**02.108 – Modern China: Puralism, and Beyond Territoriality**

**Question 3.**

According to one 19th century English account of the Taiping: ‘wherever the long-haired armies appear, there all trade ceases; flourishing cities cease to exist, thickly-populated and highly cultivated provinces become howling deserts.’ Were the legacies of the Taipings wholly negative?

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The Taiping Rebellion was one of the most bloody wars in modern history, conservative estimates of war dead number 20 million with some estimates as high as 70 million. The rebellion which originated in the Guangxi in 1851, eventually engulfed much of southern China including the Jiangnan region which was the agricultural base of the Qing dynasty. Eventually defeated in 1864 by regional militias led by Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang and Li Hongzhang, the Taiping Rebellion left an indelible and lasting impact on China. This essay through examining the impact of the rebellion in its immediate aftermath and in the longer term aims to answer the question of whether the legacies of the Taipings were wholly negative. Although, the devastation brought to the Jiangnan region was clearly negative in the short term, some of the policies implemented did benefit the peasant class. The decentralisation of the Qing government during this time also affected it subsequently during the 1911 Revolution and into the Early Republican period. Beyond this, the Taiping Rebellion also served to inspire the policies and strategies of the Chinese Communist Party.

The devastation of large parts of China, the death of millions and the displacement of many more brought about by the fighting between the Taipings and the Qing in the short term was without a doubt wholly negative. Cities which had formerly been centres of commerce and trade were completely gutted by the fighting. ‘The degree of physical destruction alone was appalling. By rebellion’s end, cities and towns, once the nodes of a thriving commercial network, lay gutted by fire, with only scorched walls standing as testimony to their former importance.’ (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 407) Besides the devastation wrought upon the cities within the Jiangnan region, much of the extremely fertile countryside suffered a similar fate. ‘piles of rubble marked the sites of former villages and vast tracts of land were no longer under cultivation.’ (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 407) The former agricultural base of the Qing dynasty was utterly ruined by the fighting, ‘Vast stretches of farmland had been ruined and abandoned’ (Crossley, 2007, pp. 100-101) and ‘what was once productive acreage lay uncultivated and unirrigated’ (Crossley, 2007, p. 116). The casualties of the fighting was not limited to just the rebels and the Qing military. Oftentimes, civilians were caught up in the hostilities, ‘Tens of millions had been killed in the past decade’ and ‘many more were dislocated or homeless.’ (Crossley, 2007, p. 100) Many became refugees fleeing not only the violence, but also the threat of starvation brought about by the disruption of agricultural production. The situation was so bleak that ‘Towns in the Zhejiang countryside reported peddlers selling cups of blood to the starving.’ (Crossley, 2007, p. 117) At the end of the war, the challenges faced by the region were extremely daunting[[1]](#footnote-1), Zhejiang province in particular was badly devastated, as the fighting in the region during the last four years of the rebellion had been especially intense. It is plain to see that the fighting between the rebels and the Qing had a completely negative impact on both the residents and the infrastructure of the Jiangnan region. Therefore, in the short term, the impact of the fighting on the population density and the economic development of the region was extremely negative.

