THE TAIPING REBELLION - Curated Transcript of BBC In Our Time podcast
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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

Rana Mitter, Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China at the University of Oxford,

Frances Wood, Head of the Chinese Section at the British Library,

Julia Lovell, Lecturer in Chinese History at Birkbeck, University of London.

Producer: Thomas Morris.

Transcript:

[Melvyn Bragg] Hello. In 1843, a young man called Hong Xiuquan in the southern province of Guandong in China failed his civil service examination for the fourth time. It was this failure which moved Hong to take up arms against the ruling Qing Dynasty and established the Taiping, or Heavenly Kingdom. Inspired by Christian teachings and disillusioned by the miserable plight of the people, Hong cast himself as the brother of Jesus Christ and vowed to purify the nation. The subsequent rebellion was to last for almost 14 years and struck a mortal blow right at the heart of the Qing imperial forces. It's estimated that more than 20 million people lost their lives. Why was the Taiping Rebellion so successful for so long, and what did it ultimately achieve? With me to discuss the Taiping Rebellion are Rana Mitter, Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China at the University of Oxford, Frances Wood, Head of the Chinese Section at the British Library, and Julia Lovell, Lecturer in Chinese History at Birkbeck, University of London.

[Melvyn Bragg] Rana, what was the political situation like in China for the Qing Dynasty before the Taiping Rebellion broke out in 1851?
So, the middle of the 19th century, what's going on?

[Rana Mitter] Well, the Qing Dynasty had been one of China's greatest and most flourishing dynasties. But by the middle of the 19th century, a whole variety of different factors were causing it to fall apart. For instance, the British were bringing opium into the country and helping to break down a lot of the social norms of the country, essentially by spreading a form of drug addiction within the country. Internally, the country simply wasn't bringing enough taxes to keep the number of armed forces and bureaucrats and other structural factors together. So, essentially, we're talking about a great empire that was slowly collapsing from within and being pushed from outside. And in this situation, there was the right possibility of social turmoil.

[Melvyn Bragg] Two factors here. One is they were regarded as intruders. Even though they come in in 1644 and taken over, they were Manchus, and that, as I take it, that was always resented. And secondly, Voltaire called them "the most perfect state imaginable". They were at a very high state of civilization not long before all this broke out...

[Rana Mitter] Absolutely. The Qing Dynasty has, in a sense, a brand name that falls very fast because although they were originally a nomadic people, (as you said, Melvyn, the Manchus, who literally came in on horseback from the northeastern plains into the central part of Chinese civilization) very quickly they acclimatized and ... acculturated themselves to the way in which most Chinese had lived over centuries, as well as keeping some of their own ethnic customs. And as a result of this, they adapted to things, for instance, like the use of civil service examinations to allow entry to the bureaucracy and that becomes important in the Taiping story. Now, this is long before the British, for instance, used examinations for entry to the civil service here. This is a tradition that actually had many hundreds of years of history in China. And even though they were men on horseback, the Qing dynasty adapted to that system very fast. So it was that system that people like Voltaire and the Enlightenment luminaries were looking at and thinking we could learn from these people and do better.

[Melvyn Bragg] And their culture, of course, their pottery, for instance.

[Rana Mitter] Absolutely. I mean, again, Jingdezhen, particularly in the previous Ming Dynasty really, became a town in southern China that was known globally for sending out that famous blue and white pottery which we still associate with Chinese porcelain. Again, one of the first Chinese brand names on a global level.

[Melvyn Bragg] And a deeper background to this, the population had doubled in a very short time and that put immense strain on the social network, the feeding network, and so on. So that was disruptive.

[Rana Mitter] Hugely so. In the 18th century, just 100 years, we estimate that the population started at 150 million people and went up to 300 million. So that's doubling. And yet the system of taxation, bureaucracy, sewage, whatever you want to think of, did not keep pace with that growth. And that created a lot of impoverished and hungry

young men, in particular, people who had no prospect of getting married, for instance, and therefore created a very unstable social situation at the grassroots.

[Melvyn Bragg] The prospect of not being married was fortified by the fact that young girls, baby girls, tended to be killed.

[Rana Mitter] Well, two things happened I think we can exaggerate. It is certainly the case that female infanticide was known and fairly regular in Chinese society, but we shouldn't exaggerate the level. One of the other things that's very important is that rich men would take more than one wife, sometimes known as concubines, and that would mean that if, say, one rich man had four or five consorts, then, of course, the number in quote marks "to go round" for the poorer male population was, of course, much less. And this, of course, was a great disgrace in traditional Confucian Chinese society, not to be married, not to have children, not to have successors who would look after your grave and your memory after you had died.

