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The Taiping Rebellion: Its Relevance to Modern China

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Review Articles

*The Taiping Rebellion: Its Relevance to Modern China**

THE Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) caused the loss of an estimated 20 million lives, twice the total population of the Philippines at the time. The contending armies laid waste countless villages and destroyed irreplaceable cultural treasures in China's southern, eastern, and central provinces. In the end, the armies and leaders of this *Heavenly Kingdom of Peace* collapsed utterly and failed to gain their goals. The revolt, however, taught lessons and had unforeseen effects which are highly relevant to the events and problems of China, and to its role in world peace today.

In his richly documented study, Professor Shih, a member of the Modern Chinese History Project of the Far Eastern and Russian Institute at the University of Washington, endeavors to tell us "what kind of movement the Taiping Rebellion was, what kind of society it sought to replace, and for what reasons."

The book is not a chronicle of this 15-year-long struggle. Rather, it assumes that the reader is well-versed regarding the main story and cast of characters. Thorough treatment of these aspects of the war is available in Franz Michael's

* THE TAIPING IDEOLOGY: Its Sources, Interpretations and Influences, by Vincent Y. C. Shih. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1967. xix, 553 pp.

three-volume work, *The Taiping Rebellion, History and Documents*, recently published under the auspices of the same University of Washington Institute.

The Taiping Ideology is a happy contribution to scholarship, very useful for seminars at the college level, and helpful to teachers of general Chinese history. From a laudable concern to be exhaustive, the author becomes so diffuse that salient issues are at times blurred or lost sight of. But in a final chapter, *A Transcendental Interpretation*, he sums up his findings rather clearly.

Professor Shih sets forth the ideas which the rebels used to win the allegiance of their followers and the people, and he deals also with ideas which burgeoned at other wellsprings, but were fed in more or less naturally to the Taiping stream. The ensemble includes religious beliefs, a just pride of race, aspirations for economic reform, political changes, and a new social order. Into the human dynamics of the Taiping campaign entered many elements: psychological, intuitive, and even visceral, rather than what we normally consider ideological. These, likewise, are given extensive treatment.

Shih's work, then, is much broader than would be an 1860 edition of *The Thoughts of Chairman Hung Hsiu-ch'üan*, even though his ample quotations from the proclamations and writings of Hung could supply a good start to such a compilation. Indeed, a comparative study of the style and content of the saying of Hung and Chairman Mao would reveal how far China has moved into a real revolution in the course of a hundred years.

Thomas T. Meadows, a respected British observer, could write with reason in 1856 a statement no longer tenable today: "Of all nations that have attained a certain degree of civilization, the Chinese are the least revolutionary and the most rebellious." *The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (Macmillan, 1935) explains the distinction:

The term revolution...connotes a sudden and far-reaching change, a major break in the continuity of development..., a major change in the political order (not merely a shift in the ruling personnel

or a reorientation of concrete policies), which must be preceded by a drastic change in the relations among different groups and classes in society. Thus a recasting of the social order is, at least in modern times, a far more important characteristic of revolution than a change of political constitution or the use of violence to attain this end.... The significance of a revolution lies in the fact that it is not merely a violent and profound modification of the social organization, but a major shift in the relations between social classes whereby the dominance of the upper class is destroyed and the lower class emancipates itself from economic exploitation buttressed by political subordination (pp. 388-389).

In China, for more than 2,000 years, through periodic *coup d'ets* and uprisings, there was continuity of social development, and permanence in political principles. More by what it destroyed than by what it built up, more by what it absorbed than by what it originated, more by what it promised than by what it performed, the Taiping rebellion marked the beginning of the end of the old social, economic, and political order of things. Since 1864 a real revolution has occurred and is continuing to take shape in China. The nationalist and communist leaders to the revolution acknowledge their indebtedness to the Taipings who seemed to fail so miserably in serving their own cause.

The magnitude of the Taiping Rebellion and such short-lived successes as it achieved were largely due to a true economic and social ferment provoked by rapid population growth, the impact of competition from foreign trade and industry, and a galloping exploitation of tenant farmers. Decadence in the Manchu court, and its ineptitude to repel Western aggression and insult, convinced many Chinese that the mandate of heaven had passed from the Ch'ing dynasty. Among possible heirs to this mandate the Taiping leaders easily occupied first place, simply because they were in the right place at the right time to reach for it. These economic, social, and patriotic elements of the Taiping platform, though not part of its primordial inspiration, waxed strong in the climate it created; they outlived the original nucleus of religious and moral ideas, and in the twentieth century came to brook no denial.

The Taiping Ideology, in the large sense Professor Shih gives it, is at all times highly complex; it embraced inconsistent

elements; it underwent great changes from period to period during the 15-year Taiping reign.

