

# Anti-Confucianism: The Formation Process and the Ideology Essence of the Cultural Policy of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom\*

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The “anti-Confucianism” constituted the main feature of the cultural policy of the Taiping Rebellion. However, the anti-Confucianism movement of the Taiping Rebellion was mainly in form rather than in content, and mainly in action rather than in thought, which manifested itself in a policy of banning and destroying the physical forms of Confucian memorial tablets, Confucian temples, and Confucian classics. The core elements of Confucianism were all inherited and retained by Hong Xiuquan, who was committed to subverting Confucius’ position as the cultural authority of Chinese society, so Confucianism, together with Christian thought and folk religious thought, constituted the main source of the ideology of the Taiping Rebellion. It was the influence of Confucianism and folk religious thought on Hong Xiuquan that gave the idea of worshipping God a localized character and made a new type of religion that combined Chinese and Western elements. The “anti-Confucianism” was mostly based on an irrational political movement, and the Taiping Rebellion never criticized the doctrine of Confucius and Mencius from a theoretical point of view. Thus the political submission of civil society to the Taiping Rebellion hardly rose to the level of political identification. Cultural antipathy, to some extent, led to the eventual defeat of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.

*Keywords:* the Taiping Rebellion, anti-Confucianism, worshipping God, Confucian culture

## Introduction

The Taiping Rebellion of 1851-1864 is known as the highest peak of the old Chinese peasant uprisings, mainly manifested in the long duration of the movement, the wide range of its influence, the fierce struggle, the far-reaching impact, and the high level of resistance. In terms of the form of struggle, in addition to armed resistance against the Qing Dynasty, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom also spared no effort to carry out reforms in the field of ideology and culture. The distinctive feature of the Taiping Rebellion compared to other peasant movements in China’s history was that it borrowed the external form of Western Christianity and created the unique Shangdi Jiao with traditional Chinese culture.

In order to establish the ideology of exclusive advocating God in the ideological and cultural fields as soon as possible, the Taiping Rebellion adopted the strategy of combining breaking the old and establishing the new. While establishing the ideological and cultural trend of worshipping God, it was necessary to abandon the old

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culture and ideology and break the superstition of the old cultural authority figures. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, became the absolute authority in Chinese culture for over two thousand years. Confucianism became the ruling thought of successive dynasties and the spiritual symbol of Chinese society. The inspirational power of Confucianism was not only reflected in the literati and officialdom class as the carrier of Chinese culture, but also influenced the daily life, customs, and ideas of the general public in a subtle way, and had penetrated into the thoughts and behaviors of people from different classes, ethnic groups, and cultural backgrounds.

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Christian mission in China was repeatedly frustrated, mainly because of the profound influence of Confucianism on Chinese society. The silence of the preaching of Christianity in China was soon broken, and the authority and ideology of Confucius were challenged as never before. Hong Xiuchuan's contact with Christianity, his creation of Shangdi Jiao, and his thoughts of worshipping God and anti-Confucianism were all part of the shocking change in the history of Western learning in the East. Of course, the ideology of anti-Confucianism of the Taiping Rebellion was not unchanging, but went through a historical process from moderate in the early period, to radical after the capital was set, and to slowing down in the middle and late periods. Past research has explained much about the negative aspects of the cultural policy of the Taiping Rebellion, but there is a lack of analysis of the complex process of its cultural policy formation, the specific characteristics of each stage, and the ideological essence it reflected.

### Moderate Attitude in the Early Period

In Hong Xiuquan's dream of 1837, Heavenly Father rebuked Confucius for not clearly expounding the truth in the Confucian classics, and Confucius was ashamed and confessed his sin. This rebuke could not be considered anti-Confucianism in the true sense of the word, but could only be described as a kind of rebellious mentality against Confucianism stimulated by the failure of the previous three imperial examinations, which probably started earlier. After worshipping God in 1843, Hong Xiuquan removed the Confucian memorial tablet from his old-style private school, which could be regarded as the beginning of his action of anti-Confucianism.

