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INTERPRETING THE TAIPING REBELLION

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INTERPRETING THE TAIPING REBELLION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
History

by
Thomas Donovan
August 2023

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an evaluation of the Chinese Nationalist and Communist interpretations of the Taiping Rebellion (December 1851- August 1864). As the largest uprising of the time, whose importance was central to the course of modern Chinese history, prominent members of both the CCP and the KMT perceived the seeds of their political movements in the Taiping Rebellion. What evidence supports their claims, to what extent they are rational, and how their narrations illuminate aspects of the rebellion is our primary task. In addition, the particular Taiping creed, and the many interpretations of it, will be analyzed and a cross-cultural understanding of the faith will be provided. Lastly, the different names which are ascribed to the uprising, and how a philosophy of perspectivism serves well when questioning the meaning of the past, will be considered.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Taiping Rebellion (December 1851- August 1864), an immense uprising against China's last imperial dynasty, has long been understood by historians as one of the most seminal events of modern Chinese history. For over a decade, Taiping rebels and the armies of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) clashed in nearly every province of the Chinese Empire, leaving behind at least twenty million dead in their wake. Led by the self-proclaimed messenger of God, Hong Xiuquan (1 January 1814 – 1 June 1864), the Taipings opposed the dominant Confucian philosophy of China, denied the legitimacy of the Qing dynasty, and waged a total war to establish their own kingdom. Following a series of dazzling initial victories and the capture of the major city of Nanjing (1853), Taiping forces grew to over a million strong and seemed poised to seize China and transubstantiate the country in their image. However after failing to take Beijing, vicious and bloody infighting ruined any sense of the movement's cohesion, British and French forces intervened against them, and the Qing government eventually managed to soundly suppress the rebellion in a fury of mass killings.

Yet despite the Qing's eventual victory, the political and economic cost was devastating for the dynasty. Unable to defeat Taiping forces alone, the Qing had to rely on provincial gentry leaders to organize, fund, and deploy armies to

combat the rebels. By surrendering the monopoly on military force, the Qing's authority over China was forever weakened, and the dynasty had to acquiesce to a dramatic rise in provincial regionalism. Hence, from the Taiping Rebellion came the fragmentation of China, a dilemma which the Qing would prove to be unable of rectifying, and which heavily contributed to the final collapse of the imperial system in 1911.

Most generally agree with the preceding summary, and the significance of the Taiping Rebellion is widely acknowledged. However, beyond its scope, general narration, and basic long term political implications, historians often immensely disagree with one another over the meaning of the Taiping Rebellion. Was the event a proto-communist peasant revolution, an ethnic nationalist war of liberation, a turn in the dynastic cycle, or a Chinese civil war? Was the Taiping theology genuinely Christian, an incomplete emulation, a hybrid of Eastern and Western thought, or a mask to disguise their political endeavors?

The goal of this paper is to offer a comparative analysis of some of the various perspectives of the Taiping Rebellion to determine the character of the movement and demonstrate the use a perspectivist philosophy has for the study of history. After providing background information on Hong Xiuquan, the Qing Dynasty, and the Taipings, we will focus on Jian Youwen's Nationalist perspective and Fan Wenlan's Communist appraisal of the affair. Just as both the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claim the legacy of Sun Yat-sen, for a time the Communists and Nationalists of China each claimed

to be the heirs of the Taiping Rebellion. To analyze why that was the case, what evidence supports their claims, and how their narrations can illuminate the Taiping Rebellion as a whole is my first task. Secondly, we will explore Karl Marx's little known interpretation of the Taiping Rebellion and compare his analysis with that of the CCP. Thirdly, a discussion of the character of the Taiping faith will follow, and a cross-cultural perspective of the Taiping creed will be offered. Lastly, we will conclude with an overview of the various names given to the Taiping Rebellion, and discuss the importance of perspectivism for the inquiry of history.

The Vision of Hong Huoxiu

In 1836, a modest but bright Hakka man from Guangzhou named Hong Huoxiu attempted to pass the Confucian-based Civil Service Examinations for the second time. From a young age he was studious, and his family hoped that his intelligence could be used to better the conditions of the clan. If successful in these strenuous tests, a prestigious status in Chinese society and a high paying position within the government awaited him; both of which he would be able to use to help his suffering village and family. Theoretically, this examination was based upon intellectual merit, and most male individuals of any economic class could attempt to demonstrate their learned ability. However, de facto, it was typically the wealthiest families of society who could afford the proper education

or bribery to meet the very selective institutional standards.¹ Studying began young, and Hong was one of the many boys who were chosen by their family to prepare for a chance at social mobility. But with a passing rate of less than one percent, most of these young men's hopes came not to be.

Like most, Hong was rejected. But he did not return home completely empty handed. Outside of the examination halls, he happened upon a Western Protestant missionary and his translator who handed him a copy of a tract titled *Good Words to Admonish the Age*. He kept the book, but paid little attention to the Chinese Protestant message, and only gave it a superficial glance before returning to his work as a school teacher.²

The next year, Hong once again attempted to pass the Civil Service Examination, and for the third time he was unsuccessful. This time, however, the stress was too much for his mind to bear and he collapsed, had a nervous breakdown, and had to be carried home. Upon arriving in his village, he begged for forgiveness from his parents for failing to make a name for himself, and for his inability to compensate them for the love they had shown him. He then fell into a stuporous immobile state and, for over a month, experienced a series of vivid dreams. He envisioned that he ascended above, and was faced with an array of figures who welcomed him with joy. He saw a dragon, a tiger, and a rooster, and was carried in a chair, accompanied by a collection of musicians, towards a beautiful palace. An old woman reprimanded him for having defiled himself, and

¹ Kuhn, *The Cambridge History of China*. Volume 10., 266-267

² *Ibid.*, 267-268

proceeded to wash him clean. Then, he was brought to another palace, along with an entourage of sages, and his heart and other organs were cut out of him, before another set took their place. His wounds healed instantly, without leaving a scar, and a large man in a black robe with a long golden beard appeared before him. The figure lamented that “All human beings are produced and sustained by me; they eat my food, and wear my clothing; but not a single one among them remembers and venerates me. What is still worse, they take my gifts and worship demons. They purposely rebel against me and arouse my anger. Do not thou imitate them.” The figure then handed Hong a golden seal, fruit, and a sword, tasked him with the eradication of the demons, and told him to “Do thy work: I shall assist thee in every difficulty.” Hong awoke, dragged himself before his parents, and excitedly shouted: “The Venerable Old Man above has commanded that all men shall turn to me, and all treasure shall flow to me.”³

In and out of lucidity Hong went, and he hallucinated that he traveled across the universe with a middle aged man, who acted as an advice giving older brother, slaying demons as they went. In his room, Hong leaped, ran, and attacked invisible enemies while shouting “Slay them, slay the demons!”⁴ When visitors spoke to him, he said that he was made the Emperor of China, and anyone who told him he was mad was met with only contemptuous confident rebuttals. He adopted a new name, Hong Xiuquan, and wrote: “My hands hold in

³ Yap, *The Mental Illness of Hung Hsiu-Ch'uan, Leader of the Taiping Rebellion*, 290-291

⁴ *Ibid.*, 291

Heaven and Earth the power to punish and to kill, To slay the wicked, spare the virtuous, and relieve men's distress."⁵ Hong's disposition towards himself and the world was forever changed.

However, after recovering from this state, for years Hong did not know exactly what to make of this experience. That is until 1843, when a distant relative and friend of Hong's urged him to read his forgotten copy of *Good Words to Admonish the Age*.⁶ This tract, written by one of the first Chinese Protestant fundamentalists, Liang A-fa (1789-1855), presented to Hong a set of ideas largely anomalous to him and his civilization. The existence of a singular, personified, all mighty, and omnipresent God was asserted. Described as the king of kings, Liang said, he is the creator of Heaven and Earth, and all of humanity are his equally worthy children. The world has become corrupt and degenerate, all other religions must be renounced, and all idols destroyed to prevent an impending catastrophe.⁷ Liang's autobiographical account of his conversion to Christianity was given, and Christian stories such as Noah and the flood, the deliverance from Egypt, the Sermon on the Mount, the life of Jesus, and the life and teachings of Saint Paul were outlined. The concept of Hell, Satan, the final Judgment, the Ten Commandments, filial piety, the Sabbath, and baptism were all explained, and vices such as wine, opium, adultery, prostitution, gambling, theft, jewelry, and cosmetics were strongly condemned.⁸

⁵ Ibid., 292

⁶ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 25

⁷ Kuhn, *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 10., 267

⁸ Teng, *Historiography of the Taiping Rebellion*, 2-3

Upon reading the tract, a wave of joy enveloped Hong, and it appeared to him that the meaning of his vision had been revealed. Certainly, he believed, the figures he previously saw were Jehovah and Jesus Christ, his father and older brother, who each spoke directly to Hong as Jehovah did to Moses. Immediately, Hong and his cousins then repented their idolatry, baptized themselves, and pledged to spread the message of Jehovah.⁹

It was from this vision which came what has been described as the worst man made disaster of the nineteenth century. From Hong's metaphysical experience, arose the God Worshipping Society, a Protestant Chinese Christian sect; whose mission began with proselytizing and iconoclasm, but eventually evolved into a total war to overthrow the ruling dynasty of China.

The Qing Dynasty on the Eve of the Taiping Rebellion

At this time China was governed by the Qing dynasty, who from 1683 to 1911 lorded over China proper and much of the surrounding regions. Unlike the previous Ming dynasty (1368-1644), which was governed by the native Han Chinese ethnicity, the Qing was a conquest dynasty led by foreign Manchus whose violent seizure of China was a multigenerational endeavor. Their conquest of China, however, was not accomplished against the will of the entirety of China's population, their armed forces were composed of many Chinese, and

⁹ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 25

their success was only possible due to the help of Ming defectors who invited the Qing across the Great Wall and into China.¹⁰

Some Ming officials chose death in the face of the change in regime, and others sided with the Manchus to help ease the process. Following their initial passing of the great wall, it took almost forty years to complete their conquest, but the Manchus were eventually successful and their rule was to last for over two centuries.¹¹ Once in power, the Qing then promoted the ideas of Confucianism and maintained many of the previously established institutions in China to cultivate political authority. The study of the classics and veneration of ancestors were endorsed, Qing rulers attempted to govern according to Confucian virtue, and enormous literary projects were sponsored.¹² The Manchu led Qing, above all, wanted to appear as the rightful rulers of China and, despite that they also attempted to cultivate and preserve their separate Manchu identity, they engrossed themselves in and encouraged Chinese culture, earning the loyalty of the scholar and gentry class. However, the Qing did develop a “literary inquisition” which suppressed the works they disapproved of to control the intellectual milieu.¹³ Further, the Qing dynasty mandated that all Han Chinese males must wear the queue hairstyle, a coiffure where one shaved the front of their head and allowed the rest to grow long in a pigtail, as an emblem of

¹⁰ Fairbank, *China: A New History*, 144-145

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 146

¹² *Ibid.*, 147, 158

¹³ *Ibid.*, 159

submission.¹⁴ This demand, which if not adhered to would be punishable by execution, was an affront to Confucian values concerning the sanctity of the body and rejected by those who opposed the Qing government.

Nevertheless, it would not be absurd to claim that the Qing was one of China's most grand dynasties; although some prefer to interpret the Qing dynasty as a multi-national polity which saw China as only one part of the whole. Regardless, during the 18th century, the Qing's population, prosperity, territorial size, and military power was unmatched, and European Enlightenment Philosophers frequently expressed a romantic idealized admiration of the Qing's relatively secular and rational administration.¹⁵ However after the golden age of 1683-1799, the efficiency of the Qing's administration began to systematically decline. By the turn of the 19th century, problems in the government became undeniably apparent. The destabilizing effects of a staggering growth of population, increased expenditure, declining tax revenue, inflation, the draining of silver out of the economy, and epidemic administrative corruption all coalesced and resulted in a far less effective government.¹⁶

During the rule of the Jiaqing Emperor (r. 1796–1820), three major rebellions and disastrous floods exhausted the administration and starved it of funds. The succeeding the Daoguang Emperor (r. 1820–1850) was then

¹⁴ Ibid., 150

¹⁵ Ibid., 151-152; Peyrefitte, *L'empire Immobile*, Introduction

¹⁶ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 7-20

compelled to raise the land tax and sell government positions to keep the administration afloat.¹⁷

Piracy and banditry dramatically rose, people were pushed off their land in droves, and an extensive illicit opium trade flourished. The gradual opening of the economy to the West threw thousands out of work, and famine, flood, plague, and bands of demobilized soldiers destabilized society. Violence was rising, different ethnic groups engaged in clan wars, and local gentry organized their own, at times criminal, defense groups to maintain order. Riots and local revolts became frequent, and the Qing government's inability to preserve the peace, along with the defeat by Britain in the Opium War (1839-42), resulted in the call for dynastic change to become ever more obstreperous.¹⁸

Amidst this crisis, secret societies grew in size and importance. These brotherhoods of the persecuted and politically voiceless, vowed to aid, give refuge, and defend one another against outsiders and the government. They adopted a quasi-military organization, had a hierarchy of officials, and were at times connected to organized crime. However, to many of the poorest, these secret societies were the only means one had for defense against pressures from the administration and other villages and ethnic groups. Guided by popular religious principles from Buddhist and Taoist traditions, these organizations strongly encouraged brotherhood and equality among the members; a philosophy which, along with their mystic religious rites, stood in stark opposition

¹⁷ Boardman, *Christian Influence upon the Ideology of the Taiping Rebellion*, 10

¹⁸ Kuhn, *The Cambridge History of China*. Volume 10., 264-266

to the neo-Confucian principles which officially directed the Qing state.¹⁹

Although each lodge had very tenuous links to one another, they shared “a common set of traditions” such as the widespread slogan: “Oppose the Qing and restore the Ming!” In the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, a historically anti-Qing region, anti-Manchu political activity was germinating.²⁰

The God Worshipping Society, its Self-Perception, and Aims

Excluding their Christian elements, at first, there were few distinctions between the God Worshipping Society and the myriad of other Chinese secret societies. Started by Hong and a few friends and relatives, by 1850, the God Worshipers had grown to over ten thousand strong, with Hakka peasants composing the majority. The Hakkas, who are a subgroup of the dominant Han Chinese ethnicity, originated in the central plains of China before migrating to Guangxi, and Guangdong in southern China. Although they were considered new arrivals to the region, and they fought the Punti in genocidal clan wars, they were not seen as distinct from Chinese civilization and a portion of them had strong nativist beliefs.

