

THE NEW YORK TIMES

OPINION

Is China Ripe for a Revolution?

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- Feb. 9, 2012

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ONE HUNDRED years ago, on Feb. 12, 1912, the 6-year-old child emperor of the Qing Dynasty abdicated, ending more than 2,000 years of imperial rule in China. But this watershed moment for modern China will not be widely celebrated in the People's Republic. The political climate in Beijing is tense as the ruling Communist Party prepares for a secretive transition to the next generation of leaders, with the untested vice president, [Xi Jinping](#), expected to become president. Reminders of past regime change and the end of dynasties are not welcome.

Of course, the current government has little to fear from the example of 1912. The Qing Dynasty, founded in 1644 by Manchu tribesmen who conquered China from the north, was brought down by a highly organized revolutionary movement with overseas arms and financing and a coherent governing ideology based on republican nationalism. The Communist Party today faces nothing like that.

What it does face, however, is enormous, inchoate rural unrest. The dark side of China's economic rise has been a shocking widening of the gulf between the prosperous coast and the poverty-stricken interior, a flourishing of corruption among local officials and, by such data as we can gather, widespread anger and discontent. The government has acknowledged tens of thousands of yearly "[mass incidents](#)," which can range anywhere from a handful of elderly widows protesting a corrupt real estate grab to communities in open revolt (like the southern village of Wukan) to murderous ethnic rioting, as occurred in the last few years [among Tibetans](#) and in western [Xinjiang Province](#) and [Inner Mongolia](#).

In that sense, it is instead the Taiping Rebellion, which nearly toppled the Qing Dynasty 50 years earlier, that bears the strongest warnings for the current government. The revolt, which claimed at least 20 million lives before it was quelled, making it the bloodiest civil war in history, suggests caution for those who hope for a popular uprising — a Chinese Spring — today.

The Taiping Rebellion exploded out of southern China during the early 1850s in a period marked, as now, by economic dislocation, corruption and a moral vacuum. Rural poverty abounded; local officials were wildly corrupt; the Beijing government was so distant as to barely seem to exist. The uprising was set off by bloody ethnic feuds between Cantonese-speaking Chinese and the minority Hakkas over land rights. Many Hakkas had joined a growing religious

cult built around a visionary named Hong Xiuquan, who believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. When local Qing officials took the side of the Chinese farmers, they provoked the Hakkas — and their religious sect — to take up arms and turn against the government.

What was so remarkable, and so troubling, about the Taiping Rebellion was that it spread with such swiftness and spontaneity. It did not depend on years of preliminary “revolutionary” groundwork (as did the revolution that toppled the monarchy in 1912 or the 1949 revolution that brought the Communists to power). And while Hong’s religious followers formed its core, once the sect broke out of its imperial cordon and marched north, it swept up hundreds of thousands of other peasants along the way — multitudes who had their own separate miseries and grievances and saw nothing to lose by joining the revolt. Out-of-work miners, poor farmers, criminal gangs and all manner of other malcontents folded into the larger army, which by 1853 numbered half a million recruits and conscripts. The Taiping captured the city of Nanjing that year, massacred its entire Manchu population and held the city as their capital and base for 11 years until the civil war ended.

SCHOOLCHILDREN in China in the 1950s and ’60s were taught that the Taiping were the precursors of the Communist Party, with Hong as Mao’s spiritual ancestor. That analogy has now fallen by the wayside, for China’s government is no longer in any sense revolutionary. So it makes sense that in recent years, the Taiping have often been depicted negatively, as perpetrators of superstition and sectarian violence and a threat to social order. The Chinese general who suppressed them, Zeng Guofan, was for generations reviled as a traitor to his race for supporting the Manchus but has now been redeemed. Today he is one of China’s most popular historical figures, a model of steadfast Confucian loyalty and self-discipline. Conveniently for the state, his primary contribution to China’s history was the merciless crushing of violent dissent.

Beijing has learned its lessons from the past. We see this in the swift and ruthless suppression of Falun Gong and other religious sects that resemble the Taiping before they became militarized. We can see it in the numbers of today’s “mass incidents.” One estimate, [180,000](#) in 2010, sounds ominous indeed, but in fact the sheer number shows that the dissent is not organized and has not (yet) coalesced into something that can threaten the state. The Chinese Communist Party would far rather be faced with tens or even hundreds of thousands of separate small-scale incidents than one unified and momentum-gathering insurgency. The greatest fear of the government is not that violent dissent should exist; [the fear is that it should coalesce](#)

The rebellion holds lessons for the West, too. China’s rulers in the 19th century were, as they are today, generally loathed abroad. The Manchus were seen as arrogant and venal despots who obstructed trade and hated foreigners. All romance was on the side of the Taiping rebels, who at the onset were heralded abroad as the liberators of the Chinese people. As one American missionary in Shanghai put it at the time, “Americans are too firmly attached to the principles on which their government was founded and has flourished to refuse sympathy for a heroic people battling against foreign thralldom.”

As Mr. Xi prepares to visit the United States on Tuesday, a similar sympathy shapes our view of China's current unrest. Just last weekend, Senator John McCain [warned](#) China's vice foreign minister that "the Arab Spring is coming to China." The dominant tenor of Western press coverage is that the Communist Party is finally receiving its comeuppance — for its corruption, for its misrule in the countryside, for its indifference to human rights and democracy. And below the surface, usually unspoken, lurks a deeply felt sense of schadenfreude — a desire to see the Communist Party toppled from power by its own people.

But we should be careful about what we wish for. For all of the West's contempt for China's government in the 19th century, when the Taiping Rebellion actually drove it to the brink of destruction, it was Britain that intervened to keep it in power. Britain's economy depended so heavily on the China market at the time (especially after the loss of the United States market to the American Civil War in 1861) that it simply could not bear the risk of what might come from a rebel victory. With American encouragement, the British supplied arms, gunships and military officers to the Manchu government and ultimately helped tip the balance of the war in its favor.

We may not be so far removed. Given the precarious state of our economy today, and America's nearly existential reliance on our trade with China in particular, one wonders: for all of our principled condemnation of China's government on political and human rights grounds, if it were actually faced with a revolution from within — even one led by a coalition calling for greater democracy — how likely is it that we, too, wouldn't, in the end, find ourselves hoping for that revolution to fail?

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A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 12, 2012, Section SR, Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: Is China Ripe for a Revolution?

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