Apart from the impact of the violence on the region’s residents and infrastructure, the fall of the Taipings also brought with it many reprisals by Qing loyalists. The Taiping rebellion had started from the Society of God Worshippers which was comprised predominantly of people from the Hakka ethnic group.[[2]](#footnote-2) This was the ethnic group to which Hong Xiuquan, the founder of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom belonged to. Hong Xiuquang had ‘envisioned himself ascending to Heaven, where he met his Heavenly Father and his elder brother, Jesus.’ (Reilly, The Protestant Bible and the Birth of the Taiping Christian Movement, 2004, p. 66) In his vision, Hong, claimed that the Heavenly Father has appointed him to ‘slay demons and to assume the imperial throne.’ (Reilly, The Protestant Bible and the Birth of the Taiping Christian Movement, 2004, p. 66) This he eventually took to mean that he should slay the Manchus and overthrow the Qing dynasty. This mission to ‘slay demons’ was carried out by the Taipings as they swept through the Jiangnan. After each city was conquered, the Taipings would first target the Manchu quarter and kill everyone in it, men, women and children. After conquering Nanjing, ‘the holy soldiers killed all the Manchu men, and then drove several thousand Manchu women to the outside of Chaoyang Gate, surrounded them, and burnt them to death.’ (Reilly, Worship and Witness in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, 2004, p. 139) This practice did nothing to enamour the rebels to the Qing and following the Qing conquest, many civilians in formerly rebel held areas were massacred. Especially when the Qing recaptured the rebel capital Nanjing, many were slaughtered. ‘On the second day, soldiers came and killed her two brothers and ransacked their rooms. Her mother knelt down and wailed: the soldier became angry and shouted, “Kill all of those who followed the rebels! Show no mercy! Those are the general’s orders!” And so they killed her mother and her little brother and her sister-in-law.’ (Meyer-Fong, 2013, p. 151). The Qing forces on entering the city began indiscriminate killing and pillaging. ‘The elderly had been slaughtered with abandon.’ (Platt, 2012) and ‘An unbreathable stench filled the air from the bodies that rotted in the streets’ (Platt, 2012). Even early on in the war, many rebels and suspected rebels were ruthlessly executed, ‘The severity of the mandarins seemed to increase in the same proportion as the extension of the insurrection; and every day some arrest took place’ (Spence, 1991, p. 136). It is evident that Taiping brutality brought about fierce reprisals against themselves and civilians staying in rebel held areas. Therefore, it is clear that Taiping anti-Manchu actions brought about negative impacts.

In the short term, the land reforms of the Taipings had mixed impacts on the people of the Jiangnan region. One of the stated aims of the rebellion was to reorganise the existing structure of private land ownership into a communalistic one in which each person regardless of their previous social class was entitled to an equal share of land. (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 379) During their occupation of the Jiangnan region, the Taiping rebels sought relatively early on to exploit the natural wealth of the region to fund their war efforts against the Qing government, and their land reforms could not be carried out in full. Due to the need to ensure an uninterrupted flow of revenue to rebel coffers, the much awaited reform of property ownership was not carried out as intended. (Bernhardt, 1987, pp. 379-380) The Taipings attempted to implement a combined religious, political and military hierarchy.[[3]](#footnote-3) In some areas, social elites were appointed to these xiangguan positions, in others, peasants were appointed.[[4]](#footnote-4) Further policies ‘worked to the advantage of tenants and against the interests of landlords’ and their effects would continue to be felt even after the end of the rebellion, ‘Taiping occupation also took a heavy toll on elite control of rural society.’ These policies included direct tax collection from tenants[[5]](#footnote-5), rent reductions[[6]](#footnote-6), and rent collection bureaus[[7]](#footnote-7). In summary, some policies implemented by the Taipings did disrupt existing landowner-tenant relationships and ‘left its mark on the imaginations of the rebellion’s survivors and their descendants.’ (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 406), some directly benefitting the peasants and others allowing peasants to exploit the policies to their benefit. These changes while negative for many of the ruling elite did bring some positive benefits to the lower social classes. Therefore, in the short term, the land reform of the Taipings did have some negative impacts but for the majority, which were from the lower classes, the impacts were more positive.