However the Society was also made up of charcoal workers, dismissed soldiers of the Opium War, miners, river porters, and members of friendly secret societies as well.²¹ Some joined for protection, others for economic relief, and

¹⁹ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 12-13

²⁰ Curwen, *Taiping Rebel The Deposition of Li Hsiu-Ch'eng*, 7

²¹ Kuhn, *The Cambridge History of China*. Volume 10., 270-271

there were those who were moved by the preaching. Many of the leading figures were individuals who failed the civil service examinations, and their education gave them the ability to organize a movement while displaced or insecure peoples amassed under their guidance.

This original core of the Taipings, especially Hong Xiuquan, devoutly believed in the truth of their religious message. Certainly the Taipings appealed to those who desired protection and support, but the crux of the society was a cohort of religious fundamentalists, and a central aspect of Taiping aspirations was the practice and establishment of their religion. At first, their task was to peacefully convert China to what they considered to be Christianity, live cleanly, dutifully worship Jehovah, and avoid the evils of opium, licentiousness, unfiliality, homicide, and gambling.²² To them, they were assigned a divine mission, were a chosen people, and everything they did was formulated in metaphysical terms.

In the beginning, this assortment of people was pictured as a group without distinctions, where everyone was a brother or sister within the same family sharing equally among themselves.²³ But despite the God Worshipping Society's egalitarian ideals, a significant degree of stratification did develop. After Taiping converts repelled a Qing force sent to disband the society, on January 11th 1851, Hong declared himself the "Heavenly King" of the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace". A new dynasty was established, the society was militarized, and several hereditary positions of kingship and marquis were created and conferred

²² Ibid., 269

²³ Ibid., 277

upon the original core of the group. Naturally, these individuals would have a greater share of the society's wealth and power.²⁴

However, although hierarchical structures emerged in the Taiping organization, it would be unjust to ignore the pronounced egalitarian nature of the Taipings. For instance, within the *Yeh-shih* there is this anecdote:

When the Taiping troops took up quarters in the residence of wealthy people, they usually broke the red sandalwood tables to pieces and used them for firewood. When questioned why they did it, they would say: "These are the things the wealthy people take great pride in showing to people, so we destroyed them in order to destroy the class distinction between the rich and the poor." On another occasion the Taiping troops got into a lady's boudoir, where they found a large quantity of bright pearls, which they ground to powder and swallowed with boiled water. They said: "If we handed them over to the officers above, it might lead them to luxury and abandonment. If we keep them for ourselves, it might be the cause of our downfall. But if we swallow the unlucky things we might receive the approval of the Heavenly Father."²⁵

The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty (published in 1853) also captures the stress the Taipings placed on the value of equality. It stated:

All Lands in the empire must be cultivated by all the people in the empire as a common concern. If there is a deficiency of land in one place,

²⁴ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 50

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 60

the people must be removed to another; and if there is a deficiency of land in another place, the people must be removed to this place. The yields of all the land in the empire, whether the crops are good or bad should be universally circulated. If there is a famine at one place, the [surplus food] of the place yielding good crops must be transported to relieve the famine-stricken place, and vice versa. The purpose is to enable all the people in the empire to enjoy together the abundant happiness provided by the Heavenly Father, Lord on High, and Sovereign God. If there is land, it shall be shared by all to till; if there is any food, clothing, or money, these shall be shared by all. In this way all places will share the abundance equally and all will be equally well fed and clothed.²⁶

Clearly, the Taipings, at least in rhetoric, shunned the unequal distribution of wealth, and evolved a system designed to distribute it evenly, even between the genders, under state suzerainty.²⁷

In practice, however, little land reform was implemented, but this is perhaps primarily due to the demands of war which weighed upon the Taipings throughout their entire existence. However, the Taiping leadership did accumulate a great and unequal degree of wealth, enjoyed luxury and privilege, and often ignored their own moral precepts; although perhaps this is only due to the leadership establishing a dynastic court, with all of the opulence and excesses such a thing entails.

²⁶ Ibid., 81

²⁷ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 143-145

Nevertheless, from the conception of the movement strict moral tenets shaped the lives of most of the Taipings. Once they came to control various cities, they applied their laws upon whom they could, particularly in Nanjing, their capital. The use of opium, tobacco, gambling, and alcohol, along with the practices of slavery and prostitution were all banned.²⁸ Society was declared to be classless, the sexes equal, and several leadership positions of the Taipings were given to women who had proven their aptitude.²⁹ Segregation between men and women was briefly established, the Qing imposed queue hairstyle was rejected, a solar calendar was adopted, the Bible replaced the Confucian classics in the civil service examinations, and the tests were opened to both genders and all races.³⁰ Lastly, foot binding, which was a standard of beauty in China that permanently crippled and immobilized the women who practiced it, was made illegal.³¹

After the God Worshipers committed acts of iconoclasm and subsequently collided with the Qing government, repeated Taiping victories over the corruption plagued Qing forces caused waves of people to flock under the Taiping banner.³² To garner support, the Taipings denounced the Manchu regime as a foreign usurpation, and argued that the Qing had unjustly taken advantage of a period of internal Chinese political confusion to seize the country. Once in power, they

²⁸ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 76

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 63

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 60

³¹ *Ibid.*, 76

³² Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 67-68

asserted, the Qing then granted a disproportionate amount of leading positions to Manchus, forcefully instituted foreign customs, and developed corrupt institutions. Scholarly titles and honors were sold by the government, and it appeared to poor individuals, who endeavored to rise in society through honest study and personal merit, that success was hopeless when positions were being bought. Bribery was said to be rampant, taxes exorbitant, daily necessities were increasing in price, famines and floods were ravaging, and Manchu soldiers and police received double pay.³³

Conversely, the Taipings promised to create an efficient and just Chinese led regime, and their tracts unambiguously attempted to depict themselves as the true representatives of China. Although they were inspired by a foreign faith, much of their actions and ideas, including the Christian ones, were justified by referencing Chinese history and traditional thought. By challenging the position of the Qing dynasty, the Taipings offered an alternative to Chinese who were disillusioned with Qing rule. To those suffocating under the weight of their lamentable conditions, or unable to rise legitimately in society, the Taipings represented a force for change.

³³ Boardman, *Christian Influence upon the Ideology of the Taiping Rebellion*, 34-35

CHAPTER TWO

Jian Youwen's Nationalist Interpretation

Originally, the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang party was envisioned as the heir of the Taiping Rebellion. Its co-founder, Sun Yat-sen, the first president of China, was born “in a village near Canton the year after the final suppression of the Taiping Rebellion... [and] in his youth and early manhood came into contact with unreconstructed radicals steeped in the Taiping tradition of armed revolt.”³⁴ Fascinated by stories of the Taipings, Sun dubbed himself as the second Hong Xiuquan, and it was said that his anti-Qing program aimed at completing the Taiping mission of national liberation.

For many years, Sun's successor, Chiang Kai-shek, concurred and wrote: “In the past our forefathers Hung and Yang rose in the southeast to overthrow the Ch'ing dynasty; though they failed and were defeated, their ethnic consciousness has flourished and become a great monument in our history.”³⁵ However once Chiang Kai-shek assumed the mantle of China, and was engaged in a civil war with communist Chinese revolutionaries, his sympathy towards the Taiping Rebellion, along with all rebellions in Chinese history, evaporated and he and members of the Kuomintang came to identify themselves with Zeng Guofan,

³⁴ Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, 16

³⁵ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 495

the Taiping's principle enemy and the upholder of Confucian civilization.³⁶ Be that as it may, however, a profusion of Chinese nationalists continue to cherish the memory of the Taiping Rebellion as a nationalistic expression of their ethnic identity.

Perhaps the best example of this is embodied in Chinese historian Jian Youwen's (1896–1978) work, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*. Following the fall of the Ming and the conquest of China by the Qing, Jian stresses, persistent Chinese resistance to Manchu rule remained and countless “Cantonese risked their lives to harass the Bannermen (The Qing armed forces), to circulate revolutionary poetry, or to participate in the activities of the Triad Society, an underground [anti-Qing] revolutionary association among the lower classes. The Manchus answered this widespread rebelliousness with violence and cruelty, further embittering the people at every turn. Having fought their way back into Canton in 1650, the Manchus reacted to the people's refusal to shave their heads in submission to Manchu custom by ordering a general massacre. Over 700,000 were killed in the streets” and there was the “forcible depopulation of several Kwangtung coastal areas”.³⁷ Naturally, resentment from these events, along with the increasing evidence of governmental corruption, passed on from generation to generation, and hostility towards the Manchus remained

³⁶ Wright, *From Revolution to Restoration: The Transformation of Kuomintang Ideology*, 515-521

³⁷ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 2-3

particularly prevalent among impoverished Hakkas.³⁸ After decades of Manchu rule, Jian asserts, this resentment then manifested itself in a massive uprising, the Taiping Revolution: an ethnic nationalist religious revolution aiming at sweeping away the corrupt Manchu regime.³⁹

In the first years of the rebellion, to garner support and outline their political mission to the people, the Taipings published appeals and proclamations to the general public. One of them declared:

“We conceive that the empire belongs to the Chinese and not to the Tartar barbarians; the food and clothing therein belong to the Chinese and not to the Tartars; the men, women, and children inhabiting this region are subjects and people of China not of the Tartars. But, alas, the Ming lost the rule and the Manchus took advantage of a quarrel to throw China into confusion and deprive the Chinese of their empire; they robbed them of their food and clothing and debauched and oppressed their sons and daughters. Yet the Chinese, although having an extensive territory and a large population, allowed the Tartars to do as they pleased without making [the least] objection. Can the Chinese still consider themselves men? Ever since the Manchus poisoned China, the flame of oppression has risen up to heaven, the poison of corruption has defiled the emperor’s throne, the offensive odor has spread over the four seas, and the influence of demons has distressed the empire, while the Chinese with bowed heads and

³⁸ Ibid., 11

³⁹ Ibid., 5-6

dejected spirits willingly became subjects and servants. How strange it is that there are no men in China!”⁴⁰

The document then lists ten grievances committed by the Manchu state:

“1. The alteration of the indigenous physical appearance of the Chinese; 2. The abolition of ancient Chinese costumes; 3. The adulteration of the Chinese blood relationship with the malicious intention to exterminate the Chinese race; 4. The debauchery of Chinese girls and women; 5. The replacement of traditional Chinese institutions and laws by Manchu codes for the persecution and subjugation of the Chinese people; 6. The transformation of Chinese spoken language to Mandarin; 7. The withholding of public relief from victims of flood, famine, and other natural calamities in order to decrease the Chinese population; 8. The toleration of corrupt and rapacious officials throughout the country who pauperized the Chinese by continuous exploitation and extortion; 9. The corruption of political administration as evidenced by the acceptance of bribery for appointment to government offices and for release from criminal charges, thus causing many talented Chinese to die of depression and despondency; 10. The suppression of uprisings for the restoration of China by ordering capital punishment for all kinsmen of nine relationships of the so-called rebel leaders so as to exterminate these Chinese national heroes and their clans.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 93-94

⁴¹ Ibid., 94

Clearly, those who commissioned and wrote this statement perceived the Qing dynasty to be a foreign entity exploiting and degrading China and her people. At the very least Jian felt so, and he wrote that there were “many slights to Chinese racial pride in the details of Manchu rule.”⁴² For instance, “Besides retaining their language, their distinguishing dress, their religion, and their customs, the Manchus even segregated themselves from the Chinese, prohibiting intermarriage, and excluded Chinese from many of the higher political positions.” Because of Manchu rule, to him, China was at this time “weak and decadent” while the Taipings were conversely “a vigorous group of nationalists... ready to overthrow the corrupt Manchu regime and to rejuvenate the country.”⁴³ Thus, the Taiping Rebellion was nothing less than “an ethnic revolution, aiming at the overthrow of the Manchus and the recovery of the rivers and mountains for the Hans.”⁴⁴

