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Hong Xiuquan and Religious Ideology of the Taiping Rebellion in 1850–1864

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Abstract. The Taiping Rebellion in mid-nineteenth-century China was not only the largest social revolutionary movement of its time, but a movement inspired to a large extent by Christianity. This article emphasizes the importance of the Bible in Hong Xiuquan's life, his radical reinterpretation of the Holy Scripture, and the role that his religious ideology played in the Taiping movement and in the very existence of Taiping Tian Guo. The research aims to determine the role of religious ideology in the Taiping rebellion, and to analyze the views of its leader. The choice of topic is conditioned by the need to study religious ideologies related to the Qing period (1644–1911), as well as by the markedly increased scientific interest in the history of China under the reign of the Manchu dynasty. In the course of the research, it was found that under the influence of Western missionaries, Hong Xiuquan embarked on promoting a modified version of Christianity in southern China, and later transformed it into the ideology of the Taiping movement: its goal was to recreate the heavenly kingdom on earth.

Keywords: Hong Xiuquan, Taiping, Christianity, God worshippers, Qing Dynasty

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Хун Сюцюань и религиозная идеология в Тайпинском восстании 1850–1864 гг.

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Аннотация. Восстание тайпинов (Тайпинское восстание) в Китае в середине девятнадцатого века было не только крупнейшим общественно-революционным движением своего времени, но движением, в немалой степени вдохновленным христианством. Подчеркивается важное место Библии в жизни Хун Сюцюаня, ее радикальное переосмысление тайпинским лидером и та роль, которую его религиозная идеология сыграла в действиях тайпинов и существовании Тайпин Тяньго. Целью исследования является определение роли религиозной идеологии в восстании тайпинов, а также анализ воззрений лидера их движения. Обращение к этой теме обусловлено необходимостью изучения религиозных идеологий, относящихся к периоду истории империи Цин (1644–1911), а также заметно возросшим научным интересом к истории Китая в период правления маньчжурской династии. В ходе исследования было установлено, что под влиянием западных миссионеров на юге Китая возникла модифицированная версия христианства, превращенная Хуном Сюцюанем в идеологию тайпинского движения: его целью было воссоздать царство небесное на земле.

Ключевые слова: Хун Сюцюань, тайпины, христианство, богопоклонники, династия Цин

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Introduction

In 1851, just eight years after the First Opium War forced China to formally allow opium imports, a group called The God Worshipping Society rose to prominence among rebellion movements in southern China. Its members, who professed a form of Christianity as interpreted by their leader, set about creating what they called the «Heavenly Kingdom of the Great world» (Taiping Tian Guo). Over time, their «kingdom» got its own center — Nanjing, initially the capital of pre-existing Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and the symbolism of the event posed a serious challenge to the Manchu Imperial House.

By the 19th century, the Qing Empire was ripe for crisis as all the necessary conditions (economic, social, political, etc.) had already been in place. The Taiping Rebellion escalated into one of the strongest anti-government uprisings in China. The adherents of the Taiping movement based their claim to power on a command from God, conveyed to their leader Hong in a vision, which he later found confirmed and interpreted in Christian books and treatises propagated by missionaries in Guangzhou [1]. The rebellion, which spanned across most of the provinces south of the Yangtze River and a number of provinces in the North, lasted for more than a decade.

The uprising has received a profound scientific coverage, as the events were well accounted of from the very early days of Taiping movement, and hence, its various aspects have been the focus of numerous publications. The rebellion was well publicized in both Europe and the Russian Empire through correspondence from missionaries and officials who eye-witnessed the events in China.

The Taiping Rebellion has been studied by numerous authors in Russia and abroad. Russian researchers V.P. Ilyushechkin [2] and D.M. Pozdeev [3] in their works tapped into official documents and sources that underlay the views of the Taipings. A.L. Anisimov [4] focuses on missionary work of Issachar Roberts. E.A. Zakharov in his article [5] gives a brief review of works on the doctrine of the Tiandihui Society published in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, the problem of the Taiping movement is addressed in every textbook and manual on the history of China.

This research also employs the works by foreign scientists. J. Spence [6] and E. Boardman [7] analyzed Hong Xiuquan personality. The works of F. Khun [8], P. Yap [9], and D. Ownby [10] examined the prerequisites of the rebellion, its course and the influence of Christianity on the ideology developed by its leader. T. Meadows [11], W. Shih [12], R. Wagner [13], and T. Donovan [14] studied Taiping ideology. The research also relied on the works of Chinese authors: Fan Wen-lan [15], Yuan Chang Teng [16], Ai Shu [17], Xiangru Ren [18], and Yu Tao [19].

