Cross-Cultural Underpinnings of the Taiping Rebellion: Potential Modern Applications

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FORUM

CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE TAIPING REBELLION:
POTENTIAL MODERN APPLICATIONS

Tim Brady

This paper enlarges our understanding of the Chinese culture by exploring the Taiping Rebellion, a bloody uprising in China that resulted when two cultures crossed. The possible applications of the causes of this rebellion to modern efforts by aviation entrepreneurs and educators to enter the Chinese market are explored.

This article is somewhat out of step with the mainstream of information normally presented in JAAER, but to this author's view, it is an important deviation. Why? Because it looks into the essential character of an important civilization that we know very little about, the Chinese, and it provides a glimpse of what has happened in the past when our two cultures have come into significant contact. The contact was one of a religious context. Its result was the Taiping Rebellion in which more than 20 million Chinese lost their lives, more than we Americans have lost in all of our wars combined. Yet in China it's referred to as a "rebellion."

The relevance of this paper to aviation is that it posts warning signs as to what can happen if we are not prepared properly to deal with that great civilization, not on our terms necessarily but on terms that are mutually beneficial. As reported in the June 14, 1993, issue of Aviation Week and Space Technology, China is expected to have the highest growth in air traffic of all Asian countries in the first half of the next decade (Mecham).

The business opportunities and the training and education needs of China that will emerge as a result of this growth signals the need for aviation educators and aviation business leaders to learn more about the Chinese people, their culture, their political philosophies, their religion, and their character. Whether or not we can deal with them successfully depends, in part, on how well we do our homework.

Toward that end this paper seeks to examine the Chinese culture at a time when the Chinese nation was extremely vulnerable to outside influence.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most fascinating cultures one can study is that of the Chinese. The recorded history of China extends more than 2,000 years into the past while artifacts, documents, and other scientific evidence lend credibility to a civilization as far back as 2,000 years B.C.

While it would be difficult to attempt to capture 4,000 years of Chinese cultural history, it is necessary to establish the pattern of Chinese history in order to better understand that culture and to glean from that the potential applications to aviation.

Since the beginning of the Han Dynasty (221 B.C.), Chinese rule has fluctuated on a dynastic cycle with each dynasty governing the country for about 300 years. Each cycle was characterized by a pattern of initial vigor, followed by stability, slow degeneration, and eventual collapse (Fairbank, Reishauer & Craig, 1965). The country would prosper greatly for about 150 years, then start a slow decline characterized by economic and political instability, general unrest, and rebellion. At the time of the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864), the Ch'ing (or Manchu) Dynasty was in the latter stages of
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disintegration (Fairbank, 1946).
American and Chinese cultures collided and sparked the Taiping Rebellion in the persons of Issachar Jacox Roberts, an American Baptist missionary, and Hung Hsiu-ch’uan, the leader of the Taiping Rebellion.

To properly establish the scene, we will consider the cultural backgrounds of Roberts and Hung Hsiu-ch’uan and then investigate the manner in which the paths of the two men crossed and the eventual results.

THE TAIPING REBELLION

The Taiping Rebellion began in 1851, lasted until 1864, and claimed an estimated 20 million Chinese lives (Hoffman, 1993). This figure is approximately 10 times the total number of Americans killed in all wars from the Revolution War to the War in Vietnam (Hoffman, 1993).

The rebellion has been described by some historians as the greatest in human history. In the words of P.M. Yap writing in the Far Eastern Quarterly:
The rebellion has been interpreted variously as a peasant uprising against official corruption, a protest against intolerable economic distress, or simply a nationalistic revolt against the Manchu Dynasty. Be that as it may, there is general agreement that it was a movement unique in Chinese history because it instituted a radical change in the political system which (had) existed for more than two thousand years, and brought economic, social, cultural and religious reforms over the greater part of Central and South China between 1851 and 1864. (1954, p. 279)

The Taiping Rebellion arose in a seedbed of internal discontent caused by a disintegrating dynasty which was unable to prevent the incursions of Western powers. The old order was crumbling and no new order had arisen to supplant it (Latourette, 1946).

Traditionally, the Chinese had always considered themselves "the center of the civilized world, surrounded by peoples of lesser culture" (Hughes, 1938, p. 35). Therefore, the dominance of the Western powers over the ruling dynasty was incompatible with the view that the Chinese had of themselves. This, coupled with the Mandate of Heaven (Fairbank et al., 1965) political philosophy under which the Chinese ruled for 2,000 years, made a rebellion inevitable. The Mandate of Heaven gave the people the right to rise up and overthrow the ruling dynasty when the dynasty lost the ability to govern. The Taipings were convinced that they had secured the Mandate of Heaven and therefore sought to overthrow the Manchus and establish in their place a new dynasty (Yeng, 1971).

