BUILDING THE HEAVENLY STATE:
THE TAIPING CONSTRUCTION OF MORAL, SOCIAL, AND
POLITICAL ORDER

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the ways in which the Taiping movement of mid-19th century China created systems of moral, political and social order as components of a state that could rival the Qing dynasty. It argues that the Taiping sought simultaneously to create a legitimate Chinese dynasty and to usher in a utopian order. Although the Taiping claimed their leader Hong Xiuquan as the younger brother of Christ, the thesis argues that classical Chinese thought and Qing practices of rulership and social organization played a far greater role than Christianity in the Taiping state. The paper’s argument is supported by examining the Taiping both chronologically and thematically, focusing on the moral publications of the Taiping, their systems of military and civilian organization, the Taiping imperial court, and the Taiping’s interactions with Westerners, consistently comparing these documents and practices with precedents in orthodox Chinese state and society.
I. Introduction

The Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) was one of the most violent and destructive conflagrations of modern history, perhaps surpassed only by the Second World War in sheer number of lives lost. By the time the Taiping were finally defeated, somewhere between ten and forty million lay dead, the Chinese countryside was ravaged, and the strength and legitimacy of the ruling Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) was fundamentally shaken. While it is commonly given the title of rebellion, civil war is a far more accurate description of the scale of violence, respective capabilities, and goals of the opposing forces. For more than a decade, a state opposed to the ruling dynasty existed in China, with its capital and territories in the most cultured, economically rich and densely populated area of the nation.

However, it has been the ideas and ideology of the Taiping movement, rather than the level of destruction it unleashed, that has attracted the most scholarly attention. Because Taiping policies and declarations advocating land reform, commonly held property, and gender and class equality continued to have salience for subsequent generations of revolutionaries and their critics, the historiography of the Taiping Rebellion has been highly politicized. Particularly during the Cold War and Cultural Revolution eras, the Taiping have been either used as straw men to attack Communism, or depicted as heroic but misguided predecessors to the People’s Republic. This politicized historiography is evident even in the finest scholarship about the Taiping. While Franz Michael’s three-volume work on the Taiping is a masterful collection of primary documents and an excellent general history, Michael’s fervent anticommunism pervades the work, causing him to castigate the Taiping as a proto-totalitarian regime, and to deem the only Taiping leader he sympathizes with, Hong Rengan, as a sort of capitalist democratic
reformer. Conversely, the official history of the Taiping commissioned by the People’s Republic of China, also written during the Cultural Revolution, sees the Taiping as a heroic peasant revolution that failed only because it lacked the guidance of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Other twentieth-century histories of the Taiping, such as Jen Yu-Wen’s Taiping Revolutionary Movement, while not overtly sympathetic to the Chinese Communist Party, celebrate the Taiping as a proto-nationalist revolution. Whether they damn or praise the Taiping, what all of these accounts have in common is that they consider them to be a revolutionary break with the precedents of Chinese tradition.

The English-language scholarship on the Taiping in the last three decades has been scant, the most notable works being Jonathan Spence’s God’s Chinese Son and Rudolf Wagner’s Reenacting the Heavenly Vision. Spence focuses on the person and psychology of Hong Xiuquan and presents his general history in a narrative form, his outstanding scholarship providing a base for my more specific study. Wagner’s work provides an insightful look at the

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3 Jen Yu-Wen, The Taiping Revolutionary Movement (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). Jen’s first-hand experience as a Guangdong native who lived through the 1911 revolution and May Fourth Movement provides a different context to his study from that of other Cold War contemporaries.


Taiping origins, though he focuses on religious ideology rather than on social and political organization.\textsuperscript{5}

In this study, I will seek to place the Taiping not in the context of a radical historical rupture, but will consider it as a movement seeking to create a legitimate Chinese dynasty, with all of the associated organizational, moral, and physical trappings. The Taiping’s fundamental challenge to the Qing was Hong Xiuquan’s usurpation of the Qing emperor’s position as Son of Heaven. Although the unique situation of South China in the early to mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century provided Hong with the Christianity in which to contextualize his visions of divinity, I argue that classical Chinese thought and Qing practices of rulership and social organization played a far greater role than Christianity in the Taiping. While earlier studies have looked at the Taiping as a revolutionary movement, I will examine it as an emergent state, albeit one with the utopian goal of bringing “great peace”. However, even the utopian aspect of the Taiping has precedent in classical Chinese ideals and texts, and the aspirations to divinity and universal sovereignty expressed by Hong differed little from those claimed by the Qing emperors.

This study thus examines the Taiping efforts to build a state which, despite the heterodox aspects of their ideology, was logistically functional, culturally legible, and morally legitimate. I will proceed both chronologically and thematically. I will begin with the genesis of the Taiping movement, examining both the literati background and the grandiose visions of Hong Xiuquan that predated his exposure to Christianity.

\textsuperscript{5} A third recent book on the Taiping is Thomas Reilly’s \textit{The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire} (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004). While it has some insights on the Taiping contextualization of Christian doctrine and the religious nature of Qing rulership, Reilly’s main goal is to show that the Taiping movement is evidence of the appeal and vitality of the Christian gospel to the Chinese people.
I next focus on the period of the Taiping at Yongan (1851-1852), during which Taiping institutions began taking shape, and many official documents on ideology and social organization were published. The construction and promulgation of the Taiping as a morally legitimate dynasty was done through the publication of a new calendar, the dissemination of a moral code, and the printing of tracts detailing proper social relations. I will also examine the creation of an elaborately ordered hierarchy of both military and civilian life in Yongan and during the early campaigns, focusing on the classical precedent of the Zhouli as the basis for Taiping organization.

In the remainder of the essay I will address the early Nanjing period of the Taiping (1853-1856), when the Taiping court, state, and social structure reached full fruition. The thesis will discuss Taiping ideals and practices of civilian organization and their classical and Qing precedents, such as the distribution of land and the establishment of civil service examinations. I will examine the elaborate sumptuary laws and harems of the Taiping leaders that arose in Nanjing in the context of general Chinese notions of the rulership of the Son of Heaven as well as specific Qing dynasty precedents. Finally, I will discuss the early Taiping contacts with the West, placing them firmly within the tradition of the Sinocentric diplomacy of the Qing and other earlier dynasties. Through all of these examples, the thesis will illustrate the ways in which the Taiping sought to create both a legitimate state and a utopian society.

II. Hong Xiuquan, Son of Heaven

In a study of the Taiping ideological and governmental structures, it is crucial to take into account the fact that the founding beliefs of the Taiping originate from Hong Xiuquan’s psychotic break in 1837. However, for the purpose of analyzing the influence of Confucian
ideology on the Taiping, the upbringing and early life of Hong prior to his declaration of the “Heavenly Kingdom” is as salient as his vision. Hong Xiuquan grew up in a small Guangdong village, with a population of no more than four hundred, most of whom were members of the Hong lineage. Like the rest of the village, Hong’s family were rice farmers of humble means, and Hong and his brothers assisted their father in the field. At an early age, Hong distinguished himself by his studiousness and intellectual capability. As his cousin Hong Rengan wrote, “his intelligence was beyond compare, there was no book that he did not read.” He quickly gained a mastery of the Confucian Four Books and Five Classics, as well as other works of Chinese history and literature, to the point that by the time he was sixteen years old, Hong was a teacher at his village school. Hong was the pride of his family, and it was eagerly expected that he would be the first of his family to pass the imperial civil service examination.

The size of the Qing bureaucracy had failed to keep pace with the explosive population growth of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and the provincial examination for the juren degree formed the bottleneck to advancement, with roughly one out of one hundred candidates passing. Though Hong was able to pass the county level examinations, after four attempts Hong was unable to pass the far more selective juren exam, one of the many victims of this reduced opportunity. It was at precisely the point when his aspirations of rising through the

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11 William T. Rowe, *China’s Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 152.
orthodox hierarchy were frustrated that Hong’s psychotic episode occurred, with its promises of anointed grandeur. Because Hong’s break predated his reading of Liang Afa’s Good Works to Admonish the Age by several years, the vision and the early writings of Hong should be viewed as independent of any Christian influence on his ideology. Instead, I interpret Hong’s psychotic episode as one in which he saw himself vaulted through divine intercession to the pinnacle of Confucian cosmological hierarchy, a position that would influence the ideology of the Taiping when it evolved from a conception in the fevered mind of Hong Xiuquan into a state aiming to replace the Qing.

In the Confucian conceptualization of social order embraced by the Qing, at the pinnacle of the social pyramid sat the Emperor, the Son of Heaven. The Qing emperors were more than temporal leaders; they were viewed as the intercessor between the divine and the mundane world of state and society. Naquin and Rawski write, “[The Qing state] was not a secular institution: its legitimacy depended upon assumptions about the ties between the Son of Heaven and the cosmos, and his crucial role in creating harmony between human society and the natural and spiritual world.”12 It was this world-binding role to which Hong saw himself elevated in his first psychotic break and “ascent to Heaven.”

The descriptions of Hong’s period of illness by Hamberg, Hong Rengan, and Hong Xiuquan’s brothers provide a glimpse of the future Taiping Heavenly King’s formation of an ideology with himself supplanting the Qing Emperor as Son of Heaven. As Hong’s brothers wrote, during one of Hong’s more lucid moments in his psychotic episode, he stated to them that

“the people of ten thousand cities have been given to my rule, that all the money and grain of the world have been given for my use, and that I was the true ordained son of the Heavenly Father, God.”\textsuperscript{13} While this account is admittedly from late in the Taiping reign, it is corroborated by Hamberg’s account from nearly a decade earlier, in which he states that Hong “often said that he was duly appointed Emperor of China, and was highly gratified when anyone called him by that name.”\textsuperscript{14} In addition to calling himself Emperor of China, following his 1837 vision, Hong gave himself the name \textit{Quan}, meaning completeness, and in a further sign of his ambitions of cosmic centrality, he began using the titles “Heavenly King, Lord of the Kingly Way, Quan”, and “Son of Heaven in the Period of Great Peace.”\textsuperscript{15}

Hong’s conception of himself not only as a monarch, but as one taking the place of the Qing emperor as arbiter of harmony between earth, humanity, and the cosmos, is evident in his early poetic writings. If Hong Rengan is to be believed, these poems were written in 1837 and predate Hong Xiuquan’s awareness of Christianity.\textsuperscript{16} Although Hong’s vision was later placed into a Christian context through what Rudolf Wagner refers to as the process of establishing the “authenticity of the vision” through external proof, they should be examined independent of their later recontextualization.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{13} Michael, The Taiping Rebellion, 9.