Perhaps one of the key long term impacts of the Taiping Rebellion was the resulting changes to the Qing government which although helped quell the rebellion subsequently contributed to the demise of the empire. Due to the failure early on of the imperial armies in suppressing the rebels[[8]](#footnote-8), the Qing court became increasingly dependent on regional militias[[9]](#footnote-9). As the war progressed, local officials such as Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang, and Li Hongzhang became increasingly powerful as the Qing court delegated more responsibilities to them. This decentralisation of authority began as a means for regional militias to operate autonomously to fight the Taipings, and this contributed to the increased success of the regional forces.[[10]](#footnote-10) At the height of his power, Zeng Guofan was the de facto supreme commander of the war effort against the Taipings.[[11]](#footnote-11) ‘The requirement that the court not only allow local forces to take the lead in the fight against the Taipings, but also permit discretion in the organization of financial and military resources’ (Crossley, 2007, p. 118) would continue on even after the rebellion had been suppressed. Even after the end of the Taiping rebellion, Zeng Guofan and his cohorts did not disband their armies[[12]](#footnote-12) with the argument that they would be needed to suppress the Nian rebellion and other rebellions in the region around Xinjiang.[[13]](#footnote-13) ‘Overwhelming and continuous pressures of local reconstruction and recovery, as well as large, well-organised, stable local rebel states, created a centrifugal force preventing the Qing court from regaining the initiative’ (Crossley, 2007, p. 121). The emergence of regional power bases led to the gradual weakening of the central authority of the Qing court. This dependency on the power of regional leaders would is seen from the example of Yuan Shikai who used his power to negotiate for the abdication of the Qing emperor in exchange for being elected president of the newly formed Republic of China.[[14]](#footnote-14) The Qing court already having little power had no choice but to rely on Yuan Shikai to fight the revolutionaries when several regional armies sided with the revolutionaries, and when Yuan decided to play both sides[[15]](#footnote-15) to ensure a position of power in the new republic, the Qing court could do little to stop him. Although, the decentralisation of power would help keep regional leaders in check[[16]](#footnote-16), it also prevented the Qing from creating a unified force to combat the revolutionaries, thus leading them to rely on Yuan Shikai who commanded the most significant regional military force. This decentralisation which began as a response to fight the Taipings, would provide the necessary bases of power for the warlords who emerged during the early Republican period. ‘The military fragmentation characteristic of warlordism was influenced by the organisational diversity of the late Qing military.’ (McCord, 2012) Although, the decentralisation of power in the Qing government itself did not directly result in the wardlordism of the Early Republican period, it predisposed the commanders of regional forces to assuming the position of warlords once they decided to exert political influence through their military strength. So while the decentralisation did on one hand contribute to the fall of the Qing and the creation of the Republic of China, it also contributed to the period of chaos which ensued in the aftermath of Yuan Shikai’s death. Therefore, I think that in this case the impacts of the Taiping revolution were both positive and negative with the negatives outweighing the positives due to the warlordism which occurred subsequently.

Another lasting impact which the Taiping Rebellion had was on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which gained inspiration for their land reforms from the Taipings’ own. While the Taipings had tried to establish communal units of 25 households as the smallest unit of organisation with their own grain stores[[17]](#footnote-17), the CCP used organisations of 20 to 30 households as the smallest agricultural unit with autonomy during the Great Leap Forward.[[18]](#footnote-18) The CCP also had people’s communes which had about 10000 members[[19]](#footnote-19), similar in size to the 2500-family unit under a Taiping shishuai. These units of organisation typically corresponded to a township or several small-sized ones. Like the combined hierarchy of the Taipings, the organisation of the commune was intended to assume multiple responsibilities. ‘They not only carry out an all-round management of agriculture, forestry, animal husbandry, side-occupations and fishery, but merge industry (the worker), agriculture (the peasant), exchange (the trader), culture and education (the student), and military affairs (the military man) into one.’ (Cheng, 1999, p. 407). One thing which the CCP learnt well from the failure of the Taipings was the need to unite the peasants against a common enemy in order for land reform to be successful[[20]](#footnote-20), which they managed to accomplish fairly well. ‘The establishment of co-operatives, and later collectives and communes, not only enabled more efficient use of land resources but also created the conditions for collective soil conservation and flood control.’ However, it must be noted that while these units of organisation were fairly successful in agricultural endeavours, they failed rather spectacularly when the CCP tried to use them to industrialise the country.[[21]](#footnote-21) In the case of land reform, the CCP managed to successfully emulate Taiping land collectivisation to improve agricultural yield. However, as such units of organisation were ill-suited for industrial activities, the Chinese people suffered greatly during the Great Leap Forward. It should be noted that the Taiping method of organisation should not be blamed as it succeeded when used for its intended purpose and failed when it was applied in a situation which the Taipings could never have conceived. Therefore, I would say that this legacy of the Taipings is largely positive and the blame for its failure lies with those who applied the reforms without understanding fully its limitations outside of agricultural production.