As has been the case in most popular rebellions in Chinese history, a religious cult formed the basis of the Taiping movement. Largely due to an accident of history, that cult was based in part on the Protestant Bible (Yeng, 1971). Christianity was not absorbed in total; rather the Taipings used a curious mixture of Christian teachings and Confucian values. The leader of the rebellion, Hung Hsiu-ch’uan, began to preach, to perform baptisms, to convert, and to inject anti-Manchuism into his teachings; his numbers of followers multiplied rapidly.

The rebellion began in the Canton region of China and expanded rapidly. The Taipings captured the city of Nanking and made it their capital and continued to a point within 30 miles of Tientsin, but failed to take Peking (Hughes, 1938). The Taipings maintained control over the greater part of Central and South China from 1851 until 1864, but suffering from decay of leadership, feuds, jealousy, and earlier failures resulting from weak leadership, the rebellion finally collapsed.

HUNG HSIU-CH’UAN

My hands hold in Heaven and Earth the power to punish and kill, to slay the wicked, spare the virtuous, and relieve men’s distress.

From North to South beyond the rivers and mountains my eyes behold.

From East to West to the reaches of sun and moon my voice resounds.

... For now I am King and everything

At will to do I’m free.

As the Sun to the sight of my body shines bright.

And from all affliction we are free.

The Dragon and the Tiger rampant

Are each assisting me. (Yap, 1954, p. 292)

These are the words of Hung Hsia-ch’uan written
after he had convinced himself that he was the second Son of God, a younger brother to Jesus Christ. The third son of a Hakka village headsman, Hung Hsiu-ch’uan was born in 1813 in a village 30 miles from Canton in southern China.

The Han Chinese consider themselves the "true" Chinese and all others inferior. The Hakkas, therefore, fall into this inferior category. Consequently, the term "Hakka" means "stranger families." This attitude toward the Hakkas is reflected in this statement spoken by a Han Chinese:

These stranger-people who came from other places are not uniform in their quality. Owing to the fact that their long wanderings deprive them of education as well as fixed abodes, they become accustomed to employing their superior numerical strength to bully the few. Their presence is a menace to order and security. (Hsiao, 1960, pp. 421-422)

The fact that the Hakkas might have been in the same village for 10 centuries seemed to matter little; they were still, to the Han, stranger-people.

Consequently, Hung Hsiu-ch’uan was not only poor but a Hakka as well.

At school, Hung Hsiu-ch’uan showed promise and when he began to excel, his relatives sacrificed to keep him there. They gave him clothes and pulled his share of the farm labors, and teachers were reluctant to receive fees from him (Yap, 1954). Hung Hsiu-ch’uan hoped to achieve an exalted position through the civil service examinations, one of the few means of achieving upward mobility in rural China.

The system of civil service examinations was established in the Chou Dynasty (1027 B.C.) and was part of the fabric that held China together for 2,000 years (Latourette, 1946). Three sets of examinations, administered over time, were mentally and physically grueling. If a candidate passed all three, he would complete the last exam while in his mid-30s. The exams were equivalent to the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctor’s degrees of Western universities. Passing each exam entitled the examinee to certain privileges and positions not accorded to the other citizenry. Thus the family of the candidate made great sacrifices for the promise of future rewards (Latourette, 1946).

In 1833 Hung Hsiu-ch’uan traveled to Canton to compete in the civil service examinations and failed, and in 1836 failed again. While at Canton in 1836, Hung was given a set of nine Christian tracts translated as: Good words to admonish the age of maxims to persuade the world. These tracts were pamphlets composed of quotations from the Robert Morrison translation of the Bible and paraphrases of scripture put together by a Chinese peddler of devotional literature named Liang Afa (Boardman, 1951). Hung Hsiu-ch’uan only glanced at the tracts (Yap, 290).