Jian, like other Chinese nationalists, was also quite impressed by the Taiping reforms proposed by Hong Regan, Hong Xiuquan’s relative and the brief director of Taiping policy. After assuming the premiership, Hong Regan submitted to Hong Xiuquan a memorial which articulated far reaching political, social, and economic goals. Of his suggestions, some were: the creation of a centralized democracy, the establishment of a press, the protection of individual rights, the institution of a mail system, the rejection of archaic social customs (such as

⁴² Ibid., 6

⁴³ Ibid., 7

⁴⁴ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 437

footbinding), the introduction of modern Western technology and scientific inquiry, the opening of banks, and the formation of social and health programs to elevate the conditions of the people. Clearly, these were a selection of extensive and radical proposals in nineteenth century China, and to Jian they earned a place in “the historical progression to the triumphant nationalist program of Dr. Sun Yat-sen.” Although the Taipings were unable to implement these reforms, Jian argues that “it is quite possible that had this program been carried out China would have been modernized half a century earlier and emerged as a new world power even before Japan.”⁴⁵

Although nationalist values guided the Taipings, Jian stresses that it was not only this nationalist motivation which galvanized the Taiping Rebellion. As he wrote: “Certainly his (Hong’s) social inheritance played a large part since anti-Manchu feeling had been quite prevalent in his time among the Cantonese and the Hakkas—especially in the lower class of people, who were generally influenced by the Triad Society. Yet it took his failures for the fourth time in the examinations to kindle his anger... Furthermore, it was only after his complete conversion to the Christian faith consequent to the rereading of the pamphlets, that his consciousness of kingship by appointment from God and his assignment to the sacred task of overthrowing the imps, i.e. idols and Manchis, became an *idée fixe*.” Hence, to him, the Taipings were a “religious-nationalistic-political” hybrid.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 362

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28

Augustus Lindley, a former British naval officer who served with the Taipings, expressed a similar assessment and stated: “Never shall I forget the noble, enlightened, and patriotic designs, which absorbed them:—to propagate the Bible, to destroy idols, to expel the Tartars from China, and reestablish one complete and undivided native empire”.⁴⁷

Although particular in their faith, an anti-Qing motivation was hardly unique to the Taipings, and there were a plethora of revolts that were prior, concurrent, and subsequent to the Taiping Rebellion which contested the legitimacy of the Qing dynasty. Many of these movements were quite diverse in nature, but if one generalization can be said about them it is that they either pushed for local autonomy from the Qing government, or repeated the recurring cry to “Oppose the Qing and restore the Ming!” Although the Qing had its Chinese supporters, dissatisfaction with the dynasty was rampant.⁴⁸

However, the Taipings considered themselves to be different from these other groups. For example, when discussing one of these anti-Qing movements, Hong Xiuquan stated: “I have often heard it said that their object is to subvert the Tsing and restore the Ming dynasty. Such an expression was very proper in the time of Kang he when this Society was at first formed, but now, after the lapse of two hundred years, we may still speak of subverting the Tsing, but we cannot

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7

⁴⁸ Fairbank, *China: A New History*, 230

properly speak of restoring the Ming. At all events when our native mountains and rivers are recovered a new dynasty must be established.”⁴⁹

Although the Taipings eventually failed in this mission, Jian argued that they did at least succeed in weakening the Qing dynasty and causing more power to fall into the hands of the Han Chinese. Further, he stated:

the single most important legacy of the Taiping uprising lies in its role as forerunner of the National Revolution of 1911. Paving the way for the later revolutionists were such factors as the post-Taiping change from Manchu monopoly of government in Peking to a climate of considerable regional independence and the rise of powerful warlords. The chaos that developed in the financial system and the debilitating effect of the “unequal treaties” signed under the stress of civil war fed the revolutionary nationalist spirit by supplying issues and a sense of urgency. But above all the Taipings stood as an inspiration. The founder of the Republic of China has listened raptly as a boy to the reminiscences of old Taiping survivors in his village, drawing from their tales of heroic battles and of dedication to ideals a deep ambition to overthrow the Manchus and complete what the Taipings had begun. Turning his boyhood dreams into a youthful revolutionary activity, Dr. Sun Yat-sen proclaimed himself the successor of Hung Hisu-ch’üan and warmly welcomed the few remaining Taiping soldiers who joined his first revolutionary organization, Hsing-chung hu.

⁴⁹ Meadows, *Chinese and their Revolutions*, 152

The retelling of Taiping adventures was one of his favorite pastimes and there is evidence that many other participants in the National Revolution were similarly enthralled by Taiping history. It is easy to discern in Dr. Sun Yat-sen's supreme statement of policy, the Three People's Principles (*San-min chu-i*), a reiteration of Taiping nationalism with the accretion of later democratic and social ideals.⁵⁰

It is undeniable that Chinese Nationalist politicians such as Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek were inspired by the Taipings, and there isn't any lack of evidence for the claim that the Taipings were aiming at the creation of what they considered to be a native Chinese led polity.⁵¹ However, although in Hong's perspective his mission was the liberation of China from alien Manchu rule, the Qing dynasty did not consider itself to be foreign to China, rejected the notion that the concept of China only referred to the Han ethnic group, and argued that the Manchus, Mongols, and Han were all Chinese and that the dynasty was a Chinese Empire.

Further, despite Taiping nationalist appeals, many Chinese were not enthusiastic about the nature of the Taiping faith which they believed threatened traditional Chinese values and religions. For instance, Zeng Guofan, a successful Chinese statesman who would have lost his position in society should the Taipings be victorious, perceived the God Worshipers as far more foreign to China than the Qing. For example, near the beginning of the rebellion, he

⁵⁰ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 9

⁵¹ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 494-495

lamented that under Taiping authority “The scholars cannot study the classics of Confucius, for they have what is called the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament. They are throwing overboard the principles of *li* and *i*, which govern human relationships, and the orthodox teachings contained in the *Book of Poetry* and the *Book of History*—principles which have been in effect in China for thousands of years.”⁵² “In short, the moral system, ethical relationships, cultural inheritance, and social institutions and statues of the past several thousand years in China are at once all swept away. This is not only a calamity in our great Qing Dynasty but is, in fact, the most extraordinary calamity since the creation of the universe”.⁵³ To him, his peers, and also many regular Chinese, the Taiping movement was not a nationalist liberation, but a rejection of the principles of Chinese civilization.⁵⁴

To Jian, however, the loyalty shown to the Qing by some Chinese is not proof of the Qing’s legitimacy, but rather is evidence of the treasonous indoctrination which was enforced upon the Chinese scholar class. He wrote:

Suspicion of the literati as intractable nationalists and the true fomenters of revolution had led the Manchus to exert pressure ranging from cruel penalties to subtle argument. Most dreaded of the penalties was the one in the Criminal Code calling for the deaths of a rebel chief, and all his family in nine related clans. A few impositions of this penalty in

⁵² Ibid., 398

⁵³ Spence, *God’s Chinese Son*, 227

⁵⁴ Wagner, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision*, 108-109

cases sometimes involving only several words or lines in a poem were enough to intimidate the majority of scholars or at least to preclude their further public advocacy of revolution. The professed anti-Manchu scholar, after two hundred years or so of this rule, was a rare exception.⁵⁵

Considering that 2,340 works were suppressed and thousands of literati punished for their thoughts, at the very least the Qing certainly consciously attempted to shape the intellectual climate and silenced any criticism of their regime.⁵⁶ As historian Rudolf Wagner wrote:

the Manchu Qing, went to the extremes in the enforcement of... ideological homogeneity, since it perceived itself vulnerable on this point because of its “barbarian” Manchu origin... a strict ban on books deemed heterodox or anti-Manchu was enforced, rigorous censorship was installed, and systematic efforts were made to weed out any heterodox religious groups and sects in which anti-Manchu or general millennial sentiment might, and often did, coalesce.⁵⁷

Today, Han Chinese generally feel a much greater affinity towards Manchus and Mongols than previously, and the CCP considers the Qing dynasty to be Chinese. Before the passing of Mao, however, “non-Han peoples were routinely referred to as ‘foreign people’ and their incursions into Chinese space and history were rendered cruel, blood-soaked invasions that left a trail of

⁵⁵ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 3

⁵⁶ Fairbank, *China: A New History*, 159

⁵⁷ Wagner, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision*, 7

graphic destruction among the Han.” However, “beginning during the late 1950s, but not completed until the 1990s, this Han-centric narrative of ‘inter-ethnic struggle’ and ‘invasion of foreign people’ was replaced with a more inclusive historiography, one that centers on the natural and harmonious ‘ethnic fusion’ of the various nationalities of China, with the conquest dynasties now rendered as examples of ‘national unification’ or the ‘peaceful unification into a single family’.”⁵⁸

For instance, historian Tan Qixiang wrote: “Regardless of whether it has been hundreds of even thousands of years, as long as an ethnic group has been active within our boundaries, we consider them all ethnic groups within Chinese history.” Or in other terms, all those who find themselves trapped within the borders of the PRC, such as the Manchus and Mongols, ought to be considered Chinese.⁵⁹ From the top down, the CCP, much like the Qing dynasty, has attempted to construct and cultivate a multiethnic understanding of China as a means to help ensure their territorial unity in the face of a deluge of provincial minorities who might cultivate a separate ethnic consciousness. Despite these contemporary conditions however, it must be remembered that the Han have traditionally considered the Manchus to be barbarians in the *Hua–Yi* dichotomy, and during the Taiping Rebellion this idea was not by any means irrelevant.

⁵⁸ Leibold, *Han cybernationalism and state territorialization in the People’s Republic of China*, 6

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11

Although historically many Chinese have considered that their identity is a cultural rather than an ethnic one, many others, particularly after the fall of the Ming, adamantly argued that one must be Han to be Chinese. Despite that the Taipings labeled all their enemies, Manchu or Han, as demons, the Han Chinese who worked against them were thought to be traitors or possible converts. The Manchus conversely were explicitly referred to as not only ethnically alien but also irredeemably evil and only warranting expulsion or eradication.⁶⁰ Thus, the Taipings fell into the latter camp, understood China as a Han state, and were not only nationalistic but expressed ethno-nationalist ideas.

In official Taiping proclamations, a concept of what constitutes China and the Chinese was expressed, and a specific homeland, culture, language, and ethnicity were referred to. Although the modern Chinese national identity had yet to crystalize, it is not as if a Chinese identity in relationship to outsiders was non-existent. It is undeniable that the Taipings considered that they were fighting for the creation of what they believed to be a Chinese state, and even their foreign inspired religion, Hong asserted and attempted to demonstrate, was based upon classical Chinese culture. Thus, it is understandable why significant Chinese nationalists, such as Sun and Chiang, were inspired by them and considered them to be a part of the history of Chinese nationalism.

