The Taiping War

Lecture outline:

A. The Opium War (1839-1842)
B. The Treaty of Nanjing
C. The Crisis Within
D. The Taiping War

Qing Dynasty 清: 1644 - 1911 (last imperial dynasty; ruled by the Manchus, a tribal people whose homeland lies to the northeast of Ming China; consider themselves the successors to the Jurchen Jin dynasty)

Daoguang Emperor 道光 (r. 1821-1850)
Xianfeng Emperor 咸豐 (r. 1851-1860)

The Opium War (1839-1842)
The Taiping War (1851-1864)

British East India Company; founded in 1600 by British merchants involved in the spice trade in SE Asia; given a monopoly by the British government to engage in trade in East Asia; via competition with Dutch and Portuguese traders, the company begins to assemble its own military; by the mid 1700s gains colonial control over north and northwest India; the British government takes over this role after 1857.

Shareholders in the BEIC pushed for greater trading opportunities in China; established a monopoly on the opium trade in China in the late 18th century; losses its monopoly over the China trade in 1834.

Hoppo: Official head of the Maritime Customs for dealing with western merchants prior to the Opium War; foreign merchants could not communicate directly with the Hoppo; instead they were supposed to communicate their concerns via the Chinese Cohong merchants.

Cohong (combined merchant companies/”gong hang” 共行): The Chinese merchant guild given a monopoly over all trading with western merchants and countries; founded in 1720; after 1760, all trading with westerners is restricted to the port of Guangzhou/Canton; from then on, the Cohong act as agents of the Qing state in all matters dealing with “West Ocean” foreigners; the Cohong must also act as guarantors for the behavior of the foreigners with whom they conducted business. This system is abolished in 1842 with the Qing defeat in the Opium War.

Lin Zexu 林則徐 (1785-1850): Official appointed as imperial commissioner to end the opium trade in Guangzhou; argued against legalization of opium on moral grounds; his attack on opium was directed against both drug users and traffickers; his destruction of three million pounds of British opium at Canton in 1839 enrages British traders and helps to set off the Opium War.

Sanyuanli Incident, May 1841: A group of scholars form a gentry-led local militia to fight the British in the Guangzhou region. From the British perspective, the attack represents a minor skirmish; from the Chinese perspective, it suggests that local power and organization is more effective than official attempts to protect the people from Western encroachment onto Chinese soil; helps to foster disillusionment with Qing officials among the Guangdong (Southern) gentry.
The Treaty of Nanjing (1842): Signed by the British and Qing governments to end the Opium War. Established the opening of five treaty ports (Guangzhou/Canton, Fuzhou, Xiamen, Shanghai & Ningbo) to unrestricted trade and residence by the British; cedes Hong Kong to British control; makes the Qing responsible for 21 million tael indemnity payment; abolished Cohong monopoly on trade with foreigners; allows for foreign nationals to be tried by their own courts in the treaty ports; gives foreign officials equal status and access to Chinese officials.

*Good Words to Exhort the Age:* a Christian tract written by Liang Afa, a translator for Western missionaries and printer; this is the first Christian text that Hong Xiuquan reads, and it helps to shape his embrace of Christian theology.

Triads (Heaven and Earth Society 天地會): originates in Taiwan and Fujian; secret societies founded in the late 18th c., especially prevalent in south China; advocated overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming; adherents were often involved in portage work or drug running and protection services; many of the Triads are attracted by the anti-Manchu rhetoric of the Taipings; they tend to be alienated by the Christian roots and communitarian practices of the Taipings.

Society of God Worshipers (拜上帝會): Founded by Feng Yunshan in 1847 in rural Guangxi Province; largely people of Hakka ethnicity throng to the quasi-Christian ideology promoted by Feng and Hong Xiuquan; fueled by inter-ethnic fighting between Hakka immigrants and original inhabitants in the Guangxi/Guangdong region; grows into a movement of 20,000 followers by 1850; becomes the social and military base for the launching of the Taiping uprising.

Hakka (kejia 客家): ethnically Han minority peoples of south-central China. Hakka women did not bind their feet and worked in fields along with the men; tended to be poorer and work inferior land compared with the original inhabitants of the Guangdong-Guangxi region.

Important Figures in the Taiping Movement:
Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1813-1864); leader of the Taiping movement; originally a would-be scholar from a poor Hakka family; converts to Christianity; believes himself to be the younger brother of Jesus; convinced that he has been chosen by God to wipe out the Manchus and establish a new Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace; launches a civil war that nearly topples the Qing dynasty.

Feng Yunshan 憑雲山 (1822-1852): Hong Xiuquan’s first convert to Christianity; founds the Society of God Worshipers in Guangxi in 1844; founding leader of the Taiping uprising; named the Southern King in 1851; dies in battle with Qing troops in 1852.

Yang Xiuqing 楊秀清 (d. 1856): a charcoal peddler from Guangxi; becomes central to the Taiping movement, eventually gaining the title of “East King”; converts to Christianity; claims to have visions and channels the voice of the Holy Ghost; engages in faith healing activities among the peasants devoted to the Society of God Worshipers in Guangxi; after setting up the Taiping capital in Nanjing, Yang has a falling out with Hong Xiuquan; in a bloody purge in 1856 Yang and some 20,000 followers are killed on the orders of Hong Xiuquan.

Xiao Chaogui 蕭朝貴 (d. 1852): a charcoal peddler from Guangxi, Xiao joins the Society of God Worshipers and quickly becomes leader of the Taiping movement; claims to channel the voice of Jesus, the “Elder Brother” to Hong Xiuquan; brother-in-law of Hong Xiuquan; given the title of “West King”; dies in the fighting to take Changsha in 1852.
Wei Changhui 韋昌輝: another early member of the God Worshipers in Guangxi; given the title of North King; responsible for organizing the slaughter of Yang Xiuqing in 1856.

Shi Dakai 石達開 (1820-1863): from a wealthy Hakka lineage in Guangxi; joins and brings his entire clan into the fold of the Society of God Worshipers; becomes one of the most capable generals of the Taipings; named the Wing King; leads a branch of the Taipings into Sichuan after becoming disillusioned by Taiping infighting; eventually defeated by Qing armies.