

THE DEVIL SOLDIER

The American Soldier of Fortune
Who Became a God in China

Caleb Carr



R A N D O M H O U S E

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A NOTE ON NAMES

Because of the vast array of spellings used in the translation of Chinese during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all place and personal names in the following text have been adjusted to a uniform system, regardless of their source. A slightly older style of translation than the current Pinyin has been used, because it is easier for English-speaking readers to pronounce. This explains why *Beijing* is still *Peking* and why American, Chinese, British, and French speakers and writers appear to be using the same spellings, when in fact they have employed many different versions.

—C.C.







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PROLOGUE

“ACROSS THE SEA TO FIGHT FOR CHINA”

In the summer of 1900 an expeditionary force of European, Japanese, and American soldiers marched into the Chinese capital of Peking, the triumphant blare of their bands and bugles announcing not only the conclusion of a successful campaign but the effective end of thousands of years of imperial rule in China. The last of the Middle Kingdom's dynasties, the Manchu (or Ch'ing), had withstood internal and external threats throughout the nineteenth century, and would hold on for eleven more years before a tide of republican revolution would engulf it completely. But all hope of recovery was in fact lost when the Western and Japanese troops entered Peking and its sacrosanct Forbidden City, the inner compound guarded by high walls that for centuries had been the residence of China's rulers. The violation of the Forbidden City by “barbarian” foreigners stripped the Manchus of any legitimate right to rule in the eyes of many Chinese, and the imperial clique was finally seen for what it was: an arrogant, corrupt group of anachronisms, whose sumptuous world of silks, dragons, peacock's feathers, and divine rule had no place in the twentieth century.

The Western and Japanese governments had ordered the march on Peking because a group of antiforeign Chinese extremists known as the Boxers, under orders from the Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi, had laid siege to their diplomatic legations and attempted to kill the ministers. The attack on the legations was a stupendously rash act, the crowning achievement of an imperial elite that had spent the last half century trying to stem the advance of foreign influence in China and preserve the empire in its near-medieval state. All such efforts had been in vain: The barbarian outsiders had finally pried China open to foreign trade, foreign religion, and foreign political ideas. The bitter Tz'u-hsi had meant to make the “foreign devils” pay for their success when she authorized the attack on the legations in June 1900. But the Western diplomats and their families had once again frustrated her by bravely withstanding the siege. When the multinational relief column marched into Peking in July, Tz'u-hsi fled in disgrace, taking with her the last chance of imperial resurgence. In the conflict between unreasoning Chinese pride and relentless foreign commercial and philosophic expansionism that had raged for sixty years, there seemed to be no middle ground, and no Chinese pride had lost the long battle.

Yet there had once been such a middle ground in the Middle Kingdom, or at least the possibility of it. For the briefest of moments during the 1860s, the imperial government in Peking as well as the foreign powers had gotten a glimpse of a China in which progressive Western ideas—particularly military ideas—would be placed at the service of the emperor and his ministers to ensure the empire's survival and participation in a rapidly changing world. Unfortunately, both the Chinese imperialists and the Westerners, as if horrified by their glimpse of this strange future, had slammed the door on it; but not before the names of those who had so briefly cracked the portal open had been recorded and honored by the

Chinese people. Legends quickly grew around those names, as at least one group of American soldiers discovered during their occupation of Peking in the summer of 1900. Writing a quarter of a century later, one of these men recalled,

There was much talk among the soldiers as to who had been the first to enter the Forbidden City, where no white “devil” was ever supposed to have been before. One day a group of us were arguing about the matter before a little Chinese shop where we had stopped for one thing or another, and of a sudden the old merchant spoke up, in pigeon English.

What did it matter, he wanted to know, which one of us had by force of arms broken into the temples of the gods? We were disrespectful of the gods, we were like burglars, for all our bravery. And we could never be the first white men to enter a sacred Chinese temple, anyway, because there was Hua, the White God. Hua had been braver than any of us—and he had been good, too. He had come from far across the sea to fight for China, and he had been carried into a sacred temple, and was there still. His was a victory of right.

The “Hua” of whom the old Chinese merchant spoke was Frederick Townsend Ward, a young soldier of fortune from Salem, Massachusetts, who had come to China in 1859 and offered his services to the imperial government in its bitter war against a hugely powerful group of quasi-Christian mystics calling themselves the Taipings. When he arrived in Shanghai, Ward was twenty-eight years old and penniless; when he died in battle three years later, he was the most honored American in Chinese history, a naturalized Chinese subject and a mandarin entitled to wear the prestigious peacock feather in his cap. He had married the daughter of another mandarin and received high praise from the emperor. But above all he had assembled out of the most improbable elements an army that was unlike anything China or the world had ever seen: a highly disciplined force of native Chinese soldiers commanded by Western officers that was expert in the use of modern foreign weapons and capable of defeating vastly superior numbers of opponents in the field. Known to the Taiping rebels as “devil soldiers,” Ward’s men were dubbed the *Chang-sheng-chün*, the “Ever Victorious Army,” by Peking; and after Ward died a memorial temple and Confucian shrine were built around his grave.

More than any other person or organization, Ward and his Ever Victorious Army had pointed the way toward a different kind of China, one in which Manchu chauvinism would have given way to reasoned Chinese acceptance of outside assistance. That assistance would in turn have allowed the empire to avoid a violent collision with progress and emerge as a twentieth-century power. China’s failure to follow such a course had, certainly, less to do with Ward’s untimely death than with the fact that the Manchus did not truly desire progress and the West did not desire China to be a power. But the momentary achievement itself, the transitory indication that an alternate future was possible, was nonetheless important—was, in a very real sense, Ward’s greatest victory.