Be that as it may, however, Jian also correctly reminds readers that the “first and most apparent motivating element [of the rebellion] was religious. From

⁶⁰ Jin, *Violence and the Evolving Face of Yao in Taiping Propaganda*, 139

his incidental contact with Christianity, Hung Hisu-ch'üan derived the belief that his life mission, by the heavenly authority of the Christian God, was to rule China and to perform the sacred task of ridding his country of all pagan idols so as to unite all men in the worship of the one true God."⁶¹ Considering that the Taipings were unable to ally with the Triads, despite their anti-Manchu and nationalist beliefs, because they refused to adhere to the strict religious practices of the Taipings, it is apparent that nationalist values were not always paramount in the Taiping movement.⁶²

Further, it is worth noting that the armed clashes in the Taiping Rebellion were "mainly Chinese against Chinese", and it is hard to imagine that Chinese peasants had as solid a conception of Chinese civilization as the educated within the Taiping leadership.⁶³ For the average Chinese person trying to survive in this conflict "pain, moral ambivalence, and confusion" characterized the war, and ideological or nationalist distinctions between the Taipings and Qing were likely vague or of less importance than personal matters.⁶⁴ Lastly, the fact that Qing and Taiping armies had to overtime increasingly rely on underpaid soldiers whose loyalty was fickle, it could be argued that, particularly near the end, there were "not two clearly defined armies animated by ideological commitments of

⁶¹ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 5

⁶² Meadows, *Chinese and their Rebellions*, 153

⁶³ Fairbank, *China: A New History*, 209

⁶⁴ Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 10

retrospective imagining, but rather a confusing multitude” of forces fighting one another.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Meyer-Fong, *To Know the Enemy: The Zei qing huizuan, Military Intelligence, and the Taiping Civil War*, 1726

CHAPTER THREE

The Chinese Communist Party's Interpretation

During the political ascendancy of Mao Zedong, the orthodox interpretation of Chinese history was that of Fan Wenlan (1891-1969), a leading philologist of the Chinese classics and an official Communist historian appointed by the chairman himself.⁶⁶ To Fan, the “main historical theme” of modern Chinese history was the people’s revolution against imperialism and feudalism. For the past century, he argued, the people of China had repeatedly risen to overturn the reactionary social-political order, yet were consistently thwarted. In 1949, however, they were finally successful, a Communist Chinese state was born, and previous revolutions, such as the Taiping, had been brought to their natural conclusion.⁶⁷

On the eve of the Taiping Rebellion, Fan asserted, China was as an agricultural feudal society which saw a minority class of landowners, large merchant interests, and usurers exploiting the labor of the oppressed peasant class. The Taipings, who were primarily composed of the unemployed, poor farmers, miners, and charcoal workers, represented the exploited, were united by class interests, and fought to overthrow the political power of the Manchu aristocracy and Chinese gentry.⁶⁸ Hong, Fan argued, used Christianity as a means of raising his prestige by proclaiming himself to be ordained by Heaven to

⁶⁶ Teng, *The Historiography of the Taiping Rebellion*, 71

⁶⁷ Li, *Between Tradition and Revolution: Fan Wenlan and the Origins of the Marxist Historiography of Modern China*, 272

⁶⁸ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 451-452

conduct a political movement. Once given power, he then began to introduce ideals of social, political, and economic equality and tried to bring them into being. Thus, above all, it was the disparity between the poverty-stricken masses and the wealthy privileged which birthed this social revolution.⁶⁹

Chinese communist historian Luo Ergang (1901-1997), expressed a similar view and wrote: “The Taiping Revolution was a revolutionary movement, guiding the peasants to rise and take up the task of liberation. Its aim was to overthrow rich merchants, bureaucrats, scholars, and gentry, classes whose [nature] was feudalistic and whose [function] was to exploit; and establish a new society in which all wealth belonged to the whole society, each and all shared land to till, food, clothes, and money, so that there was no place where the wealth was not commonly shared and nowhere the people were not all well fed and clothed.”⁷⁰ To him, the Taiping revolution was “a great revolution in the history of China, with far-reaching influence. In its revolutionary platform are embodied all the basic revolutionary principles of later days, such as the liquidation of the class of landlords; abolition of private landownership; plans for building ships, railroads, factories, and other modern industries; struggle for international equality; equality among men... If the T'ai-p'ing t'ien-kuo succeeded, China certainly would not have sunk into semifederal and semicolonial status.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid., 453

⁷⁰ Ibid., 447

⁷¹ Lo, *T'ai-p'ing t'ien-kuo shih-kao*, 1

Despite their revolutionary virtue, however, because the Taipings divided themselves into several cliques, indulged in luxury, were without proletariat class leadership, and were attacked by imperialist Britain and France, they were doomed to failure, claimed those like Fan.⁷² The historical conditions of the time, particularly the lack of leadership from an organization like the Chinese Communist Party, prevented the Taipings from being able to create a socialist society, despite their socialist ideals.⁷³ But nevertheless, the Taiping Revolution still bequeathed a glorious legacy to future revolutionary movements, and exerted “anti-feudal revolutionary influence” on the subsequent Chinese Communist Party.⁷⁴

As Fan wrote:

The Chinese proletariat and its party—the Chinese Communist Party—took up the task of guiding the great enterprise of the Chinese people’s revolution. After thirty years of determined and bitter struggle, we have achieved a fundamental victory. The progressive portion of the *T’ai-p’ing t’ien-kuo* revolutionary platform is not only realized; it has been greatly developed. From “The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty” to the land reform of the Chinese People’s Republic, from election of local officials to the people’s democratic dictatorship, from the preparatory attempts to establish new industry to the control of the socialist heavy

⁷² Michael, *T’ai-p’ing T’ien-kuo*, 1

⁷³ Fan Wen-lan, *T’ai-p’ing t’ien-kuo ko-ming yun-tung shih*, 1948

⁷⁴ Teng, *Historiography of the Taiping Rebellion*, 72

industry owned by the people, from demands for political and economic equality to the realization of the equalities, from the naive antifederal culture to a national and scientific people's new democratic culture—from any point of view, the achievements of the new democratic revolution have surpassed those of the *T'ai-p'ing t'ien-kuo* revolution many times.

However, if we look at the *T'ai-p'ing t'ien-kuo* as our vanguard, for the initiatives they had taken they deserved the lasting memory of the Chinese people.⁷⁵

On January 11 1951, the People's Daily, the official organ of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, published a statement encapsulating the Chinese communist interpretation. It declared:

It is exactly one hundred years since the outbreak of the *T'ai-p'ing t'ien-kuo*... During the fifteen years of their rule, the revolutionary heroes established a state, organized themselves into a formidable military power, put into practice various revolutionary policies, and aroused enormous masses of peasants to fight for the overthrow of the feudal land system. Almost a million peasants participated in the struggle, and all of them fought to the very end... Although at the time of the Taiping Revolution the old feudal society had begun to collapse and China had begun to slip into a semicolonial and semifederal society... there was not yet the emergence of a modern working class... This is the fundamental reason the Taiping

⁷⁵ Fan, *T'ai-p'ing t'ien-kuo ko-ming yun-tung lun-wen chi*, 5

Revolution could not but fail... Peasants are after all an unorganized group of small producers, and they are unable to formulate a clear revolutionary platform by means of which to unify all revolutionary masses.” But despite that, “The great patriotism of the Chinese people as expressed in the *T'ai-p'ing t'ien-kuo* is forever the pride of the Chinese people.⁷⁶

This perspective, which arose out of Soviet historical analysis, is not unique to the Chinese Communist Party, and some contemporary left-wing Western historians also understand the Taipings within a similar framework. English historian John Newsinger, for instance, describes the Taiping Rebellion as a “peasant revolt” calling for the “abolition of landlordism and the establishment of a form of primitive communism.”⁷⁷ To him, the Taiping Rebellion was “a mass uprising against oppression and exploitation for the establishment of a better world”, and was only defeated “in good part, by the assistance provided to China’s Manchu rulers by the western powers, in particular by Britain.”⁷⁸

Certainly, it is difficult to imagine that a rebellion or revolution as large as the Taipings could have erupted without economic distress and social instability, and it is undeniable that the conditions of China’s poor in the 1840s were increasingly grim. In the regions which spawned the Taiping Rebellion, a large landowning class dominated, the government administration was weak, the negative effects

⁷⁶ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 453-457

⁷⁷ Newsinger, *The Taiping Peasant Revolt*, 29

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 30, 57

of the Opium War were pronounced, crime was widespread, and there existed great social and economic disparity between the masses and the elite.⁷⁹ “When the officials oppress the people rebel” has been a persistent slogan of Chinese popular uprisings, and the nearly institutionalized corruption and extortion squeezed the destitute to the point of desperation. All the while, overpopulation, excessive taxation, and natural calamities pushed people off their land and into bandit and secret societies.⁸⁰ The Taipings, which were originally one of these societies, were composed primarily of members of the lower classes, they explicitly expressed egalitarian values, and their land system captured in writing the desires of the landless peasantry and small landholders; a fact which, in the opinion of Luo Ergang, demonstrates that the Taipings were in effect outlining a utopian communistic peasant society characterized by the equitable division of state owned land.⁸¹

Indeed, it is undeniable that the economic promises made by the Taipings wooed many Chinese to their cause, and it appears that destitution was one the major reasons Taiping forces swelled to over a million strong.⁸² As the British diplomat Thomas T. Meadows explained: “For the day labourer, the institution of equality of property, or at least of a sufficiency for every man, which is promised by the Tae ping leaders, is of course peculiarly attractive”.⁸³

⁷⁹ Fairbank, *China: A New History*, 206

⁸⁰ Curwen, *Taiping Rebel*, 2-4

⁸¹ Ohanjanian, *Taiping Agrarian Policy: Some Chinese and Soviet Views*, 128-129

⁸² Newsinger, *The Taiping Peasant Revolt*, 31

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 30

However, the notion that the eventual Taiping defeat was due to foreign intervention is far less certain. Although British and French forces certainly helped the Manchu Qing against the Taipings in the final years of the conflict, the decisive military defeats of the Taipings were dealt to them by Chinese gentry armies. Furthermore, Taiping internal division and infighting devastated the movement far more than anything else and ought to be considered the main reason for its failure.⁸⁴

Furthermore, although Communist or leftist writings on the Taipings often depict the rebels as anti-imperialist in nature, we are without any solid evidence that the Taipings opposed imperialism by principle. Despite that they fought against the British and French Empires, they did not desire to do so and considered these nations to be their distant Christian brothers. As historian Rudolf Wagner wrote: there “is not a single indication that the Taipings criticized British colonial rule. It was assumed to be quite natural that Christian powers had their colonial subsystems of barbarians, and Taiping China would retain its own entourage.”⁸⁵

In a similar theme, some historians have also described the Taipings as a progressive group of nineteenth century feminists. In sharp contrast to traditional Chinese society, the Taipings allowed women to fight in the army, take the civil service examinations, and hold office in government, and it is not surprising to find such, in conjunction with the Taiping ban of foot binding, being cited as proof

⁸⁴ Kuhn, *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 10., 310

⁸⁵ Wagner, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision*, 56

that the Taiping movement contained feminist ideas. However, the fact that the Taiping leadership officially exalted obedience as the greatest trait in women and used them as a reward for military courage seriously disrupts the argument that the Taipings were feminists.⁸⁶ Further, the Taiping ban on foot binding and the inclusion of women in labor was not prompted by any feminist theory, but rather has its origins in Hakka culture, which did not practice foot binding and allowed women to work alongside men.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of the Taiping movement as a peasant revolution was orthodox in the Chinese Communist Party during the political ascendancy of Mao. Indeed it was Mao Zedong himself who understood the Taiping Revolution as a proto-communist peasant revolution. However, what about the perspective of Marx? Although one might say that the influence of Marx currently over the CCP is hardly significant, the government of China still pays homage to the name and figure of Marx, and Mao was certainly inspired by him. Intriguingly, Marx commented on the Taipings multiple times in a few newspapers, and one is able to compare his analysis with that of the CCP.

Karl Marx's Interpretation

In 1853, the year of some of the Taipings' greatest victories, Marx first publicly commented on the Taiping Rebellion. After having been told by the Prussian missionary Karl Gützlaff that there were socialistic elements in the recent

⁸⁶ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 72

Chinese rebellion, in an article in the Daily Tribune, Marx wrote that the “Chinese revolution seems likely to exercise [great influence] upon the civilized world. It may seem a very strange, and a very paradoxical assertion that the next uprising of the people of Europe, and their next movement for republican freedom and economy of Government, may depend more probably on what is now passing in the Celestial Empire — the very opposite of Europe — than on any other political cause that now exists”.⁸⁷ With the young seemingly egalitarian Taiping movement gaining victory after victory over the Qing, Marx believed at this juncture that a profound revolution for freedom was taking place in China, and he hoped that the disruption to British trade would in turn usher in a revolution in England. As Dona Torr wrote: “perhaps, dreamed Marx, when our European reactionaries have to take refuge in Asia and at last reach the Great Wall of China, guarding the very hearth of reactionary conservatism, they may find inscribed above its gates: —“Chinese Republic. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.”⁸⁸

Marx then followed by arguing that:

Whatever be the social causes, and whatever religious, dynastic, or national shape they may assume, that have brought about the chronic rebellions subsisting in China for about ten years past, and now gathered together in one formidable revolution the occasion of this outbreak has unquestionably been afforded by the English cannon forcing upon China

⁸⁷ Marx, Karl. “Revolution in China and In Europe.” *New York Daily Tribune*, 14 June 1853.

⁸⁸ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 492

that soporific drug called opium. Before the British arms the authority of the Manchu dynasty fell to pieces; the superstitious faith in the eternity of the Celestial Empire broke down; the barbarous and hermetic isolation from the civilized world was infringed; and an opening was made for that intercourse which has since proceeded so rapidly under the golden attractions of California and Australia. At the same time the silver coin of the Empire, its lifeblood, began to be drained away to the British East Indies.⁸⁹

To Marx, the recent Qing defeat in the Opium War, the opium crisis, the financial piercing of China by the West, and the draining of silver out of the Chinese market had destabilized the government and economy of China, discredited the ruling dynasty, and culminated in a volatile situation.

This is certainly a reasonable analysis of the causes of the Taiping Rebellion, and many historians continue to cite these events as among some of the igniting factors for the affair. Although it is true that Marx neglects to mention any of the crucial internal problems besetting the Qing dynasty, intimate knowledge of the conditions of China was not available to all but a few Europeans in the 19th century, and Marx was not one of them.