\textsuperscript{14} Hamberg, The Visions of Hung-siu-tshuen, 11.

\textsuperscript{15} Spence, God’s Chinese Son, 49-50.

\textsuperscript{16} I am inclined to believe in the veracity of Hong Rengan’s account, because as the foremost promoter of Taiping Christianity to Western emissaries, and the most “Westernized” of the Taiping, he had nothing to gain from forging a poem of Hong Xiuquan’s that has much in the way of declarations of divinity and kingship, and not a mention of God or Christ.

\textsuperscript{17} Wagner, Reenacting the Heavenly Vision, 24.
These writings situate Hong’s megalomania not in the context of a unique relationship with Christ or God the Father, but as consonant with his status as the new recipient of the Mandate of Heaven. The motifs of the compass directions are invoked repeatedly to communicate the universal nature of Hong’s position. In a poem written on the wall of the temple in his hometown, Hong proclaimed that “My eyes survey from the North to the South beyond the rivers and mountains; my voice is heard from the East to the West to the tracts of the sun and the moon.”18 Hong’s vision of ecumenical rule through the descriptive motif of the compass directions is also evident in another poem written soon after his first “ascent to heaven.” In it, he writes, “The East, West, South, North venerate the Sovereign supreme; Sun, Moon, stars and constellations join the song of triumph… With great peace and unity, what happiness there shall be.”19 In this poem, Hong not only restates the traditional Chinese synecdoche of the four directions to refer to the entire earthly realm, but widens the scope of authority to the cosmos as well. With the final line, Hong gives himself a mission befitting his grand jurisdiction, and it is this ideal of “great peace and unity” under the divinely authorized rulership of Hong that formed the guiding principle of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Though the ideals of universal rulership, unique relationship to the divine, and the effort to create a harmonious society were later placed in a quasi-Christian context, in their original conception and in much of their practice, they drew from the Confucian ideology of the Qing state that Hong sought to supplant.

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18 Hamberg, The Visions of Hung-siu-tshuen, 12.
19 Michael, Taiping Rebellion, 20.
In the years following the psychotic vision of Hong Xiuquan and its subsequent Christian contextualization, Hong began gathering around him a “God Worshipping Society” in the rural and rugged region of Thistle Mountain in Guangxi. By the late 1840s, they numbered in the thousands, and began to attract the attention of local authorities. Tensions mounted as Hong’s God Worshippers became increasingly armed, organized, and in opposition to Qing and local gentry authorities. In late December 1850 and January 1851, the God Worshippers routed Qing forces in the town of Jintian, and Hong’s movement shifted from tacit opposition to armed conflict with the state. It was at this point that Hong Xiuquan formally proclaimed the foundation of his dynasty, Taiping Tianguo, the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. Following this dynastic declaration, the God Worshippers, henceforth known as the Taiping, encircled by enemy forces, fled their base area and began the long and violent trek north.

In October of 1851, for the first time the Taiping took control of a city, Yongan. With the capture of a city, the Taiping leadership was given the opportunity to apply in fact what Hong had seen in vision, a world order based around his Heavenly Mandate that would bring about an era of great peace and unity. Though the structures and organization of the Taiping reached their full development at the Heavenly Capital of Nanjing, the hierarchical and classically based moral ideals and social and military practices were expressed in the early campaigns and the administration of Yongan.

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20 Unless noted otherwise, the accounts of the events of the Taiping Rebellion are drawn from Michael, The Taiping Rebellion, Spence, God’s Chinese Son, and Jen, The Taiping Revolutionary Movement.

21 Spence, God’s Chinese Son, 133-134.
III. The Construction of Taiping Moral Authority

The Taiping Calendar

While the building of political and military structures was crucial to the early Taiping, the construction of moral authority was a necessary component to the formation of a dynasty aiming to supplant the Qing. Immediately upon taking power in Yongan, the Taiping were faced with the task of reinforcing Hong’s legitimacy as the divinely ordained ruler and arbiter of cosmological order, as well as creating a definite temporal break with the now delegitimized ancien régime. This task was not unique to the Taiping, however, as previous Chinese dynasties had wrestled with the issues of legitimacy involved in assuming the Mandate of Heaven. One way in which ascendant dynasties could proclaim their cosmic jurisdiction and inaugurate a new era was through the promulgation of a calendar. While the only extant Taiping calendar dates from 1853, in the Nanjing period of the Taiping, it marks the third year of the Heavenly Dynasty. The Taiping counting of time thus begins in 1851, during the early campaigns, and scholarly consensus holds that it was in Yongan that the calendar was first published. The setting of the calendar was the prerogative of the Emperor alone, illustrating, as Rawski terms it, “his power to fix space and time.” Thus Hong, as the “Son of Heaven,” used the creation of a

22 Michael, Taiping Rebellion, 322.
23 Spence, God’s Chinese Son, 142.
new calendar as a gesture that would cement the ideological structures of his rule and his connection with the divine through the measurement of time.

Not only did the calendar bolster Hong's cosmological justifications for rule, but it illustrated the millenarian goals of the Taiping. The new calendar did more than mark time; it promoted the Taiping as a dynasty that would usher in a golden age. As Hong Rengan wrote of the calendar, “Now our heavenly dynasty has a new heaven and a new earth, with new suns (days) and new moons (months)… …From now on farming will be timely and the four seasons will be correct, and the movements of the heavenly course will continue endlessly and eternally.”\(^{25}\) The calendar as a marker of a new dynastic era was viewed as equally important with the physical trappings of power in establishing the legitimate divinely inspired rule of the Taiping. In a preface to an edition of the Taiping calendar, Hong Xiuquan stated that “through the grace of Father and Eldest Brother they came down to earth and brought me along to be the lord, establishing the heavenly kingdom, heavenly capital, the heavenly hall, and heavenly calendar, to be carried on forever and ever.”\(^{26}\)

Much previous scholarship has emphasized the ways in which the Taiping calendar diverged from the Qing and other Chinese dynastic predecessors, and indeed, there were real differences between the calendrical systems. The Taiping used a solar calendar rather than the traditional Chinese lunar-based calendar. More significantly, in light of their heretical religious beliefs, the Taiping declined to mark specific days as more auspicious than others, and


\(^{26}\) Shih, *The Taiping Ideology*, 88.
designated a Sabbath day. However, there were many similarities in the way in which the Taiping and Qing calendars were organized, particularly regarding solar and lunar terminology to reckon the passage of time and seasons. The Taiping used the same numerological system of cycles, lunar mansions, and solar terms as the Qing, the only changes being the replacement of characters made taboo by the Taiping with acceptable homonyms.

Indeed, while the Taiping radically proclaimed that “all the corrupt doctrines and perverted views of preceding almanacs are the result of the demon’s cunning devices to deceive and delude mankind,” they reproduced much of the structure of the traditional calendar intact. As with many other aspects of Taiping ideology and practice, where they differed from the Qing, they looked to classical texts and the mythical past for inspiration and justification. In the case of the calendar, the notion of a 366-day year was taken from the “Canon of Yao” in the Book of History, one of the Five Confucian Classics. The changes to the calendar can thus be seen as part of the Taiping efforts to present themselves as the correctors of the errors of the Qing, and as both a new beginning and a return to an idyllic past in a traditional Chinese context.

“*The Heavenly Commandments*” and their Confucian Counterparts

While the creation and publication of a calendar helped to promote Hong Xiuquan as the Son of Heaven, other measures were also necessary to illustrate his position as a divinely inspired ruler of a morally legitimate dynasty. One way in which Chinese emperors had historically displayed their ethical credentials as rulers and reinforced their hegemony over social

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norms was through the promulgation of moral instructions. These instructions, in the forms of edicts and maxims, would be published throughout the empire and read aloud at ritual events. The publication of such moral edicts dates at least to the first Ming emperor, Ming Taizu (r. 1368-1398) and his Six Maxims, and may date as far back as the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The Six Maxims were a succinct summation of the rules governing an ideal Confucian society; they exhorted the populace to “be filial to parents, respectful to elders, and amiable to neighbors, to instruct their children, remain in their place, and to do no evil.” The dedication of the Qing to the maintenance and reproduction of Confucian ideology was evident in the Shunzhi emperor’s (r. 1644-1661) decree that Ming Taizu’s Maxims be carved on stone and posted in each prefecture.  

This model was followed by the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661-1722), who in his consolidation of Qing rule, published the Sixteen Maxims of the Sacred Edict, first issued in 1670, later expanded upon by his son and successor Yongzheng (r. 1722-1735). These sets of maxims served to project the authority of the Chinese state down to the local level and to aid a pre-modern bureaucracy in the governing of a vast and populous realm by promoting morals that would encourage social stability. In an empire whose population numbered over 400 million and was without the technologies of transportation and communication at the disposal of modern states, it was necessary to formulate such devices of social control.

Hong Xiuquan, as an aspiring Confucian scholar, would have been familiar with Kangxi’s maxims. He would have read them in the course of his studies, and after passing the

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county-level civil service examination, Hong would have participated in the ritual recitation of the edict by the Hua county magistrate. While the vast majority of the Taiping, including leaders such as Yang Xiuqing and Xiao Chaogui, were less educated and even illiterate, they would likely be aware of the Sacred Edict as well. In the years when they were growing up, not only were the edicts posted in the local vernacular, they were recited in front of the village temple twice a month, and travelling performers would reenact stories illustrating the moral precepts of the Sixteen Maxims as a form of popular entertainment. The Taiping were thus aware of the usage of moral guidelines as a means to promote themselves as virtuous rulers and shape social norms.