The ideology was conceived in original sin, i.e., by a man of unbalanced mind working on bad theology. Such vitiated roots simply could not produce a coherent, sound ideology as their fruit. Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, six times in all, failed to pass the exacting civil service examinations, and thereby gain entry to a scholar-official's career in the gentry. Disheartened, he fell into an illness marked by delirium, wherein he had visions that were nourished in good part by nine Protestant tracts which he read repeatedly but digested poorly.

He believed he was called by God to preach the amalgam of these tracts and his visions, and to assume leadership of a group of Christians eager to rid China of idol-worshipping. They began violently to destroy images in the public temples, to the intense annoyance of the unconverted, who called upon the authorities and courts to punish them. These clashes raised for him and his cohorts the question whether officials who opposed the revealed will of God had not themselves lost the favor of heaven and become part of the evil from which China needed to be purged. After arrest by provincial police in 1850, Hung was forcibly rescued by his followers, and found himself at the head of armed bands committed openly to rebellion against the existing government. These mushroomed quickly enough into a formidable army.

Professor Shih's first two chapters on *Religion and Moral Views*, provide a detailed exposition of the good and bad components of the group's confused Christian doctrine. As an example of the bad:

In the *Taiping Heavenly Chronicle* and Hung's commentary on the Bible, God was represented as having a wife, from whose womb came three sons, Jesus (the Heavenly Eldest Brother), Hung Hsiu-ch'üan himself (the Heavenly King), and his chief aide Yang Hsiu-chi'ing (the Eastern King). Because of this Hung and Yang enjoyed a peculiarly privileged position. They were not the children of the heavenly Father in the usual sense of the word. No other mortals were said to have come from the womb of the Heavenly Mother (p. 10).

Experiences apparently truly religious, and flashes of authentic insight occur in the early religious teachings of the

Taipings, and one is filled with a sense of pity for the men who came close to truth, but then deviated to a perverse grasp and use of it. An interesting study of the mental illness of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan by P. M. Yap, an expert in social and comparative psychiatry, is summarized in pages 448-449 of the book under review. At first the Taiping leaders were honest zealots, not religious impostors. Yet reflective reading of their story alerts us to dangers inherent in hasty indigenization of the Christian creed; it induces reserve in our trust of impulses of "the Spirit" to private interpretation of revealed truths by poorly instructed people not enlightened and helped by the authorized teaching Church. Today's searchers for "a theology of revolution" might have something to learn from mistakes conspicuous in the Taiping experience.

The blending of religion and rebellion in the Taiping ideology rather quickly proved detrimental to both. Wherever the Taipings went, in the name of Christian zeal for the honor of God they destroyed sacred books, idols and temples, renowned pagodas and Buddhist monasteries. Doing so, they projected in a widespread and striking way an image of Christianity as intolerant and violent; a persecuting force. Just when doors to China were at last being opened to Christian missionaries, pseudo-Christians created with fearful impact this shocking, adverse impression on China's hundreds of millions.

In 1916, the well-informed Timothy Richard wrote:

"The Taiping rebellion made the Chinese fear religious propaganda as a dangerous political movement; its baleful effect against the spread of Christianity remains powerful. The number of lives lost during the years of Taiping rule rolled up a legacy of hatred against Christianity which has scarcely yet melted away." (p. 423)

The "Christianity" widely and vigorously publicized by the Taipings was riddled with errors from undisciplined syncretism and false mysticism. Even the parts stated with accuracy of formula were expounded and applied without grasp of their true meaning and inner spirit. The Taiping kings and generals who got into politics and warfare to serve their new faith began soon enough to use this religion to serve their politics and warfare. As new problems confronted them,

they justified all sorts of abusive practices by appeal to private revelations or arbitrary interpretations of Scriptural texts. This, of course, discredited Christianity in the minds of sincere, intelligent people with decent values.

A large practical factor in the final failure of the Taiping rebellion, despite its initial successes and its feeble Manchu opposition, lay in bad organization and administration of civil and military affairs. An enterprising Minister of Foreign Affairs might have prevented the Manchu-Western agreements which ultimately extinguished Taiping hopes. Capable and patriotic Chinese personnel were within reach, but they were conservative Confucianists of the gentry or scholar class. These men were, on the whole, alienated by the unorthodox religious tenets of the Taipings. They saw Christianity as of foreign origin, threatening the existence of traditional Chinese culture. Tseng Kuo-fan and Li Hung-chang, men of this class, were the generals in command of the imperial forces which at last broke the back of the Taiping armies. They preferred loyal service of the Manchu emperor under whom they could preserve Chinese culture, to joining the Chinese Taiping rebels whom they thought were betraying the civilization of which they should have been proud.