What follows is not a biography of Frederick Townsend Ward in the conventional sense, for it would be impossible to write a conventional biography of a man whose legacy has suffered so many attempts at eradication. Ward’s service to the Chinese empire gave him great renown in the distant, troubled country that he adopted as his own. His memory was honored and his eternal spirit appeased (or so it was hoped) with annual sacrifices at the shrine built to his memory. But the ever-suspicious imperial Chinese government harbored lingering anxiety concerning Ward, largely because of his foreign origins. In the United States, by contrast, Ward’s exploits received only passing mention in Congress and the press following

his death, and then were virtually forgotten. For their part, the Ward family made repeated attempts to pry money owed to their illustrious relation out of the Chinese government, but they did little to ensure that an accurate account of his life would endure.

When the imperial Chinese government finally collapsed in 1911, Ward's legacy was further endangered. The American Legion named its Shanghai post after him and tried to maintain his grave during the era of Republican China. But China's new rulers were not sympathetic, for Ward—although his origins were American and he harbored doubts about the shortcomings of the Manchu dynasty even after he became a Chinese subject—had fought for the Manchu cause. His private misgivings about imperial corruption and repression were considered academic by most of the Republicans. Then, too, Sun Yat-sen had fallaciously but effectively traced the origins of Chinese nationalism back to the Taiping rebellion, which Ward had helped defeat. It thus comes as no surprise that Sun and his followers did little to perpetuate Ward's memory.

The brutal Japanese seizure of Shanghai in 1940 brought the destruction of many official Chinese and American consular documents, further clouding Ward's legacy. In addition, the Japanese sacked Ward's shrine and memorial hall and defaced his grave (after promising American officials that they would not). Although they later claimed to have made an effort to restore the site, the cataclysmic war between Chinese Nationalists and Communists followed too quickly on the heels of World War II for verification of such claims to be possible.

Finally, the victory of Mao Tse-tung's Chinese Communist party made it certain that assembling a record of Ward's Chinese adventure would become an exercise in detective work as much as scholarship. Like Sun Yat-sen, Mao drew badly flawed but popular parallels between his own and the Taiping movement. (Chiang Kai-shek assisted this effort by making similar comparisons between the Communists and the unsuccessful Taipings, vainly hoping that they would discourage popular support for Mao.) In pursuit of their revisionist goals, Communist scholars sometimes misplaced or destroyed invaluable relics and documents relating to the Ever Victorious Army. But the profound Communist discomfort with Ward and his legacy demanded even greater destruction: In 1955 Ward's remains were dug up, and his grave site and shrine were destroyed and paved over. The whereabouts of Ward's bones today are unknown. They have almost certainly been destroyed. A plain headstone over an empty grave in Salem, Massachusetts, is the only memorial to this most noteworthy of nineteenth-century American adventurers.

For all these reasons, the following account is not an attempt so much to reconstruct Ward's life from the inside out as to paint a picture of the man by allowing the events and people who surrounded him—and about whom we know a good deal more—to throw light on his shadowy figure. No man's life can be truly understood out of context, but in Ward's case the context is especially vital.

Put simply, that context was the Chinese empire during its penultimate period of internal and external crisis. The bizarre visions that compelled Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, the Taiping leader, to attempt the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty became, through the chain of circumstances, a very real factor in Ward's life. And the formation of Ward's character in Salem, Massachusetts, and aboard American sailing vessels during the 1840s and '50s is important to any understanding of how the Chinese empire survived. Similarly, foreign attempts to open

China to greater trade and Western influence are key to understanding why Ward was drawn to Shanghai. And no account of the West's intrusion into China in the nineteenth century can be complete without an account of Ward's achievements.

The precise meaning of those achievements has always been a problem for analysts. Historians disposed to view late imperial China from the left have seen Ward as an indirect facilitator of Western penetration and exploitation: a pawn bent on shoring up a corrupt dynasty that was powerless to stop Western imperialism and a man who had no regard for nascent Chinese nationalism. Others have seen Ward as the embodiment of the imperial Chinese government's response to the simultaneous threats of internal disorder and external aggression, a response that became known as the "self-strengthening movement." In this light, Ward was not an unknowing Western tool but a willing Manchu instrument, ultimately controlled by Peking and used by the imperial government to bring the Chinese army up to date. Still others have written Ward off as a simple mercenary, greedy for plunder and a servant of the Manchu cause only because the Manchus were the most desperate and convenient employers.

Yet the Frederick Townsend Ward who emerges from a careful study of events does not fit into any of these categories. Certainly, his campaigns served the Manchu cause and initially made most Westerners (whose goals in China were opposed by the dynasty) uneasy and even hostile toward him. Yet by the time of his death he was operating in close coordination with Franco-British regular forces, and Peking was expressing strong worries about his ultimate ambitions. Some who knew Ward claimed that he intended, once the Taiping threat had been eliminated, to establish his own warlord principality within China. Yet given his consistent defense of Chinese political integrity, it seems unlikely that he ever meant to carry out such a betrayal of China itself. And while he was unquestionably a soldier of fortune, Ward's loyalty to his men and to China was always more important than his desire for reward (although he certainly did expect rewards for his service). A talented officer by trade, Ward cut a remarkably poor figure as a mercenary: He made sure to secure funds for his army but rarely did the same for himself, instead accepting notoriously unreliable notes of debt from his Chinese backers. In truth, Ward had little real business sense at all; his talent was for soldiering, and he put that talent to use defending China.

