

# Gunpowder Man

## **Resource Guide for Teachers to accompany performances of the play**

by Duende: Drama & Literature

### **The Story**

As the play opens, we meet **Little Tiger**, a young Chinese woman. She is about to leave Sweetwater, a small mining town in the mountains of the West.

The year is 1882, the same year that the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibiting further immigration of Chinese. It was an era of great hardship for Chinese in America. They faced being beaten, robbed, and even murdered by a white population that blamed them for the economic troubles besetting the working people of the day. Many Chinatowns in the West were burned. And that is what has just happened in Sweetwater.

The morning after the fire, Little Tiger comes to the church where she and her brother have worshiped the past twelve years. The concerned white parishioners have gathered there to talk about “the problem.” She is smudged from the fire. She carries two baskets containing all that she was able to save from her home. Before she leaves Sweetwater she needs to tell her white friends who she really is. And so begins her tale.

She takes on many roles from her past. We get to know her as a happy child in rural China living with her parents, grandparents, and twin brother. The movement known as the Taiping, or Great Peace, comes into their lives with its hope for a more equal and just society. Her parents go off to fight in the Taiping Rebellion. Little Tiger and her brother are left with the village and their grandparents.

We see how they adapt to being the children of idealistic rebels. We hear how their mother becomes a hero of the revolution.

Then corruption begins destroying the Great Peace from within and the army of the Emperor finishes it off when the twins are sixteen. Because its people had backed the Rebellion, Little Tiger’s village is destined for destruction. So the grandparents send her and her brother off to Gold Mountain, or California, in 1864. Little Tiger travels disguised as a boy.

In San Francisco they find others who speak their dialect, Hakka. One of these gets them a job working for the Central Pacific Railroad. Because she is so small, Little Tiger is almost rejected for the job, but her quick-witted brother convinces the bosses that she can be an excellent cook for the crew. We learn about life in the railroad camps as the twins live and work next to a crew of Irish immigrants. And we learn the dramatic sequence of events that cause her to become one of the Gunpowder Men who hang from the cliffs in baskets and set charges in the sheer stone face.

Finally we experience her move to Sweetwater, her love for the town and its church and the restaurant that she and her brother open. We understand her growing fear as the anti-Chinese violence grows in the U.S. And we share the events of the previous night, the burning of her Chinatown, and how Little Tiger faces the ultimate challenge to her values as she must decide whether to take violent revenge on the people who have done her such wrong.

## Vocabulary

**Cape Horn** – A solid rock cliff near Colfax, California, which rose 2000 feet from the American River and from which a path for the railroad had to be blasted.

**Chink** – A derogatory slang name for Chinese immigrants. It was meant to be insulting and indicates a racist attitude toward Chinese.

**Concubine** – A woman forced into slavery to serve a man.

**Forbidden City** – The walled portion of central Beijing which contained the palaces and offices of the Chinese Emperors.

**Crocker** – Charles Crocker (1822-1888), one of the Big Four (with Stanford, Huntington, and Hopkins), the businessmen who got Congress to fund the building of the Central Pacific. Crocker was the only one of the four who actually managed the construction.

**Hakka** – An ethnic group within China. Some of them claim to be the original Han Chinese and that their language is closer to Classical Chinese than modern Mandarin. By the 1800s they had differentiated themselves from the majority of Chinese in important ways. The women did not bind their feet. The women did much more physical labor and had more managerial positions in the family, owing to the fact that many of the men worked far from home. The Taiping movement originated among the Hakka of the South before spreading to other ethnic groups.

**Hong Xiuquan** – Founder and leader of the Taiping movement and Rebellion. He was called the Heavenly Leader.

**Qing Dynasty** – (pronounced Ching) The dynasty that ruled China from 1644 to 1911. They were actually not Chinese but came from Manchuria and were always regarded as usurping outsiders by many Chinese.

**Queue** – The long single braid worn by Chinese men during the Qing (Manchu) dynasty (1644-1911) as a sign of allegiance to these foreign rulers.