[Melvyn Bragg] Then we seemed to have had a run of plagues, droughts, crop failures, all that meshing in. Frances Wood, how much influence did Christian missionaries have in China in the 1840s? And how free were they to rove around?

[5:16]
[Frances Wood] ..I think if you ask the missionaries, of course, they'd say it was "enormous", but in fact, they had very little [freedom to rove around]. You have the great ...Catholic missions in the 17th and 18th century...

[Melvyn Bragg] The Jesuits?

[Frances Wood] Yes, but the Protestant mission movement in China doesn't really get going till the very beginning of the 19th century, and then it's illegal and everything is done through outside printing, is done in ...[?]; it's underground almost, in effect. Pf course, missionaries push and push and push, but it isn't until you've had the signing of the treaties at the end of the Opium Wars in the 1840s that missionaries are allowed into China. So it's a very short period of time in which the Taiping ideology could build up on the basis of Christianity. And I think it's partly a matter of geography that Hong Xiuchuan comes from Guangdong Province and it is in Hong Kong and that area that the major early missionary activity takes place.

[Melvyn Bragg] As this young man started the whole thing, can you tell us a bit about him?

[Frances Wood] He was born in the area very near Guangzhou-Canton. He was born in about 1814 to a fairly prosperous farming family, but he was a Hakka. They're called the "guest people" in China...[and] he was, in a sense (not as much as the Qing) ... was a sort of outsider, because the Hakka are ... internal [Chinese] migrants, if you like. And though his family is supposed to have moved to this area about 800 years previously, they were still regarded as outsiders by the local people. So he comes from this Hakka group. He is, however, obviously very intelligent because he is chosen from his family to go and take the imperial exams. A farming family want to have a son who passes the bureaucratic exams and therefore achieves considerable status in the local society, but the poor man fails at least four times...We know he was about five foot five

and quite good looking, apparently fairly well fleshed [but] one of the things ...that's probably important about what happened with the movement (but we know nothing about) is his charisma and he must obviously have been a very charismatic character.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we return to those exams for a moment? Because, it seems he failed exams four times - "oh [what] a loser". But we're talking about an exam system which was ferociously difficult, and less than 1% of people who applied got through, and inside that, 1% were privileged persons. So somebody coming from a small farming background down near Hong Kong might not have had much of a chance, clever as he might have been.

[Frances Wood] ...I think there was a slight sort of favour towards the Hakka - they were allowed a slightly higher percentage of marks. But ...fundamentally, it was almost impossible to pass and Chinese literature is just full of people who spent their entire life trying to pass the exam.

[Melvyn Bragg] So ...their entire life - they just kept taking it?

[Frances Wood] Yeah.

[Melvyn Bragg] That's the way to live, isn't it?

[Frances Wood] If your family can afford it.

[Melvyn Bragg] Now he found Christianity, or it found him. What do we know about that encounter between Christianity and Hong and what did he get from it? What was his Christianity?

[Frances Wood] What we know is that at one point, when he was in Canton trying to take the exams, he picked up a pamphlet written by a Chinese convert, Liang A-fa, who'd worked with many of the ... major missionaries in the Canton area. He's supposed not to.

Protestant missionaries, mainly Protestant?

[Frances Wood] Oh, this is entirely Protestant down here. Yes, ... but all sorts [of Protetants]. I mean, you've got fights between the London Missionary Society and the American Baptists...[etc] But he doesn't seem to have read [the pamphlet] at first. But then another time, he was taking the exams and he fell into a delirium, he had a fever, he was delirious, and something about the pamphlet entered his head. And in his delirious dreams, God came to him and informed him that he was also his son. He was Jesus Christ's younger brother.

[Melvyn Bragg] And he took that on board.

[Frances Wood] He took that on board, believed it firmly, and obviously saw that he had a cause. He was a messiah.

[Melvyn Bragg] But just to get this absolutely straight, what was the basis for his Christianity? Did he read the New Testament? Did he know it well? Had he any

acquaintance with the Old Testament or the Ten Commandments? What did he know of Christianity to make him declare himself a Christian and the brother of Jesus Christ?