But was serving China synonymous, to Ward, with serving the Manchus? This appears less certain. Ward was fully aware of the dynasty's flaws: Although they had ruled with the power of Confucian tradition for two hundred years, the Manchus were still regarded by many Chinese as invaders, whose usurpation of power from the Ming dynasty in 1644 was criminal. It may well be that Ward intended to turn against these descendants of the "Tartar horde" once the Taipings had been defeated. Such a move would probably have been aimed not at the establishment of his own warlord domain but at the restoration of a native Chinese dynasty similar to the Ming. For their part, the Manchus initially thought that they could use Ward and became fretful when they discovered how singularly he remained his own man, a true "free-lance." Clearly they took the tales of Ward's expansive ambitions seriously. In the end, however, we will never know what marching orders the Ever Victorious Army would have received had its creator and commander lived to see the fall of the Taiping capital of Nanking.

Whatever the nature of his ties to the West and to the Manchus, Ward did prove true to the

task of serving China: His organization and leadership of the Ever Victorious Army were crucial to China's military restructuring, which was an important part of the short-lived period of general reform that touched all branches of the Chinese government in the 1860s and '70s. Those reforms did not, in the end, prove fundamental enough to prevent disasters such as the Allied march on Peking in 1900 or the fall of the Chinese empire in 1911; but on the most basic level they ensured that there was a Chinese nation—rather than a collection of feuding principalities and European colonies, as had been distinctly possible—that could become a republic. For this if for no other reason, Ward's place in history is important.

It is useful to bear in mind, however, that this importance was a largely unconscious achievement for Ward. A high school dropout with almost no formal military training, Ward was neither an idealist nor a philosopher but an adventurous realist who sought to carve out a place in what had consistently been, for him, a hostile and violent world. His first thought was not for instituting comprehensive programs of reform but for his soldiers, whom he affectionately called "my people." Yet, as shall be seen, it was precisely this commitment to the people around him—rather than to the kind of political, religious, and commercial ideologies that obsessed the Taipings, the Manchus, and the leaders of the Western communities in China—that made Ward unique. The ingenuousness of his achievement does not reduce its significance. It simply helps us understand his compelling, mysterious character.

“A NEW RACE OF WARRIORS”

On May 2, 1860, the city of Nanking, China—nestled between a wide bend in the Yangtze River and a commanding promontory called Purple Mountain—was alive with celebration. Its citizens, who had been in open rebellion against the Manchu emperor in Peking for the better part of a decade, had endured a bitter siege during the winter, one that had finally been broken by a daring series of feints and raids by the rebel armies. After long months of deprivation, the way now seemed clear to bring badly needed food, arms, and treasure into the city. And so the people of Nanking lifted their voices in thanks to the god whose worship had made them outlaws in their own country: *Shang-ti*, the “Supreme Lord,” whose eldest son was called Jesus and whose second son, the rebels believed, was their own leader, their *T’ien Wang* (“Heavenly King”). The scattering of the Manchu emperor’s soldiers—or, as the followers of the T’ien Wang called them, the “demon imps”—before the walls of Nanking was taken as yet another sign that the T’ien Wang had truly been dispatched by Shang-ti to bring down the Manchu dynasty and establish the *T’ai-ping t’ien-kuo* (“Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace”) in China.

In the midst of the May 2 rejoicing, the T’ien Wang dispatched a message to his senior advisers and assistants, summoning them to an immediate council of war to determine the future of the great Taiping movement. The message was brought out of the T’ien Wang’s sumptuous yellow palace by one of his female attendants: Taiping men were generally forbidden from entering the inner sanctum of their leader, who lived alone with a retinue of concubines and cited Solomon and his hundreds of wives as a hallowed example. Making its way from splendid residence to splendid residence, the summons finally reached the colonnades and gilded domes of the palace of the *Chung Wang*, or “Faithful King.” (The T’ien Wang’s lieutenants, though subordinate to him, all incorporated the word *wang*, or “king,” into their titles.) The Chung Wang had been more responsible than any man for lifting the recent siege of Nanking. Indeed, his considerable military talents had ensured the survival of the rebellion for a number of years. And he had been honored in return: Once a poor mountain farmer and laborer called Li Hsiu-ch’eng, he now controlled troops numbering in the hundreds of thousands, as well as a vast fortune in silver. But in the spring of 1860 the Chung Wang was a deeply troubled man, vexed by doubts about the Taiping cause that no amount of honor or reward could ease.

Though only thirty-seven at the time he was summoned to the May 2 council of war, the Chung Wang had about him, said an Englishman who knew him in Nanking, “a trace of arduous mental and physical exertion” that “gave him a rather worn and older appearance. His figure light, active and wiry, was particularly well formed;... his bearing erect and dignified, his walk rapid but stately. His features were very strongly marked, expressive, and good, though not handsome according to the Chinese idea, being slightly of a more European cast than they admire.” An anxious, restless man, the Chung Wang seemed to find spiritual ease only on the battlefield: “His large eyes flashed incessantly, while the lids were always

twitching. From his energetic features, and the ceaseless nervous movement of his body ... no one would imagine that he could possess such perfect coolness in battle; yet I have often since observed him in action, when, in spite of his apparent excitability, his self-possession was imperturbable, and his voice ... unchanged, save being more rapid and decisive in the moments of greatest danger."