In their promulgation of moralizing decrees, the Taiping not only followed the Qing form of dissemination of ethics, but echoed many of the same Confucian values as the dynasty they denigrated as “imps” and “demons.” The Taiping issued several documents during their occupation of Yongan on the proper moral behavior of their subjects, intended, just as the calendar was, to impress upon their subjects that a new era of moral righteousness had begun. One such document, The Heavenly Commandments, though based upon the Christian Ten Commandments that Hong was exposed to in the 1840s, fulfilled much of the purpose of propagating a divinely ordained moral and social code just as the Sixteen Edicts did. While a form of this edict may have been written in the “underground” period of the Taiping in the late


32 Spence, God’s Chinese Son, 28.

33 Spence, God’s Chinese Son, 70, 108.

1840s, it was first published in Yongan in 1852 as the “The Book of Heavenly Commandments.”\textsuperscript{35} These Heavenly Commandments are instantly recognizable to the Western reader as the Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments.\textsuperscript{36} Nevertheless, in his study of Taiping propaganda, Wagner explicitly cites the Heavenly Commandments as a replacement for and corrective of the Sacred Edicts.\textsuperscript{37}

The methods the Taiping used to promulgate the Heavenly Commandments were modeled after those used by the Qing state to disseminate the Sacred Edict. The “Book of Heavenly Commandments” was widely distributed among the populace under the Taiping. Chang Te-Chien, a contemporary pro-Qing scholar, wrote that once the Taiping acquired printing facilities, “each household would have one copy, but eventually each person had one.”\textsuperscript{38} The importance placed upon the Book of Heavenly Commandments was such that converts to their cause were forced to learn the text by heart within twenty-one days of joining or risk being beheaded. The threat of decapitation, however, could be lessened by the frequency that the Heavenly Commandments were recited in Taiping cities. In a direct echo and intensification of the practice of public indoctrination used by the Qing state with the Sacred Edict, the Taiping

\textsuperscript{35} Michael, Taiping Rebellion, 111.

\textsuperscript{36} The Taiping Heavenly Commandments are, as reprinted in Michael (119-123): 1) Thou shalt honor and worship the Great God. 2) Thou shalt not worship false gods. 3) Thou shalt not take the name of the Great God in vain. 4) On the seventh day, the day of worship, thou shalt praise the Great God for his grace and virtue. 5) Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother. 6) Thou shalt not kill or injure. 7) Thou shalt not commit adultery or be licentious. 8) Thou shalt not steal or plunder. 9) Thou shalt not utter falsehoods. 10) Thou shalt not conceive a covetous desire.


\textsuperscript{38} Wagner, “Operating in the Public Sphere,” 125.
required that all subjects attend a preaching of the precepts twice daily.39 Through all of these methods and enforcements, the Taiping ensured that their heretical beliefs were transmitted in an orthodox fashion.

While the focus of the Heavenly Commandments on religious matters seems to stand in contrast to the more worldly maxims of the Sacred Edict, both texts are concerned with positioning themselves as a divine authority from which to deliver their moral decrees. The Taiping Heavenly Commandments first work to establish the legitimacy of their moral source, the Great God, done through the first four commandments' emphasis on the God’s singular power and his need to be honored. This program of religious legitimization is most explicit in the First Heavenly Commandment, which states that "The Great God is the Universal Father of all nations of the world. All men are given birth and nourished by him, all men are protected by him."40 The assertion of divine legitimacy in the Sacred Edicts is less obvious, perhaps because the Qing rulers sought to reinforce the existing orthodox Confucian system rather than present an alternative moral basis for rule. However, in Yongzheng’s introduction, his praise for his father Kangxi presents him as a similarly divine and universal patriarch. "His virtue was as extensive as the ocean; and his grace widely diffused to the boundaries of heaven. His benevolence nourished the myriads of things, and his righteousness rectified the myriads of the people."41 The emphasis on nourishment of the world in both texts is notable, establishing God and the Emperor, respectively, as benevolent and omnipotent.

39 Wagner, "Operating in the Public Sphere," 128.

40 Michael, Taiping Rebellion, 119.

41 William Milne, The Sacred Edict of the Emperor Kang-he, amplified by his son, the Emperor Yoong-Ching (London: Black, Kingsbury, Parbury, and Allen, 1817), xx.
The later Commandments, though admittedly Christian in their origin, reflect virtues similar to those expounded by Kangxi, and reference China’s mythical past for further justification. The latter six Commandments, with their concern on the proper relations between human beings, serve a purpose similar to the explicitly socially centered virtues of the Sacred Edict. The Fifth Heavenly Commandment to honor thy father and mother echoes the first maxim of Kangxi on filial piety, and uses legendary Chinese figures to illustrate it. The classical Chinese past of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors served as a moral exemplar to Hong Xiuquan and the Yongzheng emperor alike. In their respective emphasis on filial piety as the basis of all order, the Taiping write that “It is recorded that Yu-yu (the legendary Shun Emperor) honored his parents to the end of his days,”\textsuperscript{42} while Yongzheng exclaims that “even the doctrines of Yao and Shun did not extend beyond filial and fraternal duty!”\textsuperscript{43}

Much as the Sacred Edict’s instructions are intended to promote moral correctness, the remaining five Commandments are strictures that will shape a harmonious and ethical society. While the Sixteen Maxims tend more towards positive exhortations of civic and familial virtue and the Heavenly Commandments to negative moral prohibitions, their goals are similar, and specific parallels can be found. The 12\textsuperscript{th} Maxim of Kangxi, warning against false accusation, has its counterpart in the ninth Heavenly Commandment against “speaking wildly, falsely, or treacherously.”\textsuperscript{44} While this edict’s command is a more specific civic and legal application of the broader moral of the ninth commandment, a more general exhortation against lying is issued as part of the 11\textsuperscript{th} Maxim’s order to “Instruct the youth in order to prevent them from doing

\textsuperscript{42} Michael, Taiping Rebellion, 121.

\textsuperscript{43} Milne, The Sacred Edict, 33.
Within this Maxim’s moral instructions to the youth are contained parallels to other of the Heavenly Commandments as well. “Lascivious practices,” analogous to the Taiping commandment against licentiousness, and theft, explicitly prohibited in the Eighth Heavenly Commandment, are both warned against in the 11th Maxim, though as examples of the results of failed parenting rather than general moral prohibitions. The “Heavenly Commandments” thus worked to present the Taiping state as the final authority on moral values, much as earlier decrees had done for previous Chinese dynasties.

The Ode to Youth and Filiality

The attention to moral education of the youth as seen in the Sacred Edict was made manifest in the promulgation in orthodox Confucian pedagogy of moralistic texts specifically for young students. One text that the Taiping explicitly drew upon in the promotion of their rule and ideology was the Classic of Filial Piety (Xiao Jing). The text, one of the original Thirteen Classics of the Confucian canon, is believed to be the account of a dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Zengzi in the fifth century B.C.E., and the currently extant version dates to the reign of the Tang Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-756 C.E.). The text describes the relations of filial duty that organize the ideal society, extending from the Son of Heaven to individual families. During the Qing dynasty, the Xiao Jing was actively promoted by the state as a basis of

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44 Michael, Taiping Rebellion, 122.
45 Milne, The Sacred Edict, 220.
education, and Hong Xiuquan would certainly have read it in his training for the civil service exam, as would other literate Taiping leaders.48

In the organization of their nascent state at Yongan, the Taiping released a publication entitled "Ode for Youth" that was intended to replace the Xiao Jing as a primer for students, replicating much of its ideology of filial piety, though recontextualized with God and Hong Xiuquan at the center.49 While the Ten Heavenly Commandments, written before the Taiping laid claim to earthly power, focus more on the morality of the individual, the "Ode to Youth", first published in 1851, explicitly works to justify Hong’s rule as the capstone of a hierarchical system of public morality based on filial piety. In its explication of the proper hierarchy of society, the "Ode to Youth" echoes the Confucian notion of the Rectification of Names. This concept, originating from the Analects, states that within each name or title is an implicit social role, and that each father, son, or ruler must fulfill their essential responsibilities and duties in order to bear their names.50 The "Ode to Youth," influenced by these Confucian ideals, uses the framework of the Classic on Filial Piety and the concept of Rectification of Names to present the ideal social relations in the coming Heavenly Kingdom.

However, the Taiping document shifts the locus of virtue significantly. Whereas the Xiao Jing begins with the duty of the Ruler, the "Ode to Youth," in its desire to assert a new basis for Hong Xiuquan’s divine mandate, first proclaims the glory of God. After a verse on filial piety, Hong’s exalted position and role as cosmic arbiter is reinforced through reverence not only of

48 Wagner, "Operating in the Public Sphere,", 130.

49 Wagner, "Operating in the Public Sphere,", 131.

person, but for his surroundings, stating that "The Heavenly Court is an awe-inspiring spot, let those near it dread the Heavenly majesty. Life and Death emanate from Heaven's son."\textsuperscript{51} The essential world-binding role of sovereign described in the Xiao Jing is echoed in the "Ode to Youth." Where the Confucian verse states that "the lessons of [the Son of Heaven's] virtue affect all the people, and he becomes a pattern to all within the four seas,"\textsuperscript{52} its Taiping counterpart proclaims that "When one man heads an upright government, all nations become settled and tranquilized."\textsuperscript{53}

The "Ode to Youth" describes a flow of virtue emanating from the Son of Heaven down through the ministers of government to individual households, each one depending upon the example of their betters. This devising of a chain of proper roles reflects the Rectification of Names, and is evident in the Xiao Jing as well as the "Ode to Youth" that was intended to replace it. Just as the Classic of Filial Piety exhorts ministers and officers to base their words, robes and conduct upon their ruler's example,\textsuperscript{54} its Taiping successor states, "When the ruler is upright, ministers are upright."\textsuperscript{55} Both texts present Heaven as the ultimate source of social morality. While the Xiao Jing advises the common people to follow the course of Heaven, the

\textsuperscript{51} Michael, Taiping Rebellion, 164.

