ching dynasty for the purpose of protecting their vested interests in China. They brought with them armaments superior in all ways to those of the Taiping troops, and this made the Taipings suffer extensive losses. Indeed, the foreign assistance to the Hunan and Anhui armies was instrumental in the loss of the Taiping-dominated lower Yangtze region.

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