Nine years later, as the Taipings were beginning to collapse, Marx published another article on the subject. In *Die Presse* he stated:

⁸⁹ Marx, Karl. "Revolution in China and In Europe." *New York Daily Tribune*, 14 June 1853.

the Oriental empires always show an unchanging social infra-structure coupled with unceasing change in the persons and tribes who manage to ascribe to themselves the political super-structure. China is ruled by a foreign dynasty. Why should there not be initiated, after 300 years, a movement to overthrow it? From the start, the movement possessed primarily a religious character; but this it had in common with all Oriental movements. The immediate causes for the emergence of the movement were close at hand: European intervention, Opium Wars, consequently a shattering of the existing government, the outflow of silver into foreign lands, disturbances of the economic balance through import of foreign goods, etc. Paradoxically, it seems to me, opium acted as a stimulant, not as a tranquilizer. What is original in this Chinese revolution are only its bearers. They are not conscious of any task, except the change of dynasty. They have no slogans. They are an even greater scourge to the population than the old rulers. It seems that their vocation is nothing else than to set against the conservative disintegration [of China], its destruction, in grotesque horrifying form, without any seeds for a renaissance.⁹⁰

Marx then quotes Mr. Harvey, the English Consul in Ningpo, who was a staunch opponent of the Taipings and whose evaluation of them undoubtedly contained elements of hyperbole. He wrote:

⁹⁰ Marx, Karl. "Chinese Affairs." *Die Presse*, 7 July 1862.

[For three months,] Ningpo is in the hands of the revolutionary Taipings. Just as in any other place in which these robbers have established their rule, the only consequence of it has been devastation. Do they follow other goals as well? To them it seems that the power of unrestricted and unlimited enthusiasm is actually as important as the destruction of foreign lives. It is true that this view of the Taipings does not agree with the illusions of English missionaries who tell fairy tales about 'the salvation of China,' the resurrection of the Empire,' 'the saving of the People' and the 'introduction of Christianity' by the Taipings. After ten years of noisy quasi-activity, they have destroyed everything and produced nothing.⁹¹

When discussing Marx's philosophy, rarely are his thoughts on the Taiping Rebellion taken into consideration. However, to some, his interpretation of the Taipings is of interest, and a selection of historians have described his analysis as a missed opportunity. Why did he not apply his philosophy to this event, they ask, and come to the same conclusions as the historians of the Chinese Communist Party? To the CCP, the event known as the Taiping Revolution was a class conflict aimed at the "overthrow of the feudal land system," which only failed due to the lack of suitable class leadership. Shouldn't Marx have the same interpretation?

⁹¹ Ibid.,

Although Marx at first spoke of the Taiping Rebellion in hopeful positive terms, his second analysis did not illustrate the Taipings as a movement consciously fighting against class inequality. Rather, his second writing on the Taipings is closer in content to contemporary Qing writer Li Ju-chao's assessment: "Their main purpose is to plunder and to loot; there is not the slightest indication of a kingly act, nor is there the remotest semblance of a tyrant's plan. Their only desire is to fight for territory by killing and to storm cities by massacre, and thus unleash their brutal arrogance and to throw the land of our Ch'ing dynasty into confusion."⁹²

This discrepancy between the CCP and Karl Marx's interpretation is quite irritating to some, and unsurprisingly eurocentrism is claimed to have prevented Marx from producing a CCP approved interpretation. But is this a logically consistent assertion to make when considering that there are Chinese historians, such as Jiang Tingfu, who expressed the same position and argued that the Taipings were an "old style popular movement" which arose within the dynastic "cyclic trap" of Chinese history?⁹³ Further, why is it that Marx is eurocentric if his analysis of this event is not in accordance with the Chinese Communist Party?

When the Taiping Rebellion first erupted, European access to China was generally limited. As Lindesay Brine wrote:

⁹² Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 398

⁹³ Li, *Between Tradition and Revolution: Fan Wenlan and the Origins of the Marxist Historiography of Modern China*, 275

The interior of the country was closed to all, and none but the devoted Roman Catholic missionaries ever attempted to penetrate into it... At Canton the governor refused to admit Europeans within the walls, and all the merchants who chose to come there to trade were obliged to live in the suburbs... [Over time] the galling tone of superiority assumed to them on all occasions by [Qing] government officials had become almost unbearable... with this state of affairs existing, it was only natural that the fast spreading rebellion should have been looked upon with favorable eyes, as a means through which it was probable that our relations, commercial and political, might be placed on a more satisfactory basis.⁹⁴

Hence, at this juncture, to many Westerners, a change in the government of China was most appealing, and it seemed to some that perhaps the West would have improved trading and diplomatic relations with a Taiping led China. This, combined with early rumors that socialist, democratic, and Christian ideals manifested themselves in the Taiping movement, caused many in the West to be sympathetic with the God Worshipers as a progressive force. However once the initial enthusiasm cooled, and the Taipings proved to be more dynastic than democratic or socialist, that they were not a direct emulation of Protestantism, and would not offer better trading and diplomatic relations to the West, they were left with few European and American supporters. Further, after Britain, France, and the United States forced the Qing dynasty to grant them diplomatic,

⁹⁴ Brine, *The Taeping Rebellion in China*, 270-272

economic, and religious concessions in 1860, “further progress of the Taipings [became] unprofitable... [and] most objectionable to all Europeans”, leaving the Taipings with few Western friends.⁹⁵

Thus, the context in which Marx analyzed the Taipings differed in 1853 and 1862. Near the end of the revolt, Marx, like many of his peers, saw the Taiping Rebellion as a bloody and destructive civil war between two Chinese dynasties rather than a force for positive change. Considering that at least 20 million people perished throughout the conflict, and that the God Worshipers established a kingdom which set different moral and economic standards between the elite and the people, it is hardly surprising that Marx did not perceive the Taipings to be an emancipatory movement. Although Taiping proclamations such as the Land System, which Marx did not have access to, outlined a utopian egalitarian society where land is owned in common by the state and equitably distributed, this system was not put in place, as the Chinese communists themselves state, and a theocratic monarchical entity rather than a republic or commune governed the people.

In Marx’s perspective, for an oppressed group to be able to emancipate themselves, an understanding of their own unequal or oppressive situation is necessitated. The knowledge of one’s own unjust conditions, once acquired, then acts as a force which propels individuals to set out to alter their unfavorable state. Or in other terms, a sense of class consciousness is contingent for a group

⁹⁵ Ibid., 270-272

to be able to organize themselves as a class and reform their asymmetrical status.

Did the Taipings conceive of themselves as an economic class? Certainly, much of their membership came from society's poorest, as was the case in all previous Chinese uprisings. But, it is far less clear if they perceived themselves as an exploited class attempting to overturn the economic hierarchy.

Chinese philosopher Vincent Shih argues that because the Taiping leaders had not explicitly identified with the peasant class in writing or in propaganda, and that they did not make any systematic attempt to do away with the landlord class, the notion that the Taipings were peasant revolutionaries is highly dubious. As we are without any evidence that the Taiping followers had a "distinct consciousness of themselves" as a peasant group overturning the feudal structure of power, Shih claims that the peasants who did join the Taipings were casting aside their role as peasants to become Taipings. A conclusion which he supports by pointing to a decree made by the Taiping leadership which stated that "those who violate the Heavenly Commandments are to be demoted to peasants".⁹⁶ Rather than liberating the peasant class, to Shih, the Taipings "leaders merely wished to take over the reins of government and showed... no wish to introduce fundamental changes in their society."⁹⁷

Although the movement was primarily composed of the poor, their interests were not central to the Taipings, few of the leadership were mere

⁹⁶ Ibid., xvi

⁹⁷ Ibid., xv

peasants, and Taiping society was de facto structurally unequal.⁹⁸ As Chinese historian K. C. Hsiao explained: “The Taiping movement failed not only to enlist the support of the peasantry as a whole but even to modify the characteristic attitude and behavior of many of the peasants that came under its sway.” When they did join the Taipings, “they took a subordinate part, acting at the bidding of rebel leaders, who very rarely were ordinary peasants... And there is no evidence to show that the peasants who fought on the Taiping as well as on the opposite side contributed anything beyond physical force; they all played, in other words, the traditional role of peasants in rebellions and in military campaigns... It is only in a very limited sense, therefore, that any rebellion that occurred in China in the nineteenth century may be said to have been a “peasant movement” pure and simple.”⁹⁹

Historian Franz Michael concurred and wrote: “It is certainly true that all Chinese armies have been recruited mainly from the peasantry, which comprises the vast majority of the Chinese people; but this fact does not in itself indicate a revolution of a social class against an existing social order, nor does it transform the leaders of such armies into “peasant leaders”... the nature of the Taiping Rebellion can be much more realistically discussed in terms of a power struggle of different bureaucratic organizations than in terms of Marxist-Stalinist concepts of class struggle.”¹⁰⁰ These arguments, along with the fact that by 1861 peasants

⁹⁸ Fairbank, *China: A New History*, 208

⁹⁹ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 442

¹⁰⁰ Micheal, *T'ai-p'ing T'ien-kuo*, 4

in many regions formed defensive militias to combat the Taipings, whose continued extraction of grain greatly exacerbated their woes, cannot be simply dismissed.¹⁰¹

In Shih's perspective, there is a "more or less uniform pattern in all [Chinese] rebellions: the recurring conditions prior to the emergence of rebellions, the nature and components of rebel ideologies, and the reasons for success or failure." Thus, to him, Chinese rebellions have a tradition of their own, and the Taiping Rebellion falls within it rather than being a revolutionary break with it.¹⁰²

Akin to prior revolts, those who joined the Taipings expressed dissatisfaction and a desire for change due to the evidence of governmental corruption, widespread poverty, state military defeats, and natural calamities. Like the founders of the preceding Han and Ming dynasties, Hong was a man of modest means leading a rebellion to overthrow oppressive rulers, combat foreign invaders, and seize the Mandate of Heaven.¹⁰³ Uniquely however, the Taipings arose in a time in which China was introduced to Protestant Christianity which altered the theological schema and resulted in the exceptional Taiping faith. However, to Shih, overall it was the inspirational imagination, charisma, and strong will of the Taiping leadership which initiated a rebellion with such a "far-reaching purpose and aim."¹⁰⁴ But despite the particularly unique elements of the Taiping Rebellion, as a whole and in the end, it was no different than any

¹⁰¹ Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 306

¹⁰² Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, x

¹⁰³ Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 116

¹⁰⁴ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, xviii

other abortive rebellion and was condemned to enter the annals of history as a destructive relic.¹⁰⁵ Thus, Shih thinks it is “objectionable to call it a peasant revolution, as the Chinese Communists would like us to believe it was. All we can say about the Taiping movement is that it was a rebellion with some characteristics of its own which distinguished it from all previous rebellions.”¹⁰⁶ To him, the Chinese Communist Party’s understanding of the event “is not simply a distortion of facts” but “reveals most glaringly the rigidity with which they adhere to their formula in their interpretation of history.”¹⁰⁷

Certainly if we are without evidence that the Taipings explicitly understood themselves as the peasant class fighting to overturn the landlord class, it is difficult to accept that they were class revolutionaries in a Marxist sense. However it would be a complete mistake to deny the “impoverishment and social polarization of central China” at this time, and the significant role inequality and privation played in this massive rebellion.¹⁰⁸ Unequivocally, “the Taiping social message exercised far greater influence upon the peasantry than either Han ethnism or religious zeal.”¹⁰⁹ This is why, although their rhetoric was primarily concerned with religion, the Taipings did make appeals for the alleviation of the woes of the masses. The best example of this is the previously mentioned Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty, a document which outlined a system which

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., xix

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., xvii

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 458

¹⁰⁸ Kuhn, *The Cambridge History of Modern China*, Volume 10., 275

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 277

mandates that “All Lands in the empire must be cultivated by all the people in the empire as a common concern” so that “all places will share the abundance equally and all will be equally well fed and clothed.” Despite this seemingly socialist expression, however, it could be argued that “equal allocation of land was primarily designed for the enhancement of government revenues through official allocation of labour” and was a means to garner support and significantly empower the government.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, dissatisfaction with their economic and social conditions prompted many to join the Taiping Rebellion. Although leaders, such as Hong Xiuquan, were more concerned with religious and ethnic issues, the role material inequality played in swelling Taiping numbers and the egalitarian ideas which were expressed in the movement cannot be dismissed. This is what the communist interpretation correctly captures, and nationalist historians such as Jian even conceded that the Taiping Rebellion “stemmed from the corrupt and exploitative practices” of the ruling class.¹¹¹ But regardless, the claim that the Taipings were peasant revolutionaries remains distinct from stating that economic destitution and exploitation contributed significantly to this multidimensional rebellion.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 279

¹¹¹ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 4

CHAPTER FOUR

The Nature of the Taiping Faith

When discussing the potential reasons for the eventual failure of the Taiping Rebellion, there are many who ascribe the foreign nature of the Taiping faith as crucial. If only the Taiping creed was less hostile to the traditional beliefs of Chinese civilization, a Taiping victory would have been certain. Clearly, the Chinese gentry, the Manchu elite, and individuals sympathetic to any traditional Chinese *weltanschauung*, were quite alarmed by the radical new elements of Taiping Christianity. However once one overemphasizes this potential cause for failure, a certain paradox emerges. If the Taiping creed was indeed so alien to China, and thus repelled the Chinese, how were the Taipings able to attract a mass of followers and lead such a substantial rebellion?