\textsuperscript{52} Charles Francis Horne, The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East (New York, Parke, Austin and Libscomb, 1917), 394.

\textsuperscript{53} Michael, Taiping Rebellion, 164.

\textsuperscript{54} Horne, The Sacred Books, 396.

\textsuperscript{55} Horne, The Sacred Books, 396.
“Ode to Youth” exhorts families to unite in joy and harmony, and thus receive blessings from Heaven.  

The remainder of the “Ode to Youth” concerns itself with the proper and hierarchical relations within the family, going into far greater detail than the Xiao Jing and seemingly every bit as Confucian as the canonical Classic. The ways of correct conduct for fathers, mothers, sons, daughters-in-law, elder and younger brothers, elder and younger sisters, husbands, and wives are all given in the Ode. Just as the Xiao Jing claims that “in the reverential awe shown for one’s father, there is nothing greater than making him the correlate of Heaven,” so the Taiping make the patriarchal family the basic unit in the divine order of being. The verses repeatedly stress the supremacy of elder over younger and male over female in the ordained roles of family, duty and honor. As the Classic on Filial Piety makes as its moral basis the principle of reverence from younger to elder brother, son to father, and subject to ruler, so too does the “Ode to Youth” organize human society. The role of the state in promulgating such decrees as the “Ode to Youth” is evident in the Xiao Jing as well, when it states that “his [The Sovereign’s] teaching of filial piety is a tribute to all the fathers under Heaven.” It was thus part of Hong’s duty as Son of Heaven and head of state to promote texts such as the Heavenly Commandments and the “Ode to Youth,” not only to disseminate normative moral codes, but to authenticate his own claim to the Heavenly Mandate.

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57 Horne, Sacred Books, 399.
58 Horne, Sacred Books, 403.
IV. The Language and Practice of Rank

The emerging social and moral system of the Heavenly Kingdom, promulgated by the Taiping in texts such as the Heavenly Commandments and the "Ode to Youth," was enacted in the language of rank and the organization of military formations. These practices, borrowing heavily from Qing and classical Chinese sources such as the *Rites of Zhou*, were part of the overall Taiping ideological project of creating a utopian world order centered on the divinely mandated authority of Hong Xiuquan. As a part of crafting a state that was both logistically functional and culturally legible, the Taiping in Yongan created an elaborate system of ranks and titles. These ranks and titles served the same purpose as the publication of the "Ode to Youth" in that they cemented the social hierarchy within the Taiping. In addition to the delineation of proper roles, the Taiping ranking system served to illustrate the universal ambitions of Hong, instill loyalty in subordinates, and visually, linguistically, and ceremonially present the Taiping as legitimate claimants of the Mandate of Heaven.

The Taiping usage of rank and title to communicate their goal of establishing a dynasty was first evident in the granting of the compass directional titles to the top leadership of the movement. In a declaration dated December 17, 1851, Hong Xiuquan granted the titles of king (*wang*) to his five top lieutenants, each with a corresponding compass direction, save for Shi Dakai, who was named Assistant King.59 This linking of the Taiping leadership to the cardinal directions hearkened back to Hong Xiuquan’s early writings in which he used the same motif to declare his universal rulership. The ideal of worldwide dominion is made explicit in the

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59 Yang Xiuqing was named East King, Xiao Chaogui named West King, Wei Changhui named North King and Feng Yunshan named South King, Michael, 108.
declaration in which Hong states that Yang shall “be in charge of the nations to the east,” Xiao shall “be in charge of the nations to the west,” etc.⁶⁰ Both these titles and Hong’s earlier poem reflect the influence of what Feng Youlan terms the “Yin-Yang school” of traditional Chinese thought in which the four cardinal directions are linked with the elements and seasons in a spatio-temporal system encompassing the entire cosmos.⁶¹ The naming of the Taiping Kings thus stood as evidence of the desire to claim the traditional role of the Chinese sovereign as both world hegemon and arbiter between the natural and social worlds.

The influence of traditional Chinese and Qing precedents on the Taiping system of rank and honor extended down from the Kings through their entire military organization. In particular, the Taiping drew upon the Rites of Zhou (Zhouli), a text that allegedly dates to the Western Zhou period (1046-771 B.C.E.), but more likely was written during the late Warring States era (480-221 B.C.E) or Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.E.).⁶² The Rites of Zhou purports to describe the government of the legendary Duke of Zhou, and in its six sections, each describing a ministry, sets the guidelines for proper governance of human affairs. The Zhouli had been used as a blueprint by both Emperors of reigning dynasties and rebel leaders who sought a classical precedent for either reform or overthrow of the status quo. Because of its contested political usage, the Zhouli has been a highly controversial text, but nevertheless was included in the canonical Nine Confucian Classics.⁶³

⁶⁰ Michael, Taiping Rebellion, 108.
⁶¹ Feng and Bodde, A Short History of Chinese Philosophy, 134.
⁶³ Elman and Kern, Statecraft and Classical Learning, 5.
In its passage on the functions of the state, the Zhouli addresses many of the issues, both practical and ideological, that the Taiping faced in creating a new state. The Zhouli, as paraphrased by Shih, states, “The king established the state, distinguished directions, rectified positions, regulated the affairs of the state, surveyed the land in the countryside, and instituted offices each with its specific function, for the purpose of setting up a standard for the people.”64 The Taiping leadership thus turned to the Zhouli as an example to follow in their goal of returning China to the ideal state of Taiping, “Great Peace.” The Taiping’s own usage of the Zhouli was first evident in the organization of their military force in their earliest days prior to the Jintian Uprising and was codified at Yongan. It was Feng Yunshan, learned in the classics as a failed scholar, who modeled the Taiping army’s structure so closely after that described in the Zhouli.65 The Zhouli served the Taiping twofold. Not only did it provide ideological legitimation to the nascent Heavenly Kingdom, but it gave a model of regimented discipline to a military force operating in hostile territory.

There are several reasons to believe that the strong resemblances between the Taiping and Zhouli systems are more than coincidence. First, though the Zhouli was not as prominent in Qing official learning as the Analects, Classic of Changes, and other texts, it was added to the imperial edition of the Classics by the Qianlong Emperor in 1754, and questions on the Zhouli appeared on the provincial and metropolitan civil service examinations.66 Second, while it does not come from any of the top leadership, a Taiping document exists stating that the military and

64 Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 257.
65 Spence, God’s Chinese Son, 127.
civil organization follows the ideas of the Zhouli.\textsuperscript{67} Thirdly, the similarities between the systems are so great that both contemporaneous Confucian scholars and modern historians such as Spence and Shih have concluded that the Taiping organization was based on the Zhouli.\textsuperscript{68}

The direct influence of the Rites of Zhou on Taiping military structure is clear in a comparison between the army as described in the Zhouli and the document “Arrangement of the Army of the T'hae-Ping Dynasty.” This text, published in 1852 and translated by W.H. Medhurst, describes in encyclopedic detail the organization of the Taiping military forces and their titles, ranks, and honors, following the Zhouli almost exactly.\textsuperscript{69} Both systems are based around progressively larger groups of soldiers generally organized by multiples of five. The Zhouli military system, as described by Shih, is made up of five men in a wu, 5 wu in a liang, 4 liang in a tsu, 5 tsu in a lu, 5 lu in a shih, and five shih in a chun, with each chun, generally translated as army, consisting of 12,500 soldiers.\textsuperscript{70} The Taiping conception of its army system, in comparison, consisted of a cinquevir\textsuperscript{71} commanding four men, a vexillary commanding five cinquevirs, a centurion commanding four vexillaries, a tribune commanding five centurions, a prefect commanding five tribunes, and a dux commanding five tribunes and heading an army of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{67} Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 253.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{68} Spence, God's Chinese Son, 128, and Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 254.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{69} It is unknown who exactly wrote this document, though, as I have mentioned above, Spence claims (perhaps from a Chinese source), that Feng Yunshan was responsible for creating the system of Taiping military organization.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{70} Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 260. The transliteration used is Wade-Giles, as it is what Shih uses.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{71} These terms are borrowed from Medhurst’s 1853 translation, and judging by their Latin origin, may be based upon rankings and titles in the army of the Roman Empire. In Michael’s translation, he uses terms such as corporal, lieutenant, and colonel, which though more familiar to a twenty-first century reader, are equally Western in origin. It is unknown to me whether the Taiping used the same Chinese terms as the Zhouli.
13, 125 soldiers. The only notable difference between the two military organizational schemes is that the Zhouli does not count officers in the ranks, so the chun thus contains fewer soldiers than the corresponding group, dux.

The Zhouli and other Confucian classics provided Hong Xiuquan and the other Taiping leaders not only with an organized schematic of rank, but also with the visual, linguistic, and sumptuary distinctions to solidify the hierarchy. The Zhouli describes five grades of official appointments, each with its distinctions of rank, including the giving of ceremonial robes at the second rank, and of ceremonial vessels at the fourth rank. In the Taiping military structure, each commander’s rank was distinguished by the size of the flag he carried, beginning with the vexillar’y’s two and half feet by two and a half feet flag, and increasing by increments of six inches up to the nine square foot flag of the generalissimo. While the creation of distinct visual markers for military rank certainly served pragmatic purposes, the Taiping adopted many forms of division and address entirely to serve the end of creating a properly differentiated hierarchy. In this desire to create an ordered society, they turned to classical and Qing precedent dating back to the beginning of China’s imperial history. Sima Qian, writing his Treatise on Rites during the Han Dynasty, explained the rationale for distinctions of rank.