Lastly, the CCP were able to learn from the failures of the Taipings in their conquest of the Jiangnan. The Taipings in their campaign, focused on large cities and towns and avoided occupying the countryside.[[22]](#footnote-22) The Taipings in doing so were forced to fight the Qing forces in open warfare and had to rely on local residents for administration and revenue collection.[[23]](#footnote-23) Mao Zedong in recognising the vulnerability of the CCP if they were to engage in positional warfare instead advocated for guerrilla warfare as the means of battle against both the Japanese during World War II and against the KMT during the civil war[[24]](#footnote-24). Besides guerrilla warfare, each member of the Red Army was also ‘entrusted with organising the people, collecting taxes, setting up local government (or a soviet), and conducting propaganda.’ (Wu, 1992, p. 84) The CCP in analysing the failure of the Taipings had rightly determined that the organisation needed an overseer in even the smallest population centre to ensure that revenue was being collected and that the constituents of the area were organised and indoctrinated to fight for the communist cause.[[25]](#footnote-25) It was by doing so that the CCP was able to effectively mobilise the entire countryside for the war effort against both the Japanese and subsequently the KMT. [[26]](#footnote-26) This quality of Red Army soldiers was what allowed the CCP to triumph over a numerically superior KMT[[27]](#footnote-27) in the civil war following the end of World War II. Therefore, the lessons learnt from the Taipings’ failures in warfare and governance allowed the CCP to defeat the Japanese invaders and the KMT subsequently. In this respect, the legacy of the Taipings is extremely positive.

By examining the immediate after effects of the Taiping Rebellion, it is clear the impacts were overwhelmingly negative from the destruction of cities, and death and displacement of millions of people to the Qing reprisals against the civilians in Taiping controlled regions. Looking at the impact of the land reforms on the residents of the Jiangnan region during the occupation, the result is mixed, being largely positive for the peasants and mainly negative for the gentry and landlords. Looking further, the impact of the decentralisation of the Qing government in response to the rebels weakened the influence of the Qing court and eventually contributed to its collapse. The decentralisation also created power bases which predisposed the regional governors to warlordism during the Early Republican period, and thus its impact is predominantly negative. The impact of the Taiping land reforms and organisation in the Jiangnan would serve as lessons for the CCP in their own reforms and their strategy in the war against the Japanese and against the KMT. These led to largely successful outcomes and are thus mainly positive. The lessons from the Taipings in conjunction with other factors led to the CCP gaining the upper hand in the conflict with the KMT and ultimately resulted in the creation of China as we know it today. Without these valuable insights, the CCP may not have been able to attain the success that they did in 1949. In conclusion, in the immediate aftermath and the short term, the legacies of the Taipings are mostly negative. However, looking at the impacts in the longer term on the CCP, these legacies are mostly positive.