Like many of the hundreds of thousands of Taiping adherents, the Chung Wang had joined the rebellion less out of genuine devotion to the strange amalgam of Christianity and Chinese mysticism that was the T'ien Wang's faith than out of weariness with Manchu oppression. In the two centuries since Tartar tribesmen had swept down out of Manchuria and into China, deposing the Ming and establishing their own Manchu dynasty, their rule had degenerated into a system of corruption and repression that left China's poorest provinces in a state of near-constant rebellion. Young peasants joined these uprisings almost as a matter of course. "When I was young at home as an ordinary person," the Chung Wang later recalled of the Taiping movement, "I understood nothing, but joined up in the excitement." In the ensuing decade of the 1850s, as the Taipings made their way from province to province and became the greatest threat to Manchu rule in the history of the dynasty, the Chung Wang battled his way up and out of the rebel ranks. But he also witnessed internecine conflicts among the Taiping leaders, brutal suppressive measures undertaken by the Manchus, the T'ien Wang's withdrawal into a private world of debauchery, and the slaughter of millions of his fellow peasants by both rebel and imperial troops. By 1860 the Chung Wang was weary and losing heart: "There were many people in the [T'ien Wang's] Heavenly Dynasty who did harm to the people; what could I alone do, for all my compassion? Power was not in my hands, so what could I do?... Once you are riding a tiger's back it is difficult to dismount."

The lifting of the siege of Nanking had not given the Chung Wang any commensurate sense of relief. In fact, his worries, especially those concerning his sovereign, had only multiplied. After the victory, said the Chung Wang, "no edict was pronounced praising the generals; the field commanders were not received in audience, nor were the court officials. The Sovereign was not interested in the affairs of government, but merely instructed his ministers in the knowledge of Heaven, as if all was tranquil." Militarily, the Chung Wang knew that the rebel position at Nanking was still far from secure. The "demon imps" would be back, and, unless the Taipings could break out of the Nanking region and secure open routes to adequate sources of supply, the imperialists would eventually crush the movement, if only through attrition. The rebels' next move would be crucial, and the May 2 council of war thus took on immense importance.

Knowing this, the Taiping chiefs arrived at the meeting wearing their most impressive regalia and armed with battle plans that each was convinced would prove the salvation of the Heavenly Kingdom. The T'ien Wang made it a point on such occasions to wear robes of imperial yellow—previously reserved for the occupant of the Dragon Throne in Peking—as well as a tall headdress reminiscent of the Ming dynasty. The Chung Wang wore a coronet of gold, in the shape of a tiger flanked by two eagles and decorated with precious stones and pearls. Rebels these men may have been—but the plundering of more than half of China had allowed their movement to take on singularly imperial trappings.

Plans for a spring campaign were proposed and discarded. The *Shih Wang*, or "Attendant King," proposed a move southeast, toward the farms of Chekiang and Fukien provinces and

the rich ports of Ningpo and Foochow. But such a long march to the coast, the other wing argued, would leave the upper stretches of the Yangtze River badly exposed and the western approach to Nanking open. The *Ying Wang*, or “Heroic King,” wished to march in that direction and reinforce the city of Anking, rightly considered the gateway to the Nanking region.

It was the T’ien Wang’s cousin and prime minister—the *Kan Wang*, or “Shield King”—who proposed the plan that most appealed to his sovereign. It incorporated the objects of the Shih Wang’s and the Ying Wang’s plans but achieved them more efficiently than either. The Taiping forces, said the prime minister, should strike out from Nanking in two great pincers—one to the north side of the Yangtze and one to the south. In a pair of wide sweeps they would shatter the Manchu forces in central China, the two armies would converge not on Anking but much farther to the west, at Hankow. The “demon imps,” their attention fixed on Nanking and Anking, would not be ready for such a move. The Shih Wang’s suggestion that the rebellion be resupplied through a move to the seacoast was also accepted. Ningpo and Foochow were too distant, however, to be incorporated into the Kan Wang’s scheme. Instead the port of Shanghai in the rich province of Kiangsu was selected as a target. Attacking here before moving west, the Taiping southern pincer would secure needed supplies—including twenty armed river steamships for use on the Yangtze—and hopefully establish friendly relations with the Westerners who traded at the port and who worshiped, the Taipings believed, their own Shang-ti.

The Chung Wang had misgivings about the prime minister’s plan but thought it the best of those put forward and elected to support it. That was enough for the T’ien Wang, who approved the strategy as well as the assignment of the Chung Wang to lead the vital southern army, which was to conquer the province of Kiangsu, move on to Shanghai, then wheel rapidly west and approach Hankow. Yet the Chung Wang’s heart was still not at rest: He was given only one month to take the provincial capital of Soochow in Kiangsu, and the T’ien Wang’s language in ordering him to do so was, in the young commander’s opinion, “severe.” But, as the Chung Wang observed, “things being what they were, and since I was employed by him, I had to obey.”

With the plan settled, the Taiping armies were assembled and addressed by their commanders. Uniforms of red, yellow, white, and orange silk, emblazoned with the names of commanders and individual units, as well as hundreds of brilliantly colored banners and thousands of long spears, all moved in splendid agitation as the Taiping soldiers enthusiastically answered the exhortations of their chiefs. Having abandoned the shaved forehead and long pigtail that were signs of Chinese submission to the Manchus, the Taiping men wore their hair loose and uncut (earning them the epithet *chang-maos*, or “long-haired rebels”), and sometimes wound it in red and yellow turbans. And there were women in the ranks, as well: The Taipings had rejected the crippling custom of binding feet, and their daughters of the cause were able to move about freely. Taken as a whole, the Taiping horde were an impressive and, in the Chinese experience, unprecedented sight.