In 1837 Hung travelled for the third time to Canton to take the exams and again failed and went into a deep state of grief and depression. Hung Hsu-ch’uan remained in a flaccid, stuporous condition for 40 days and at one point was close to death. During this period, Hung hallucinated and saw visions of Hell and Heaven. In one vision he was taken to a large and luminous place, cleansed, given a new heart, and commissioned by an old man to exterminate the demons who were leading mankind away from the old man’s service. In another vision a middle-aged man (the son of the old man) helped Hung slay the demons (idols) that were pursuing humanity (Latourette, 1946). Later Hung told his parents, “The venerable Old Man above has commanded that all men shall turn to me, and all treasure shall flow to me” (Yap, 1954, p. 290).

After a fourth examination failure and upon his return to his native village, Hung rediscovered the Christian tracts. On reading them, he realized that the old man of his visions was God and that the younger man was Jesus Christ. Further, he realized that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ and was placed on this earth to bring the Chinese people to God (Yap, 1954). Hearing of a missionary in Canton, and yearning to increase his knowledge of his new-found religion, Hung sought out Issachar J. Roberts (Purden, 1975).

ISACHAR JACOX ROBERTS

It pleases the Lord in the spring of 1834, deeply to impress my mind with the duty of becoming a missionary to the heathen; and in Feb. 1835, I resolved, in the strength of the Lord to go as such in China. (Purden, 1975, p. 4)
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With these words, Issachar Roberts decided upon a missionary career to China that would last for 30 years. Roberts was born in 1802 in frontier Tennessee. The rigors of frontier life and the stern Protestantism under which he was reared shaped his life and affected his missionary work which was to come. Roberts studied at the Furman Academy and was ordained a Baptist minister in 1828. From the academy, he went to Mississippi to preach and supplemented his income by practicing the trade of saddle-making; somehow he managed to accumulate property worth $30,000 (Leng, 1963).

It was during Roberts’ stay in Mississippi that he decided to become a missionary. His first choice of countries was Liberia but finally he chose China instead. Rejecting the rules and regulations of the Baptist Missionary Board from which he had sought funds and was denied, Roberts used his property as a capital foundation and established the Roberts Fund and China Mission Society (Purden, 1975).

In 1836 Roberts sailed from Boston to Macao and since China proper was closed to foreigners, spent time learning the language and began preaching in a Chinese leper colony in Macao. While there, Roberts defied requests of the missionary board to send journals of his work home and continued his craft of saddle-making. Roberts was at times even at odds with the other Baptist missionaries in Macao (Coughlin, 1972).

In 1842, when China ceded Hong Kong to Britain, an American mission was established. Roberts and other missionaries went to Hong Kong. Disliking his boorish ways, the other missionaries managed to get Roberts transferred to a small village on the south side of the island. There Roberts preached while continuing to badger the officials to let him go to Canton. The Treaty of Nanking (1842) had opened China to foreign powers, and Roberts was eager to bring his version of the word of God to the Chinese heathen masses (Purden, 1975).

In 1844 Roberts’ request to enter China was approved and he established the first mission in Canton. Roberts adopted Chinese dress and established a day school for girls and a boarding house for boys. Roberts was thoroughly convinced of his personal mission to save China and was stubbornly opposed to any help.

However, in 1845 the Baptist Missionary Board sent another missionary to Canton to help out. Roberts refused to work with the man and even went so far as to maintain a separate mission by himself. In 1847 a failed candidate of the civil service examinations, Hung Hsiu-ch’uan, came to study under Roberts (Coughlin, 1972).

CULTURES CROSS

When Hung Hsiu-ch’uan learned of the American missionary in Canton he traveled there in order to study the Christian religion and probably to reinforce what he had resolved in his own mind about his visions.

The first meeting between Hung Hsiu-ch’uan and Roberts was a fulfilling one for each. Roberts felt that if he were to reach the Chinese people and bring them to Christianity it would be through his Chinese disciples. In Hung he had found the perfect candidate. Hung was well-educated and intelligent, and had a special quality of personal magnetism. Hung Hsiu-ch’uan told Roberts of his visions and Roberts was elated. In a letter home that year, Roberts wrote that Hung’s story had given him "the most satisfaction of any Chinese experience I have ever had" (Coughlin, 1972, p. 55).

Hung Hsiu-ch’uan studied under Roberts for a period of about two months during which time he became convinced of the thoroughness of Hung’s conversion and prepared to baptize him. Unfortunately, two of Roberts’ Chinese assistants became extremely jealous of Hung’s favor and persuaded him to approach Roberts to inquire of certain facts concerning future employment. The two assistants knew Roberts well and plotted to discredit Hung in Roberts’ eyes. Hung Hsiu-ch’uan took the bait and approached Roberts, who became furious and refused to baptize Hung. Badly in need of money, Hung was forced to leave the mission (Purden, 1975). Roberts had assumed that Hung was, in reality, a “rice Christian” who had feigned conversion merely to ensure himself of funds and food, and refused to accept Hung’s pleadings to the contrary.