Therefore, with respect to the order of sovereign and ministers, the order at court, the order of the honorable and the lowly, the noble and the humble, down to the position of the commoners; and the appropriate differences in carriages, dresses and robes, foods, manners of

72 W.H. Medhurst, Sr. “Arrangement of the Army of the T’hae-Ping Dynasty” in Pamphlets Issued By the Chinese Insurgents at Nan-King (Shanghai: Office of the North China Herald, 1853), 38.
73 Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 218.
74 Medhurst, “Arrangement of the Army of the Taiping Dynasty,” 38.
marriage and funeral and sacrifices—with respect to all of these, each has its proper way and each has its regulated pattern.75

This explication of social hierarchy and sumptuary law, clearly rooted in the Confucian notion of the Rectification of Names, provided a model for the Taiping. The hierarchical regulation of the court was first envisioned by the Taiping in their organization at Yongan. “The Ceremonial Regulations of the Taiping Dynasty,” published in 1852, provided a glossary of honorific titles for Hong Xiuquan, the Taiping Kings, and their families. While Sima Qian’s Shi ji and the Zhou li were written many centuries prior to the Taiping, they had an example of such hierarchically differentiating practices in the reigning Qing dynasty.

The Qing court utilized a vast and elaborate system of hierarchical names and visual signs to signify superior ranking. While the Taiping later adapted more of the Qing court ritual in their capital in Nanjing, in regards to the influence on the “Ceremonial Regulations,” the system of numerological honorifics is most relevant. The Qing practiced a system of titles based around numbered years, expressed in the term wan-sui yeh used to address the Emperor, literally, Lord for Ten Thousand Years.76 This form of honorific was used in the birthday greetings of members of the royal household as well. While the birthday of a lower ranking consort was referred to as “a thousand autumns”, that of the empress dowager and emperor were called “ten thousand years.”77

75 Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 219.


77 Rawski, The Last Emperors, 51.
Likewise, the “Ceremonial Regulations of the Taiping” describes a strictly differentiated system of numerological rank. It states that the eldest son of Hong Xiuquan will be addressed as “ten thousand years,” commonly translated as “long live the emperor,” while Hong’s younger sons will be addressed as “one thousand years.” A distinct hierarchy is evident among the Taiping kings that was not clear in their original directional titles, perhaps a sign of increasing stratification of rank in the Taiping. While Yang Xiuling was granted the honorific “king of 9,000 years,” Xiao Chaogui was “8,000 years,” Feng Yunshan was “7,000 years,” and Wei Changui and Shi Dakai were granted the titles of “6,000 years” and “5,000 years” respectively. The detailed language of rank extended vertically down to the titles of the soldierly ranks described in the “Arrangement of the Army of the Taiping,” and horizontally to the sons, daughters, fathers-in-law, and mothers-in-law of Taiping notables.

While the Kings received numeric titles, Taiping titles of the women were often color-based, and emphasized beauty and chastity. These titles included “noble beauty,” “chaste persons,” and “jade,” “gold,” and “snow,” with the explanations given of the purity of jade, the beauty of gold, and the cleanliness and loveliness of snow. These differentiations of status and rank no doubt helped to cement the hierarchical system of an emerging militarized state, as well as served to create the ideal “Great Peace” through the Rectification of Names. The “Ceremonial Regulations” also offered a foreshadowing of events in Nanjing. The mention of multiple mothers-in-law hinted at the creation of the royal harems that would rival any Qing emperor, and

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78 Medhurst, “Ceremonial Regulations of the T’hae-Ping Dynasty”, in Pamphlets Issued By the Chinese Insurgents at Nan-King (Shanghai: Office of the North China Herald, 1853), 51.

79 Medhurst, “Ceremonial Regulations of the T’hae-Ping Dynasty”, 53.

80 Medhurst, “Ceremonial Regulations of the T’hae-Ping Dynasty”, 52.
it was the differentiation of rank between the Kings that ultimately led to the violent implosion of the Taiping leadership in 1856.

V. Taiping Ideals and Practices of Civilian Organization

While the occupation of Yongan produced significant developments of Taiping ideology and organization, it lasted only a few months. The Taiping, encircled and besieged by Qing forces, abandoned the city in April 1852 and began their long march north, gathering and conscripting recruits as they campaigned.\(^1\) The poorly organized Qing banner armies were unable to stop them, and on March 29, 1853, the Taiping captured Nanjing, the wealthy former Ming capital sitting in the cultural and economic heartland of the Lower Yangzi.\(^2\) It was in Nanjing that Hong Xiuquan and the other Taiping leaders established the capital of their Heavenly Dynasty. The Taiping, with an established capital, a measure of strategic security, and a large civilian population under their control, were now faced with the task of expanding their organizational systems from governing a mobile army to ushering in the divinely ordained Great Peace, Taiping.

The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty and its Precedents

One of the first aspects of civilian life that the Taiping sought to organize was the administration and distribution of land. The document "The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty," published in 1853 at Nanjing, has been frequently cited by historians seeking to damn or praise the Taiping ideology as a predecessor to Communism. However, in elucidating their

\(^1\) Spence, God's Chinese Son, 153.

\(^2\) Spence, God's Chinese Son, 171.
vision of a properly organized civilian society, the Taiping turned to the classical ideal presented in the *Zhouli*. *The Rites of Zhou*’s treatises on land cultivation and distribution, much like the rest of its text, describe in minute detail a highly idealized and regimented system, and thus appealed to Taiping leaders looking for a classical guide from which to build their Heavenly Kingdom.

The first section of “The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty” is evidence of the desire to create such an ideal hierarchical administration centered on the divine authority of Hong Xiuquan. In it, much as in the Taiping proclamations on military structure, an elaborate system of hierarchically ranked officers of varying stations is described. This structure reflected both the regimented and militarized nature of Taiping life and a desire to return to the legendary harmony and order envisioned in the *Zhouli*. The second segment of the Taiping publication, concerning the classification of varying qualities of land, directly echoes the *Zhouli*. As they did with many other traditional precedents, the Taiping adopted and intensified the *Zhouli*’s system as they attempted to translate a legendary ideal into a political and social reality. While the *Zhouli* describes three categories of land quality, with some later commentators expanding to nine subcategories in their interpretations, “The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty” expands this to nine, with precise amounts of grain yields and equivalencies between differing grades of land specified.

The Taiping’s reasoning for this precision in agricultural assessment was that they intended to create a system in which land would be distributed equally. An egalitarian

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83 J.C. Cheng, *Chinese Sources For the Taiping Rebellion 1850-1864* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1963), 38.
distribution of land is described in the *Zhouli*, and the Taiping incorporated this ideal into their utopian vision for the Heavenly Kingdom. In a notable departure from the patriarchal norms of Chinese culture, "The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty" proclaimed that every person over the age of 16, irrespective of sex, should be granted equivalently productive land.\(^{85}\) Furthermore, the Rites of Zhou also stated that all land ultimately belonged to the king or the state, a notion germane to the Taiping, who sought to promote Hong as a divine ruler with universal jurisdiction.\(^{86}\) The Taiping adopted this idea in "The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty" and molded it to the theocratic, ecumenical, and utopian nature of the Heavenly Kingdom, stating that "In the empire, none shall have any private property, and everything belongs to God, so that God may dispose of it."\(^{87}\)

While the previously quoted excerpts seem to present a clear plan for an egalitarian society without private property, in other respects the Taiping document is vague, laying out general utopian ideals such as "If the production of food is too small in one place, then move to another where it is more abundant," and "In this way the people under Heaven shall enjoy the great happiness given by the Heavenly Father... ...There shall be no inequality, and no person shall be without food or fuel."\(^{88}\) Declarations such as these can be seen as at least as important in propagandizing the rule of Hong Xiuquan and his mission of ushering in divinely ordained harmony as in providing a program for governance.


\(^{85}\) Cheng, *Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion*, 39.


\(^{87}\) Cheng, *Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion*, 40.
"The Land System of The Heavenly Dynasty," despite its often vague utopianism, offers many specific programs, often with a classical precedent. The proclamation encourages both agriculture and sericulture in very precise terms, stating that "All women shall raise silkworms, spin cloth, and sew dresses. Every family shall have five hens and two sows, without exception." This cornucopian vision of plenty, with its exhortations to produce, has a classical precedent in Mencius, who wrote "Let mulberry trees be planted about the homesteads with their five mu, and persons of fifty years may be clothed in silk. In keeping fowls, pigs, dogs, and swine, let not their times of breeding be neglected, and persons of seventy years may eat flesh." While the works of Mencius would certainly have been read by Hong and other educated Taiping leaders, the emphasis placed on sericulture and animal-raising by the Taiping in "The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty" had a temporally closer and far more widely distributed precedent in orthodox Chinese society. In Kangxi's Sacred Edict, the fourth maxim urges the people of China to "Give the chief place to husbandry and the culture of the mulberry tree, in order to produce adequate quantities of food and raiment."

"The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty" has several other sections with specific decrees that reveal both the regimented and militarized nature of life under the Taiping and the precedents for their systems. In addition to the classical model of the Zhouli, the Taiping also had the contemporary practice of the baojia mutual security system as an example of pyramidal

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88 Cheng, Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion, 40.

89 Cheng, Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion, 40. Also note that even in this most "revolutionary" Taiping document, with its gender-blind distribution of land, traditional gendered occupational roles are reinforced.


91 Milne, The Sacred Edict, 37.

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social organization. The *baojia*, in theory, served as a system of local social order, mutual security, and civil and criminal justice that encompassed all Chinese households. The system was subdivided into *jia*, each containing 100 households, and *bao* which were comprised of ten *jia*. At both the *bao* and *jia* levels of organization, the groups were theoretically supervised by a "headman" chosen from among their number.\(^{92}\) The headman was theoretically held accountable for the actions of all within his *bao* or *jia*, enforcing a sense of communal responsibility and ideally creating a local society in which all worked to maintain social order.\(^{93}\)

While there is no explicit statement of the Taiping looking to the *baojia*, it is clear in "The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty" that they had, at least as an ideal, a large and highly gradated hierarchical state apparatus, with all final decisions made by the Heavenly King, Hong Xiuquan.\(^{94}\) The titles and ranks described in the systems of justice and promotion and demotion are the same as those used in the "Arrangement of the Army of the Taiping Dynasty," evidence of not only a highly hierarchical organization, but a militarized one based on the precepts of the *Zhouli*. The imposition of the military structure that characterized the Taiping from their early years to their nascent state in Nanjing is most evident in these final sections of "The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty." The exact same groupings of regiments based around multiples of five modeled after those of the *Zhouli* and used to organize the Taiping army at Yongan are reproduced in the "Land System." However, the base units are not individual persons, but families, each of whom must also offer one person to conscription in addition to

\(^{92}\) Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, 53.