[Frances Wood] At this stage, it's simply Liang A-fa's pamphlet. I mean, Liang A-fa wrote quite well, and he wasn't too "off the beam", if you like. But then, in about 1847, Hong goes to, as it were, ...follow an American Baptist, from Tennessee, Jacox Issachar Roberts who was a fairly strict Baptist. And ... already at that time it becomes clear that Hong's ... view of Christianity, quite apart from considering himself Jesus Christ's younger brother, may have been a bit skewed, because Roberts apparently originally promised to baptize him, full immersion and so on, and then refused. We're not quite sure why, but it does seem as if Roberts, at this early stage, had some doubts as to the validity of Hong's Christianity.

[Melvyn Bragg] What were the main points of Christianity that Hong went for?

[Frances Wood] I think one of the main ones was his closeness to God. I mean, the personal message. And I think that's fantastically important. Otherwise...

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, I mean, did he believe in salvation? Did he believe in love thy neighbor? Which bits did he take?

[Frances Wood] He took bits of all of those in the sense that when he created the Taiping, he wanted to have equality between men and women, all their valuables should be shared, and so on.

[Melvyn Bragg] Julia Lovell, when he went back after this fourth exam and said he didn't want to do exams anymore, he'd had this vision, he was going to start a new movement, and he went wandering around to start the new movement, and was rejected and thought of as a fool for .. some time, anyway. And then he got going. We could come to that in a moment, because it's astonishing the way he did, as it were, "get going". But what was his vision? What did he want China to be that it wasn't?

[11:21]
[Julia Lovell] Well, the place that he first goes to preach and to get adherents is in southwest China. And this is, I suppose, a classic breeding ground for the kind of impoverishment and social discontent that Rana was talking about before. And what Hong and his associates are promising is something quite simple and quite reassuring to the desperate, dispossessed, often Hakka communities, so ethnic minority communities, that they find there. What they're promising is a radical egalitarian vision in which all are equal. So all the adherents of this new religion are going to be equal before God, they're universal brothers and sisters - food, land and resources will be shared out. Also importantly, from the very start of the movement, there's an intense militancy about it. So families, and also professional groups are bonded together into militia, self defense units and this militancy really grows through the 1840s. I think, to begin with Hong's vision is more a religious one. His idea, at least in theory, is to convert the empire to Christianity. But it becomes increasingly anti-regime, anti-Qing through the 1840s. And by 1850, the Manchus, the Manchu Qing, I think, had been very much identified as the evil demons who have to be expunged, so that a paradise on Earth in China can be achieved.

[Melvyn Bragg] But can we go back to those earlier days? He brought these people together. Before we know it, [from my] reading about this, he's got 10,000 followers. What were they following? Just an extraordinary number. Is this a time when charismatic, millenarian, idealistic, thought, was [what] people would take ...up? ... Did it sweep across the country backwards and forewards? Was he just one of many [prophets], or was he giving them something special? And how was he getting it over that so many came and gathered around him for the ideas he had?

[Julia Lovell] I think, yes, it's true to say that he is one of many potential leaders of rebels existing in China at that time. The same time, I think, the fact that he espouses this foreign alien religion, Christianity, does give an extra iconoclastic edge to his vision for transforming Chinese society. I think it's more of a challenge to the Qing because it's so foreign. But you're quite right, he taps into what you've just called a long standing "millenarian tradition" in Chinese thought. So periodically through Chinese history, at times of social or economic or political crisis, desperate bands of rebels have emerged through the empire. And their idea is that the empire is beset by social decline, moral decline, corruption and so on, and that they will be led by a messiah in a great apocalyptic battle, and after this battle, paradise on Earth, a great peace, will be achieved. And I think it's quite easy to see, if you look at China in the 1840s, all the old millenarian signs seem to be there. There's the economic problems, social decline, of course the catastrophic defeat at the hands of the British in 1842. The signs all seem to be there. So it's a real fertile breeding ground for a set of ideas, such as Hong's.

[14:56]
[Frances Wood] Of course, in the past, it was often Buddhism that inspired [millenial movements in China]. And of course, that's what's different, that [Hong] takes Christianity.

[Melvyn Bragg] Yeah, just one more thing... [The Chinese were] catastrophically beaten by the British, drugs, as it were, [were] being forced [into China]. [The Qing Empire has demonstrated that they] can't defend their borders, [with an associated] loss of face and all that. But one more thing about this before we move on, Christianity was alien, as Frances was saying... in the sense that it was a single religion, if you were Christian, you couldn't have any other religion, it was above the Emperor and the Empire. This wasn't the way that Chinese syncretic religions in China worked [where, for example,] you could be a Buddhist and a Daoist at the same time. So Hong was forcing through ...an "alien" religion [in your words] wasn't he?

