

Christianity in the Middle Kingdom: Taiping Rebels and the Synthesis of Chinese Metaphysics with Christianity

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Abstract:

The Taiping Rebellion played a major role in weakening the Qing dynasty and shaping the political transformations that followed its decline. The Taipings' embrace of Christianity has long divided both Christian observers and secular scholars. At the center of this debate is whether Taiping theology should be understood merely as a deviation from Protestant orthodoxy or as a creative vernacular reconstruction shaped by Chinese cosmology, ethics, and late Qing crisis. This paper argues that although the Taipings did not conform to Trinitarian orthodoxy, they nonetheless developed a distinctive localized form of Christianity. Drawing on close readings of Hong Xiuquan's edicts, poems, and commentaries, this study shows how Taiping thinkers redefined God, heaven, kinship, and kingship through concepts intelligible to nineteenth-century Chinese audiences. This localized faith was one which spoke to the moral and discursive frameworks indigenous to the social conditions of China. Seen in this light, the movement reveals how foreign religious ideas were localized in modern China and why the Taiping case remains central to debates on heterodoxy, indigenization, and political theology.

Keywords: Taiping Heavenly Kingdom; Hong Xiuquan; localization; Christianity in China; political theology.

1. Introduction

Amid foreign incursions and mounting internal crises, the Taiping Rebellion appropriated Christian ideas to challenge a Qing political order already in decline. Though the Rebellion would ultimately fall to the onslaught of Zeng Guofan and his Hunan Army (Xiang Jun) in 1864, its fall would prove to be

a Pyrrhic victory for the Qing ruling class. This rebellion was unique in the annals of Chinese history in that its leader, Hong Xiuquan, was not only inspired by Christian religious concepts, but in fact claimed to be a blood relative of Jesus Christ appointed to rid the land of demonic forces.

Whereas scholars such as Eugene Boardman and Xu Rulei argue that the Taipings were not genu-

inely Christian because of their doctrinal deviations and violent practices, others, including Carl Kilcourse, offer a different interpretation [1, 2]. According to Kilcourse, such views are essentialist and prevent scholars from analyzing the Taipings from outside of a Western Christian perspective [3]. Jian Youwen, himself a Chinese Christian, independently corroborates Kilcourse's position, as he views the Taipings as a localized branch of Chinese Christianity [4]. Echoing the above viewpoints, scholar of Chinese Christianity Thomas H. Reilly in his "Blasphemy of Empire" thesis holds that "The Taiping faith, albeit kindled by Anglo-American Protestantism, developed into a dynamic new Chinese religion, one whose conception of the title and position of the sovereign deity challenged the legitimacy of the imperial order" [5].

This paper argues that Taiping theology was neither orthodox Protestantism nor merely a distortion of Christianity, but rather a localized synthesis shaped by Chinese religious and political concepts. This paper will show that as Christian religious terms and concepts were translated into Chinese, they took on meanings heavily influenced by Chinese social, historical, and religious traditions. The theological concepts encompassed by this process of indigenous transformation include everything from Christology and soteriology to the mere translation of the monotheistic "God" into the Chinese language. The localization of these concepts would provide a framework for the articulation of a revolutionary Christian movement which situated China at the center of salvation. This revolution synthesized Chinese elements in such a way that Christianity was no longer a foreign religion, but the sole path through which China could be restored to the glory and righteousness of its classical past. This paper will further draw on both secondary scholarship and close readings of Taiping poems, edicts, as well as other primary texts in order to demonstrate these points.

2. Good Words to Admonish the Age and Hong Xiuquan's Early Religious Development

a. Liang Fa the Unwitting Sower of Sedition

Prior to studying with the American Protestant missionary Issachar Jacox Roberts in 1847, Hong Xiuquan's sole exposure to formally articulated Christian doctrine came in the year 1836 in the form of a work already undergoing and contributing to the unconscious process of localization. This work was none other than a tract entitled *Good Words to Admonish the Age* written and compiled by a local convert to Christianity known by the name of Liang A-Fa. Liang was a lower-level functionary in a Cantonese

print shop who had run into the Presbyterian missionaries Robert Morrison and William Milne and converted under their influence [6].

According to scholar Philip A. Kuhn, "The arrangement of the material in *Good Words* is unsystematic" [7]. The tract consists largely of quotes or excerpts from the Morrison-Milne translation of the Bible accompanied by Liang's commentary. For example, volume one consists of passages from Genesis with commentary followed by a lengthy condemnation of Chinese "idol worship," the book of Isaiah, and finally the Sermon on the Mount.