\(^{93}\) Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 125.

\(^{94}\) Cheng, *Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion*, 41-43.
performing their familial service. This section thus illustrates both how the Taiping used classical precedents as the blueprint for their ideal state and society, and how these highly hierarchical and regimented social structures were employed in the context of a state engaged in constant warfare.

Lastly, any discussion of “The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom” must acknowledge that this proclamation, however visionary and infamous, for the most part went unimplemented. Though Hong and the other Taiping leaders may have had every intention of executing their egalitarian plan, the Taiping state existed not in Heavenly Peace, but in ceaseless war with the Qing and their allies. In such a situation, the extraction of revenue to fund military campaigns was more important than an idealized equal distribution of land. Kathryn Bernhardt’s study of taxation and tenancy in the Lower Yangzi sheds important light on the actual effects on the ground of the Taiping’s organizational plans for land and people. In regard to the Taiping structure of personnel, while the military remained organized as such, the reality of civilian life was far more haphazard than the pyramidal Zhouli system, and the distribution of land was even further from the ideal. While Bernhardt examines the Taiping during the years 1860-1864, late into the history of the movement, the “Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty” was scrapped as early as the summer of 1854, when Taiping kings Yang Xiuqing, Wei Changhui, and Shi Dakai requested and were granted permission by Hong to leave existing property arrangements in place in order to receive land taxes to maintain their campaigns.

95 Cheng, Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion, 44-45


Nevertheless, the Taiping’s promulgation, and lack of implementation, of the utopian governmental ideology of the Zhouli must be taken within the context of the goals and restraints of the movement. These proclamations existed as moral underpinnings of the new dynasty as well as organizational principles. The regimented system promulgated by the Taiping represented a vision of ideal relations between persons, the Heavenly Peace of plenty and order, once overseen by the Duke of Zhou and now to be ushered in by the new Son of Heaven, Hong Xiuquan.

The Taiping Adoption of the Civil Service Exam and Literati Propagandizing

While the regimented system described in “The Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty” would serve to organize the general populace, the Taiping also sought to bind the allegiance of the literati to their state. In Hong’s efforts to build a coherent and ordered state at Nanjing that would reflect his dynasty’s ideology, Hong looked to the very system of normative order that had cast him out: the civil service exam. From at least the time of the Ming (1368-1644), the state, the gentry elite, and official ideology had been intertwined in the practice of the civil service examinations.98 As a conquest dynasty, the Qing sought to legitimize themselves as inheritors of the Mandate of Heaven, consciously emulating their Ming predecessors in an effort to restore an idealized order. The Qing thus quickly moved to reinstate the civil service examination, with special examinations held in the reign of Kangxi for the purpose of winning the allegiance of the literati.99 The civil service examinations not only were the cornerstone of idealized Confucian

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98 Benjamin A. Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), xvii.

99 Rowe, China’s Last Empire, 28.
meritocratic government, but allowed the Qing to control elite ideology and promote themselves as the supreme arbiters of culture, values, and morality.

It was this position of moral and cultural authority, as well as the allegiance of the literate population, that Hong sought to claim. In order to create a class of Taiping literati loyal to his state, Hong and the other educated Taiping leaders recreated the form of the orthodox Qing civil service examinations with Taiping content. Whereas the Qing examination used the Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism and the Sacred Edict of Kangxi, the Taiping civil service examinations were based on the “Heavenly Commandments” and the Old and New Testaments.  

In addition to questions on Taiping religious texts in the civil service examination, the Taiping sought to enlist the aid of the literati in propagandizing their rule through essay contests. The Taiping commissioned educated men in Nanjing to write essays on three topics: praise for the establishment of the Heavenly Capital in Nanjing, denunciation of Zhili province (the province where Beijing was located) as the Demon’s Den, praise for the printing of Taiping texts at Nanjing. The essay commission took place as early as late 1853, and the completed essays were published in 1854. The essays praising the choice of Nanjing for the Heavenly Capital exalted Hong with classical allusions for choosing such an auspicious location, mentioning its firm walls, its form like a crouching tiger and a coiling dragon, and its “royal atmosphere,” perhaps a reference to its former status as the Ming capital. While the essays denouncing

100 Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 575.


Zhili Province consisted primarily of anti-Manchu condemnations, those praising the printing program stated that the “imperial proclamations have awakened the foolish and ignorant,” and that “henceforth the majesty of Heaven will be greatly enhanced and all four directions will look up to the Sovereign’s glory.”\textsuperscript{103} The essay commissions thus worked towards reinforcing the universal, divine, and legitimate rule of Hong Xiuquan among the literate by praising his wisdom and majesty, and linking him to the former glory of the Ming in contrast to the despised Qing.

The Taiping, like every other emerging Chinese dynasty, sought legitimacy through the support of the literati. Publications such as the “Heavenly Commandments” and “Ode to Youth” not only replicated the structure and modes of promulgation of the most orthodox texts, but much of their content stressed the very same morals of filial piety. The Taiping drew upon the classic \textit{Zhouli}, and sought to appropriate the venerable system of civil service examinations. Nevertheless, the Taiping were considered by the vast majority of literati as not only unorthodox, but heretical to the extreme. Though the Taiping replicated the cosmological and social system of ordered proper hierarchical relations culminating in the divine authority of the emperor, they shifted the locus of that authority from the abstract “Heaven” and its Son to Hong Xiuquan and his strange and foreign God. Indeed, despite the many Confucian aspects of the Taiping, literati-general Zeng Guofan, who led a pro-Qing army, stated that the Taiping were “what Confucius and Mencius are crying about in the netherworld.”\textsuperscript{104}

Likewise, though the Taiping drew heavily upon the ancient \textit{Zhouli} as a blueprint for their social and military organization, that text was far from a stable member of the Qing canon.

\textsuperscript{103} Michael, \textit{The Taiping Rebellion}, 302-3.

\textsuperscript{104} Jen, \textit{The Taiping Revolutionary Movement}, 231.
Not only was the text’s authenticity and meaning heavily debated at the highest levels of the literati, but it had been previously used by highly controversial and often derided leaders such as Wang Anshi (1021-1086). Literati thus saw the Taiping, who on the whole possessed far less education than the orthodox elite, as using the Zhouli as a crude and transparent cover for their heretical beliefs.\(^{105}\) Though some disaffected literati would join the Taiping, they never gave them the legitimacy they needed to claim the Mandate of Heaven.

VI. In the Court of the Heavenly King: Taiping Practices of Rulership

In their project to create a legitimate dynasty, it was not enough for the Taiping to construct an ordered social and military system. In order to stake his claim of divine rulership, Hong Xiuquan needed to behave and comport himself as the Son of Heaven. The Taiping in Nanjing greatly elaborated the system of noble rankings and royal harems that had begun at Yongan, taking many inspirations from the practices of the Qing court. Behind all of the vast palaces, extensive harems, and sumptuary laws was the goal of creating a political order which reflected Hong’s unique relationship as the intercessor between the human and heavenly realms. In these practices, the Taiping leadership sought to create visual and performative signs of the gradations of divinity extending downward from Hong through the kings.

The Qing Influence on Sumptuary Distinction in the Taiping Court

The Taiping had ample precedent in the Qing dynasty for an elaborate ritually and sartorially differentiated court. In both dynasties the sumptuary signs of authority extended outward from the body and clothing of the sovereign. Not only did the garments worn by both

\(^{105}\) Wagner, “The Zhouli as the Late Qing Path to the Future”, 372.
Qing Emperors and Hong Xiuquan illustrate their claims to universal dominion, but they used the very same imagery to signify their status. The Qianlong emperor’s robes presented a microcosm of the emperor-centered cosmology of the Qing. The hem depicted water, mountains rising from the four axes of the robe, and the Emperor’s head emerging from a dragon-filled sky.106 The headgear of Hong denoted his position of universal ruler and arbiter between Heaven and Earth even more explicitly. His crown was to have twin dragons, twin phoenixes, and the inscriptions “the unified empire” and “the heavens full of starry constellations,” proclaiming the vastness of his jurisdiction. Lest there be any confusion over the purpose of the headgear, the memorial commissioning his crown states that because the “Ten Thousand States” will come to pay homage, and in order that peace and unity prevail, “It is necessary to set up institutions and publish regulations that increase the majesty of the Heavenly Father.”107

While the visual and inscribed claims to rulership were those of the sovereign alone, the Taiping use of beasts both mythical and real to signify rank extended to high officials. In this, too, they were inspired by the elaborately delineated and symbol-filled Qing court that they intended to replace. Whereas many in the Qing court wore dragon robes, only the emperor, his sons, and highest-ranking princes could display the five-clawed dragon on their clothing, while the four-clawed dragon decorated the emperor’s brothers’ garb.108 While the dragon was limited

106 Angela Zito, Of Body and Brush: Grand Sacrifice as Text/Performance in Eighteenth-Century China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 44.

107 Michael, The Taiping Rebellion, 452. This memorial is undated, but as it was written by Yang Xiuqing, it certainly dates to no later than 1856. Also note that Yang has given himself a slightly, but distinctly, higher rank than Wei Changhui or Shi Dakai.

108 Rawski, The Last Emperors, 42.
to the court, the Qing also employed animal insignia to mark military rank, using creatures such as the mythical qilin, lions, tigers, and rhinoceroses. 109

The Taiping also created a sharply delineated system of animal symbols for rank. The same memorial commissioning Hong Xiuquan’s crown also describes the headgear of Yang Xiuqing, Wei Changhui, and Shi Dakai, each decorated with two dragons, but only one phoenix. In addition, the inscriptions on the helms of the wang (kings) subtly differentiated their ranking. 110 The Taiping also used a system of animal insignia for their military ranks, though the correspondence between creatures and rank was not exactly the same as that of the Qing. 111 The use of animal motifs as signifier of majesty and power extended to the palaces of Hong and the Taiping leaders as well. The main hall of Hong’s palace was called the Golden Dragon Hall, and the pillars of its entryway were accordingly carved with dragons. 112 Many other couplets referring to dragons were placed on the doorways of Taiping ministries, and Western visitors to Nanjing remarked disparagingly on what they saw as the gaudy and tasteless dragon decorations in the palaces of the Taiping leaders. 113

Lest one think that this discussion of dragons and other mythical beasts is overly arcane, it is important to consider the very real hold that these creatures had on the popular imagination

109 Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 220.