In a sort of apologia for his position, Tseng Kuo-fan expressed the attitude of the scholars:

The rebels plagiarize some of the religious ideas of the foreign barbarians, and from the kings down to the soldiers and mean runners all call themselves brothers. They say God alone can be called father, and all fathers of the people are brothers and all mothers, sisters. The peasants cannot have their own land to till and to pay tax, for all land belongs to the T'ien Wang (Hung Hsiu-ch'üan). The merchants cannot trade and make money, for they say that all commodities belong to the T'ien Wang. The scholars cannot study the classics of Confucius, for they have what are called the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament. They are throwing overboard the principles of *li* and *i* which govern human relationships, and the orthodox teachings contained in the *Book of Poetry* and the *Book of History*—principles which have been in effect in China for thousands of years. Is this merely a crisis in the Manchu dynasty? It is an unprecedented crisis in the history of traditional Confucian moral principles. For this, Confucius and Mencius must be moaning at the ninth spring. How

can the educated fold their hands and sit on the side as spectators without thinking of doing something about it? (p. 398).

Many instructive insights on human and political questions can be gleaned from this book on Taiping Ideology. The rebels inveighed against the imperial literary examinations, which perpetuated the ideas and values of the establishment. Success in them was a life-and-death key to government employment; the group in power could frame them as tools of thought-control. The Taiping leaders saw the limits which this system imposed on freedom, and yet were quite ready themselves to utilize it to their own ends.

When they began to rule, they needed officials for many posts. To recruit them, they announced an extra examination. "However the *Analects* of Confucius, and Mencius should most certainly not be used, because the doctrines contained in them are contrary to our sacred teachings. . . . The *Heavenly Commandments* and the (Taiping) precious teachings are really sacred decrees, and should be learned by all. In this examination, we may pick our topics from these, to give the scholars of later times an incentive to learn them without persuasion. With this stone, two birds will be killed at once" (p. 42).

In his 13th Chapter on *Twentieth-Century Interpretations* (of Taiping Ideology), Professor Shih introduces a sizable section on views from Communist China with a wry remark that shows both a cultured man's sense of humor and a research scholar's frustration. "The Communists, as one would expect, assume a more or less uniform point of view. Reading their works is like listening to Ravel's *Bolero*, with its cumulative production of sound and insistent monotonous rhythm. Minor variations occur occasionally, but the main themes are repeated over and over with tedious monotony" (p. 449). State-prescribed examinations are not the only stones by which birds can be killed, and their free singing stilled.

The *North China Herald* of Shanghai carried on November 12, 1864, an editorial which was somewhat an obituary of the Taiping Rebellion. Among other things, the writer claimed:

It has been but seldom during the history of the world that even the most highly civilized and carefully disciplined troops have fought for an idea. They fight now and have ever fought for the aggrandise-

ment of a man, not for the enthronement of a theory; for wealth or glory or power, but seldom for the establishment of a dogma. So long as Hung Hsiu-ch'üan as a living, tangible, prince and general led his troops, success brooded over his banners. The hordes which followed him looked to him as an all-accomplished general, and not as the promulgator of a new Gospel. They fought under him, with him, for him, so long as they saw him before their eyes, and believed that the power of conquest was inherent in him. But as soon as T'ien Wang became an idea, and the man was sunk in the Emperor, as soon as a transfer was attempted of the enthusiasm which was felt for the successful general to the faith which he professed to spread, disaffection began its work, and thus the decadence of the Insurgent movement may be traced to the day on which Hung Hsiu-ch'üan transformed himself into a rival Emperor, and surrounded himself with a parade of mock dignity, faintly copied from the customs of the dynasty whose destruction he threatened (p. 422).

In many ways this bit of rhetoric has a mid-19th century flavor. Our review has touched on only a few points related to Taiping history, not enough to offer evidence proving or disproving the Shanghai journalist's thesis. I seriously doubt that he would be of the same opinion today; and, if he were, he would surely not express his views boldly in any Shanghai publication. The art of indoctrination has been refined and intensified to a fantastic degree since 1917, nor is idealism non-existent.

There are China experts who tell us that if the Taiping rebellion had succeeded, the country would have been spared more than a century of cruel turmoil, and would not just now stand ominously alienated from the family of nations. Professor Shih adduces other experts who argue well that the rebellion was, very early and radically, foredoomed to failure. If it had wiser leaders and abler administrators with sounder principles and stronger determination, it would not have been the Taiping rebellion. To indulge in a bit of idle speculation personally, I suggest that if Hung Hsiu-ch'üan had defeated the imperial armies, another revolt as violent as his would still have been needed to produce a durable, progressive government in China.