The collection of sources of the article is based upon can be divided into several groups. The first group includes manifestos by Hong Xiuquan, such as Manifesto on the Destruction of Northern Barbarians by the Will of Heaven [20]; Manifesto on the Extermination of Devils, Salvation of the World and Pacification of the People by the Will of Heaven [21]; An Appeal to the People [22]; Taiping Rules [23]; Land System of the Celestial Dynasty [24]. The second group is constituted by the records of those related to the events: notes by missionary Archimandrite Palladius [1], Liang Fa's treatise (In Chinese) [25], notes by traveler John Bunyon [26]. The third group is constituted by legal regulations — An Imperial Decree Providing for

the Further Toleration of Christianity, by Granting the Restoration of Real Estate to Chinese Christians throughout the Empire [27].

The research is aimed to study the influence of Hong Xiuquan's religious guidelines on the rise of Taiping ideology in nineteenth-century China, which may enable a better understanding of the role of religion in contemporary social and political processes.

Path to Rebellion

As China was recovering after the Opium War of the early 1840s, Hong, a disillusioned student and a Confucianism follower found solace in the Christian teachings of the West. Coincidentally it was during this period that the Qing government issued a number of laws more loyal to Christianity and Christians [27].

Little is known about his early life. Hong was born in Guangdong in 1814. Although his family belonged to farmers, he opted for civil service, which his relatives did not approve of. He sought a post of a civil servant and made four attempts at taking the imperial entrance exams, but failed all of them. These mishaps made the future leader reconsider and try to find a place in Christian churches, to that end he asked the preacher to baptize him, but even there he was turned down. Everything changed after he attempted to take the state examinations in 1833 in Canton. The failure forced Hong to shake off his illusions over the service system and accept a job in a school.

Despite significant changes in Hong's vision of himself and his calling, he continued teaching in a local school, but the villagers were not ready to accept an anti-Qing teacher, which made Hong resign from his position as a village tutor in 1844. [6. P. 17]. Hong was aware that he could no longer stay in the village, and from that time on, he began his transformation into a future leader of an uprising.

His principal source on Christianity between 1833 and 1847 was Liang Fa's *Quànshì Liángyán* (Good Words to Exhort the World) [25]. Although the text was an eclectic compilation, to an extent it was true to some parts of the Old and New Testaments. Liang Fa believed that the way of life the Chinese lived had led them «into a selfish oblivion of the ideals of moral purity» [28]. His ideas were extended by Hong to the ideology of the Taiping, portraying the Chinese society as being in a deadlock and the change of dynasty as almost inevitable. As Boardman notes, a number of assumptions, reflected in the book, criticized religious practices and secular culture among the Jews, and that may have had an impact on the change of Hong's attitude to Confucianism, on his disillusionment with it, and

as a consequence, with the state system in China [7]. Based on these texts, Hong Xiuquan embarked on interpreting his own dreams that he had dreamt six years earlier. Having delved into a more detailed study of Christianity, he came to conclusion that the two figures who appeared in his dream were God the Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. Hong came to think of himself as Jesus' brother; he also believed that he was to shoulder the burden of destroying all the demons in the world [7].

American sinologist F. Kuhn wrote that it was not until 1842 that Hong Xiuquan realized the connection of his visions to Christianity [8], and this had an enormous impact on his nascent worldview. He apparently became more virtuous and pious as a personality compared to the witty and straightforward self of that earlier Hong. He no longer used his born name — Huoxu, but adopted a new one — Xiuquan, which translates as "perfect" [13].

Soon after he found the key to interpreting his visions, he and his closest associates were independently baptized. Hong began preaching to his family and associates on the virtues of his version of Christianity. Over the next few years, the most important doctrinal texts [20, 21, 22, 23, 24] would be written, which laid foundations for the ideology of the Taiping Rebellion. According to D.M. Pozdeev, one of the reasons for the uprising was the belief that the Manchu dynasty would fall 200 years after they assumed power, that is, in 1844 [3].

Hong Xiuquan embarked on a journey across the country, during which he first experienced a close contact with the Western preachers in 1847. In Canton Hong met Issachar Jacob Roberts, a Protestant missionary. Hong was extremely enthusiastic about meeting his counterpart. His enthusiasm grew even higher after Roberts made a commitment to tell him about the intricacies of Christian doctrine. However, they soon parted ways; as P.M. Yap suggests, Roberts and Hong were unable to find a common ground on the most important issues of faith [9. P. 290].

