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# Marx and the Taipings

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*With all the May anniversary dates to mark, we missed the May 5th birthday of Karl Marx (a man to whose thought the Chinese Communist Party still pays homage, even if you wouldn't know it from their economic policies). Had we been on our toes, we might have found a China-specific way to mark that date, like looking back to how Marx, in his journalist mode, wrote about the Taiping Uprising, an event that the CCP would later treat as a precedent for their own revolutionary struggle. Well, in the spirit of better late than never, here's what one of our past contributors, Daniel Little, [had to say about just that subject on a blog of his own](#), in a piece that he's letting us repost in its entirety here...*

By Daniel Little

It is interesting to observe how Europe's greatest revolutionary, Karl Marx (1818-1883), thought about China's greatest revolution in the nineteenth century, the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). We might imagine that this relentless advocate for underclass interests might have cheered for the poor peasants of the Taiping Heavenly Army. But this was not the case. Marx wrote about the Taiping Rebellion several times in the *New York Daily Tribune* and other newspapers, and his analysis and his sympathies are fascinating. His articles are as close to blog postings as one could get in the middle of the nineteenth century; they are topical, opinionated, and pretty revealing about his underlying assumptions.

The Taiping rebellion was enormous in every way: perhaps 20 million deaths, armies approaching a million soldiers, sustained Taiping control of large swatches of Chinese territory and cities, and an extended time duration of fighting (about fifteen years). The American civil war took place during roughly the same time period; and the Taiping rebellion was many times more destructive. It is a truly fascinating period of world history, and one that had important consequences in the twentieth century. (Mao and the Chinese Communists largely represented the Taiping rebellion as a proto-communist uprising.) So how did Marx respond to this social catastrophe? In a thumbnail — his observations show a remarkable blindness to a contemporary historical event that seems tailor-made for the framework of his own theories of history and underclass politics.

In 1853 Marx wrote a piece for the *Daily Tribune* called "Revolution in China and in Europe" that encapsulates his own understanding of what the Taiping revolution was, and what brought it about. He lays the largest causal role on the effects of the Opium Wars a decade earlier. English cannons smashed the appearance of invincible power and authority of the Imperial Chinese state and imposed humiliating conditions on the Chinese nation. "Before the British arms the authority of the Manchu dynasty fell to pieces." And, simultaneously, trade and financial penetration by the European powers occurred in ways that were almost fatally deleterious to the Chinese economy and polity. Forced opium trade led to a rapid depletion of Chinese silver reserves; and the forced availability of English textiles led to severe dislocation for Chinese textile workers. "In China the spinners and weavers have suffered greatly under this foreign competition, and the community has become unsettled in proportion."

Nine years later Marx published another article on the Taiping rebellion, this time in the German newspaper, *Die Presse*. The article, "Chinese Affairs," begins with a pretty remarkable bit of Asiatic stereotyping:

Some time before the tables began to dance, China—this living fossil—started revolutionizing. By itself there was nothing extraordinary in this phenomenon, since the Oriental empires always show an unchanging social infra-structure coupled with unceasing change in the persons and tribes who manage to ascribe to themselves the political super-structure. (442)

In this piece he picks up a somewhat different theme from that of the earlier article. Here he offers an interpretation of the Taiping rebellion against the backdrop of Manchu colonialism: "Why should there not be initiated, after 300 years, a movement to overthrow it?" So the 1853 theory postulates the weakening of the Chinese social order as a chief cause, while the 1862 theory postulates a nationalistic motivation — a desire of Han people to overthrow Manchu rule. (An irony here is that the Taiping movement emerged with key support from Hakka people, a cultural minority within the Han population.)

The interpretation that Marx offers for the occurrence of a vast rebellion in China, then, is largely an exogenous one: war, trade, and European intrusion led to a total disruption of China's social order; Manchu colonial rule created nationalistic unrest; and rebellion ensued.

Marx then goes on to a description of the nature of the rebellion and the rebels.

What is original in this Chinese revolution are only its bearers. They are not conscious of any task, except the change of dynasty. They have no slogans. They are an even greater scourge to the population than the old rulers. It seems that their vocation is nothing else than to set against the conservative disintegration of China, its destruction, in grotesque horrifying form, without any seeds for a renaissance. (443)

There are no agents in this description, no social program, and no agenda for change. Instead, there is only blind violence and destruction. Marx quotes with evident approval the dispatch of Mr. Bruce, the English Ambassador to Peking, who decries the violence and disorder of the Taiping armies. And Bruce's central observation is the violence and rapaciousness of the Taiping armies, stealing or destroying all property in the regions they controlled.

Notice what Marx's analysis does not do. It does not identify the class nature of the Taiping movement. It does not ask what were the social causes that led Chinese peasants to follow the Taiping armies. And it does not ask what was the social program of the Taiping movement. The Taipings are represented as a cipher — just an irrational uprising of millions of passive followers.

So whatever happened to the tools of historical analysis that Marx recommended — the forces and relations of production, the concrete circumstances of class relations, the intimate connection between material conditions of life and political behavior, and the emphasis on exploitation and rebellion? Why was Marx not disposed to ask the basic questions about the Chinese case: who are these people? What are the social relations from which they emerge? And what are they attempting to bring about in their rebellion? Why, in short, didn't we get something more akin to The Civil War in France, with an effort at a detailed social and political analysis of the uprising?

It is hard to escape the answer to this question: it is Eurocentrism in the extreme, and a consequent inability to see the implications of his own categories of analysis for this otherwise intriguing case. This isn't exactly news, of course. But it does underline the importance for today's historians of finding ways of treating world history without imposing the categories of European experience. A China-centered analysis of the Taiping rebellion has a very different look from the sketch we find in Marx's descriptions. (See an earlier posting on historical comparisons for more on this point.)

There is a great deal of very good contemporary historical research on the Taiping rebellion. Here are a handful of good contemporary treatments:

- Cole, James H. 1981. *The People Versus the Taipings: Bao Lisheng's Righteous Army of Dongan*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.
- Kuhn, Philip A. 1970. *Rebellion and its enemies in late imperial China, militarization and social structure, 1796-1864*, Harvard East Asian series, 49. Cambridge, Mass.,: Harvard University Press.
- Kuhn, Philip A. 1977. *Origins of the Taiping Vision: Cross-cultural Dimensions of a Chinese Rebellion*. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 19 (3):350-66.
- . 1978. *The Taiping Rebellion*. In *The Cambridge History of China* v. 10, edited by D. Twitchett and J. K. Fairbank.
- Spence, Jonathan D. 1996. *God's Chinese son: the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Wagner, Rudolf G. 1982. *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision: The Role of Religion in the Taiping Rebellion*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, Univ. of Calif.

These histories bring out many different aspects of the Taiping story, and they don't all agree. They also bring out an element that is entirely missing in Marx's comments — the influence of Christian missionaries on the formation of Taiping ideology. But what they all agree on is that the Taiping movement was socially complex, with a strong ideology, a very specific set of demands about property and social institutions, and pretty complex military relations. And they certainly agree that the relationship between Manchu rule, European colonialism, and internal social factors is far more complex than Marx's story allows.

Both articles discussed here (as well as a large number of postings on India) are included in [Karl Marx on Colonialism & Modernization: His Despatches And Other Writings on China, India, Mexico, the Middle East and North Africa](#), a volume edited and introduced by Shlomo Avineri.

**Tags:** [CCP](#), [Karl Marx](#), [Taiping Rebellion](#)