**Strobridge** – John Strobridge, superintendent of construction for the Central Pacific Railroad, employed by Charles Crocker.

**Taiping (Great Peace)** – The religious movement and Rebellion (1851-1864) that began in the South of China and eventually controlled a huge portion of central and southern China. It was based on certain Christian principles brought to Canton by Protestant missionaries. Its ideology had much in common with certain ideals from the U.S. Declaration of Independence believing that all humans are created equal, all should have equal opportunity and equal justice—and preaching full equality for women. See web sites for further information.

## Production History of Gunpowder Man

**Gunpowder Man** was written by Rick Foster in 1995 when he was on staff at Sierra Repertory Theatre in Sonora, California. It toured schools in the Central Valley and Mother Lode that year. In 1997 he expanded it to a full length version which played both to adult audiences and to school matinees at the Stage 3 Theatre, also in Sonora. In 1999 the current version (incorporating some material from the full length play) toured for Foothill Theatre in Nevada City, California, and now for Duende: Drama & Literature. In February, 2000, the play again toured the Central Valley and Mother Lode and performed seven times for the public at the Bradford Studios in Sonora.

## Useful Web Sites

### Encyclopedias, Background Information, & Primary Sources

Encyclopedia.com—results for Taiping Rebellion  
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/articles/12597.html>  
brief encyclopedia entry

Encarta—results for Taiping Rebellion  
<http://encarta.msn.com/index/conciseindex/62/062af000.htm>  
brief encyclopedia entry

EPISODES IN CHINA'S HISTORY  
<http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/china0.htm>  
good one-page overview of Taiping Rebellion

Modern Era: II  
<http://www-chaos.umd.edu/history/modern2.html#taiping>  
good brief description of the rebellion with a link to a good map of China

History of China: Table of Contents  
<http://www-chaos.umd.edu/history/toc.html>  
main table of contents on which the previous page occurs

Chinese American Literature  
<http://labweb.soemadison.wisc.edu/cni514/fall97/sumera/china.html>  
background on Chinese American culture

Books for the Classroom  
<http://labweb.soemadison.wisc.edu/cni514/fall97/sumera/resources.html>  
more information from the Chinese American Literature site

Religion and Rebellion in China: the London Missionary Society Collection  
<http://www.nla.gov.au/asian/pub/aglms1.html>  
background on the influence of British Protestant missionaries on the Rebellion

Chinese Cultural Studies: The Taiping Rebellion, 1851-1864  
<http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/taiping.htm>  
primary source document on “The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom” 1853

Rivendell's History Page  
<http://www.watson.org/rivendell/historyeasttaiping.html>  
description of the history behind the rebellion, and its aftereffects. The Rivendell home page offers other things of interest to teachers and students.

Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882  
<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/chinex.htm>  
text of the act

## **Sites relating to the Railroad**

Railroad Museum: the Big Four

[www.csrnf.org/big\\_four.html](http://www.csrnf.org/big_four.html)

from the Railroad Museum site: brief description of the Big Four and the building of the railroad.

Transcontinental Railroad–Driving the Last Spike

[www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/rail.html](http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/rail.html)

from the Museum of the City of San Francisco site: description of the history of the Central Pacific construction

The American Experience/the Iron road/About the Program

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amex/iron/index.html>

description of the episode of the PBS series on the railroad; includes a link to the teacher's guide for the video

New Perspectives on the West

[http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/wpages/wpgs000/w010\\_001.htm](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/wpages/wpgs000/w010_001.htm)

excellent site on the Ken Burns PBS documentary on the West

The West–Episode 5–The Artillery of Heaven

[http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/wpages/wpgs100/w15\\_003.htm](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/wpages/wpgs100/w15_003.htm)

The page relating to the railroad episode in the Burns documentary

## **Curriculum and Lesson Plan Information**

Chinese History and Cultural Project Golden Legacy Curriculum

<http://www.chcp.org/Pgolden.html>

a curriculum on Chinese and Chinese American culture with links to California History Forum

The Asian American Experience in the United States: A Chronological History

[http://askasia.org/for\\_educators/fe\\_frm2.htm](http://askasia.org/for_educators/fe_frm2.htm)

a lesson plan on Asian American history

## **Maps**

China: Maps

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~felsing/cstuff/cmmaps.html>

links to many maps of China

## **Some relevant legislation up to the time of the play**

1790----Naturalization Act of 1790 grants the right of U.S. citizenship to all "free white persons." Same right is not granted to Asians.