Presumably, Roberts concluded that his disciple had to be baptized; otherwise, their further cooperation was impossible. However, Roberts' entourage disagreed, refused to perform the ceremony, and noted that Hong was not entitled to any kind of support from the church, including financial aid. Roberts was extremely alarmed that his disciple, according to rumors from other missionaries, was seeking financial guarantees for his future [16. P. 56]. Later, in the course of the uprising, Roberts hoped to the very last to turn the interests of the Taiping leaders towards Western powers, but, in the end, he was forced to flee Nanjing [4. P. 148].

It has been argued that because of these differences between the preachers and the future leader of the rebellion, Hong missed on the opportunity for further instruction in Christian doctrine [10. P. 100]. We can assume that,

at least initially, Hong Xiuquan's goal was to manipulate religion for the sake of achieving his personal well-being. However, Hong failed to establish a rapport with Roberts, because he was not ready to devote himself entirely to the study of religious dogma, as it would have been a setback to his main objective — to establish the new order and overthrow the Qing dynasty [23]. He embarked on propagating his teaching to people. As mentioned above, Hong traveled around China in 1844, and in 1847, following his encounter with missionaries, he established an association of followers, which he called the “Worshippers of God” [10. P. 101].

To illustrate, here are a few excerpts from manifestos written by the leader of the rebellion. According to Hong Xiuquan, China is the “head” while the Qing government is the “feet” [20]. He described the Manchus as a “barbaric” dynasty, and contemptuously dubbed them “Tatars” [20]. Such a moniker played into the hands of the Taiping rebels, as they sought to show that the Manchus were strangers to China. Hong noted that “the feet are elevated above the head” [20], and it is Taiping's job to eliminate chaos and bring order back. One example of the lack of order under the Qing, cited by Hong was the fact that Chinese men were compelled to cut hair leaving a long ponytail in the back, which turned them into “wild beasts” [20], and that people were pressed to abandon traditional clothing in favor of «barbaric» clothing [20]. He also condemned the Qing institution of marriage, because Chinese «beauties» were forced to “share the bed with lecherous foxes” — Manchus [10]. In addition, he turned against bribery and alterations to the Chinese language. Another key aspect was the fact that sizeable Chinese army subordinated to no more than 100,000 troops of the Manchu army [2]. Hong Xiuquan taught that all people were «children of the Lord God», who had the power to overthrow the Qing regime and «find happiness in heaven» [2].

Obviously, his enthusiasm for Christian doctrine undermined his confidence in Confucianism. Besides, Hong Xiuquan rejected all forms of Confucian symbolism and Buddhist rituals. The leader believed that the Manchu dynasty had provoked the wrath of the Lord God, so the Taipings should be guided by his admonition that «who obeys heaven will be saved, but the disobedient will perish» [21].

A brief outline Hong's religious ideology is as follows: first, Hong's visions made him believe that he was the younger brother of Jesus. This outstanding position in the Christian world gave him grounds to assume that he should do something great and beneficial for the people oppressed by the Qing rule. As mentioned above, one of the reasons why Hong Xiuquan loathed the Manchu dynasty was the system of admission to public office, which effectively barred him from entering the service. P.M. Yap speculates that Hong wished to convert China to his version

of Christianity [9. P. 291]. He preached brotherhood and sisterhood of all people before God. In addition, one of the most important aspect of the doctrine was that it proclaimed common right to property [24]. Since the land ownership issue was extremely acute, this conception would later receive a great public response. Due to the preaching of «heavenly message» [8], the faith, or rather Hong's religious ideology enabled to rally a large army of up to a million men and women to his cause (the Taiping rebels treated women as equals) [29].

Hong set about building the Heavenly Kingdom (Taiping Tian Guo). This kingdom was to be based on a strict moral code that valued community above an individual [23]. All personal property of the followers, including money and jewelry, was used to build an army. Hong Xiuquan told his followers that if they died in a battle, their souls would reach paradise (Tian Guo). According to an authentic Chinese dictionary Qiyuan [30], Tian Guo is the paradise for religious disciples, and the place where chosen souls go after individual death. At the same time, Hong had larger-scale plans: to establish the heavenly kingdom, i.e. paradise, on earth, hence the name of the promised new state.

In the eye of his followers, Hong's vision was absolute truth, an act of divine premonition, while their own actions were mere interpretation and realization. Hong's message was unique in the way that it provided a framework to both understand and solve a large number of problems. Rumors began circulating among the population on the benefits of converting to Hong Xiuquan's teaching. By the summer of 1850, the God-worshippers were ready to turn against the Qing Dynasty. Over the next three years, battles were fought with mixed success, with the greatest victory coming in March 1853, when the Taiping conquered Nanjing. Hong saw it as the first step towards establishing the Heavenly Kingdom on Earth [7].

