

CHAPTER XVII

BY WAY OF SUMMARY

IN the middle of the nineteenth century the Taiping rebellion arrested the attention of the world. It all but ruined the central provinces of China. That so great a catastrophe should have sprung from the brain of a man who, in his palace at Nanking, revealed such meager ability, who was so notoriously dominated by the king of the East and his own feeble relatives, is almost unthinkable. After consideration of all the factors and examination of the sources at hand, I have adopted the theory that the real author of the movement was the man whom the imperialist sources claim to have been the teacher of Hung Siu-ch'üan and Fêng Yun-shan, the man Chu Kiu-t'ao, and that it was he who in the early days of the movement came to be known as the T'ienteh-wang, and at the beginning was supposed to be the chosen emperor to restore the Ming Dynasty. The recently published *Taiping T'ien-kuo Yeh Shi* also asserts that Fêng Yun-shan and Hung Siu-ch'üan followed this Chu, and states that after his death Hung succeeded to the headship of the movement.¹ I believe that this death did not take place until the Taiping host broke out of Yungan and the T'ienteh-wang was captured by the imperialists. He assumed the name Hung Ta-ch'üan, which he himself admitted to be a false one. His confession fits so well into the scheme and so completely supplies the effective

¹ *Taiping T'ien-kuo Yeh Shi*, XII, 13.

motive for this uprising that I have little doubt that he and Fêng—working together on the basis of Hung's supposed revelations from God—organised and planned the revolution, and that only the circumstances of his capture and the death of Fêng soon after brought it into the control of the fanatical elements whose incapacity for rule and whose emphasis of their fantastic religious views proved eventually the undoing of their cause. What might have been a national movement thus became a sectarian outburst which alienated the substantial elements of society, inducing them to support the Manchu Dynasty in preference to so eccentric a group as the Taiping schismatics. It also explains the defection of the Triads who gave their support at first and withdrew from the movement in the very moment when it was bursting forth from the hills of Kwangsi to conquer its way to Nanking. Such a change of front is explicable only on some such theory as that set forth here.

The Western nations were arrested by the news that a Christian state was being set up, that the Taipings accepted the doctrines, from across the sea and had even received instruction from missionaries and invited them to come to Nanking. Not long after their conquest of Nanking representatives of three powers went from Shanghai to study their political and religious views. They discovered their political incapacity and learned that their religion, while ostensibly based upon the Bible, interpreted the Christian Scriptures in the light of Confucian and Buddhist ideas. Moreover, with an almost revolting anthropomorphism, they claimed Deity for Hung, the T'ienwang, proclaiming him the second son of God, while Yang, king of the East, asserted that he was the Holy Ghost and Saviour from Disease. They were possessed with a strong spirit of iconoclasm and gave much attention to the teaching of the Ten Commandments and

the outlines of their faith, while unlimited opportunities for loot kept their armies full. Leadership, however, declined steadily and internal quarrels detached their best captains from the cause. In 1858 new generals of real genius came to the fore, notably the Chungwang and the Yingwang, under whom the waning rebellion gained new life.

Such political, religious, and intellectual weakness on the part of the Taipings would have led to their early downfall had the Chinese government been strong and united. But the earlier rulers of the Manchu Dynasty had made such unity impossible by parcelling out the civil and military power so as to frustrate anti-dynastic uprisings, like that of the famous Wu San-kwei, against whom K'anghsi had so desperate a struggle. Local autonomy was fostered, and the system of government so exaggerated this localism that it became impracticable to mobilise considerable armies. Moreover, the central government had no steady revenues apart from the contribution of the provinces, and the provinces did not furnish enough to support national armies. Governors were therefore unwilling to meet the expenses necessary to equip and maintain strong forces for imperial needs. These handicaps made it all but impossible for Tsêng Kuo-fan to raise armies at all, because he had nothing but high-sounding titles which did not command the needed funds. The governor of Hunan, and somewhat later the governor and viceroy of Hupeh, did give him a measure of support, but it was not until towards the end of the rebellion that his position as viceroy of the Two Kiang, with Li Hung-chang and Tso Tsung-tang as governors under him—both of them his protégés,—provided him with the money needed to increase his levies sufficiently to bring the rebels to bay. When Tsêng Kuo-ch'üan marched to Nanking to begin the siege he had but

twenty thousand men, but by the middle of 1864, when Nanking was captured, some fifty thousand served under his banner. With all the income that he could secure by contributions from various provinces and from his own vice-regal domain, not to mention the sums realised from the sale of honors and patents to official rank, his entire account for the eleven years ending with the fall of Nanking only approximated 21,300,000 *taels*! Here we have a clue to understanding why it required so long to crush this movement.

If we are tempted to regard the work of Tsêng as being too dilatory, as showing too much prudence and caution where dash and energy would seem to have been required, the above-named embarrassments must not be ignored. Nor can we pass over the patent fact that the regulars proved to be utterly useless in this war, and that without the militia the rebellion could not have been suppressed at all. If, then, Tsêng could bring the latter into action only in small groups of a few thousand each, because he lacked the means to secure scores of thousands, and if in addition we recall the fact that the rebels readily enrolled hundreds of thousands of the riffraff of China lusting after loot, we are not justly entitled to lay the fault at Tsêng's door. It was one of the defects of Chinese government which could not be remedied by anyone caught in the system. He had the thankless task of discovering funds for armies as well as of winning victories, and these funds had to be secured often against the will of officials who thought they had better claims to the same funds; and besides jealous confrères, he had to overcome the red tape and vested interests of officialdom until his end was finally gained.