Consequently, Hung Hsiu-ch’uan, with his limited knowledge of Christianity, began to preach his version of it. He named his movement the Taiping tien-kuo or Heavenly Kingdom of the Great Peace, and, as its leader, took the title of Tien-wang, or Heavenly King (Fairbank et al., 1965).
In constructing his religion, Hung Hsiu-ch’uan borrowed from the Old Testament (with interpretations) but not from the New Testament. Basically the illustrations from the Old Testament were confined to three episodes: the creation, the flood, and Israel out of Egypt. The Ten Commandments, as modified, became the central feature of moral instruction. To demonstrate how the Commandments were culturized, we can look at the way the Taiping religion used the Seventh Commandment which forbids adultery. They expanded it to include strict separation of the sexes, rules against the casting of amorous glances, rules against the keeping of lustful thoughts, prohibitions against the smoking of opium, and stringent rules against the singing of licentious songs (Boardman, 1951). In the main, the "Biblical component of the Taiping religion was used as an effective instrument of mass control and an important factor in Taiping military success" (Boardman, 1951, p. 123).

While Hung was building the foundations of the rebellion, Roberts continued his missionary work in Canton. In 1849 Roberts returned to the United States, married, and returned to China. When the American Baptists had split earlier over the issue of slavery, Roberts had aligned himself with the Southern Baptists, who, in turn, supported his China mission. When Roberts returned to China, he had already exhausted his own funds and now was relying almost exclusively on support from the Southern Baptist Missionary Board. The board had directed that Roberts assist an elderly missionary who shared quarters with an unmarried female missionary. One Sunday morning after Roberts left to preach to the Chinese congregation, the elderly missionary took his life by slashing his throat with a razor. Mrs. Roberts and the female missionary were terrified and sent a note to Roberts by the houseboy. Roberts wrote in reply: "Let the dead bury the dead, I must preach the gospel. He has enough of his own board to attend to him" (Purden, 1975, p. 9).

Understandably, the board wasn’t appreciative of Roberts’ action and for this and other acts, Roberts was dismissed. Once again he was without institutional support, but the paths of Issachar Roberts and Hung Hsiu-ch’uan crossed again. Roberts found that the leader of the rebellion raging in South China was none other than his old pupil, Hung. Shortly after, a letter arrived from Hung Hsiu-ch’uan inviting Roberts to come to Nanking and preach. Roberts was elated, but without institutional support, and with the demand for missionary-made saddles low, Roberts was without funds. He immediately sent out scores of letters to America requesting private financial support for the great undertaking; he had sought the key to the heart of China for 15 years and now it was within his grasp. Efficiently rationalizing his first interpretation of Hung’s behavior, Roberts envisioned his former student as the salvation of China. For Roberts, however, another disappointment was in the making.

The official attitude of the United States was not to support the Taiping rebels but to support the Manchu government with whom all trade agreements had been negotiated. The American foreign minister would not allow an American missionary to coddle the rebels, but Roberts refused to accept the edict and tried to reach Nanking anyway. However, naval action on the Yangtze River prevented him from reaching his goal (Coughlin, 1972).

Roberts returned to America, and for the next two years he worked, waited, and drummed up support for his China mission. During this time, most missionaries in China and many back-home Americans supported the Taipings, thinking that it was a true Christian-inspired rebellion. However, following the Treaties of Tientsin and Peking at the conclusion of the Arrow War (1860), American sentiment began to shift away from the Taipings and toward the Manchus. This shift was due in part to the trade concessions made by the Chinese government and in part to tales emerging from China of Taiping in-fighting and cruelties. Roberts, however, remained convinced that the Taipings could provide solutions to the problems to which he had devoted much of his life.

Roberts returned to Canton where for the next five years he attempted to reach the Taipings in Nanking. Finally, in October 1860, he reached Nanking but as far as he was concerned, there was no Christianity and to his horror he found that the Taipings considered the Holy Trinity to be God, Jesus Christ, and Hung Hsiu-ch’uan.
Hope died hard within Roberts, but it died. Hung, in an effort to retain Roberts, tried to persuade him to act as foreign minister, a post Roberts refused. With the Taiping Rebellion crumbling, Roberts fled Nanking, barely escaping the hand of Hung's brother who had Roberts' murder in mind.