In 1856, Hong's good health started deteriorating. Some sources claim that he committed suicide by swallowing poison on June 1, 1864 after the Qing authorities gained a decisive military advantage. All hope of retaining the «kingdom» was gone and his body was later found in a sewer [13]. Other sources say he died of illness, possibly food poisoning from eating wild vegetables, as food was scarce in the city sieged by government troops [2]. Hong's body was buried near the former Ming imperial palace, but was later exhumed by the Manchu military to make sure he was dead. The remains were then cremated, and the ashes were discharged from a cannon to «ensure that he would not find a final place to rest» [9. P. 293].

Four months before his death, Hong bequeathed his throne to his eldest son, Hong Tianguifu. The city fell on July 19, 1864 in a brutal massacre initiated by government troops, which killed more than 100,000 people [17. P. 90].

Religious Ideology

Hong had several sources to rely upon when interpreting the visions he received in his dreams. One of them was undoubtedly Liang Fa's treatise, largely viewed as a principal source of Hong's inspiration [25]. While in Guangzhou, Hong learned from Roberts that Liang Fa's treatise was based on two other sources, namely the Old Testament and the New Testament. In a while, Hong also acquired knowledge of another source, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* [26], which was popular among enthusiastic clergy in China at the time.

Karl Gutzlaff, a renowned Protestant missionary, made significant effort to spread the Old and New Testament in China in the 1840s [6]. His Chinese Union, an evangelical movement, successfully progressed with distributing the Holy Scripture throughout China. In every likelihood, some of Gutzlaff's converts may have been preaching to the Taiping members, although no evidence has been found so far actually linking Hong and the Chinese Union. However, Boardman pointed out that the propagation of Taiping ideology coincided in time with Issachar Roberts' vigorous preaching activities in 1847, to which Gutzlaff provided much assistance [7]. As Boardman found out, it was in that year that Hong Xiuquan for 2 months was a disciple of Roberts', who was engaged in translating Christian texts, including the Bible, into Chinese. If so, the Bible published in Nanjing in 1853 was most likely the one Hong first saw from Roberts in 1847. The fact, that a major Christian text was published in the capital of the new state suggests an outstanding importance Hong attached to its central (sacred) figure, Jesus Christ, and consequently to himself as the main figure of Taiping ideology.

Through the study of religious literature, Hong Xiuquan developed his own conception of the world and his role in it [6]. Hong's visions when interpreted by means of those sacred texts lay the foundation for Taiping religious ideology. Hong Xiuquan believed that everything in heaven and on earth was created by God, omnipresent and omnipotent. During lifetime, people are taken care of by God, and after death, a human soul either ascends to heaven and enjoys happiness or, in case of disobedience to God's will, becomes one of the demons, hunted for by ghosts and sent to eternal suffering in hell [21; 23].

We share the opinion of W. Shih (Yanjin University, Washington University) that there is not a least doubt that the Taiping movement was unified and cemented by religious elements of Taiping ideology [12. P. 20]. A. Shu (Wuchang University) suggests a close connection between Hong's Christian ideas and the foundations of his state, which is manifested linguistically: the name of the Taiping state (太平)

means “The Greatest and Most Prevalent Equality and Justice in the World, Followed by Tian Guo» (Kingdom of Heaven) — 天国, Tian for 天 and Guo for 国), which clearly demonstrates biblical influence and religious character of this political force. In fact, the very name Tian Guo (Kingdom of Heaven) was borrowed from the first sentence of the fifth chapter of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel: «Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven» (Matthew 5:3)» [17. P. 86].

Xiangru Ren of the University of Edinburgh argues that when Hong Xiuquan chose a religious path, it was no accident that he declared himself as the Heavenly King of and a self-proclaimed brother of Jesus Christ. The researcher quotes T. Reilly: “The nucleus of the Taiping Rebellion was the Christian movement known as the BaiShangdihui (Society of God Worshippers). While inspired by a Protestant tract, this movement quickly developed a faith, which was distinctively Chinese in its orientation, character and purpose” [18. P. 673].