Hong Xiuquan was familiar with Confucian classics and history books since his childhood. He was keen on the imperial examinations in order to bring honour to his family and had taken the examination four times. His thoughts were deeply influenced by Confucianism and he held it as a golden rule, which determined that the God Hong Xiuquan later accepted was still transplanted from Confucianism. In Hong Xiuquan's early religious works, such as *Baizhengge* (《百正歌》), *Yuandaojiushige* (《原道救世歌》), *Yuandaoxingshixun* (《原道醒世训》), *Yuandaojueshixun* (《原道觉世训》), he cited Confucius, Mencius, and other Confucian figures as positive characters and held them up as moral models and "positive characters" examples. Besides, he also quoted extensively from Confucian classics such as *The Analects of Confucius* (《论语》), *The Book of Songs* (《诗经》), *The Classic of Documents* (《尚书》), *The Book of Rites* (《礼记》), *The Book of Filial Piety* (《孝经》), and *The Book of Mencius* (《孟子》) to support the local, orthodox, and rational nature of the idea of worshipping God. In 1852, during the Yong'an period, the Taiping Rebellion compiled these early works into *Taipingzhaoshu* (《太平诏书》) and published it officially, still retaining the positive quotations from Confucian figures and classics, which could be reflected that up to this time, Hong Xiuquan still publicly agreed with the ideological value of Confucianism. The *Yuandaojueshixun* (《原道觉世训》) in the *Taipingzhaoshu* (《太平诏

书》) even referred to Confucius as a “sage”. However, when the revised version of the *Taipingzhaoshu* (《太平诏书》) was published after the capital was set, these contents were completely deleted.

From exclusive advocating God and the prohibition of idol worship, it was a necessity for the Taiping Rebellion to be anti-Confucianism in action. Confucius was an idol worshipped by the literati and officialdom class. Not only Confucius, but also “heaven, earth, sovereign, parents, and teachers” were all idols worshipped by people, which Hong Xiuquan, of course, opposed. Confucius’ position of cultural authority in Chinese society was also intolerable to Hong Xiuquan. Announced in the winter of 1848, the *Taipingtianri* (《太平天日》) pretended to be God’s voice to angrily denounce Confucius’ reputation as greater than God, which was undoubtedly also Hong Xiuquan’s hidden purpose. To establish faith in God, the authoritative position of Confucius must be brought down. Therefore, Hong Xiuquan’s critical attitude towards Confucius was again strengthened than before. The *Taipingtianri* (《太平天日》) recorded that God ordered an angel to scourge Confucius who begged and pleaded. However, unlike the “Yanluoyao”, the contradiction between Confucius and the Taiping Rebellion was not the contradictions between ourselves and the enemy, and God “considered that his merits could make up for his faults and allowed him to enjoy the blessings in heaven and never allowed him to come down to earth”.

In December 1848, the “Heavenly Brother” came down to earth and instructed Hong Xiuquan through the mouth of Xiao Chaogui: The books of Confucius “will be burned in the time of peace”, which established the cultural policy of the Taiping Rebellion to ban and burn ancient books after the uprising. However, this policy was not implemented by the Taiping Rebellion immediately after the Jintian Uprising. In addition to the objective circumstances of mobile fighting, the anti-Confucianism operation was shelved mainly for the sake of enlisting the hearts and minds of the literati and officialdom and reducing resistance to the march at the early stage of the war. It was also possible because Xiao Chaogui had already died in battle outside Changsha in September 1852 under the intervention of Yang Xiuqing and other rulers who opposed the cultural terror policy.