1850----Foreign Miners' Tax imposed against the Chinese and other non-U.S. citizens, but enforced only against non-whites. Tax was \$3 dollars a month. It attempted to limit the amount of people of color, including Chinese, in California.

1854----California Supreme Court rules, in *People v. Hall*, that the testimony of Chinese, blacks, "mulattos" and Native Americans against whites is invalid; not repealed until 1872.

1859----Chinese are excluded from San Francisco public schools.

1864----First federal immigration law is created -- an act to "encourage" immigration. First immigration law bars criminals and prostitutes from entering the country.

1880----California Civil Code amended to prohibit inter-racial marriages between a white person and a "Negro, Mulatto, or Mongolian." The law is not repealed until 1948.

1882----Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 bans Chinese laborers from emigrating to the U.S. and prohibits them from becoming naturalized citizens.

## The Taiping Rebellion

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Chinese culture began to move away from the traditional beliefs of the past. Western culture and beliefs moved slowly into the foreground in China, especially the Christian doctrine spread by missionaries which found itself at the center of the Taiping ideology. The Chinese were beginning to realize the present glory of the Western nations, which stirred a brief resurgence in traditional thinking. Even radical quasi-Christian movements like the Taiping Rebellion made use of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist ideas to develop its tenets.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the unrest moved closer to the surface. Natural disasters in the form of floods, droughts and famines swept across the entire country. Neglect on the part of the Manchu government not only facilitated the incidents, but offered no relief or aid in their aftermath. The defeat of the Manchus by the English during the Opium War heightened the tensions between governed and government even more. The outburst of pro-Chinese thinking prompted an anti-Manchu feeling, especially in the south where Manchu rule had never been strong. The Manchus, only a century before given credit for China's success in conquest, were charged now with all of China's problems. All of these contributed to the evolution of the T'ai-p'ing T'ien-Kuo, and the end of China as an isolated kingdom.

The Treaty of Nanking of 1842 aided in lowering the status of the Ch'ing dynasty even further. Among the elite of China, an aversion to absolute rule was spreading. Scholars thought that the Manchus had outlived their use after a brief golden age, and that the time had come to place the rule of China in Chinese hands again. The foreign ideas and people who now streamed into China without hindrance were strongly resented. The Emperor Tao Kuang, (1821-1850) had lost the respect of his people. The Mandate of Heaven called for a change.

The Manchu dynasty, called the Ch'ing, came to power after the Ming. Called in to aid a rebellion that the now-weak Ming dynasty could not control, the Manchus took over Peking in 1644 and turned over the rule of South China to the Chinese generals who had aided in their conquest. Nurhachi, the first Manchu Emperor and founder of the dynasty, (1559-1626) made a conscious effort to avoid the mistakes made by Chinggis Kahn centuries before. He kept the tribal lands of Manchuria as a cultural base, but the Ming bureaucratic system was changed only to admit Manchu leaders. There were several main factors which contributed to the longevity of the Manchu state. They maintained an impressive military force, and during the Ch'ing China's borders expanded greatly. The highest government office and all important positions were held by Manchus. In this manner, they made use of Chinese ideas but were careful to remain in control of the bureaucracy. The administration at the

capital city of Peking was a mix of Chinese and Manchu officials, so much so that the Ch'ing came to be called a dyarchy.