Though it is not entirely known the full breadth of Christian sources that Liang had at his disposal, it is certain that he at least had the Morrison-Milne translation of the Bible at hand, as it is the source of Liang's biblical passages. It is worth noting that in his own diatribes as well as some quotations, Liang uses the terms "Shen Tian Shang Di" as well as Jehovah to refer to God. This is significant for a number of reasons. First, these terms were alien to the Morrison-Milne Chinese translation. Second, both were terms that would go on to be utilized in some form by Hong and the Taipings.

Liang takes great pains to thoroughly excoriate traditional systems of Chinese metaphysics: Buddhism and Taoism. Confucius and his attendant disciples are also not spared. In a lengthy condemnation in the tract's first volume, Liang states, "Due to ignorance of the Bible, people have fallen into every demonic path, and instead worship idols made by the hand of man" [8]. This condemnation of Chinese culture is also accompanied by frequent allusions to contemporary moral degeneracy. Liang also associates idol worship with poverty and material immiseration as well as elite decadence. He states, "And for those wealthy businessmen, their halls are filled with offerings to the Bodhisattva Guanyin, The God of Money, The Child of Wealth, gods of landowners and wells etc. all have candles and incense lit and arrayed for them" [8]. Throughout, Liang stresses that the answer to this befuddlement is the realization that judgment is near and mankind's only salvation is through faith in the one God, Jesus Christ.

b. The Scholar Who Would Be King

While there are no explicit doctrinal innovations in Liang's work, it is not difficult to see how a new convert could come away with certain aspects of the Christian faith emphasized over others. Though Hong Xiuquan had received Liang's text in 1836, it would not immediately take on a significant place in his thinking. After failing the imperial examinations in 1837, Hong suffered a period of prolonged illness during which he claims to have had visions that were, at the time, not fully comprehensible [9]. In 1843, Hong once again failed the imperial examinations, but this time he responded by reading more care-

fully the text he had received in 1836 [10]. Liang's text provided him with a new framework with which to interpret his previously opaque visions. Here his newfound Christianity is apparent, as he characterizes his previous vision as an ascent to Heaven. He identifies the figures he meets in decidedly Christian terms, with the bearded erudite figure who welcomed him into the celestial kingdom being named as the "Heavenly Father, Shang Di" [11]. In his vision, Hong is imbued by the Heavenly Father with the power to slay demons and combat evil. In fulfillment of this, the Heavenly Father bestows on him the title "Heavenly King of Great Peace" (Taiping Tian Wang) [11]. Throughout Hong's recounting of his vision, he refers to Christ as "Tian Xiong", or Heavenly Elder Brother. Although the Taipings are now famous for their iconoclasm, Hong nonetheless characterizes the divine in an anthropomorphic fashion. Not only is the Heavenly Father portrayed as an older man in a dragon robe, but he also has a "Heavenly Mother" as a wife. In a twist perhaps most shocking to Western Christians, Christ is also assigned a heavenly spouse.

3. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's Definition of Heaven and Divinity

a. Heaven Knows Its King

The Taiping alterations to traditional notions of Chinese divinity and their relation to the establishment of statehood are also not to be overlooked. In the many Confucian iterations of the metaphysical order, heaven was an abstract and largely impersonal cosmic force whose patterns were inscrutable to all but the most learned sages with Confucius as their paragon. The Taipings, under the influence of Christianity, used the indigenous "heaven" to represent in equal measure the Christian God, his Kingdom, and by extension those deputized to act with the accompanying authority [12].

Hong, as the Heavenly King, was not merely a passive or coincidental embodiment of received wisdom; rather, he was imparted with authority by a conscious creator conceived of as residing in Heaven. So it was in the Taiping system that Heaven was a watchful deity with a direct earthly representative to whom obedience was obligatory [13].

Though Hong Xiuquan was initially received positively by Christian missionaries, doctrinal disputes soon became apparent. Hong's claim to be a "second Son of God" drew strong criticism from missionaries and later Christian commentators, many of whom regarded such a claim as Hong inserting himself into the Christian Godhead as a fully divine entity [14].

Other missionaries argued that Hong's claim to be Jesus' natural-born brother, sharing God as a common father, effectively rejected the doctrine of divine incarnation. In this group's view, Hong's invocation of the title "Son of God" was meant to metaphorically represent the gravity of the mission bestowed both upon him and his "elder brother" and thus obliterated the foundational theological tenets of both Protestant and Catholic Christianity from an entirely different angle [3].

b. God and His Sons

Hong's view of himself as a Son of God did not, however, entail what the missionaries who derided his theology assumed it did. The assumption that Hong was claiming to be a Son of God on par with Christ, and by extension God himself, was in fact quite contrary to the actual system of theology propagated by the Taipings. While Hong did view himself as a literal Son of God, the rejection of mortals claiming the mantle of divinity was in fact a tenet of central importance to the Taiping movement. This opposition stemmed from the Taipings' objection to the usurpation of divinity they accused the Chinese emperors of having engaged in. Such a position also had strong implications regarding the doctrine of the Trinity.