In Fan Wen-lan's perspective, it was economic pressures which were responsible for the outbreak of violence. To him, the Taiping faith was but "an outer cloak" covering a revolutionary political program aiming at overturning "feudal" structures of power and opposing imperialism. Hong's theology was not a sincere religious revelation, but a means to garner prestige among his peers and establish himself as a legitimate source of authority.¹¹² Or, in other terms, Taiping Christianity was an unstable superstructure covering the reality of the economic base which really drove the movement. Thus, rather than the Christian

¹¹² Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 453

God, the God of Hong was “a god of equality, liberty, and fraternity”, a “revolutionary god.”¹¹³

Although he does not share Fan’s communist philosophy, Vincent Shih expresses a similar understanding of the Taiping faith. In his work, *The Taiping Ideology*, he evaluates the Taiping religion as a means of unifying various peoples into an organization to achieve political ends. He states:

There is not the slightest doubt that the religious element in the Taiping ideology was the fundamental unifying force of the Taiping movement... The Taipings were consciously or unconsciously looking for something that would replace the traditional ideology, which had been in effect for so long that the people were blinded by its indoctrination to the gross injustice that had been done to them by the ruling clique under the cloak of moral training. They were seeking some positive outlook that would enable them to break the hold of the orthodox ideology upon the minds of the people so that they could see straight for themselves without having their judgements warped by the official views. Just at this moment came Christianity, which must have seemed to the Taipings a God-sent gift to lift them out of the morass into which the traditional attitude of fatalism had sunk them.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Li, *Between Tradition and Revolution: Fan Wenlan and the Origins of the Marxist Historiography of Modern China*, 275

¹¹⁴ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, xiii

Thus, in his perspective, “the Taipings were definitely using religion to camouflage” their political ambitions.¹¹⁵

To Shih and Fan, the Taiping movement was primarily political in nature and their religion was an apparatus of their temporal organization. Contemporary observer of the Taiping Rebellion Humphrey Marshall, the American Minister to China, expressed a similar sentiment and stated: “I incline very much to believe that a cold and crafty agitator has revamped the matter contained in the religious tracts which, from time to time, the missionaries have published in China, and without any exact idea of the nature of the new doctrine, has drawn around his standard of revolt the discontented spirits as well as the desperate of the province through which it has passed.”¹¹⁶

There were other contemporary witnesses, however, who rejected this analysis and defended the Taiping faith as founded upon sincere religious feeling. For example, British diplomat Thomas T. Meadows stressed that the Taipings were originally a religious society which was only “brought into collision with the local authorities” in the autumn of 1850.¹¹⁷ To him, it “was by dire necessity alone that Hung sew tseuen was immediately constrained to add character and functions of patriotic insurgent to those of religious reformer.”¹¹⁸

The missionary Joseph Edkins (1823-1905) agreed, and argued that the “Christian insurgents in China never had the confidence of any part of the nation.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 342

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 404

¹¹⁷ Meadows, *Chinese and their Rebellions*, 105

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 141-142

Their religious character was one reason of the unpopularity of their cause. If they had been crafty impostors, they would have chosen some other watchword than that of Christianity.”¹¹⁹

Although the idea that the Taipings used religion as a means to accrue political power and advance a platform is logical, it is unjustifiable to accept that someone is a charlatan without definitive evidence of duplicity. Certainly, vivid metaphysical experiences and radical religious conversions are not inhuman, and Hong, despite his inconsistencies, appears to have been devoutly convinced of his faith. After establishing the Taiping capital in Nanjing in 1853, Hong progressively refused to seriously concern himself with political matters and dedicated much of his time to religious questions. Further, in the final years of the conflict, and as the Taiping military situation began to unravel, Hong did not express any fear, asserted that God would deliver them, and refused to abandon his capital. As he stated: “I have received the sacred command of God, the sacred command of the Heavenly Brother Jesus, to come down into the world to become the only true Sovereign of the myriad countries under Heaven. Why should I fear anything?” Less than a year later, in a state largely disconnected from the reality of the political situation, he perished among his society shortly before the capital fell.¹²⁰

Meadows in his work, *Chinese and their Rebellions*, describes religious feeling as force which defies logical planning. To him, the “ultimate triumph of

¹¹⁹ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 405

¹²⁰ Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 322

religious movements, whether conversions or revivals, rests largely on the merely sympathetic affections. A cheerfully disposed man steps suddenly into the company of people all for the moment sad or grave... the spirit of sadness or of gravity communicates itself to him, and he too becomes sad or grave... Human beings are, in short, prone to be affected by any emotion which they think they perceive in others". Thus one only "requires that a man, sufficiently "half-cracked," and grossly enough the victim of immoral self-delusion, to preach absurd and vicious doctrines with the full force of strong unhesitating conviction... and you immediately have a sect". Hence, "the number of deliberate impostors—of self-confessed impostors—is far rarer than we might at first sight be inclined to suppose. We cannot rightly understand past history, or present occurrences in the world, unless we assume as a fundamental principle that all those who have exercised a marked influence on their fellow creatures, or done great things in the world, have fully believed themselves to be mainly, if not altogether, in the right."¹²¹ In other terms, mass religious feeling is most often not the result of the machinations of a few con artists, but rather is the byproduct of the genuine fanatical self assertion of religious leaders.

The devotion of Hong becomes readily apparent when considering how he never questioned the religious revelations of Yang or Xiao. In the early years of the God Worshipping Society, and while Hong was away from the main congregation, two individuals, Yang and Xiao, experienced spirit possession

¹²¹ Meadows, *Chinese and their Rebellions*, 89-90

where the divine supposedly spoke through them. Naturally, this gave them a great deal of influence in this religious society, and Yang even eventually threatened the position of Hong before being liquidated in a preventive attack.

Meadows wrote that the

fact of Hung se tseuen's acknowledging these two men as communicators of the will of God and Jesus is also proof of his own perfect sincerity. Had he been merely a crafty, deliberate imposter, he would, as a necessary consequence, have held Yang sew tsing and Seaou Chaou hwuy to be equally impostors; and would, sooner than any other, have perceived that this assumed capacity of communicators of the Highest Will virtually gave them the supreme direction in the affairs of the Godworshippers—the power to command himself as well as every other member of the community. As a sincere believer, on the other hand, of the reality of his own mission and of the doctrines of faith he preached, there were many reasons for his being led to acknowledge and submit to their pretensions.¹²²

Although it is true that the Taipings did evolve into a political organization, they were at first a religious society which only “by dire necessity alone” became a political faction after their existence was threatened by the Qing administration. Thus, it was only after the Qing dynasty attempted to negate the God Worshipers' way of life, establishing an existentially significant friend-enemy

¹²² Ibid., 103-104

distinction between the Qing dynasty and the God Worshipers, that the latter became a political faction.¹²³ As Carl Schmitt wrote: “A religious community which wages wars against members of other religious communities is already more than a religious community; it is a political entity.”¹²⁴

Rather than the Taipings being primarily a political organization, Historian Eugene Boardman asserts that political and religious motivations were intertwined in the Taiping Rebellion and usually inseparable from one another.¹²⁵ Despite acknowledging the role religion played in the Taiping movement, however, Boardman believes that “the Taiping ideology cannot be called Christian because of the absence in it of indispensable features of the Christian ethic.”¹²⁶ Although the Taipings rejected the worship of idols, exalted a singular universal, personified, stern, but also merciful, deity, adhered to the Ten Commandments, and practiced plenty of Christian rituals, such as Baptism and the Sabbath, Boardman argues because they failed to properly demonstrate the Christian concepts of universal love, the golden rule, humility, and the social gospel their religion “was not Christianity.”¹²⁷ Like most of the nineteenth century Western missionaries, Boardman believed that the Taipings failed to meet traditional European Christian formulations, misunderstood the concept of the “Kingdom of God”, blasphemously asserted their interpretation of the divine over

¹²³ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37

¹²⁵ Boardman, *Christian Influence upon the Ideology of the Taiping Rebellion*, 34

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 113

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 107-114

the traditional Protestant lens, and were a failed emulation of true Christianity. Thus, although inspired by Biblical stories and tenets, the Taipings were not Christians.

Vincent Shih largely concurred with Boardman's assessment of the Taiping faith, although he stated that Boardman "set the standard too high when he criticizes the Taipings for being unable to understand the spiritual aspect of the Christian teachings. If one must measure up to his ideals in order to be called Christian, very few people, even in Christendom, are true Christians".¹²⁸ Despite this, however, in Shih's perspective Boardman is correct to assert that the Taipings were not Christian due to a few discrepancies between the Taiping faith and Christianity.

For example, the fact that "Hung refused to believe in the divinity of Jesus," rejected the Nicene and the Athanasian Creeds, and asserted that to worship Jesus as divine is to worship an idol before God, is proof to Shih that the Taiping faith was not Christian in character.¹²⁹ Although this belief is certainly unorthodox and distinct from mainstream Christian theology, the assertion that Jesus was not divine has appeared before in Christian history. For instance, the Christological doctrine of Arianism, first attributed to Arius (256–336), asserted that Jesus Christ was not coeternal to God, but was rather the begotten son of God.¹³⁰ Further, contemporary Unitarianism holds that although Jesus Christ is

¹²⁸ Ibid., 432

¹²⁹ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 155-156

¹³⁰ Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 289

the savior of humankind, he is not comparable or equal to God himself. Thus, although the Taiping interpretation of the divinity of Jesus is outside of the predominant currents of Christianity, making a distinction between God and Jesus is not alien to the faith in the slightest.

Although the Taipings were clearly inspired by Western Christianity, Shih stresses that they borrowed “a great deal which cannot be called Christian because of its modification and distortion. The Taipings took their idea of God from Christianity; but this Christian idea received so many bizarre modifications that at the end of the process it was no longer like the Christian idea. In the hands of the Taipings, God acquired a human physique and a wife”; two attributes which Shih perceives as extramural of the Christian framework.¹³¹

Joseph Edkins would have concurred with Shih as in 1861 he entered Nanjing intent on “purifying Hong’s religion of its misconceptions”, with the Taiping assertion of God being embodied with a human physique being one of the pressing issues. But, despite Hong’s friendly attitude towards Edkins, it became quickly clear that Hong was wedded to his conception of Christianity and was not interested in revising his interpretation. To Hong, God was not characterized by immateriality but was similar in form as mankind, which he created in his image.¹³² However, although it is true that the human physique of God does have some basis in the Old Testament, most Western Christians

¹³¹ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 160-161

¹³² Spence, *God’s Chinese Son*, 287-289

disagree and argue that any description of God in the Bible is figurative rather than literal.

Regardless, Shih finds the traditional Chinese imagery the Taipings used in their description of God as evidence for the inauthenticity of Taiping Christianity. As mentioned before, when Hong illustrated his metaphysical experience, he pictured God as a large man, noble like an emperor, with a black robe and a golden beard. Certainly, this depiction of God differs in details as seen in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, but also in many respects the essence of the thought is the same. As Shih correctly states: "These modifications are understandable when we remember that Hung's cultural background was vastly different from that out of which the Christian belief grew."¹³³

Although the Taiping idea of God having a wife is certainly jarring to most Christians, it is clear that this belief is the result of the Taipings taking the fatherhood of God literally.¹³⁴ As the Taipings believed that Jesus was born in the same manner as a mortal, he needed a mother to bear him. Although in most Christian churches, due to the oneness of Jesus and God, there wouldn't be a need for God to have a family in this fashion, in the Taiping sect the context called for this aberration. Further, it is possible that the importance placed upon the family structure by Confucianism may also be the source of this conception of God as well.

¹³³ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 160

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 161

Another commonly cited Taiping practice used to dispute the Christian nature of the Taiping faith was the fact that Hong practiced polygamy. To some, because the Taiping leadership took multiple wives, there existed a contradiction between Taiping Christian moral tenets and practices. In the minds of the Taipings, however, polygamy was uncontroversial as it was an already established practice in China. Considering that the Taiping faith grew primarily in isolation from Western missionaries and was inspired mostly by the Old Testament, which depicts polygamy neutrally, it is not surprising that the Taiping leadership took additional wives once coming into power. Further, as the Mormons of the United States were at this time exhibiting a similar practice, it is difficult to denote the Taipings as particular in this regard as well.¹³⁵

The early Taiping phenomenon of experiencing visions and spiritual possession was also critiqued as unorthodox and un-Christian by some. This is an erroneous assumption, however, as spirit possession and visions were present throughout the history of Christianity, and common among recent converts and during the Great Awakenings.