Before setting the capital in Tianjing, from the perspective of exclusive advocating the God, Hong Xiuquan denied the supremacy of Confucius in the cultural field and opposed all idol worship, including Confucius. But he did not deny Confucianism in his thought, and he quoted Confucian classics in many of his writings and restrained his anti-Confucianism actions. Overall, Hong Xiuquan’s attitude toward Confucius and Confucianism was relatively moderate. However, in the early period of the Taiping Rebellion, the keynote of the policy of banning and burning ancient books had been established, and an atmosphere of contempt for culture and the literati gradually developed among the Taiping army. In Wuchang, on the one hand, Yang Xiuqing was busy consecrating Confucius, while on the other hand, the Taiping soldiers “threw books and scrolls all over the ground, ditches and dirty pits, everywhere”. This seemed to be a harbinger of the official anti-Confucianism policy.

### **The Radical Movement After the Capital Was Set**

In 1853, when the capital was set in Tianjing, the policy of banning and burning ancient books was officially implemented. All the books of Confucius, Mencius, and all classes of authors were called “evil books”, which were not allowed to be bought, sold, store or read, and were destroyed; otherwise, people were decapitated. The Taiping Rebellion clearly declared Confucius and Mencius to be demons. As a result, the Taiping army burned and banned ancient books and destroyed the Confucian temples in Nanjing. The literati

Ma Shouling witnessed the situation of the search and ban of “evil books” in Tianjing: “The collection of books needs to be carried by the stretcher. The books are thrown in when passing by the toilet and puddle. The books which cannot be thrown were burned with fire. The books which cannot be burned were poured by water”. Hong Xiuquan also wrote and published the *Three-Character Classic* (《三字经》), an enlightenment textbook for young children, which reinterpreted Chinese history from the perspective of God worship, changing the traditional view of history that honored and praised the emperors, military generals, and prime ministers of the past dynasties and pointing out that the word of God had been lost since the Qin and Han Dynasties and after that China had entered the Dark Ages.

Hong Xiuquan launched the anti-Confucianism movement so hastily; his purpose was only to establish the exclusive advocating for God and to achieve ideological unification. From the subjective point of view, after setting the capital in Tianjing, Hong Xiuquan thought that half of the country was in his hands, the remaining demons would be destroyed immediately, the unification was not far away, and his governing philosophy had consciously changed from “conquering the country” to “ruling the country”. Therefore, it was necessary to establish a new ideology of dominance as soon as possible. Then a radical and coercive movement to isolate people from ideological and cultural contact and connection with traditional ideology was certainly a quick way to do so. From the objective point of view, in Jiangnan, the strong Confucian culture and the people’s deep-rooted orthodoxy, loyalty, and clan consciousness made both the literati and officialdom class and the common people had an innate sense of superiority and rejection, resistance, and even hostility toward the rebels who started in the remote and backward places and armed themselves with heretical religion.

Hong Xiuquan did not and could not completely deny the value of the existence and ideological influence of Confucianism. For a traditional Chinese culture that had been the dominant ideology for 2,000 years, Confucianism had permeated all classes of Chinese society, including the depths of Hong Xiuquan’s own thinking. The Taiping Rebellion adopted a simple, brutal, and radical policy, based more on an irrational political movement, and used ambiguous religious language to rigidly and forcefully instill in the people the orthodoxy of “conforming to God” and the justice of “revolting against tyranny”, without ever criticizing the doctrine of Confucius and Mencius ways from a theoretical perspective, which was difficult to obtain a real and sustained ideological identity in civil society. Therefore, it was difficult for civil society to sublimate its political submission to the Taiping Rebellion to the level of political identity.

### **Anti-Confucianism Tended to Slow Down in the Middle and Late Periods**

One year after the capital was set, the radical policies had a great negative impact. Yang Xiuqing petitioned Heavenly King to “censor books” and “keep books” and to stop “burning books” and “banning books”. On March 2, 1854, the “Heavenly Father” came down to earth and officially ordered, through the words of Yang Xiuqing, “*the Four Books and the Thirteen Classics* contained many expositions on the nature and truth, and declared much about the way of regulating the family, ruling the state, filial piety to parents, and loyalty to the monarch. Therefore, the dong King submitted a petition to ask to retain the rest of the other books”. In other words, it was declared that the doctrine of Confucius and Mencius could not be completely abolished. Under the pressure of Heavenly Father and Yang Xiuqing, Hong Xiuquan was compelled to set up the Book Censoring Office and had people censoring *The Six Classics*. Besides, the attitude of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom towards Confucius also changed; they claimed that “Confucius was originally in heaven, but suddenly escaped to the earth and became a demon to confuse people, so the Heavenly Father was furious