The Opium War and its aftermath had a great influence on the Ch'ing dynasty. The English, when told "Take away your opium, and your missionaries, and you will be welcome" chose to come with both and throw welcome to the wind. The fact that the English had the power in the first place to disregard the Emperor and his ambassadors was a blow to Chinese esteem. Suddenly these little European nations from far away were threatening the traditions and tenets kept by China for thousands of years. Losing the Opium War was the beginning of the end of the Manchu dynasty. Later, one of the Taiping leaders would state:

"Each year they [the Manchus] transform tens of millions of China's gold and silver into opium and extract several millions from the fat and marrow of the Chinese people and turn it into rouge and powder ... How could the rich not become poor? How could the poor abide by the law?"

The problem the Manchus were faced with in China was their preservation as a ruling body despite their obvious minority, (only two percent of the entire population of China was Manchu). To do this they used a combined measure of Legalist and Confucian ideas. The ruling class amassed enormous material resources, which laid down the barrier of wealth. To keep the nobility from becoming corrupt, they instituted a class policy in which every son had to earn his father's rank. They also maintained a distance from the Chinese culture. Inter-marriage and trade with the Chinese was illegal. Manchu traditions like the Banner System were preserved, and knowledge of the Manchu language was mandatory. To further the separation, all Chinese men were made to braid their hair in a queue as a token of their submission.

However, years of leadership and comfort had taken their toll on the Ch'ing dynasty. By 1850, the nobility was indolent and corrupt, and the military had become lax. The Emperor Hsien-Feng had not yet completely let go of the government, but he was in no estimation a strong ruler. There were rumors to the effect that the Emperor was ready to abandon China entirely but for Yehonala, a favorite concubine with much power. Hsien-Feng was indicative of the waning of Ch'ing glory, he was weak and ill. The Emperor stayed in Peking but gave all power of government to the Prince of Korchin, Seng-ko-lin-chin, and Yehonala.

Secret Societies, always a factor in Southern China, now rose to prominence. The people of China, who had swept their ideas into back corners for fifty years, were now ready to listen to the radicals. The Taiping rebels secretly encouraged and allied with other groups, including a band called the

Triad. On May eighteenth, 1853, Triad members instigated the locals and took over the major shipping port of Amoy. They held onto the port despite imperial assault until November eleventh, executing all Manchu officials and foreigners during that time. Suddenly, the people of China realized that the Ch'ing was no longer an absolute power. With that act, the Taipings awakened a nation to rebellion.

To the Taipings, the Ch'ing dynasty was a challenge to be met and overthrown. The Manchus were "demons fighting against the true God." Although they held Confucian and other traditional beliefs to be the root of the Manchu corruption, these ideals are present intrinsically in their doctrine. The Taiping ideology came to be a conglomerate of Christianity and the golden age of Chinese culture. The Taiping goal was simple: destroy the Manchus and restore to China her past greatness.

The leader of the Taipings, Hung Hsiu-Ch'uan, shaped the entire rebellion and thus much of modern China. He was born on January first, in 1814. He lived in the farming community of Fu-yuan-shui in Kwangtan Province, South China. His father, Hung Ching-yang was a small independent farmer. Because Hung was an exceptionally bright child, his family hoped that he would pass the examinations in Canton and thus become one of the elite. They therefore sent him to school when he was seven, where he did well. In 1827, when Hung was fifteen, he was given his first examination, the preliminary. He passed this, but failed the main examination for a sheng-yuan degree, (the one which would have elevated his class). Hung tried to pass several times until 1843. This incident may have fed his hostility towards the Ch'ing and China's condition. He took an interest in politics and the government after he was converted to Christianity. His translation of the Christian doctrine formed the beliefs and ideology of the Taiping Rebellion. In 1837, Hung had a revelation which changed his life, career and outlook. At the time he was in Canton for his examinations, where he knew a Protestant missionary. Hung spent two months studying the bible doctrines under the missionary. Some years before, in 1835, Leang-afa, the first protestant Christian in China, had given Hung several papers also about religion. Hung had not studied these until he was given a second pamphlet, and began to look at them in more depth back at his home village. Hung was struck suddenly by sickness, and was unconscious for about four days. During the time he was in a coma, he had a vision to the effect that he was the younger brother of Jesus, and had been taken up to Heaven to see him.