Indeed, in the midst of this spectacle of color and passion, relatively few onlookers stopped to remark on the utter backwardness of the Taipings’ armaments. Most carried simple swords and spears; firepower was confined to antique gingals (weighty matchlock firearms supported by cumbersome props), the occasional musket, and ancient cannons that, though often

beautifully embellished, were as likely to split open as to hit their marks on firing. The arsenal was rounded out by “stinkpots”—hand-held bombs that produced burning, nauseating gases—and firecrackers, used to create panic. One British consular official, who had traveled up the Yangtze in 1853 to get a preliminary picture of the rebellion for his government, had made a point of asking about this seemingly vital shortcoming:

I inquired how it was that the Taipings did not make greater use of the smaller firearms, muskets and pistols, the former of which I said were, with the attached bayonet, our chief arms? I was induced to ask this because, while there was a great demand among the Taiping soldiers for swords, they seemed to take little interest in guns. [The commander] said, that his people did not understand the use of them, and that they were valueless when the supply of ammunition ran out or the gun springs went wrong. Swords and spears, he said, seldom got out of order, were easily repaired, and he found that his people could always beat the Imperialists with them.

It was no boast. Backward as Taiping arms were, imperial weapons were no better—to date, at least. The “demon imps” had won no crucial engagements against the rebels. And, so long as the terms of the conflict remained the same, it seemed unlikely that they ever would.

The Chung Wang marched out of Nanking accompanied by his bodyguard—a tested force of 5,000 men from his native province of Kwangsi. Then his fully assembled army of almost 100,000 troops began the trek toward Soochow: over a hundred miles through country as yet untouched by the rebellion and occupied by imperial soldiers. But the faith of the Chung Wang’s legions in their commander was great, and that faith gave them powerful confidence. As one Western missionary who had witnessed an earlier Taiping advance remarked, the “personal appearance of their men in arms, and of their women on horseback ... made the insurgents appear like a new race of warriors.... They all seemed content, and in high spirits, as if sure of success.”

A very different sort of scene was taking place in the walled cities and towns that sat along the line of advance from Nanking to Soochow. Here nervous mandarins and imperial officials of varying civil and military ranks received word of the approach of the Taipings with visible fright. Some of this fear was inspired by rumors of rebel atrocities, but much of it sprang from the knowledge of what the emperor would do to any man who failed in his appointed task. Simple beheading was the best of these fates; the infamous “death of a thousand cuts”—in which the skin was flayed from a living traitor’s body—was more commonly pronounced. Faced with the manifold dangers of a successful rebel advance, many Chinese officials chose suicide, as did hundreds of the citizens under their control.

And, even if such unfortunate Chinese could steel themselves and face the rebel approach, they had another enormous problem to contend with: retreating imperial forces, whose most common form of defense against the rebels was of the scorched earth variety. The loose discipline of the imperial troops was another result of the Manchus’ two-hundred-year reign during which the post of soldier had steadily lost social and political luster and finally become a refuge only for those who could not succeed as civil bureaucrats, scholars, farmers, or merchants. Such men were ill-disposed toward mercy or regional loyalty, and their making a wasteland of the territories assigned to them at least gave the emperor no cause for complaint.

In truth, the Taiping rebellion had seen unrestrained brutality practiced by both sides. In the face of this fact, even sinophilic Westerners had been forced to admit that, while the

people of the Middle Kingdom could not generally be accused of cowardice, it would (as one Western expert who observed the rebellion wrote) “be more difficult perhaps to defend the Chinese against the charge of being cruel.” This cruelty may have been qualitatively different from that which characterized the peoples and governments of many Eastern and Western nations during the mid-nineteenth century. But, as was so often the case, the Chinese outdid the rest of the world in quantity. During the ten years since the Taiping rebellion outbreak, the people of the Middle Kingdom endured almost unbelievable suffering: by 1860 somewhere between 10 and 20 million Chinese had died in battle, been slaughtered wholesale, or starved to death. But not before exhausting every possibility of survival: several cities and towns ravaged by the rebellion, human flesh had been selling by the pound.

Given such an atmosphere, it was small wonder that the Chung Wang—a man known for his exceptional decency and leniency—should have inspired fanatical devotion among his people. By distributing food and money to starving Chinese peasants in the territories he conquered, the Chung Wang was able to net immense popularity on both sides of the rebellion. It was a testament to his humility and perception that he never deluded himself as to the nature of that popularity: “Today,” he later wrote in his account of the rebellion, “everyone knows the name of the Chung Wang Li Hsiu-ch’eng it is really because I was ready to distribute money; even enemy officers and officials with whom I came into contact were treated well; and because I was willing to give help to the suffering people.... It is not because I was talented, and I was not the head of the government.”

The point was an important one. The vast body of China’s peasantry had scant interest in the Taiping faith and little affection for the Manchu dynasty—the brutality practiced by both sides ensured as much. Popular loyalty in this most cataclysmic of the world’s civil wars was therefore generally secured through one simple policy: decent treatment. The same citizen who might flee the advance of a Taiping general who was, for example, an ex-bandit using the cause as a cover for plundering (and there was more than one such man in the rebel camp) might easily welcome the advance of the Chung Wang. Similarly, villagers who had once risen in rebellion against oppressive Manchu officials might shift their loyalties back again if an enlightened imperial commander appeared on the scene (although in 1860 there were precious few of these).