[15:37]
[Julia Lovell] Yes. And obviously Frances knows a lot more about the syncretic tradition than I do. But I think the thing that we have to keep in mind with particularly 19th century China, is its tremendous pragmatism. It's at this time, [that] in the West, a lot of quite hard stereotypes about the Chinese are growing up - that they are xenophobic, that they're anti-foreign, they're conservative, traditional. But actually, if you look on the ground at what's going on at China at the time, you see an astonishing pragmatism. And particularly in South China, when people are used to contact with the foreigners, they're used to trading, they're used to alternative sets of ideas, reading translations of foreign newspapers and so on and so forth.

[Melvyn Bragg] Frances, do you want to come in and finish what I interrupted ... and then I'll go to Rana.

[16:26]
[Frances Wood] Well, I was going to agree with Julia very much that in the past, millenarianism, which does occur whenever you've got social and economic unrest, was largely based on bizarre ideas, based on Buddhism. And I think Julia is absolutely right to talk about the extraordinary importance of Western ideas. I mean, the West is doing good things and bad things in China at the time. It's disrupting things like traditional shipping routes, bringing in steamers, so that you've got an awful lot of unemployed boatmen who will join Hong Xiuquan. They add to the growing army. So foreignness is very important.

[Melvyn Bragg] Rana?

[17:00]
[Rana Mitter] I think it's those two things which actually get to the heart of [the question of] why Christianity [is so important in gaining traction for Hong's movement], remembering that over and over again, it's the outsiders in society, both ethnically and in terms of unemployment, who are being called to it. And also something we just need to add to the mix, in the ideology of the Taiping, one of the big selling points for Hong Xiuquan is that he really takes aim at the traditional Confucian-based nature of society. He essentially equates Confucius, the traditional philosopher of China, pretty much with the devil in the Christian tradition, along with the Manchus, who were also devils, the Qing dynasty. And by doing this, by creating someone to hate, I mean, this is really kind-of ... "eliminationist" language that he uses. He wants them put to the sword. He's able to concentrate this outsider feeling into a religious ideological weapon.

[Melvyn Bragg] Julia talked about them becoming militias. And by about 1850, they're organizing for war and conquest, as well as organizing for a heavenly society. Can you talk a bit about the way in which they did organize themselves? Again, it's sort of mysterious that, as it were, out of poverty, hopelessness and nothing, they spring up (but we might come back to that). How did they organize themselves?

[18:07]
[Rana Mitter] Yes, well, it really was the "church militant". I mean, literally in this particular case, essentially what they did, as with so many other aspects of their ideology, was to also draw on traditional forms of organization, but adapt them. China had ...over the centuries ...[had alternated]... waves of very strong imperial central government ...[with] periods of great weakness. In the times of weakness, it was traditional for local elements of society, particularly what you might call the local elites, sometimes known as the gentry...

[Melvyn Bragg] Warlords?

[Rana Mitter] "Warlords" actually suggest perhaps higher levels of central control than there would have been. Now we're talking about really very local, bottom up type society here. This is one of the things, again, we shouldn't be misled into thinking that the great Emperor sits on the throne and controls everything that goes on in China. Rather, there's an awful lot of grassroots activity. And so in places like this isolated

Hakka community in southwestern China, Hong Xiuquan and his followers were able to kind-of get together and bind people together with the ideology, into taking up arms, training and drilling themselves. This also came from the great

[Melvyn Bragg] Did he do it or did he have people? He doesn't seem to be the chap who organised that sort of stuff. He seems to be the charismatic "come and join us, come and join us" [leader]. Who was sorting out this militia?

[Rana Mitter] Yes, absolutely. He has a variety of other people. For instance, Yunshan Feng [?], who becomes one of his well, I was about to say "followers" [but] also "rivals" ,... in a sense, and other people within this Hakka community who have a much greater sense of things such as military organization,... administration and the practicalities that are needed to turn something from an apocalyptic message into an actual social movement. So although [Hong Xiuquan] declares himself to be the heavenly leader, very soon, he has a whole coterie of other leaders around him who handle these more practical matters.

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you want to develop that? Julia lovell the internal structure of what became the Taiping military movement

[Julia Lovell] Yes...

[Melvyn Bragg] It began to conquer, didn't it? Began to move across China and fed itself on victories and was joined by those it conquered

[20:05]
[Julia Lovell] That's right. And of course, because it's a civil war, with every town that they conquer, they acquire arms, silver and more followers, of course. So it snowballs...

[Melvyn Bragg] To an enormous number. We begin quite soon to talk about a million people. (You people do, in the notes, I've read.)