For the next ten years, Hung joined Leang-afa as a street preacher. With several close friends, he founded the Society of God Worshippers and remained the head of that organization until the March of 1847, when he returned to Canton to study with Isaachar T. Roberts. Roberts was an American Southern Baptist missionary, who adopted Hung as a special student and encouraged his ideas of rebellion. Later, the missionary was to

change his mind, calling Hung and his fellow revolutionists "coolie kings" who were "crazy and unfit to rule."

From these studies Hung created his own version of the Christian doctrine. Although he agreed that God was the maker of the universe, he never accepted Jesus as a deity, and the entire idea of a Trinity seemed to him to be too similar to Confucian values. The Taipings thought that they were the chosen people of their god, with a mission to overthrow the wicked Manchu regime. Because they were a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, they believed the Manchus to be thieving usurpers and therefore incapable of a legitimate claim to the government.

Despite the thorough assimilation of Western religious beliefs by the Taiping, their theology was more of a mosaic than a pure Christian sect. There was an innate sense of family in their doctrine which hearkened back to Confucianism. Their idea, too, of bringing divinity into the reality of everyday life was more corrupt Buddhism than Protestantism. Even their version of the Ten Commandments, (called the Ten Heavenly Precepts) differ significantly from the bible. Their religion was a translation of a translation, and therefore completely their own.

Confucianism had a large influence on the Taiping religion. Although much of the "borrowing" from their traditional religions may have been subconscious, almost all of the Taiping propaganda and essay writing depended as much on Confucianism as on Christianity. The Chinese could readily accept God as a father figure because ancestor worship had been a part of their culture for thousands of years.

Hung recognized and incorporated several key Confucian tenets into his doctrine, such as converting the Five Human Relationships of Confucius to The Five Heavenly Relationships of the Taiping. The Taiping fatalist outlook also stems from Confucianism. The Classics, too, were a source of Taiping wisdom literature. Mencius appealed especially to them because of his semi-Christian stress on the inherent goodness of humanity. In fact, the only point that the Taipings went directly against in the traditional religion was the role of women in society. The Taipings included women as commanders of forces, and several famous woman bandits played key roles in the rebellion as well.

The Taipings as a fighting force were formidable but rather less than coherent. Their style was to collect an army as they went, inciting the populous to rebellion. Their first military success was the capture of Hupeh, after being held in the city of Yung-an by the Emperor's militia. They attempted in that same campaign to seize Kwangsi and Hunan, but failed to hold either. This initial success was balanced by severe defeats by the imperial forces at sea, where the Emperor had far better material resources. Their battle record was inconsistent, with spurts of inspired fighting and long periods of relative

inertia.

The goal of the Taipings from the start had been to take Nanking, and to spread their rule throughout the entirety of China. Though severely factionalized and having changed leaders several times, they managed to install a Taiping government in Nanking, stressing egalitarian values and claiming to be in the process of restoring China's glory. The Taipings formed a kingdom indeed, selecting kings on the basis of their purity and devotion. Yang Hsiu-ch'ing, who became the Eastern King and later head of the entire rebellion, had previously been a charcoal seller.

By 1863 the Taiping Rebellion was falling apart. Holding the city of Nanking against imperial and foreign forces had become virtually impossible. Sometime in the June of 1862, the Hunan army was preparing to launch their final attack. Hung Jen-kan, the third and final leader of the Rebellion, had attempted during his rule to reevaluate the tenets and beliefs of the Taipings, as well as salvage the Taiping cause. This was not to be the case. Their dream of moving beyond Nanking seemed to be lost.