In the century and a quarter since its conclusion, the Taiping rebellion has been represented by various commentators—from Western missionaries excited by the rebels’ neo-Christianity to Chinese revolutionaries searching for the roots of their populism—as an ideological struggle. But while the religious and political components were important as detonators, the more fundamental and long-standing desire for decent treatment was the charge. Because of this, the struggle became—to an extent only grudgingly conceded by social historians—one of personalities, of individual leaders and their idiosyncratic policies. And among these personalities, in the spring of 1860, the agitated, restless young general known as the Chung Wang was preeminent.

During the march to Soochow he once again demonstrated why. Meeting exceptionally stiff imperial resistance at the walled town of Tan-yang, the Chung Wang spent two days reducing its defenses. Upon learning that the imperial commander of Tan-yang had died during the battle, the Chung Wang ordered his body found, placed in a coffin, and buried at the foot of the town’s pagoda: rare treatment for a fallen antagonist during so bitter a conflict. But, a

the Chung Wang put it, “[a]live he was an enemy, dead, he was a hero; I did not bear him any hatred.” The Chung Wang claimed that the imperialists lost 10,000 men at Tan-yang, and while such numbers were invariably exaggerated by both sides during the rebellion, the victory did open the way to the town of Ch’ang-chou, the first vital position on the line to Soochow.

The capture of walled cities and towns was the outstanding feature of warfare throughout China during the Taiping period, but it had particular importance in Kiangsu province. Here the mountains and hills that surround the Yangtze farther upriver settle into a flat, rich alluvial plain, as the surging waters calm and spread into a nourishing delta. This was some of China’s finest farm country: moist, rich earth laced by tens of thousands of small creeks and manmade canals. Most of these waterways were impassable to anything but small rivercraft, and their nerve centers were the towns that appeared at crucial intersections. As a general rule these towns were surrounded by high walls—sometimes as thick as they were tall—in which were cut gates in the primary directions of the compass. Some towns were actually built over the creeks and canals, and most were surrounded by muddy moats that, given the near-medieval state of China’s military development, offered additional protection. Outside the walls stockades and trenches were constructed as a first line of defense, and these could be formidable. The Chinese excelled at the construction of earthworks, as well as at their destruction, usually accomplished through tunneling and mining with heavy explosive charges.

By mid-May the Chung Wang was approaching Ch’ang-chou, where he made short work of the outer defenses. The city itself held out for a few days, falling on May 20. A familiar scene then took place, as the Chung Wang recorded: “After entering the town, we did not kill or harm the people, but some were so frightened that they jumped into the water and were drowned.” The Chung Wang allowed his men a full two days’ rest, then proceeded southeast. The T’ien Wang’s deadline for taking Soochow was drawing nearer.

From Ch’ang-chou the Taipings marched along the Grand Canal, an extensive manmade waterway built during the sixth and seventh centuries to connect the Kiangsu breadbasket with the northern provinces. Every stage of their advance brought the rebels deeper into a landscape which was strikingly unlike the rough, impoverished country of southern China where their cause had originated. Kiangsu’s cultivated fields, bamboo groves, and freshwater lakes offered a life-style that had always been beyond the grasp of peasants in provinces such as the Chung Wang’s own Kwangsi. Approaching the town of Wu-hsi, the Taipings came within sight of the largest inland body of water in the region, T’ai Lake, its waters clearer than the muddy Yangtze and hemmed in by sloping hills. A sharp but relatively quick battle for Wu-hsi took place, and then the Chung Wang again paused for two days.

The approach to Soochow brought clear signs that the retreating imperial armies, aware that their hope of halting the rebel advance was vain, were turning to their usual practice of plundering and burning as they departed. The Chung Wang met with decreasing resistance and an increasingly war-weary populace as he neared what was reputed to be the richest city in all China. Soochow, known for its fine textiles and beautiful women, was a showplace of complex ornamental gardens winding among extensive waterways spanned by delicate bridges. More important, it was the administrative center of the region, the possession of which lent its captors immense legitimacy in the eyes of the peasants. On his arrival the

Chung Wang surrounded the city and made ready for an assault. But the imperialists were already gone. Remarkably, Soochow was conceded without a fight on June 2—the precise termination of the T'ien Wang's one-month deadline. Upon entering the city the Chung Wang found that many Manchu officials were already on their way to Shanghai, and those who had not escaped he guaranteed safe passage back to their own people.

In Soochow, as in every town or village they took, the Taipings destroyed Buddhist and Taoist idols, denounced the teachings of Confucius, and propagated the faith of Shang-ti. But in Soochow the Taipings found their revolutionary ardor far less welcome than in poorer districts. The citizens, said the Chung Wang, were “ungovernable and wicked and would not be pacified.” At last, in a signal demonstration of the power of individual leaders during the rebellion, the Chung Wang himself ventured into the villages around the city: “From all sides people came with weapons in their hands and surrounded us. All the civil and military officials with me turned pale. I was willing to sacrifice my life if the people of Soochow could be pacified; so when spears threatened my life I did not draw back. I explained everything and the people were convinced and everywhere ceased their activity and put aside their weapons.” In addition to civilians, large numbers of former imperialist soldiers went over to the Chung Wang's standard. His army was gaining irresistible momentum.