In his works, Hong revives theological positions often labeled "heretical" by orthodox Christians, arguing that although Jesus is the redeemer of humankind and the Son of God, he is neither identical with God nor of the same divine substance. In his commentary on Acts of the Apostles, Hong states, "Shang Di is the Lord above, that is to say that only the Heavenly Father is Shang Di, not that Jesus is Shang Di" [11]. Chinese Christian scholar Jian Youwen holds that this alone cannot cast the Taipings out of the fold of Christianity, as he characterizes Hong's views as belonging to a Unitarian interpretation of the faith [12]. In line with this supposition, Hong and the Taipings are adamant that God is one, indivisible Heavenly Father. In this cosmology, Jesus, though of paramount importance, is God's Son but in no way comparable to him. Hong is Jesus' subordinate younger brother destined to bring Christ's mission of redemption to its ultimate completion. Hong's view whereby a son cannot be equal to his father is viewed by scholars such as Jian Youwen and Carl Kilcourse as reflecting Hong's own Confucian upbringing. They argue that although Hong often excoriated Confucianism, the linguistic framework of Confucian familial hierarchy unconsciously shaped his reading of Christian texts and thus his theological conclusions [9, 12].

c. The Eastern King, The Holy Spirit, and the Divine Wind

In a debate with Christian missionaries, the Taipings' "Eastern King", Yang Xiuqing, was accused of blasphemy multiple times for reasons already outlined above,

but also on account of his having the title “Divine Wind” or “Holy Spirit” conferred upon him [15]. Such claims, while obviously disconcerting to missionaries attempting to make forays into the Taiping Court, were not in contradiction with the Taipings’ own system of theology. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Hong states, “Shang Di alone is God ... the Divine Wind (Sheng Shen Feng) is the wind belonging to Holy God Shang Di (Sheng Shen Shang Di), not that the wind is Holy God. The Eastern King (Yang Xiuqing) is the (divine) wind”. Later in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Hong states, “There is a Holy Spirit, and he is the Eastern King” [16]. It is indicative of Taiping theology that the Eastern King was “born” into an anthropomorphized heavenly family in much the same way Hong held he himself was, as he states, “The Eastern King is God’s beloved son, born of the same mother as the Heavenly Brother (Jesus) and myself” [16].

In Hong’s own reading of the New Testament, he identifies the Holy Spirit not as a composite element of a triune Godhead; instead, he views it as a separate entity which accompanies the divine presence of God the Father as he descends to the mortal plane. In his commentary on Jesus’ trials in the wilderness as narrated in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Hong states, “Shang Di is Holy God (Sheng Shen), and he comes with the Holy Spirit (Sheng Ling), so on Pentecost Holy God did come down and was witnessed as fire and wind. The fire and wind flow forth from God, and they are altogether one”. Within this theological system, those begotten or chosen by God could be described as bearing the divine presence without thereby constituting a separate person sharing the same substance as God [11].

d. Translation: Another Piece of Evidence for Unconscious Indigenization

This notion of God descending to the material realm with the Holy Spirit is also key to understanding the Taiping theological justification for the role played by the Eastern King. The Taipings held that God the Father would periodically utilize the Eastern King as a conduit for divine messages. When this occurred, it was believed that the Eastern King spoke directly for the Heavenly Father. Scholar Zhou Weichi, drawing on the research of Luo Ergang, observes that traditions of spirit possession and religious ecstasy were well-known to the folk religions of Guang Xi during the time when the future rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom began to preach there [17]. The role of the Eastern King, himself a native of Guang Xi, outlined above could be described as an expression of indigenous religious tradition in a new, Christian form originally inspired by the charismatic strands of the Anglo-American Protestantism the Taipings had been exposed to [3].

It is worth noting that in the above passages, the translation of the Bible Hong used to write his commentary was not the Morrison-Milne Bible, but the Gützlaff Bible. This version of the Chinese translation of the Bible used “Sheng Shen” to mean Holy Spirit. As seen above, Hong interpreted this as meaning “Holy God”. This is likely because “Shen” in Chinese can refer to either a god or a spirit. It is possible that Hong’s interpretation was due to the fact that both Liang Fa and the Morrison-Milne translation of the Bible to which he had first been exposed utilized “Shen” to refer to God the Father. Such a reading on the part of Hong and the Taipings also demonstrates that Christian terms and concepts translated into a Chinese cultural context were interpreted in unique ways imbued with indigenous meaning. As can also be seen, the meanings arrived at by the Taipings were often not in accordance with the intended message of the missionaries who originally translated and carried the Christian faith to China.