Roberts remained in China until 1866, having never accomplished his goals. Finally he returned to the United States. Roberts' life ended as it existed, on a tragic note. His wife deserted him; his children disclaimed knowledge of him; and he died from the effects of leprosy, ironically a disease he contracted during his first encounter with the Chinese (Yeng, 1971).

Hung's life also ended tragically. When the Taiping Rebellion was in the latter stages of disintegration, Hung must have realized that he could never be the Mandate of Heaven. He committed suicide by swallowing gold coins.

**SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS**

In the patchwork evolution of cultures colliding, scraping against one another, and to some degree merging, one can rarely point to specific events or specific personalities with the genuine assertion that one event or one person made a change in culture a reality.

Hung Hsiu-ch'uan was not a product of himself but rather of his culture. Some historians assert that Hung was insane (Yap, 1954). Perhaps so. But to understand his life is to understand the culture from which he emerged. There were few means for the poor to achieve high position in the Chinese society, so when Hung Hsiu-ch'uan showed promise, he was urged, pushed, and constantly harangued by members of his family. He had been culturally conditioned toward achievement of a goal which was, for him, impossible within the existing social system. When the system failed to allow him to achieve that goal, his mind created a means to bypass the system. Here again the system, or culture, worked to the advantage of his new goal. Having been educated in the classics, he was well aware of the Mandate of Heaven political philosophy, and he knew also that the Manchu Dynasty was dying. The trappings of Christianity were all Hung needed as a means of reinforcement to convince him that he was to be the God-creature that would lead his country into a new social system, a new dynasty.

From a cultural viewpoint, Hung's actions were understandable.

So too were the actions of Issachar J. Roberts. He had been reared in the staunchly Protestant, almost puritan, environment of frontier America. He was taught to be self-reliant, ruggedly individualistic, and non-compromising. His attitude toward the heathen Chinese masses was one of superiority. He saw himself as the father-figure, the teacher, the hope of China. While he dressed in the clothes of the Chinese, he didn't enter into their minds, nor they his. He was the product of a society that felt they had the answers to the questions of the world; Americans were the possessors of the only conceivable acceptable answers.

It is not surprising that communication opportunities were missed. The history of the Taiping Rebellion and the parts which Roberts and Hung played is a painful exercise in what-might-have-been had they understood each other.

**A MODERN PERSPECTIVE**

To put the ancient Chinese culture and the Taiping Rebellion into a modern perspective, two observations seem appropriate. First, in view of the 4,000-year parade of Chinese dynasties and the nature in which they came to power, reached stability, and ruled for more than two centuries, it seems that it would be wise for Westerners to accept the current ruling clique in China as another dynasty which has received the Mandate of Heaven from the Chinese people. For tens of centuries the Chinese people have decided who rules them through the Mandate of Heaven political philosophy. They apparently have decided. We should thus be prepared to deal with the current dynasty for about the next 200 years.

Secondly, the effects of the Taiping Rebellion could hardly have been predicted as a result of two cultures merging for a brief moment in time. The lesson of this is to expect the unexpected. It is easy to miscommunicate, difficult to clearly express ideas and visions that benefit both cultures. For example, in early contacts with the Western world, particularly the Americans, the Chinese viewed the Christian religion as barbaric because when we practiced Communion ("Drink the blood of my blood, eat the flesh of my flesh"), the Chinese considered this to be cannibalism, a social
hurdle they had leaped over thousands of years before. In their cultured minds, Americans were barbarians.

Then, as now, we Americans were interested in establishing trade relationships. In those early relationships, the Chinese thought of us as barbarians; we thought of them as backward. Today we can but hope that the trade attitudes expressed by the current leadership are those that the Taipings expressed. The Taipings supported an equal nation-states trading framework and were especially supportive of trade with Western nations (Uhalley, 1991).

As the force of Western technology permeates Chinese society, particularly in aviation and other high-technology industries, what new Taiping Rebellion will it breed? Consider the changes that digital technology alone will cause as the ability to quickly communicate vast quantities of data is firmly in place in China.

We in aviation must approach this market with a deep sensitivity to the potential effects of our forays. We must ask ourselves, "How will this aviation activity which we have already determined will benefit our own society also benefit the Chinese, their culture, their value system, their educational system, their national goals and their national will?"

The success of our endeavors will likely hinge on our ability to provide an effective answer to this question.□

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