[Julia Lovell] That's right. And, well, you just need to look at the record of military conquest. By 1853, they've taken this great prize, Nanjing, which is an ancient capital of the Chinese dynasty. And Nanjing is absolutely key strategically, because it's the city in the southeast where the tribute grain starts travelling up the Grand Canal to Beijing. So to hold Nanjing is to hold the Qing Empire by the throat, as it were. In terms of the organization of the Taiping movement, of course it's important to remember it's intensely autocratic. At the top there are these heavenly kings, of which Hong Xiuquan is one, and their claims to divine status come from the fact that they regularly fall into trances, during which God communicates policy changes.

[Melvyn Bragg] Is this the Christian God is communicating or is he a mixture of Christian and is he still a clearly Christian God? You're shaking your head, you're nodding, where do I go?

[Julia Lovell] No, I'm agreeing. He's still their version of the Christian God,

[Rana Mitter] But he's a very confucian Christian God. I mean, the ideas like sort of obeying your parents, filial piety, they exist, of course, in the Christian Bible, but they're given a very traditional Chinese term.

...

[Rana] ,.. Julia had mentioned this victory in 1850. Can you be more specific about it? And that begins what is a 14 year long time civil war [with], we are told ... 20 million deaths, [can you discuss the beginnings] ...[of this] war?

[20:13]
[Rana Mitter] So the capture of this ancient capital of Nanjing, which Julia has mentioned, is essentially the turning point for the Taiping. It is the moment when they switch from being an insurgent, almost, you might say, revolutionary movement, to actually being an alternative state on Chinese territory. And I think that's the way that we have to think about the Taiping for those 14 years as an alternative rival to the imperial Chinese government. And the reason we should think of it that way is because, as we'll probably discuss in a moment, the foreigners including the British, actually spent a lot of time scratching their heads, thinking, which of these Chinese regimes should we support? And one of the reasons that they thought that is that very quickly, another character we haven't mentioned yet, also called Hong, who's a cousin of Hong Xiuquan, Hong Rengan, becomes essentially the Prime Minister of this new Taiping Tianguo, the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace". And he puts forward the ideas that are supposed to solidify the movement. In other words, setting up a new type of government based on this idea of Christian doctrine, but also with, for example, a banking system, post offices, the building of railways, which will increase communications around the Taiping areas. He wanted newspapers set up so that news could be spread. And all of these things were set down and brought to the Heavenly King as a set of policy strategies. And one of Hong Rengan, the Prime Minister's, reasonings was that if they did this, then they would be able to attract international recognition, they would be able to declare that the Taiping was actually a stable, reliable state.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can I come back to our founder, Julia Lovell - Hong? Is he rather pushed aside now? Does he still have an influence once it becomes ... now a civil war, powerful rebellion, a mighty thing? [Perhaps people might say] "We'll have him there for his original purpose, but actually we're getting on with building up a big army and taking big cities and moving forward"?

[24:00]
[Julia Lovell] As Francis said, we can infer. He was an intensely charismatic man, but as a ruler, he was also increasingly unpredictable, as you would expect from someone who expresses policy decisions through falling into a trance and having God speak through him. I think one of the key points to make about Hong's rule is how "double standarded" it was. In fact, on the one hand, the Taiping philosophy was an intensely puritanical aesthetic one. It made very, very harsh demands on its subjects. For example, it wanted to abolish private property exploitation, everything was to be collectivized and supposedly for the common good. [There were] very harsh laws against drinking, smoking of tobacco or opium dancing. The sexual behavior of the followers was also very, very harshly regulated. The sexes were segregated, in fact,

entirely, I think until 1855, when that policy was resigned because it was bad for morale. But at one point, sexual relations, even between married couples, ... husbands and wives, carried the death penalty. So on the one hand, there's this very harsh moral stance, but it seems to be there was one rule for the ruled and another rule for the rulers. So Hong Xiuquan already, even when they're in the wilderness, he's calling his sort of rather modest hut the "Dragon Palace". And when he's carried into Nanjing, on this great triumphant entry in 1853, he's carried in on a great yellow silk sedan chair with 16 bearers, and it's flanked by lots of beautiful women, twirling yellow silk parasols. And once ensconced in Nanjing itself, he very much retreats behind his palace walls, he surrounds himself with an enormous harem - so, again, another sort of double sexual standard there. In fact, in his palace, he has no men at all, it's entirely peopled by female officials and female servants. He's particularly obsessed with hygiene, clean towels, that kind of thing.

[Melvyn Bragg] ...Frances, do you want to come in here?