The most well known and controversial belief of the Taipings, however, was the idea that Hong was the second son of God and the younger brother of Jesus Christ.¹³⁶ Naturally, this alarmed many contemporary Western missionaries who felt that this claim endangered the Trinitarian, Christological, and

¹³⁵ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 137-138

¹³⁶ Kilcourse, *Son of God, Brother of Jesus: Interpreting the Theological Claims of the Chinese Revolutionary Hong Xiuquan*, 125

soteriological orthodoxies and was a blasphemous attempt to claim ontological equality between Jesus and Hong.¹³⁷ Further, to them, because the son of God was divine, Hong, by assuming the title the second son of God, was depicting himself as divine in nature. For instance, Alexander Wylie (1815-87) stated: “The monstrous doctrine they have adopted of Hung-seu-tseuen being the second son of God, and on par with Jesus Christ... is, I fear, a most serious obstacle to their humble reception of the truth as it is in Jesus.”¹³⁸

However, there were other missionaries who interpreted Hong’s title in a metaphorical sense, and asserted that Hong did not believe himself to be divine but rather thought to be chosen by God to carry out a divine plan. As Joseph Edkins stated: “He regards Christ as the greatest of God’s messengers, and himself as second only to him; and it is in this light that he believes himself to be brother of Christ and God’s son.” Thus, the Taipings were not elevating Hong to the status of Jesus, instead Jesus was seen as God’s greatest messenger and Hong as his second. Nevertheless, the erroneous idea that Hong considered himself divine or the Taiping claim that Jesus was a distinct non-divine messenger was still enough to render most Western missionaries unsympathetic to Taiping theology.¹³⁹

In a similar theme, many also criticized that one of the Taiping Kings, Yang Xiuqing, was given the title “Wind of the Holy Spirit” rendering him comparable to

¹³⁷ Ibid., 126-127

¹³⁸ Ibid., 126

¹³⁹ Ibid., 128

God. However, as the Taipings did not recognize the Trinitarian, it is better to understand the title as honorary and a reflection of Yang's political ambitions.¹⁴⁰ He, unlike Hong Xiuquan, was far more calculating, responsible for much of the early military and political success of the movement, and attempted to accrue titles to increase his authority. With his death during a major purge, however, any religious influence over the Taipings he had quickly dissipated.

Although a historian must acknowledge that historically there are many different christianities rather than a single Christianity, it is certain that the Taipings interpreted Christianity in a different manner than the major branches of the faith, and thus it is easy to understand why many described their religion as an incomplete or failed emulation of Christianity. Some, however, approach the faith in a different manner by focusing on the Chinese elements of the Taiping creed, and assert that the religion was predominantly Chinese in content rather than a partial or incomplete expression of Christianity. For instance, anthropologist Robert Weller proposes that "the people of Guangxi made Hong's Christianity their own" and transformed it into something very much Chinese in character. Rather than converting the Chinese, Hong's original Christianity "dissolved" "into local Guangxi culture... [which] won the early God Worshipers much of their following and shaped much of their future."¹⁴¹ In other terms, it was only once Hong's Christian ideas were infused by Guangxi popular religion,

¹⁴⁰ Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 222, 230-232

¹⁴¹ Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China*, 35

which became the predominant element of the Taiping faith, that the God Worshipping Society grew in popularity and became a significant movement.

Historian Ssu-yu Teng shared a similar judgment and argued that:

Hung Hisu-chuan was perhaps influenced more by local religions, especially Confucianism and Taoism, than by Christianity. Although Hung claimed to be a worshipper of God and to proscribe equally Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, yet the ideas of these three religions were also freely adopted. While on the one hand, at the beginning of the revolutionary movement, he was responsible for the destruction of the Confucian tablets, on the other, he quoted heavily from the Confucian classics, especially those sentences including the term Shang-ti, for his God. Confucian proverbs or mottoes were quoted as the words of God or Jesus, the Confucian ideas of filial piety, loyalty, and obedience were emphasized in his writings, and the Confucian funeral ceremonies were first adopted for funeral services.¹⁴²

Thus, as historian Robert Lin said: "It is more appropriate to describe the Taiping movement as being influenced by the well-intended and sincere efforts of the Christian missionaries in seeking Changes in China than to speak of a genuine Christian influence on the Taiping movement as a whole."¹⁴³

Undoubtedly many elements of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and popular Chinese religions permeated Taiping Christianity. Despite that the

¹⁴² Teng, *New Light on the History of the Taiping Rebellion*, 89

¹⁴³ Lin, *The Taiping Revolution: A Failure of Two Missions*, 58

Taipings explicitly expressed a desire to break away from many Chinese religious practices they considered idolatrous, they were unable to completely sever the tie between themselves and the overwhelming influence of the then predominant currents of thought in their civilization. Given that they were not blank slates, this is unsurprising.

However, this does not negate the existence of the pronounced Christian element of the Taipings, and it would be a mistake to consider that their faith was only or predominantly an instance of popular Chinese religion. Although Weller correctly acknowledges that “Taiping Christianity was new and radically different” and that local Guangxi culture played a noticeable role in shaping Hong’s religious message, it is far more uncertain that “Hong had entered Guangxi with a fairly tidy ideology, but by 1849 his ideas had been thoroughly dissolved and transformed in the cauldron of local traditions.”¹⁴⁴ Hong’s revelation and quasi-Christian ideas were never displaced, and it is difficult to imagine how local Guangxi religious culture could have sustained such a massive rebellion once it spread beyond Guangxi. Further, evidence of Chinese popular religious influence over Taiping Christianity does not necessarily infer that the faith was not Christian, as it seems that those who joined the Taipings were drawn to Christian ideas and practices which were intelligible to them because they connected to elements of their own religious background. The best example of this being the

¹⁴⁴ Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China*, 35, 83

Taiping connection made between the Christian God and the classical Chinese deity Shangdi.

Historian Thomas H. Reilly describes studies like Weller's as emphasizing "what is marginal" and marginalizing "what should be emphasized." In Reilly's view, to describe the Taipings as a Chinese sect is to ignore the "distinctively Christian aspects of the rebel religion. Taiping soldiers were expected to memorize the Ten Commandments, to attend worship services where they prayed to Shangdi as the Heavenly Father and sang their version of the traditional Christian doxology, and to attack and destroy religious statuary regarded as idolatrous."¹⁴⁵ The importance of these factors, to Reilly, in tandem with Hong's elevation of "the Old and New Testaments to the status of books that were "pure and without error"" cannot be neglected.¹⁴⁶ Rather than treating "Taiping Christianity as a warmed-over Protestantism" or dismissing "the Christian dimension of the Taiping religion", Reilly affirms that Taiping Christianity was "a distinct new form of Christianity or Chinese religion."¹⁴⁷

Unfortunately the claim that Hong elevated "the Old and New Testaments to the status of books that were "pure and without error"" is a tad misleading. In fact Hong Xiuquan significantly revised portions of a few Biblical stories in the official Taiping Bible. Although it is true that cultural and political considerations often impact the choices of words in each translation, it seldom involves anything

¹⁴⁵ Reilly, *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom*, 11

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 12

substantial. The edits made by the Taipings to the Karl Gützlaff Bible in 1853 and 1861, however, were comparatively unprecedented and involved the explicit redaction and revision of biblical accounts.¹⁴⁸

Hong Xiuquan first read the Bible during a brief stay in Canton in 1847, years after his metaphysical vision and the reading of Liang's tract which prompted his conversion. After capturing Nanjing, the first version of the Taiping Bible was published, and it contained one major alteration: the verses telling of the incestuous affair between Lot and his daughters were deleted from Genesis 19 and replaced with a sanitized narration; a rather unheard of degree of tampering. In 1861, an updated version was published and more edits were made. The "incestuous" account of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar was rewritten, the scene of Noah intoxicated, asleep, and undressed before his sons was removed, acts of duplicity by Abraham and Issac were cut, and Genesis 27.8-25 was heavily revised.¹⁴⁹

Rather than accepting the word of the Bible as the supreme authority over the faith, Hong asserted that "Father God knows that the New Testament has some erroneous records" and was utterly convinced that he was personally given a mandate by God to interpret the faith properly.¹⁵⁰ Thus, the Bible was not considered to be without error by the Taipings, and the text did not occupy the central place in their faith taken by the vision of Hong Xiuquan. As the Taipings

¹⁴⁸ Tong, *Taiping Ideology and the Rewriting of the Chinese Bible*, 268-269

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 273-277

¹⁵⁰ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 163

did not adopt the concept of original sin, but remained dedicated to the Confucian principle that man is by nature pure and good and only becomes evil due to a lack of proper cultivation, Biblical stories depicting immoral acts committed by characters of importance were unacceptable to them and warranted revision.¹⁵¹

Although they worshiped a monotheistic God, treated the Ten Commandments as universal laws, believed the suffering of Jesus Christ redeemed their sins, and incorporated practices such as Baptism, and the Sabbath in their faith, the Taipings interpretation of Christianity exemplified unorthodox beliefs and native Chinese traditions and religions were well represented in Taiping thought and institutions. “The outward structures of the monarchy, the bureaucracy and the land system embodied much utopian material from the native culture. Residues of popular Buddhism and Taoism can be found in Taiping religious texts, and the language of Taiping ethnism owed much to ethnic-nationalist movements of the past.”¹⁵²

Once Liang’s Christian message was interpreted untutored by Hong, what developed into Taiping Christianity wasn’t merely a version of Western Protestantism or traditional Guangxi folk religion, but was an indigenized amalgam of both Chinese and Western religious traditions. In the mind of Hong Xiuquan, in the far distant past, China had once been a Christian nation and the classical Chinese supreme deity Shangdi was a manifestation of the Christian God. Although once on the path of righteousness, by the time of the Qin dynasty

¹⁵¹ Lin, *The Taiping Revolution: A Failure of Two Missions*, 56

¹⁵² Kuhn, *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 10., 280

(221-206 B.C.) the rulers of China had arrogated to themselves the title of Huangdi (translated as God or Emperor), displaced the proper worship of Shangdi, and established the Emperor as an idol before God.¹⁵³ Acts which Hong considered to be grievous sins of idolatry and the cause of China's present strife.

The Taipings thus aimed to not only unseat the Qing dynasty, but to abolish the imperial Chinese system as a whole and replace it with a kingdom which would accord a proper place to the worship of Shangdi. Rather than a revolution, the Taipings were striving for a restoration of the classical system of China which they associated with the worship of the Christian God; a belief they shared with some Jesuit missionaries.¹⁵⁴ Hence, despite being inspired by and containing elements of a foreign faith, Taiping Christianity as a whole was not foreign to China in the least; which accounts for both its doctrinal differences with Western Protestantism and its ability to find masses of Chinese adherents who favored a change in the hierarchical order. Just as Maoism is a sinified Marxism-Leninism, Taiping Christianity was a sinified Protestantism. Considering that Christianity, like any other faith, is always in the making, one ought not be taken aback by such a development. Thus, rather than trying to comprehend Taiping Christianity merely within the framework of either Western Protestantism or Chinese popular religion, it is best to analyze the faith as the byproduct of cross-cultural contact and an example of how religions evolve depending upon the context in which they are practiced.

¹⁵³ Reilly, *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom*, 87

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 89-90

Naming the Taiping Rebellion

In China the Taiping movement is most often denoted as a revolution. In part this is due to the CCP's official adoption, then modification, of Soviet historiography which argued that the Taiping Rebellion was driven by revolutionary egalitarian ideals. However, non-communist historians also employ the term revolution to describe the Taiping movement, and the use of the word need not necessarily invoke communist imagery. As historian Charles Curwen wrote: "Denying the legitimacy of China's rulers, opposing the dominant ideology and replacing it with something totally heterodox, challenging the very basis of Chinese society and economy, the Taipings promised a far more profound revolution than any other popular movement in Chinese history."¹⁵⁵ Thus, as historian John S. Gregory has stated: "The term 'rebellion' indeed does it something less than justice, for it was a revolutionary protest against many of the basic features of traditional Chinese society and government which, if successful, would have wrought far more than just another turn in the old dynastic cycle."¹⁵⁶

Indeed, the Taiping movement was fundamentally different from all else in China at this time. Rather than just merely seizing power, the Taipings planned to abolish the Chinese imperial system, establish a Chinese Christian kingdom, implement mass worship of their heterodox faith, redistribute land, and introduce Western modes of being and technology. Everyone but the leadership and ranks in the army were to call each other brother or sister, the genders were made

¹⁵⁵ Curwen, *Taiping Rebel*, 1

¹⁵⁶ Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings*, xi

more equal, and a common treasury was established to feed and clothe the poor. Despite this however, Vincent Shih correctly argues that “[whether or not] the concept of equality and cultural elements such as railroads, steamships, postal service, and newspapers can be considered revolutionary has to be determined by their effects. If they succeeded in producing a change in the mental attitude of the people, if they succeeded in bringing about a new pattern of behavior, then they may be considered revolutionary. Despite all the official proclamations of the Taipings, the spirit of equality was absent from their society; neither was there a pattern of behavior indicating revolutionary advance.”¹⁵⁷ Considering that in the end the Taiping’s mission was left incomplete and unsuccessful, it is impossible to determine exactly if the movement would have brought about revolutionary changes if triumphant, and thus most historians in the West have settled on the term the Taiping Rebellion.