Other exigencies that Tsêng had to face and overcome were: (1) His own lack of military training. He was a civil official and an accomplished scholar—never a cap-

tain of troops. (2) Lack of encouragement, at times amounting to actual opposition from the officials and gentry of the provinces in which he operated, because of his being for much of his career outside the line of regular administration. (3) Friction, at times, with the soldiers and officers of the regular army, who were naturally jealous of this irregular force. (4) His inability, until he became viceroy, to get possession of funds without begging for them from the regular officials. (5) The necessity of withstanding the frequent panics into which Taiping successes or imperial failures threw the Peking government, causing them to order him to abandon strategic positions and chase after some elusive insurgent king. (6) The snares of Taiping commanders more brilliant than he to draw him and his men from their proper objectives. (7) At times, great peril to himself, and at others (what is perhaps almost as important) "loss of face." In all these things he showed himself patient, enduring, and brave.

We must be careful not to claim too much for him. The plans which he so steadfastly carried out sometimes originated with others, in particular the gifted Kiang Chung-yuan and the incompetent Saishanga, to the latter of whom he owed the idea of the "new model" army, and to the insistence of the former, his flotilla. But it was his own skill that surrounded him with a galaxy of faithful and able officers, many of whom reached high rank both during and after the Taiping rebellion—Hu Lin-yi, Pao Ch'ao, Yang Tsai-fu, P'eng Yu-ling, Li Hung-chang, Tso Tsung-tang, Li Han-chang, and his brother, Tsêng Kuo-ch'üan, not to mention a host of lesser lights and several who would have become equally famous had they not succumbed in the struggle. Through the support of such reliable men Tsêng not only brought the Taiping rebellion to a close—and would doubtless have done so with-

out foreign aid—but also gave to China a higher and better type of official than she would have had without his work.

At the close of the war he had become the most powerful official in the land, and his career was the precedent whereby several of those who served under him reached the highest provincial positions without actually passing through the lower grades. This was a radical departure from the usual practice, and one that calls forth comment from Li Ung Bing in his history. Tsêng himself, in the effort to suppress the Nienfei, held for a time power, not only over Chinese soldiers, but even over Manchu Banner-men in the north. And he achieved the suppression of the Nienfei by calling back to his side the same men who had supported him in the earlier war, though Li Hung-chang reaped the glory for which Tsêng had prepared the way. Such a service, both direct and through such men as these, is a sufficient refutation of the sarcasm of Morse² who, speaking of Li and Tsêng, says: "Of the two, Tsêng had been brought little into contact with foreigners, and, if his sense of humour were small, might pride himself on having suppressed the great rebellion without their aid." It furnishes ground also for judging the opinion of Sir Robert Hart, who, as regards Tsêng's settlement of the T'ientsin massacre in 1870, holds that "his general inaction, his fear of the people, and his want of decision have led people very generally to wonder how he won his former laurels, and to think that he is an overrated man, of but mediocre ability (in which opinion I fully concur)."³ From the story of Tsêng and his work during the terrible years from 1853 to 1864—considering all the circumstances—such a reflection seems unwarranted. Sir Robert Hart can have had no

² Morse, *International Relations*, II, 207.

³ Letter to E. B. Drew, September 28, 1870, quoted in *ibid.*, II, 203.

sufficient knowledge of the obstacles overcome, nor do the documents in the T'ientsin settlement itself seem to me to justify his strictures.

As to foreign relations, it is true that Tsêng had not been brought into much contact with Europeans. His early attitude of hostility to them was, however, modified as time went on. His objection to using them in the Chinese armies arose not through anti-foreignism but because he preferred that China should not become entangled in dangerous complications through their employment. He did at times object to the undue extension of foreign trade and methods of communication, but he gave attention to building steamers and, towards the end of his life, advocated the sending of students abroad for study. Some of his letters and memorials show that he kept in touch with foreign politics more closely than the great majority of Chinese officials.

A word may be added on a point which has not been discussed in the body of this book. Was the Manchu Dynasty worth saving? Today Tsêng Kuo-fan does not command the consideration that was once accorded him. The splendid memorial temple erected to him at Changsha has suffered much at the hands of the republican armies which have held the city since 1911—though a part of the gardens has been yielded to the family for a girls' collegiate school, of which Tsêng's great-granddaughter is principal. In the minds of some, his name has been associated with the Manchu Dynasty, which is anathema. But the memories of Chinese patriots are as short as those of all their kind throughout the world. They ignore the unpalatable but certain fact that the voice of the reformer and revolutionist has carried weight in China only since the end of the nineteenth century, and that Tsêng and his army represented the true will of the nation aroused against the Taiping rebels, who struck

at the roots of many of the social and moral customs in the life of the people.

And there is the further fact, that if the rebellion had been successful it would probably have divided the country into two nations, or have brought on more wars, for the north never rallied to the Taiping call as did the south—and despite the success of the revolution of 1911, the country appears to be hopelessly divided today, largely on geographical lines. Such a division would have been a calamity, for then the thought of preserving the territorial integrity of an Asiatic empire was not granted even the honor of lip-service. By holding together the country, even under the Manchu Dynasty, Tsêng gave it power to survive until a day when the empire builders were discredited if not checked. When a happier China realises something of this consideration it may again grant to Tsêng the soldier and Tsêng the statesman what it readily concedes to Tsêng the loyal servant of those whom he served and to Tsêng the Princely Man of Confucius' ideal.