But not all Kiangsu's residents were eager to live under rebel rule. As word of the remarkable events at Soochow made its way east, panic among imperial officials and peasants heightened. This was an experience wholly out of the ken of the province's farmers and merchants. Clearly the Chung Wang's Taiping horde was not to be stopped by the undisciplined troops under the command of local Manchu officers, who continued to desert in large numbers. After the fall of Soochow, a pair of the emperor's senior servants in the region wrote (or, as the process was known, “memorialized”) to their master in Peking that “[t]he whole area is deserted, and there is no means by which to raise a hand [against the rebels]. The stream of refugees moving toward the coast became ever larger, their desperation ever greater.

The hopes of these frightened thousands were fixed on what had been, until fairly recently, a muddy, comparatively unimportant trading town at the juncture of the Huang-pu River and Soochow Creek, a town that was now—through the bustling, often bizarre activities of its small multinational population—fast on its way to becoming China's greatest emporium.

* * *

In old Chinese it meant “above the sea,” but in the last century and a half the name *Shanghai* has assumed a set of connotations that have little to do with geography. And the port that the Chung Wang approached in the summer of 1860 was hard at work building that reputation. One of five “treaty ports” that Great Britain had forced the imperial Chinese government to open to foreign trade and residence following the Opium War in 1842, Shanghai was an ancient city that had known no Western resident before that year. Plagued for centuries by typhoons and Japanese pirates, Shanghai was not one of southern China's most fashionable cities. Soochow was more beautiful, Canton a greater commercial center, and almost any city had a better climate, especially in summer, when Shanghai's dank air hung heavy with cholera, dysentery, and smallpox. The crowded inner city—enclosed by a three-and-a-half-mile wall in A.D. 1554—was a notorious sinkhole of filth and crime. For a

these reasons, Shanghai ranked in the collective mind of the Chinese elite as less important than the other four treaty ports: Ningpo, Foochow, Amoy, and Canton.

Yet Shanghai had advantages that the Chinese—who had long since abandoned any seafaring ambitions—had never appreciated. Located in almost the exact middle of the long Chinese coast, it was convenient to ships sailing to northern as well as to southern parts of the empire. Situated near the mouth of the eminently navigable Yangtze, it was a natural gateway to the interior. And there were other amenities. Shanghai's climate might not have been the best, but the surrounding countryside was loaded with dozens of species of game and the shooting was excellent. (Unacquainted with shotguns, the Chinese could hardly have taken full advantage.) On a more commercial level, the general lack of interest displayed by Chinese officials toward the affairs of Shanghai made it a haven for outlaws as well as a logical center for smuggling: Soon after the conclusion of the war which took its name from the drug, chests of opium began pouring into Shanghai, creating vast fortunes for those intrepid Western "businessmen" brave enough to endure Shanghai's hostile climate and far from cosmopolitan atmosphere.

These sporting traders, smugglers, and adventurers were the founders of Shanghai's foreign community, which took root outside the walls of the inner (or, as it was soon known, Chinese) city in the years following 1842. The British were granted a corner parcel of land fronting both the Huang-pu and Soochow Creek, and they quickly set about civilizing it in a typical fashion. Huge pilings were driven into the silt- and mud-covered bank of the Huang-pu, and the area was filled in with dirt. A long stretch of park was created, soon to be dubbed the Bund (an Indian term for "embankment"). In 1850 there were just over 175 permanent foreign residents in Shanghai, but there were already some twenty-five mercantile firms building large, bungalow-style headquarters along the Bund, which was destined to become one of the world's great trading strips.

In 1849 the French made arrangements with the Chinese government for their own "concession," built on land between the British settlement and the Chinese city. And soon it was the turn of the Americans, who colonized the waterfront across Soochow Creek. (In the words of one early historian of the period, "the American settlement was not created, but just 'grewed.' ") Streets and roads that followed meandering creeks were laid throughout all three areas: only twenty to twenty-five feet wide and little more than mud tracks when the rainy season arrived. Large wooden gates were placed at the intersections of many of these roads (their closure at night was a safeguard against rioting by the Chinese), and a primitive system of oil-burning streetlights gave a slight sense of security to nocturnal wanderers. Houses were built by the score, open-air structures that, despite their occasional expense, were designed with the summer months in mind and could be immensely uncomfortable during Shanghai's frequently brisk winters.

No question of climate or terrain, however, could dampen the amazing spirit of Shanghai's small but rugged foreign community, a spirit that was perhaps best symbolized by the fact that before the Western settlements had a municipal council they had a racetrack. The first version was built in 1850 and saw contests primarily between Chinese ponies, but by 1854 a new, larger track on the western edge of the British settlement had been constructed—complete with grandstand—and residents were soon bringing thoroughbreds from home and Arabians from India to compete. Before long foreign Shanghai had a library, a literary and

scientific society, even amateur theatricals in a converted warehouse. But none of these ever achieved the popularity of the track. When races were not being run, it was open to the public as a bridal path, its infield was used for cricket matches, and it became the principal outdoor arena for the unique blend of Western civility and freebooting panache that was Shanghai society.

In all, despite its climatic drawbacks and its inattentiveness to sanitation (in the early years of the foreign settlements most sewage was simply dumped over the edge of the Bund) Shanghai in the 1850s was a far more appealing place than one might have expected to find in an empire torn by a singularly savage rebellion. One visitor described the port's foreign residents "riding or gyrating on the race course, as though they were being lounged. Those who prefer gossip to exercise frequent the Bund, a broad quay which extends the whole length of the Settlement, and which is crowded with Chinese porters all the morning and sprinkled with European ladies and gentlemen in the afternoon. The harmony and hospitality of Shanghai make it infinitely the most agreeable place of residence in China."