110 Michael, The Taiping Rebellion, 452.

111 Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 221. Shih also notes that the Taiping did not use the Qing system of animal insignia for civilian ranking, ascribing it to the militarized nature of Taiping society.

112 Michael, The Taiping Rebellion, 534.

of China. To the Taiping as well as the Qing, these animals were symbols of majesty and power that authenticated their divine rule. In a proclamation issued in 1853 or 1854, these fantastic creatures are explicitly associated with the establishment of a universal kingdom: “Now that the Tien Wang (Hong) has established the capital at Nanjing and the ten thousand countries have come to the court, it is certain that dragons, phoenixes, and qilin will respond to the occasion and arrive.” It is clear as well that this decree was not merely symbolic, but reflected an earnest belief, for it concludes with a threat to those who discover these beasts and fail to present them to the court.\textsuperscript{114}

The sumptuary laws decreed by the Taiping included regulations on color as well as animal insignia. In this too, they had ample precedent in the traditions of the Chinese imperial court, most immediately from the Qing. The color yellow symbolized imperial power, and the brightest hue of yellow was reserved for the Qing emperor, with less brilliant shades worn by his sons. Red held significance in Chinese culture as well as a symbol of luck, and had been used as the dynastic color of the Ming.\textsuperscript{115} The Taiping followed in this tradition by restricting these two colors for the use of the court alone in an 1854 proclamation issued by Yang. Whether they were consciously imitating their imperial predecessors or not, the goal of creating an ordered visual differentiation between the elite of the court and the general population was clear, stating that “the embellishments of dress, by principle, should strictly follow established rule to distinguish high rank from low.”\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{114} Michael, \textit{The Taiping Rebellion}, 475.


\textsuperscript{116} Michael, \textit{The Taiping Rebellion}, 476.
Taiping Imperial Harems

Despite the Taiping’s many proclamations decreeing the equality and separation of the sexes, Hong Xiuquan and the other leaders in Nanjing kept large harems. While this may seem an act of blatant hypocrisy to modern observers, this practice of elite polygamy must be viewed as part of the project of creating a legitimate imperial court befitting the Son of Heaven. As with many of the practices of the Taiping court at Nanjing, the influence of the Qing court was strong. The Qing emperors kept a large and highly stratified harem, with eight rankings of imperial consorts, each with a different allocation of food, clothing, jewelry, stipends, and maids. The power of the Qing emperor and court system over the individual concubine was cemented by several means, including the elimination of the dowry, the changing of names based on rank, and the limitation of contact with their natal families.

Both the practice of elite polygamy and attention to delineating the rank of royal consorts were evident in the Taiping movement as early as the occupation of Yongan. In a publication dated December 17, 1851, Hong decreed that his first wife be referred to as niang-niang, translated as empress, while the imperial concubines of the first rank be referred to as wang-niang, translated as “noble lady.” The varying titles of Taiping women given in “The Ceremonial Regulations of the Taiping Dynasty” can also be seen as influenced by the named

117 Rawski, The Last Emperors, 132.
118 Rawski, The Last Emperors, 133.
ranks of the Qing harem. Hong’s harem, already numbering thirty-six women in Yongan in one account, expanded further in the palaces of Nanjing. According to the admittedly hostile source of the contemporaneous pro-Qing scholar Chang Te-Chien, Hong had gathered nearly two hundred official concubines by 1855, while those of the other Taiping kings numbered in the thirties. However, Chang’s account of large-scale royal polygamy is corroborated by the confession of Hong’s son Tiangui Fu, who stated that not only did his father have “eighty-eight queens,” but that he himself had been given four wives by the age of nine.

While both the Taiping and Qing imperial courts kept large harems, the origins and methods of acquiring the women within them differed greatly. The concubines of the Qing court, known as xiuni, “elegant females,” were chosen from the daughters of the Eight Manchu Banners in a triennial selection held at the rear gate of the palace in Beijing. The Taiping, conversely, gathered women for the imperial harem from conquered towns and cities and shipped them to Nanjing, where they would be either selected for concubinage or sent home. This disparity reflects the very different contexts of the Qing and Taiping states. While the Qing xiuni system worked to solidify the bonds between the Manchu elite and the court, and

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120 Medhurst, “Ceremonial Regulations of the T’hae-Ping Dynasty”, 52. While the titles given for women include those for female officers as well as wives, several sources (Shih and the Chinese primary accounts he draws upon) suggest that Taiping women officers often doubled as the concubines of leaders.

121 Michael, The Taiping Rebellion, 189.

122 Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 71.

123 Michael, The Taiping Rebellion, 1530.


differentiate them from the general Chinese populace, the Taiping practice reflects the militarized and often haphazard nature of their rule, as well as the centrality of Nanjing to the Taiping state.

The Taiping also used the harem to reflect the universal ambitions of Hong Xiuquan’s rule. In addition to housing concubines in the harem according to their native province, four chambers were built, each entitled “Chambers for Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern foreign girls.” The women of these chambers were dressed in what the Taiping believed to be costumes of foreign lands, and participated in ceremonies meant to give the appearance of tributary missions from their supposed native countries.¹²⁶ While this ritual bolstered Hong’s claims of world hegemony, the Taiping soon were faced with interactions with foreigners, and they did not come as tribute bearers to their Heavenly King.

VII. Taiping Interactions With the West and the Problem of Universal Sovereignty

After the 1853 capture of Nanjing, the Taiping movement could no longer be ignored by the British, French, and American merchants, missionaries, and officials operating in China. Having gained access to several treaty ports in the wake of the First Opium War (1839-1842), representatives of the Western powers were equally eager to spread the gospel of Christ and the gospel of free trade. With the rapid entry of the Taiping onto the national stage, many Westerners hoped to find a Christian dynasty that would be more receptive to their desires to “open” China than the intransigent Qing. However, though the Taiping incorporated many

¹²⁶ Shih, The Taiping Ideology, 90.
Christian elements, they were placed in the context of Hong as Son of Heaven and universal ruler, alienating the Western emissaries.

Because the Qing dynasty also laid claim to the universal Mandate of Heaven, its diplomatic interactions with European nations had many similarities with those of the Taiping. Though it is an oversimplification, John K. Fairbank’s study of what he termed the “Chinese World Order” provides a useful overview of the Sinocentric diplomatic system of the Qing. According to Fairbank, the position of the Chinese emperor as the quasi-divine Son of Heaven placed him above all other earthly sovereigns. In the hierarchical Confucian system, the emperor was not only lord of lords, but acted as the ultimate locus of virtue. Foreign heads of state, viewed as vassals, could partake of this virtue by engaging in proper conduct and ceremony and acknowledging the overlordship of the Son of Heaven. In addition, Fairbank argues that the “tribute system” served to create a diplomatic structure that expanded the Sinosphere by “transforming” foreign rulers through contact with Chinese culture.127

In his monograph on the 1793 British Macartney Mission to the Qianlong emperor, James Hevia illustrates the sinocentric diplomatic system of the Qing, and how this conception of international relations clashed with that held by the emerging nation-states of the West. The ideal of emperor as moral exemplar and lord above all other nations has a classical precedent that both the Qing and Taiping looked to as a ritual guide, as we have seen: the Zhourli. In the “Comprehensive Rites of the Great Qing,” published in 1824, the Zhourli is quoted stating that

127 John K. Fairbank, The Chinese World Order (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 6-10. While Fairbank’s study is very useful for providing an overview of the Sinocentric system as a precedent for the Taiping, it speaks of a dehistoricized “China.” Written at the time of the Cultural Revolution, it seeks an imperial precedent for what he sees as Maoist problems with the existing world diplomatic system.
“In our time the enunciated teachings of the imperial family have reached the foreign peoples of the four directions who come as guests.”¹²⁸ In Lord Macartney’s audience with Qianlong, this ideal of emperor as the head of the human family and orderer of the cosmos was visually and performatively enacted through the site, timing, and spatial placement of the ambassadors and attendants at the embassy.¹²⁹

However, Lord Macartney and the other Englishmen traveling with him were operating in a vastly different framework of diplomatic relations. The worldview of Macartney and other late 18th century Europeans was that of the “Law of Nations,” in which all nations, at least in theory, were recognized as sovereign equals. In this Enlightenment view of international relations, the forms and ceremony of diplomatic embassies must reflect the equal status of nations.¹³⁰ Macartney and his contemporaries thus misunderstood the highly symbolic rites of the Qing court. To those schooled in the European system of international relations, the Qing emperor’s claims to universal sovereignty were “titles and epithets of Oriental hyperbole,” and the insistence on kneeling was evidence of their “arrogant and insupportable pretension.”¹³¹

The experience of mutual misunderstanding that occurred in the Macartney Mission was replicated in many aspects of the interactions of the Western nations with the Taiping at Nanjing. Since the time of their grandfathers on the Macartney Mission, the system of diplomatic protocol between nations had been codified at the Congress of Vienna. With the signing of the Treaty of


¹²⁹ Hevia, Cherishing Men from Afar, 174.

¹³⁰ Hevia, Cherishing Men From Afar, 75.

¹³¹ Hevia, Cherishing Men From Afar, 95, 233.
Nanjing (1842), the “Law of Nations” could now be imposed on the Qing, its insistence on equality in language and ceremony masking the inequality in power relations.\textsuperscript{132} However, as the entire legitimacy of the Taiping’s dynastic claim rested on the status of Hong Xiuquan as the Heavenly Sovereign and younger brother of Christ, they insisted on claiming universal jurisdiction and superiority to their Western interlocutors. Though it is unclear how much of the details of Qing diplomatic ceremony the Taiping leaders would have been familiar with, Hong and other failed literati among the Taiping would have at least read the Zhouli, and essays on “world-ordering” were required on civil service examinations during the late Qing.\textsuperscript{133} In addition, the vision of Hong as supreme sovereign had been evident since the earliest days of the movement, and it was this ideal of divine universal rulership that was expressed to Western emissaries.