[26:22]
[Frances Wood] ..I was going to say that it's very important that he does retreat and that you have Hong Rengan, as it were, the acceptable face, so that you do have an extraordinary division. I mean, people don't see Hong Xiuquan at this time. Foreigners are all piling in to Nanjing, wanting to understand [the Taiping]. You get the British from Hong Kong, the French are coming, and they all want to visit, but they never get to see the man himself anymore. All matters are handled by Hong Rengan.

[Melvyn Bragg] Rana, they seemingly advanced without much trouble towards Shanghai. Why didn't the Qing do more to stop them? Or did it try and fail?

[26:57]
[Rana Mitter] The Qing essentially tried and failed. Again, this was a moment of realization, and really horrific realization, for the Qing Dynasty. Remember, we said right at the beginning that let's say 150 years before, 200 years before, the Qing Dynasty were nomadic warrior people. I mean, they were the Manchus who came in, and this was part of a very long standing tradition. Now, as the Qing themselves saw it, at the highest levels, becoming part of Chinese civilization, becoming settled, sedentary, part of that more Confucian system had also made them soft. They were more interested in reading books, than fighting and putting themselves to arms. And while there was a certain element of mythmaking in that, it certainly was the case that by the mid 19th century, the Qing armies, the "National Army" you might almost say, was not the honed fighting force that had been in the two centuries before. And so when they tried to fight the Taiping, which they certainly did, they kept losing, and this made the Qing realise that they had to do something about their military and fast.

[Melvyn Bragg] Before we go into that, Francis Wood, what are the Western missionaries saying about Taiping? In a sense, they're "their boys" aren't they? Christianity has made a huge wedge into China - that's one ... rather cruel [way of]... looking at it. What happened there?

[28:07]
[Frances Wood] I think, absolutely, [the western missionaries] are, at the beginning, very enthusiastic, and that enthusiasm is not just amongst missionaries, but also

amongst the merchant classes in Shanghai. I mean, people look upon this. Christianity is obviously essential to the, as it were, the Western outlook. And it also, I mean, eventually it gets into the Times and the Times starts saying, ... "The Qing is over, we have this alternative", as Rana was saying, we've got this alternative administration. So there was considerable enthusiasm at the beginning, but it does wear off because Hong Xiuquan is very much pursuing his own form of Christianity. And though he's not, for example, seen,... he exchanges letters with the Reverend Edkins [?] of the London Missionary Society, who writes large letters to him (because it's widely believed that he's got rather poor eyesight) suggesting that God actually only had one son. What you get is then ...Hong Xiuquan using the "Imperial Red Brush", striking that through - not "only son - I'm the other one". And also, [when people write] that "possibly you've got to think about religion in a slightly figurative sense" - all this is crossed out. "No! Real!" [Hong Xiuquan] says. So Hong Xiuquan himself destroys quite a lot of missionary support that had been there in the beginning.

[Rana Mitter] Just to add, Issachar Roberts, the man who Frances mentioned earlier, actually comes back during the period of the Taiping's highest pomp because he is quite inspired by this idea. And he spends what, about a year or so there? And day by day, his jaw begins to drop as he realises that this vision of Christianity is not remotely what he and his Baptist colleagues were thinking of.

[Melvyn Bragg] Julia Lovell, the Qing realized that they'd lost face abroad by being beaten by the British in the drug wars and they'd lost face at home, their armies couldn't take on the Taiping. So they're in a bad way. They called in Western persons, one of whom was "Chinese Gordon", who reorganized the Qing military forces with Western weapons and Western methods. Can you tell us what effect that had?

[Julia Lovell] I think it does have an important effect in ... turning the tide of Qing defeats at the hands of the Taiping. It's really a strategic miscalculation by the Taiping movement. They decide in the early 1860s they'd like to take Shanghai. Shanghai makes good sense, it's the center of Western trade in China, it's one of the fastest-growing treaty ports which opens after the Opium War. So it's the center of Western wealth and Western military technology in China. And when Taiping armies try to take it, the Western forces in Shanghai ... decide they're going to slip out of their neutrality towards the Taipings and actually repulse this attack. And once the Taiping attack on Shanghai has been repulsed ... European and American commanders... start to train Chinese fighters, Chinese soldiers alongside Western soldiers. They also give the Qing armies access to Western artillery and rifles. And this is really key in the Qing assaults on Taiping-held walled cities in Southeast China, because it means that these once impregnable walled cities are no longer so defensible. Having said that, there is an important Western influence in turning the tide against the Taiping, but there are also internal factors to the Qing armies themselves. What we see in the 1850s and the 1860s in order to suppress the Taiping rebellion, is the emergence of new sorts of provincial armies in the Qing army. So these are organized by ruthless, incredibly well-disciplined local commanders and their units are intensely loyal to these local commanders. So what you're seeing is no longer a hereditary elite ... - the Qing Manchu hereditary elite had declined by the 1840s - but we're seeing local forces with an intense, vested interest in keeping local order.