By 1860 there were still no more than a few thousand permanent foreign residents in Shanghai (living alongside the few hundred thousand Chinese who were crammed in around the walled city), but there was another element that was increasingly affecting life in the settlements: transient soldiers and sailors. As trade in Shanghai grew—by 1860 more than two hundred foreign cargo ships might be docked in the port at any one time—so did the number of sailors wandering the streets of the city looking for work or, just as often, for a way to relieve their boredom between journeys. As for soldiers, England had once again gone to war with China in 1856—this time with the assistance of France—in an effort to force further trading privileges out of a Chinese government that had no wish to see foreign barbarians doing extensive business outside the five treaty ports. Although hostilities in the conflict were primarily confined to the extreme north and south of the empire, Shanghai was a common port of call for military units in transit.

As might be expected, an entire industry devoted to the entertainment and intoxication of such men grew up in the foreign settlements. Brawling and general disorderliness became a very real problem. Because most of the city's legitimate trade was carried on in the British settlement—and because that settlement had not only a police force but a jail and magistracy willing to put people in it—this problem was considerably worse in the American settlement and especially the French concession, where municipal revenue was raised in large part through the sale of licenses for brothels as well as gambling and opium dens. Many such houses became legendary, as did the whores who worked them. By the spring of 1860 the *North China Herald*, Shanghai's outspoken proponent of British views and the official organ of the British consulate, had this to say to soldiers whose "thirst, which seems little short of that of Tantalus" drove them to drunken misconduct:

As long as all this takes place among ourselves, and not too often, we cannot complain, but unfortunately curiosity carries the soldier among the Chinese, and it is then his peculiarities become dangerous; his martial bearing and winning ways are not appreciated by the ladies of China, as they are by those of his native country, damsels do not find the same attraction here in a red coat as they do elsewhere, his bargaining propensities are viewed with suspicion, and his presence in a Chinese shop is strongly objected to, the rough way in which he meets and overcomes obstacles, (Chinamen included) is repugnant to the Chinese mind, and the natives are beginning to find no amusement in the intoxicated soldier, and heartily to detest all the little eccentricities so common to his cloth.

An attitude of arrogance toward the Chinese was hardly unique to drunken soldiers. Disdain for their hosts characterized many if not most of the Westerners in the Middle Kingdom. On the other hand, the recent decades of closer contact had done little to improve the opinion that those hosts held of their guests. To the average Chinese the foreigners were coarse “barbarians” intent only on exploitation; to the average Westerner the Chinese were stubborn upholders of a backward order. And no group aroused greater antipathy in the foreigners than the ruling Manchus and their hirelings in the treaty ports. Whether or not the Taiping cause had merit—and there were many foreigners, especially missionaries, who felt that its close approximation of Christianity was worthy of encouragement—the visitors certainly had no trouble understanding how it had grown so strong. As the *North China Herald* put it:

The Great Rebellion, like an old *fungus* full of proud flesh, does not heal up; on the contrary, if popular rumors may be taken as an index of the matter, it continues to go from bad to worse.... The old foundations of this government are thoroughly rotten; its ranks and orders are broken; and its gorgeous decorations are in tatters. It is no mere ghoulish body-politic that is devouring things. The evils are *legion*; year by year they multiply; and no mortal can tell when or what will be the end of the things.

In the spring of 1860, as Shanghai’s already crowded Chinese city began to fill up and finally overflow with refugees from the west, the foreign community grew increasingly curious about the nature of the army that was headed their way. True, the possibility that the rebellion would adversely affect trade alarmed many Westerners. And, despite missionary pleas for indulgence of the rebels, the apparently blasphemous elements of the Taiping religion (primarily the T’ien Wang’s repeated references to the Supreme Lord as his “Heavenly Father” and to Christ as his “Heavenly Elder Brother”) became sources of deep concern in the settlements. But England and France were at war with China in other parts of the empire, and if a Taiping victory meant an end to Manchu corruption and obstinacy, might be desirable. Thus few foreigners saw any reason in 1860 to abandon the policy of neutrality that had been their approach to China’s difficulties throughout the decade of rebellion—provided, of course, that the Chung Wang promised not to harm Western residents or interfere with their commerce.

But this calm resolve began to erode with the arrival of ever more alarming reports from the field. In the beginning of June news of rebel movements around Ch’ang-chou finally reached the coast. The *North China Herald’s* correspondent put “the rebels now between Nanking and Ch’ang-chou at 140,000 (!) divided into seven large columns. This, with all the division and subtraction invariably to be applied to returns of the kind in China, still leaves to be inferred that the Nanking garrison did break out in considerable strength.” From the city of Hangchow, conquered by the rebels, came tales of butchered Buddhist priests and general devastation: “Accurate statistics are difficult to obtain in such cases, but the reports generally concur in the statement that *from fifty to seventy thousand lives were lost* in a few days; and it is still more sad to think that a large proportion of these were suicides.”

Such reports—accompanied by mounting rumors that Taiping spies were at work in Shanghai, preparing the city for conquest—had an alarming enough effect on the foreigners in Shanghai; their effect in the Chinese city and among imperial officials was devastating. Suspected rebel agents were captured in mounting numbers and dealt with summarily, as the

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