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1. ‘With critical sectors of agriculture inoperable, an unprecedented number of refugees and migrants, as well as the destruction of the academies, government offices, libraries, orphanages, market places and millions of private homes throughout Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Fujian, Anhui, Hunan and Guangdong, the challenged of the reconstruction appeared overwhelming’ (Crossley, 2007, p. 117) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Hong took a short trip back to Thistle Mountain in Guangxi, where he discovered that Feng Yunshan, in his absence, had gathered several thousand Hakka believers into the Society of God Worshipers’ (Reilly, The Protestant Bible and the Birth of the Taiping Christian Movement, 2004, p. 67) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘In its ideal form, the xiangguan structure of administration was part of a political, military and religious hierarchy modelled after the classical system of local control described in the *Zhouli*.’ (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 382) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘The men appointed xiangguan in the Jiangnan were of backgrounds and stations in life as diverse as the categories in this recruitment notice’ (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 382) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 396) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 399) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 399) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘The Qing efforts to repulse the Taiping were uphill struggles in the early years’ (Spence, 1991, p. 146) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘It also acknowledged the dynasty’s increased reliance on (Han) militia irregulars as a result of the declining military prowess of the banner forces.’ (Meyer-Fong, 2013, p. 140) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ‘Zeng’s efficiency as the commander was hampered by the chronic lack of funds. His situation improved, however, when he was given official sanction to take control of the tax revenues in the provinces where his armies were operating.’ (Spence, 1991, p. 146) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ‘The entire imperial war against the Taiping was now in Zeng Guofan’s hands’ (Platt, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. ‘Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, Zuo Zongtang and other governors did not disband their armies at the end of the Taiping War’ (Crossley, 2007, p. 119) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘the end of the Taiping War did not mean the end of the empire’s battle against rebels and rebel kingdoms’ (Crossley, 2007, p. 119) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ‘On February 12, pressured by Prime Minister Yuan Shikai, who had come to terms with the southern party, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty announced his abdication, thus ending autocratic monarchy’s rule in China’ (Esherick & Wei, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ‘the court recalled Yuan Shikai from his retirement to lead the dynasty's defense, counting on his influence as the army's founder to keep it loyal to the dynasty. Instead, Yuan played both sides of the fence.’ (McCord, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ‘At the same time, this organizational diversity reflected a long-standing dynastic strategy that guarded against military usurpation by preventing the accumulation of too much military power in the hands of any one commander’ (McCord, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ‘Surplus gain would be deposited in the public granaries that were to be set up for each 25-family unit. (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 394) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. ‘Reforms also reduced the size of rural production units and transferred authority to the production team. Teams, cut to approximately 20 to 30 households, replaced giant entities as the basic agricultural labor and accounting units.’ (Friedman, 2005, p. 14) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ‘People’s communes so far established usually have a membership of 10,000 people in each’ (Cheng, 1999, p. 407) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. ‘Mobilisation could be achieved along the lines of the most fundamental contradiction – for example, against the “enemy” provoking the most widespread or acute opposition.’ (Huizer, 1999, p. 12) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. ‘as industrialisation became the main target of the communist government, the people were victims of disastrous experiments’ (Huizer, 1999, p. 13) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ‘the Taipings made prefectural and county cities and large market towns their targets of attack, and these same cities and towns then became the loci of their power.’ (Bernhardt, 1987, pp. 380-381) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ‘To govern the vast countryside that lay beyond their direct control, the Taipings, again much like the Qing, depended on the assistance of Jiangnan residents.’ (Bernhardt, 1987, p. 381) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. ‘the military strategy that had been adopted, particularly in CCP relations with the KMT, namely, to “select only mountainous areas suitable for strategic defence when stationing troops; keep constantly on the alert for surprise attack and sabotage; and do not ask for big cities for stationing troops.”’ (Wu, 1992, p. 83) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. ‘As a fighting force on the battlefield and as a propaganda force or as organisational workers in the rear, the Communists were unrivalled.’ (Wu, 1992, p. 103) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. ‘By August 1945, Chu The boasted that the Red Army was one million strong, backed by a militia of 2.2 million and a population of 100 million people in nineteen liberated areas in as many provinces of China.’ (Wu, 1992, p. 102) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ‘The numerical strength of the KMT, however, was four times greater than that of the CCP in 1945’ (Wu, 1992, p. 102) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)