Hong’s success was based on his ability to describe «a realistic and meaningful universe that provided a framework to both understand and solve a surprisingly large number of problems» [13]. The Taiping members were consciously or unconsciously looking for something to replace traditional Chinese ideology that had been in place for so long that had come to ignore the blatant injustice that was being done to people by the ruling elites under the guise of moral education. They were looking for sorts of positive worldview that would allow them to overcome the influence of Confucian ideology so that they could make observations and reasoning on their own without being influenced by the government. At the same time, however, the Taiping faith was no more than an «outer cloak» to cover a revolutionary political program aimed to overthrow Qing government and counter external enemies. In other words, religion could inspire people to revolution, but it could not create it — someone had to come up with political slogans, and so it happened. In this context, of interest is the opinion of Yu Tao (Academy of Social Sciences in Australia), who defined the Taiping form of ruling as theocracy. “After a series of military victories over the Qing regime, the rebels built the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Tai Ping Tian Guo), a theocracy that controlled the rich lower Yangtze region for more than a decade” [19. P. 12].

Vincent Shih in his *Ideology of the Taiping* [12. P. 20] regards their religion as a means of uniting different peoples in an organization to achieve political goals [12. P. 20]. Yuan Chang Teng (Taiwan University) notes a degree of fatalism among the Chinese, which was expressed in their perception of the Taiping doctrine as a God-sent gift meant to help them out of the plight in which they were plunged by the Qing government. Thus, the Taiping rebels, definitely, used religion to guise their political ambitions [16. P. 56].

B. Shih cites the opinion of the Taiping Rebellion contemporary Humphrey Marshall, an American envoy to China, who stated that the cold and cunning propagandist (Hong) reinterpreted religious tracts, occasionally published in China by missionaries, to create a doctrine of his own, capable of rallying to his cause all those discontent and desperate in the country [12. P. 12]. Accordingly, God for the Taipings was «the god of equality, freedom and fraternity», «the revolutionary god» [14. P. 52], blessing them for such a change.

However, other contemporaries defended the Taiping ideology as the one based on a true religious feeling [13]. One example is British diplomat Thomas T. Meadows who emphasized that the Taiping were originally a religious society, which did not come into conflict with the local authorities until the autumn of 1850 [11. P. 47]. In his opinion, it was only by sheer necessity that Hong Xiuquan was forced to bring to his movement the character and functions of a patriotic movement [11. P. 49]. We share Eugene Boardman's opinion that in the Taiping Rebellion political and religious motives were intertwined and, as a rule, inseparable from one another [7. P. 78].

The defeat of the Taipings was brought about by a variety of circumstances, from socio-political to cultural and economic, to military, diplomatic and others. Hong's religious ideology stands out among them because it was not a sincere religious revelation, but a means of gaining authority and establishing itself as a legitimate source of power [12]. In other words, faith was an unstable add-on, covering up the reality of the economic circumstances that were actually driving the movement. Obviously, this was an alteration of the very idea of the movement, originally aimed at changing the spiritual world of the Chinese. The idealistic constructs of Hong Xiuquan's faith failed, having clashed with political reality of the Qing Empire.

The Taiping evolved from a religious society into a political organization after their very existence was threatened by the ruling Qing dynasty; and vice versa, they themselves became a threat to the dynasty [24].

Conclusions

Hong Xiuquan is one of the most outstanding figures in Chinese history. The idea to combine spiritual and secular power, which he came across through his acquaintance with missionaries, reading religious literature, which helped him interpret his visions, made Hong believe in his unique mission and act accordingly. He refined Protestantism provisions in order to reconstruct key Christian tenets and biblical episodes to achieve his own ideological and then

political goals, which culminated in the «Heavenly Kingdom» established by him with the center in Nanjing.

Hong truly believed that the Taiping movement he headed would lead China to a better future. He regarded himself as possessing the qualities necessary to rid the whole world of evil (be it in the form of the Qing dynasty or Confucian teachings) and to establish a new world order based on the ideology he had created. This approach is recurrent in Chinese history, when those who rebelled against the existing power (dynasty) always put forward religious ideas (and created respective associations) to attract supporters.

Hong Xiuquan sought to create heavenly kingdom on earth, rather than promising it after death. In this way, his teachings was different from other world religions, as the new world (heavenly kingdom) of Xiuquan was possible there and now, in the time being, not “beyond”. This distinction was superimposed on a specific Chinese feature: after he founded the «kingdom,» he intended to establish his own heavenly dynasty.

However, despite greater emphasis put on religion, it should be noted that Hong was never an ordained member of any of the ministries of the Protestant hierarchy. He was not brought up in the Protestant tradition, and yet, he renounced Confucianism and Buddhist teachings. Therefore, despite his perception of himself as a religious, devout man, he was essentially a secular figure leading a faith-based organization he created. His unique ideology or rather, his unique worldview gives every ground to conclude that Hong Xiuquan himself was the embodiment of both religion and ideology of the Taiping state.

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