4. Taiping Political Theology

Flowing forth from these premises, the Taipings also found ample theological justification for the establishment of their earthly political regime and its accompanying violence. To the Taipings, their nation’s title of “Heavenly Kingdom” had a literal as well as metaphorical meaning. As Christian missionaries had attempted to inform the Eastern King, the Christian Kingdom of Heaven was, by definition, not one belonging to the mortal plane [18]. The depth of Hong’s conviction that Heaven was of a dual character, one celestial and one earthly, can be seen in his commentary on Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians. Hong asserts that the otherworldly Heaven is the sole domain of God the Father, but the Taipings’ Heavenly Kingdom was to be the “Little Heaven” established on Earth. Hong goes on to claim that as Christ vows to rebuild the temple in three days, so too is the Taiping establishment of the Heavenly Capital (Tian Jing) a fulfillment of this vow [11]. Hong also interpreted many biblical parables in a militant and literal manner that could be used to justify violence. It must be remembered that Hong’s original vision contained the exhortation to slay the demons infesting the Earth, and it is in this light that the New Testament as well as the Old are interpreted. For example, in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Hong states that he has made real the biblical principles contained in the parable of the farmer ordering the weeds to be separated from the wheat and burned. In the same gospel, he takes note of Christ’s statement, “Do not think that I came to bring peace. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Hong annotates in a fashion congruent with the above analysis when he writes “Now the Father and Son have descended to rid the world

of demons and restore righteousness." Here Hong views the Taiping violence as a literal embodiment of Christ's vow to mankind. As was stated in the previous section, the Taipings heavily associated key figures in their own leadership with the descent of divine authority to the mortal plane. In these commentaries, Hong presents his mission as the purging of China from what he regarded as the demonic scourge of Qing rule [11].

The Taipings under Hong Xiuquan held that their new faith was not truly new, but rather was a return to the worship of the deity "Shang Di" of China's classical past. To the Taipings, "Shang Di", the chief deity of China during the Zhou Dynasty, was in fact none other than the monotheistic God of the Christian faith. In the Kingdom's decrees prohibiting certain behaviors, Hong thoroughly quotes *Mencius, The Books of History and Poetry*, as well as the *Yi Jing* in order to show Shang Di's place of prominence in Chinese antiquity. Hong goes on to state that from the beginning of the Qin and Han dynasties, China continuously walked astray upon a "demonic path" [11].

Hong Xiuquan further charged the imperial office with arrogating the divine mantle, as the second character of emperor in Chinese "Huang Di" was held to be a usurpation of the second syllable of "Shang Di". In a proclamation issued after the capture of Nanjing, the Taiping state declared that "all who claim the title of emperor (Huang Di) will, in accordance with the Law of Heaven, be subjected to public beheading" [11].

5. Summary

The Taiping movement brought together diverse religious and political elements into a distinctive theological structure. Hong Xiuquan's earliest exposure to Christianity, while not containing explicit doctrinal deviations, nonetheless likely conditioned his eventual application of his new faith to contemporary Chinese social reality. While Hong and the Taipings derided the classical Chinese systems of thought which justified the rule of the Manchu and had humiliated China, the rebels nonetheless retained the framework of the system that had produced them. Rather than dismissing the Taipings as simply heterodox or mistaken, Taiping theology should be understood as a historically situated attempt to translate Christian ideas into the moral and political language available in nineteenth-century China.

The future of discussions regarding religious indigenization is one full of opportunity for further exploration. The Taiping rebellion represents a particular and poignant example of theological localization in which Christian terms, concepts, and practices were articulated in language intimately shaped by native Chinese understandings. In

the future, scholars should delve deeper into the Taiping example as well as continue to parse other examples of religious indigenization within Chinese history. It would be of particular interest to further explore the connection of Taiping theology to past millenarian religious movements in China and the extent to which such movements potentially served as a cultural modality for the Heavenly King's role as slayer-of-demons. Furthermore, there would be much to be gained from investigating why, for instance, Chinese Islam did not produce similar apocalyptic frameworks, even when rebellions were conducted on the basis of Islamic identity as in the case of the Panthay Rebellion.

While this paper has primarily dealt with specific aspects of Taiping theology, it would behoove future scholars to continue to investigate other aspects of the rebellion. Of prime importance would be whether or not the rebels' political structures were merely a recreation of the feudal order in the manner of past peasant rebellions, or whether the egalitarian elements of Taiping ideology could be conceptualized as presaging future secular, bourgeois revolutionary movements.

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