Historian Tobie Meyer-Fong prefers the name “Taiping Civil War” and claims that the term rebellion “inadvertently, or at least unthinkingly” assumes the dynastic perspective.¹⁵⁸ Further, to her, the use of the term civil war “allows that the nineteenth-century Chinese case might not be exotic or exceptional and is in fact comparable in key respects to other times and places. By renaming this as a civil war, we can refocus attention on damage and destruction rather than the peculiar vision or ideology of a man and his followers. The term *civil war* eliminates implicit value judgments and transcends the totalizing political and

¹⁵⁷ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, xv

¹⁵⁸ Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 11

moral narratives that emphasize national priorities over individual and collective suffering.”¹⁵⁹ In her perspective, it has been a mistake that Taiping scholars had been “preoccupied with abstract ideological questions rather than with damage”, and that we ought to “reconsider these priorities” and think about “what it might have meant at the local level to the millions of people who has lost their lives, livelihood, and loved ones.”¹⁶⁰

Although one understands why the argument that the word rebellion implicitly depicts the Taipings as illegitimate and the Qing dynasty as legitimate can be made, it must be mentioned that the term rebellion is not necessarily inherently negative. There are many romantic tales of rebels fighting for the common good against a corrupt or malevolent authority, and there isn’t any reason to suppose that one can not simultaneously use the term Taiping Rebellion and sympathize with the God Worshipers. As Mao has said: “to rebel is right.”

Nevertheless, it is true that Taiping scholars have been heavily concerned with the theoretical ideas of the movement. Nationalists articulated why the event was an emblem of their ethnic history, communists pressed that the uprising was a representation of class struggle, and historians and theologians have been debating the nature of the Taiping faith for over a century. Certainly the plight of the civilians in this conflict has not been explored in depth until recently, and one ought always be glad to see the exploration of new perspectives.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 11

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 2

However, the notion that the Taiping Rebellion was a civil war, and that the pronouncement of the Heavenly Kingdom was “an act tantamount to secession” must be challenged as the Taiping Rebellion shares only the most superficial resemblance to the nearly concurrent American Civil War.¹⁶¹ Considering that all places and events contain elements which are unique to themselves, I find it difficult to understand the need to argue that nineteenth-century China was not “exotic or exceptional.” Any culture or people can be exotic, it all depends if the perceiver is familiar with them or not.

When the Taiping Rebellion erupted, the Qing dynasty was the long established government of China and the God Worshipers were a young upstart striving to eject the Qing, take control of the mantle of China, and create a government and society which suited them. Both the term rebellion and revolution serve well to describe this scenario; and when one considers the name of the Boxer Rebellion this becomes incredibly clear.

The Boxer Rebellion was a nativist, anti-foreign, and anti-Christian uprising in the Qing dynasty spanning from 1899 to 1901. Following repeated encroachments upon China by foreign empires, the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists massacred Japanese, Christian missionaries, and Chinese Christians in mass and began a siege of the diplomatic Legation Quarter in Beijing. Their slogan was "Support the Qing government and exterminate the foreigners" and, unlike the Triads and the Taipings, the Boxers called for the

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 5

defense of the Manchu regime and targeted only Westerners, Japanese, and Chinese accused of being under foreign sway.

As the Boxers were not aiming to overthrow the Qing government, and considering that the Qing government supported the Boxers in their anti-foreign endeavors, many have asserted that the name the “Boxer Rebellion” is inappropriate for this incident and decided to utilize the term the “Boxer Uprising” instead.¹⁶²

Contrary to the Boxer Uprising, the Taiping Rebellion was an attempt to overthrow the Qing dynasty, and the name the Taiping Rebellion, unlike the term the Boxer Rebellion, does not contradict reality. That being said, however, if one wishes to explicitly treat the Taipings as legitimate as the Qing dynasty, the term civil war then seems suitable. The notion that such a term uniquely allows one to focus primarily on the “individual and collective suffering” of civilians, however, is not necessarily true as one can theoretically focus on that aspect or not regardless of the term civil war.

¹⁶² Esherick, *Origins of the Boxer Uprising*, xiv

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In opposition to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy of history, Leopold Von Ranke asserted that the discipline is an empirical science that is fundamentally concerned with facts over meaning. The past ought to be understood in its own terms, with its own internal rationale, free from a priori judgements and teleological systems. Thus, it is the historian's role to ensure that "no preconception of the meaning of history is to prejudice its investigation," and historians must liberate themselves from the restraints of their own context. However, to him, history was also the result of the compounding effects of different events, and is thus unified with the whole. As he wrote: "Beside freedom stands necessity. It lies in what has already been formed, what cannot be destroyed, which is the foundation of all rising activity. What has been constitutes the connection with what is becoming... A long series of events – succeeding and next to one another – in such ways bound to one another, form a century, an epoch."¹⁶³

Although the idea that one can approximate a suprahistorical perspective is alluring, few now deny that an objective understanding of anything is inhuman, that a totalizing metanarrative is incomprehensible, and that historical knowledge procures its light and intensity out of the context of the present. The unity one

¹⁶³ See Warnke, *Gadamer Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 16

perceives in history is not a fact of reality, but “a product of a retrospective narrative detailing the way in which events are related.”¹⁶⁴ The meaning of history then, is historically situated and subjected to reevaluation once the context of the perceiver shifts. The inability to cognize pure truth and reveal the past as it was, however, does not excuse one to renounce the dialectic and claim that all is relative. Rather it is a reason to engage with multiple contrasting evidence grounded perspectives, lest one be left with a particularly distorted image.

Unlike most nationalist historians, Fan Wenlan’s political philosophy prompted him to pay greater attention to the history of the common laboring people of China and their rebellions and revolutions. To him, the past was a series of efforts by mass movements to overturn reactionary structures of power and progress history forward. The Taipings, being one of these movements, were driven by class interests, fighting for communist utopian ideas, and their faith was but a mask to accrue authority to further their political and economic aims.

As previously mentioned, it is clear that economic and social woes decisively contributed to the development of the Taiping Rebellion. If Hong were to have offered his religious message in times of prosperity, peace, and dynastic confidence, it is extremely implausible that he would have gained a significant following. The lamentable conditions of the masses, the fact that the Taipings were primarily composed of them, and the egalitarian ideals which manifested themselves, however imperfectly, in the movement cannot be ignored. However,

¹⁶⁴ Warnke, *Gadamer Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, 17-19

one must recall that the Taipings did not explicitly describe themselves as a peasant movement, leaving the notion that the Taipings were peasant revolutionaries without evidence.

Nevertheless, by focusing on the material causes of the uprising, which are undoubtedly crucial, Fan's interpretation highlights well the importance of one of the most significant forces of history: social and economic conditions. However, although it is true that the development of the rebellion depended upon material conditions, the notion that the Taiping faith was but "an outer cloak" masking economic motivations cannot be supported.

The cloak metaphor first appeared in Friedrich Engels' study of the German Peasant War, and it is certain that Chinese Communist historians have been influenced by his judgment of the uprising. In his work on the subject, Engels argued that Thomas Müntzer, a theologian and a leader of the peasant movement, publicly employed incendiary religious rhetoric to rally the masses, but privately spoke as an atheist materialist in terms of economics and politics.¹⁶⁵ Of course, however, there isn't any historical evidence to support Engels' claim, just as we are without evidence that Hong secretly held secular beliefs.

In Jian Youwen's perspective, rather than being an emblem of class conflict, the Taiping Rebellion was, above all, an "eruption of revolutionary nationalism", and a glorious attempt of the Chinese ethnicity to seize sovereignty of their homeland.¹⁶⁶ While the Taipings never explicitly referred to themselves as

¹⁶⁵ Boer, *Marxism, Religion and the Taiping Revolution*, 15

¹⁶⁶ Jian, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 544

peasant revolutionaries, they did call themselves the rightful representatives of China, described their war against the Qing as an effort to achieve liberation, and their example later served as an inspiration for the influential Chinese Nationalist Sun Yat-sen.

Despite that many now consider the Qing dynasty to be Chinese, Hong Xiuquan, and the other Taiping leaders such as Yang, Xiao, and Hong Rengan, were undoubtedly of the opinion that the Qing dynasty was foreign. To them, the Qing dynasty's conquest of China was not the 'peaceful unification into a single family', but an unjust tragedy which saw the death of hundreds of thousands of Chinese, and the imposition of a government which humiliated, exploited, and oppressed the Chinese people. Furthermore, although the war was mostly characterized by Chinese fighting Chinese, in the perspective of the Taiping leadership, the Han who stood against them were either treasonous or being led astray by demonic forces and capable of being converted to the Taiping cause. The Manchus, conversely, were to be either expelled or killed, redemption was argued to be beyond them, and they were to be without a place in a Taiping led China.

By focusing on the motivations which propelled the Taiping leadership, Jian was able to capture well what they believed to be fighting for, and his argument that Hong Xiuquan's mission was to establish the worship of his faith and a native Chinese dynasty cannot be contested. However, what one discovers in a work like Meyer-Fong's is that the perspective of the common civilian or

soldier in this conflict was far less ideological than historians have often supposed. To her, “suffering and damage were the defining features” of the war and allegiances to either the Taipings or the Qing could prove to be quite fickle or unstable.¹⁶⁷ Thus, although one could reasonably describe the Taiping leadership as nationalistic, the notion that all, or even most, of their soldiers were is not necessarily true, as it appears that the desire to better their lot or preserve their or their loved ones’ lives is what motivated most.

In both Jian and Fan’s evaluations of the Taiping Rebellion, different emphases are made. In Jian’s work, the Taiping Rebellion is presented as the Chinese ethnicity combating the invader for their homeland. In Fan’s commentary, the affair is represented as the exploited class striving to overthrow the exploiter. In each narration, truth is revealed, just as it is simultaneously concealed. Although Jian accurately depicts how religious and ethnic motivations were major concerns of the Taiping leadership, the role economic conditions played in fomenting the rebellion and the perspective of the common, often quite non-ideological, Chinese is scantily explored. Conversely, despite that Fan correctly demonstrates how the Taiping Rebellion contained egalitarian ideas and could not have developed without the economic distress and social instability characterizing China in the age, he fails to capture the profoundly religious elements of the movement, dismisses the faith as insincere, and asserts a strict peasant revolutionary interpretation despite evidence to the contrary.

¹⁶⁷ Meyer-Fong, *What Remains*, 10

It is undeniable that human beings are inevitably and constantly involved in interpretations. Although much astounding work has been done in the name of pursuing truth, it is by nature ever elusive and the form it takes is fundamentally shaped by the context and values of the perceiver. Thus, any analysis of social and natural phenomena is unavoidably hermeneutic; which is why, for example, different individuals, peoples, or generations can interpret history, morality, and truth so differently. Yet it is not only the influence of political, cultural, and ethical values which is apparent, as the evidence which is accessible to historians can also significantly bind their interpretation of the past and present as well. For example, Karl Marx's analysis of the Taiping Rebellion mirrors the general opinion of Western diplomats and news media primarily because, as a European in only indirect contact with China, they were the sources of information on the Taipings available to him. In China, due to the Qing government's effort to destroy Taiping documents, there is a dearth of sources on the Taiping Rebellion, except the generally anti-Taiping local gazettes and the always anti-Taiping records of the government. Further, documents the Taipings produced themselves which remain tend to be but idealistic proclamations, while Western reports on them are naturally influenced by religious, economic, and diplomatic interests; all of which makes defining the character of the Taiping Rebellion particularly difficult.

The limitation of the sources on the Taiping Rebellion in part accounts for the diversity of opinion expressed by historians. Be that as it may, however, a

wide array of differing interpretations are still articulated in debates surrounding well documented events, such as the Great War. Depending upon the ethical, political, and cultural affinities of the perceiver, the purpose of the war, and who is to blame for its eruption can vary immensely from perspective to perspective. This is because all historical narrations, like philosophical systems, are a “personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir”.¹⁶⁸ Despite the inability to grasp objectivity, however, knowledge is still attainable, and our prejudices and biases not only restrict our ability to know, but allow one to know. However, knowing necessitates engaging in an open dialogue with other perspectives, as only by coming to a *verständigung* with others are findings and arguments tested, and the development of a more sound and expansive understanding is possible.¹⁶⁹ But the objective of the discussion must not be to win the argument, as the dialect only progresses forward when understanding and truth is sought first. The dialogue must be open to all to provide their various interpretations, one should be prepared for the revival of old discussions should new evidence be illuminated and arguments formulated, and it ought be understood that what is considered to be truth is but the building of consensus.¹⁷⁰ Thus, rather than adhering to a rigid absolutist conception of truth, or falling back upon a relativistic philosophy, the study of history calls for a perspectivist philosophy which acknowledges that the meaning or significance of

¹⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 13

¹⁶⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Part II

¹⁷⁰ Vogel, *Against Nature*, Chapter 6

an event will differ depending upon the perceiver. By maintaining a dialogue between contrasting evidence based perspectives and preventing the domination of a particular viewpoint or framework, a more rich and comprehensive understanding of the past comes into being. Although it is impossible to synthesize all opposing perspectives into an all-inclusive narrative, a discourse between antitheses expands the scope of understanding, and the fundamentally hermeneutic nature of history is subsequently revealed.

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