The Taiping’s first major interaction with the West came shortly after the capture of Nanjing, with the mission of the British ship Hermes led by Sir George Bonham in April 1853.\textsuperscript{134} When Bonham requested an audience with Hong, the supremacy of the Taiping leader and the insistence on proper ritual seen in the Macartney Mission were plainly stated in the reply: “Whereas God the Heavenly Father has sent our Sovereign down on earth as the true Sovereign of all nations in the world, all people in the world, who wish to appear at his Court, must yield to the rules of ceremony.”\textsuperscript{135} The traditional Chinese notion of foreign leaders coming to pay tribute and enlist themselves as vassals was evident in another Taiping letter to Bonham, noting

\textsuperscript{132} Hevia, Cherishing Men From Afar, 235.

\textsuperscript{133} Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 272, 718.

\textsuperscript{134} Spence, God’s Chinese Son, 195.

\textsuperscript{135} Michael, The Taiping Rebellion, 515.
approvingly that “you English have not deemed myriads of miles too far to come and acknowledge our sovereignty.”  

The notions of universal sovereignty authorized by the Christian God are also evident in the Taiping correspondence with an American mission to Nanjing in 1854. In a letter sent to Frank L. Buchanan, Captain of the U.S.S. Susquehanna, the ideals of the Chinese sovereign as the font of virtue and education, and of tribute missions as a method of acculturation are expressed. The letter implores the Americans to offer fealty, promising that

If you can revere Heaven and recognize the Sovereign, then our Heavenly Court, regarding all under heaven as one family and uniting all nations as one body, will certainly remember your faithful purpose and permit you, year after year, to bring tribute and come to court annually so that you may become ministers and people of the Heavenly Kingdom, forever basking in the grace of the Heavenly Dynasty, peacefully residing in your own lands, and quietly enjoying great glory.  

Were it not for the appeal to the common belief in the Christian God, this statement could have been used by Fairbank himself to illustrate the “Chinese World Order.”

The Taiping assertions of Heaven-appointed hegemony fell upon deaf ears, much as had the earlier Qing claims of overlordship. In a response to the Taiping, Bonham wrote that he was unable to understand “that portion which implies that the English are subordinate to your Sovereign,” before going on to remind the Taiping of the terms of the Treaty of Nanjing allowing trade and travel of British subjects in China, providing the direct contrast of the Euro-American diplomatic system to that of the Taiping.  


Taiping's statements of universal sovereignty with bewilderment, the American ambassador Robert McLane, writing one year later, refused to submit the United States to the religious and political authority of Hong Xiuquan, and advised maintaining neutrality to see which contending party would emerge victorious.¹³⁹ This statement proved to be ominously portentous, for the Western powers, dismayed by the Taiping's assertion of Hong's divine hegemony, maintained neutrality while the Taiping armies faltered against the Qing. Finally, when more favorable trade concessions had been extracted from the Qing, British, French, and American mercenaries aided and led Chinese armies against the Taiping. In the end, the Taiping proved to be not the Heaven-appointed elder brother of nations, but a mere thorn in the side of the emerging Western-dominated world order.

VIII. Epilogue and Conclusion

Though I have sought to be as comprehensive as possible, this study has inevitably left out many aspects of the complex and varied history of the Taiping Rebellion. Their military campaigns and maneuvers, the ideological response of the Qing, their effects on the rural society of China, and the role of Western intervention all have been either cursorily referenced or omitted; each could be the subject of a work of at least this length. The most obvious narrowing of my focus has been temporal. Though the Taiping continued to exist for a decade more, the focus of this study ends shortly after they established their state in Nanjing. Indeed, in the years following the founding of the Heavenly Capital, the organizing structures of state and society that I have described in this essay either slowly or quickly fell apart, with the roots of the

collapse often found in those very same structures. The Taiping efforts to attract literati were rejected, their system of rank led to internal dissension, and their efforts at promoting their universal sovereignty ensured the enmity of the West.

The main body of this study concludes with the Taiping ascendant, their Heavenly Capital established, and the overthrow of the Qing seemingly imminent. A large Taiping army was at the outskirts of Tianjin by October of 1853 and it looked as though Beijing would soon fall. However, their Northern Expedition to capture the “Demon’s Den” was turned back, defeated equally by the forces of the Qing and winter, just as the Taiping’s efforts to ally with the Western powers were met by bewilderment and rebuff.\textsuperscript{140} The elaborately hierarchical system of ordered rank and title broke apart violently, for though the Taiping wang were said to be brotherly kings, Yang Xiuqing was eager to promote himself to a divine level. What began in the summer of 1856 as a request for a title equal to Hong’s own ended with two of the Taiping kings and their followers dead, another in flight and never to return, and Hong, deeply shaken, retreating further and further into the private world of his harem.\textsuperscript{141}

Though other campaigns were launched, cities were taken, lost, and retaken, sieges were raised and lifted, and new leaders came to prominence and fell from grace, the Taiping never again seriously threatened to capture Beijing. The forces defending the Qing dynasty shifted from the moribund Manchu Banners to the far more dynamic local Han armies led by gentry such as Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang and aided by Western arms and personnel. Finally, by the summer of 1864, the end had come for the Heavenly Kingdom. With Nanjing under a

\textsuperscript{140} Jen, \textit{The Taiping Revolutionary Movement}, 185.

\textsuperscript{141} Spence, \textit{God’s Chinese Son}, 242-248.
tightening chokehold by Qing forces and the city beginning to starve, Hong Xiuquan declared that the people would be sustained by *manna* from heaven as the Israelites were. Apparently following his own advice, Hong died on June 1, 1864 at the age of fifty-one, of illness exacerbated by malnutrition. The Heavenly King exited the mortal world not upon a heavenly chariot, but in a simple yellow robe, his body never to be recovered.\(^{142}\)

The Heavenly Capital finally fell on July 19, the dreams of Great Peace ending in an orgy of fire and blood. In the aftermath of the fall of Nanjing, more than 100,000 were killed, a level of slaughter that would not be seen in China again until the more famous massacre in that same city seven decades later.\(^{143}\) Those Taiping leaders who escaped the sack of Nanjing were eventually all killed, some defiant to the end, some resigned to their fate, others vainly seeking to ally themselves with their captors. In a moment both ironic and poignant, Hong’s fourteen-year-old son’s last request before his execution was to be allowed to study for the Confucian civil service exam that had so vexed his father.\(^{144}\) By February of 1866, the last Taiping general was defeated, and the remnants of the Heavenly Kingdom extinguished.

What significance then, do the measures taken to build the efficacy and legitimacy of a state have, when that state ultimately failed after fifteen years of struggle and turmoil? I have previously argued that the Taiping sought to build a state that would be a recognizable and legitimate Chinese dynasty. Indeed, many practices that the Taiping employed were designed to bolster the position of Hong Xiuquan as the Son of Heaven and to promote order and loyalty

\(^{142}\) Spence, *God’s Chinese Son*, 325.

\(^{143}\) Jen, *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, 530.

\(^{144}\) Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 1531.
among the populace, often with basis in both Qing and classical precedent. However, it cannot be denied that Hong’s movement was of a messianic and utopian nature. When Hong declared himself to be the anointed divine leader of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace, he was not merely claiming the throne held by the Qing emperors, but a mandate to re-order the entire world. Most previous scholars have emphasized the revolutionary and even “modern” nature of the Taiping, linking them forward to later Nationalist and Communist revolutions, and those that have not have dismissed them as a mere band of rebels, no different from any other of the earlier two millennia. Departing from both of these totalizing views, I believe that the Taiping effort to craft their utopian system with forms reflecting a legitimate dynasty was a phenomenon very much fitting with both the world-wide and specifically Chinese situation of the mid-19th century.

While from a Eurocentric perspective, the decades from 1815 to 1870 are commonly seen as one of relative peace, the mid 19th century was wracked by rebellion, civil war, and strife: the Taiping Rebellion, American Civil War, Revolutions of 1848, and Indian Mutiny being but a few. With rapidly expanding industrial economies, populations, communications, and systems of imperial domination, the legitimacy of existing socio-political structures was called into question in nations in both the “West” and what would become the “Third World.”145 One form that these struggles for legitimacy took was that of messianic movements.

Not only Hong Xiuquan’s Taiping, but the Babis in Iran and Joseph Smith’s Latter Day Saints in the United States sought to build a utopian order based upon their own relationship to the divine. All three of these movements, despite their hearkening to sources thousands of years earlier for their legitimacy, were distinct products of the emerging modernity of the second

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quarter of the 19th century. Indeed, both Hong Xiuquan and Joseph Smith were influenced by the Second Great Awakening in Protestant Christianity which reacted to the modern age by stressing individual mystical experiences and belief in the coming Millennium.\textsuperscript{146} Although the Babis had no connection with Christianity, the area in which the Bab recruited the most followers was, like Guangzhou, subject to intervention and influence from European imperial powers whose disruption called into question the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty.\textsuperscript{147} All three messianic movements brought down the ire of the ruling government upon them, though none with the scale of violence even approaching that of the Taiping.

The Taiping efforts to build a coherent state and society, though ultimately a failure, cannot be claimed as a revolution in the mold of those of the twentieth century, nor can it be considered the last gasp of pre-modern Chinese rebellion. Instead, the Taiping were reacting to a rapidly changing world by offering a utopian alternative. In their construction of this state the Taiping sought classical bases of order as an answer to the dysfunctional Qing dynasty. In this simultaneously millenarian and traditionalist approach to state and society, the Taiping sought to create a legitimate dynasty that could counter the chaotic forces around them with Heavenly Peace. Though the Taiping fell a century and a half ago, their quest to create a polity which could order the cosmos and the hearts and minds of humankind alike remains elusive.


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