[Melvyn Bragg] Frances Wood how did the Taiping react to being defeated and being pushed back? Did they blame it on themselves?

[32:38]
[Frances Wood] Well, they tended to regroup. I mean, it took a long time for the Westerners to actually completely destroy them. There's an incredibly long period between their attempts to deal with Shanghai and the event...

[Melvyn Bragg] What's an incredibly long period?

[Frances Wood] Sorry - several years ...[4 years]... between their attempts on Shanghai. They then go in other directions. I mean, at one point they reach within 70 miles of Peking, the Qing capital. And I wanted to just say that we've been talking about the Qing army, we've been talking about the Western armies, which do in the end, of course, defeat the Taipings. But one has to remember that the Qing army, even before its reorganization, was very thinly spread and was dealing with rebellions in the centre of China, in the Southwest of China, was dealing with foreigners, I mean, you get the Second Opium War in the middle of all of this. And in fact, what resists the Taiping, the local resistance. If you take counties near Hangzhou, just south of Nanjing, the Taipings come looking for land, looking for material, sweeping through peasant areas, and the only resistance you get is from the poor, local gentry - the people who've passed the exams. And you get stories in the in 1861, in this Xiaoshan area, for example, one man Tan leads 50 of his lineage, armed mainly with hoes and shovels against a great Taiping force. I mean, the typing are much better organized, much more ferocious. Another one leads 500 members of his lineage. They're all wiped out. Bao village, thousands of people, again armed only with agricultural implements, are besieged. So all over the Taiping area, which is much of sort of central China, you've got the Taipings, endlessly skirmishing, and at the same time as skirmishing, they also destroy things like dykes, sluices and water [ways?], so they cause incredible destruction. And the Qing army and the Western armies seem very far away.

[Melvyn Bragg] Rana, ... the Taiping were, we could say "finally" [defeated]... in 1864 by the Qing Imperial forces. Can you give us some details of their final stand, which was regarded as the bloodiest battle recorded so far in history?

[34:40]
[Rana Mitter] Pretty much. I mean, although we don't have exact statistics, clearly the number of casualties in just three days at the last Battle of Nanjing, their last stand at their capital, had over 100,000 deaths, and we're talking about very brutal, violent deaths. By this stage, essentially, the Taiping leadership had broken down. For instance, Hong Xiuquan, the Heavenly King, had died by this stage, partly because the city had been besieged by the Qing forces. There was no food left.

[Melvyn Bragg] How did he die?

[Rana Mitter] We think that he died of some sort of food poisoning. By what we mean is there was very little eat inside the city. People were gathering herbs and weeds. He actually ordered this. He said there was going to be "manna from heaven". He took a biblical message even in the last days, but unfortunately, there was no manner in the traditional sense, instead, people pulled these weeds together and it seems quite likely

that some of the weeds were poisonous. And he died. He died quite quietly in that sense. He didn't die by the sword. His son, who was just a boy by that stage, was put on the throne in his place. But of course, by this stage, this had very little power, very little significance. And, of course, the besieging of the city meant that essentially the last days had come. But what was noted by the Qing attackers, who essentially [wrote] the records we have to read, because the Taiping left very few.

[Melvyn Bragg] ...[Did they] have Western leaders and Western soldiers?

[Rana Mitter] They don't have Western leaders, they have Western advisors by this stage. The key figures are, as Julia mentioned, these provincial leaders, and the key figure is a man called Zeng Guofan from Hunan Province, essentially a traditional loyal Confucian servant of the Qing. And he basically reformed the army of the province to essentially make it into a fighting force, but with Western advice. So he's besieging Nanjing at this stage. And in the records afterwards, he says, "I never encountered any rebels as brave and as determined as these". And since being a rebel against the emperor is one of the worst things you could do in Chinese tradition, this was quite a compliment. So they went down fighting with blood and the sword.

[Melvyn Bragg] And ...[is it true that] that rather than surrender, they collectively burnt themselves?...