Nanking fell to the army of Tseng Kuo-ch'uan on July 19th, 1864. The Taiping kings and leaders had planned an organized breakthrough but the walls fell too suddenly for many to escape. Hung Hsiu-ch'uan had died in Nanking a month before, on June first. His son was taken out of the city in the band of escapees and named the new T'ien Wang. Every Taiping found by the Hunan army who did not renounce their faith and surrender was killed. The brother of the conquering general, Tseng Kuo-fan, wrote a report on the condition of Nanking after its siege:

"Others searched the city for any rebels they could not find, and in three days killed over 100,000 men. The Ch'in-huai creek was filled with bodies ... Not one of the 100,000 rebels in Nanking surrendered themselves when the city was taken but in many cases gathered together and burned themselves and passed away without repentance."

### **Long Term Effects of the Rebellion**

Although a technical failure, the Taiping Rebellion changed the way the Chinese government functioned. The devastation and loss of life in the Yangtze Valley left the once-fertile area a desert for the next hundred years. The Land Tax which the Ch'ing leaned upon so heavily was simply no longer a source of any money at all. Soon, the Manchus were relying solely on the Maritime customs taken in by non-Chinese port operators, as well as on the sale of offices in the administration. The examination system fell into serious neglect and eventually passed away altogether. Now, the main way to advance in class was to buy into political rank. Province leaders and generals assumed a greater power than the central bureaucracy, because the Emperor had bestowed power upon warlords to raise a large enough

army. Most of these armies remained under private command rather than returning to the Emperor, and the entire society became factionalized as a result.

When the Ch'ing dynasty fell in the early 1900's, it left a power vacuum. Foreign influence reached new heights as the merchants and traders that had been so much a part of the late Manchu dynasty poured into China. Japan swiftly became the dominant power in the country. The Chinese economy in every respect increasingly became a subsidy of Japan, especially North and Northeast China. China was pushed into the modern world by force. Soon Japan began to take Chinese territory. In 1915 they began to assert a dominant role in ports and small cities in Manchuria and Shandong. This subversive method of war culminated in 1931 with the taking of Northeast China and the establishment of a puppet government called Manchukuo. China was taken from the inside out.

The Taiping Rebellion changed the face of China. Every revolution that it inspired brought the country closer and closer to the rest of the world. Although the Taipings had heard neither of Karl Marx nor of Communism, they shared many of the same ideals. The Heavenly Kingdom of the Taipings is not so distant from the commune-oriented Marxist utopia. The Taiping leaders had attempted to establish a caste-free society based on egalitarian precepts. They did carry out this primitive Communism. Land was evenly distributed. Slavery and the sale of women was outlawed, as were foot-binding, prostitution, arranged marriages and polygamy. The Taipings were strongly against opium, alcohol, and tobacco. In short, the Communist Revolution may have been but a realization of an underground movement in China which began in the mid eighteen-hundreds.

The Taiping Rebellion played a significant role in ending China's isolationist outlook. The Nian Rebellion, Boxer Rebellion, and the Communist Revolution all stem from the emotions and ideas which emerged from the Taiping vision. The influx of strange, new things had started in China an unsettling movement, away from the old ways of the ancestors and into the Western sphere of influence. The attempts of the Taipings to end this unrest and to reinstate a golden era are similar in many points to the Communist attempts in the same direction. After the Taiping Rebellion, China would never again be a realm unto herself. With the failure of the Taiping movement, the age of the emperors was finished.

The Taiping movement itself was a product of the clash between the East and the West which took place in the nineteenth century. The people of China, on the verge of joining the forming world community, took refuge briefly in their unique blend of traditional culture and modern idealism.

For a time they fended off the foreigners, the weak Emperors, the crowding countries and strange cultures with this faith. When the Taiping Rebellion was crushed, the Chinese once again fled to an idealistic society, listening eagerly to the promises of Mao and Communism. In each of these cases, there was an inherent wish to return to the golden age of China, when the only threat to the unity of their lives was nature itself. The Taiping Rebellion was a reaction against progress, more importantly against change. That action continues to mold the current events in China, a sign that the people, not the central authority, can control the future of China.