THE NATURE OF TAIPING REVOLUTION (1850 - 1864)

Although the Taiping Rebellion was primarily a reaction against a disproportionate share of the country's wealth being consumed by the Manchus, it was not an ordinary peasant uprising. The new Taiping ideology was derived from Christian, Buddhist, and Taoist influences, and it sought to replace the Manchu dynasty with an ideal communist society. The capital of the new kingdom was set at Nanking.

Although the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom lasted for a comparatively brief span of 15 years, it was of distinguished importance in the history of modern China because of its attempted introduction of various political, social, and economic reforms. This thesis would seek to analyse the character and practices of those religious, ethnic and social measures taken by the Taiping regime.

In the period preceding the Taiping uprising, China was plagued with a host of difficulties. The Manchu government was becoming less efficient, and there were widespread corruption and overtaxation which brought severe hardship to the masses. The plight of the people was aggravated by the many natural calamities - severe droughts, floods and famines - which uprooted many peasants to join in an increasing roaming populace.

After China's defeat in the Opium War (1839 - 1842), the prestige of the Manchu government was further damaged. The trade concessions granted to the Westerners severely depressed the native handicraft industry. There was widespread unemployment and the masses desired social reforms.

Moreover, the ethnic Chinese had always resented to be ruled over by the Manchus who were regarded as barbarians by the Chinese. The resentment was compounded by government policies which were repressive and discriminating against the Chinese. It was during such a period of internal dislocations and external threats that the Taiping uprising originated.
Although the Taiping armies were recruited mainly from peasants, it was not an ordinary peasant uprising. The new Taiping ideologies were derived from Christian ethnics emphasising on the canonical indoctrination, equality of sexes and universal brotherhood of man. It sought to overthrow the foreign rule of the Manchus and to replace it with an ethnic Chinese government; to build a better nation through a series of proposed social reforms and to protect the sovereignty of Chinese territory against Western encroachment.

Therefore, we could perceive that the goals of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom were noble and revolutionary. However, the Taiping leaders were ill-experienced in government administration; they were unable to formulate sound policies and detailed programmes for implementing their ideas into reality. In addition, the Chinese were slow in adapting themselves to the new social and economic order of the Taiping Kingdom. These factors, together with intervention by the Western powers, brought to the final defeat of the Taiping armies.

That the Taiping uprising is a rebellion or a revolution cannot be decided merely upon its immediate failure or success. We must also, with the advantages of hindsight, evaluate the short-term and long-term consequential effects of the uprising upon the course of China's modern history. As such, I believe that to a certain extent, the Taiping uprising should be viewed as a revolution; nevertheless, it is not a completely successful or a thorough revolution.

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