[Rana Mitter] Mass suicides. Again, fighting to the last drop of blood, if possible, partly because they knew that if they were captured, and indeed, having said that many were captured and made prisoners of war, there would be no mercy for them, they would be executed. Interestingly, some of the higher officials who were captured, for instance, Prime Minister Hong Rengan, were given some chance to write down their sort-of confessions and recollections, partly as a means of providing information for the dynasty before they had their heads cut off.

[Melvyn Bragg] Julia, what impact did the rebellion have on the Qing Dynasty, then, after that battle, it slowly peters out. So what influence did it have?

[37:14]
[Julia Lovell] Well, obviously an immediate physical impact. As Francis mentioned, the human destruction caused by the typing rebellion was extraordinary.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we just get to that figure? I know I said it in the introduction and in the trial that "20 million" were killed. Now, how do you arrive at that figure? What evidence do you have for that? ...

[Julia Lovell] Well, the latest Chinese figures, that Ran has been researching actually, say "70 million"...

[Rana Mitter] Well, not personally [researching], but this is one of the I mean, basically, the People's Republic of China, which has taken a very great interest in its recent history, has calculated that if you include children who were never born, so to speak, so the demographic disaster, then you get up to 70 million. That's slightly different from people actually being killed. Essentially, we have to look at things like population

registers. I mean, Imperial China and the Taipings as well were quite good about keeping registration of population for tax purposes. And by looking at how those numbers change, you can make some sort of demographic estimation of how many people were killed, although you have to also factor in things like refugee flight, people who left areas of registration.

[Melvyn Bragg] By and large, you think you can stand up the figure of 20 million.

[Rana Mitter] This is the kind of figure, I think, that we feel is right,

[Julia Lovell] But also tremendous destruction of property as well. I think something like 600 cities are supposed to have been destroyed. China has 18 provinces. I think 16 of those provinces are affected in some way by the Taiping rebellion.

[Melvyn Bragg] Francis Wood can you put the Taiping rebellion in the greater context of Chinese history?

[38:45]
[Frances Wood] I think we've already mentioned rebellions and there were disastrous rebellions towards the end of many dynasties. So that it's, in some ways, if you take a rather boringly, traditional view, you can say it's just another one of those. And it's part of the "cumulative death", if you like, of the Qing Dynasty, because I think it's important to remember that there were many other rebellions, as we were saying, going on at the same time in the Southwest, where people from Dali were hoping to join the British Empire rather than the Qing Emperor at this sort-of time. So [the Taiping Rebellion] helps to finish off the Qing, on the other hand, it does another thing, which is it ...

[Melvyn Bragg] They do last for another 50 years, though, don't they - into the 20th Century?

[Frances Wood] That's quite a short time in Chinese history. [laughter] One of the things I think it does do, which is quite important, which Julia mentioned, is that one of the ways in which the Qing does survive is that it has given huge impetus to the modernization of armies. And it also, I think, does it's all part of the beginning of the attitude of many of the younger, reforming provincial leaders that they want to look at the West, they want to learn from the West, and a lot of this is through armaments and military training. So, in a sense, the Taiping has forced the Qing into much more of an engagement with Western technology.

[39:57]
[Julia Lovell] I think if you're looking at the impact of the Taiping rebellion, you see the seeds of two of the big stories of 20th century China. One is the modernization and the Westernization of the military machine, which will [turn out to] be so much a part of the fight to take control of 20th century China. And the other big story, I think, is decentralization of power, particularly after 1911, when the Qing Dynasty finally falls. In that revolution, China quite quickly fractures into kingdoms which are ruled by local warlords. And I think these men are very much the direct political descendants of these powerful regional commanders who emerged in the 50's to fight the Taipings.

[Rana Mitter] ... [Echoing]... that last point that Julia has made, ...the Taipings essentially, ...triger off this period. I mean, you referred to it as the "warlord period"... earlier, Melvyn, and perhaps we can call it a "period of militarism". It's one of the reasons why today, in the present day and going into the future, the government now, the People's Republic of China, is so paranoid about the idea of the country splitting up or being torn apart from within. Because within the living cultural memory, if not literally the living memory of people, the post Taiping settlement in which the country was in danger of splitting up is very fresh in their minds, and that affects policy today - in the here and now.

[Melvyn Bragg] And Marx made quite a lot of the Taiping, didn't he?

[Rana Mitter] Yes, he had this very colourful phrase. When he heard about it, he was very excited and said that "this might be the blow that would touch the mummified corpse that was Qing China and turn it into dust". It didn't quite work out that way, but you can see why the common property element in particular would inspire him.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, thank you all very much. Thank you, Rana Mitter, Frances Wood, Julia Lovell.... [and] thank you very much for listening.