and has now caught him in heaven and punished him to plant a vegetable garden”. It was said that Confucius “had become a demon to confuse people”, but now he “turned the demon into a human being”, which was obviously a compromise on Confucius. It could be seen that Hong Xiuquan did not fully “rehabilitate” Confucius. The Taiping Rebellion never engraved and published the censored Confucian classics, which could also be seen in Hong Xiuquan’s negative and delayed attitude. But after all, under the continuous intervention of Yang Xiuqing, the former Taiping Rebellion’s policy of sweeping away the culture finally came to an end.

In the later period, Hong Xiuquan’s public attitude toward Confucianism had moderated compared to the earlier period. Firstly, the slowing down of the policy was a fait accompli. Secondly, the overly radical cultural policy caused general resistance from the literati and officialdom class and was difficult to implement. The third was that the late auxiliary Hong Rengan and Li Xiucheng held some good feelings towards traditional culture, and they had an influence on Hong Xiuquan. The *Tianfushengzhi* (《天父圣旨》) printed in 1860 and the *Taipingtianri* (《太平天日》) officially printed in 1862, stated that Confucianism “also had some points that conformed to the truth” and no longer mentioned Confucius’s history of “becoming demon”.

At the beginning of the occupation of southern Jiangsu and Zhejiang, the Taiping Rebellion destroyed ancient books and Confucian temples. However, the overly aggressive anti-Confucianism momentum of the Taiping army was soon overshadowed by the resurgence of the worship of Confucius and the reading of Confucian classics. In terms of the exercise problems of the imperial examinations, those proposed by the early Taiping Rebellion were based on the doctrine of worship of God, while many of those of the later local examinations were from *The Four Books* and *The Five Classics*. In 1861, the Taiping army authorities in Changshu and Zhaowen publicly organized candidates to consecrate Confucius, and in 1862, they “rebuilt the Confucian temples to honor the system of rites and music”. The local resurgence of the worship of Confucius and reading of Confucian classics was not only the inevitable result of the fading of the idea of worshipping God in the late Taiping period, but also related to the advocacy of traditional order by the Zhong King Li Xiucheng and the moderating attitude of Hong Xiuquan towards Confucianism. There were profound ideological reasons for the adjustment and change of cultural policies in the occupied areas of the Taiping Rebellion. Confucianism, as the core of traditional culture for more than two thousand years, had a deep-rooted ideological system and a huge and profound social influence, especially in Jiangnan, which was occupied by the Taiping Rebellion, where the culture was highly developed, the talents gathered, and traditional culture was particularly strong. The Taiping Rebellion which was mainly composed of peasants was unable to form a new ideology and could not be completely free from the constraints of Confucian culture. Although they had the enthusiasm and courage to change the old culture and old order, they did not have the determination and patience for cultural reform. After the religious enthusiasm had calmed down, along with the hollowness and paleness of ideas of worshipping God, they could only naturally return to the traditional mainstream ideology and be assimilated into the traditional culture.

### Conclusion

In terms of the adjustment of the cultural policies of the Taiping Rebellion and the change of ideas about Confucianism, “anti-Confucianism” constituted the main feature of the cultural policies of the Taiping Rebellion, but concrete analysis of specific issues was still required: For Confucian orthodox figures such as Confucius and Mencius, Hong Xiuquan once denounced them as “demons”, but soon revised his attitude and basically held a moderate critical attitude; for Confucianism and its ideas, Hong Xiuquan never refuted them

from a theoretical point of view as he did with the revision of *The Bible*, but accepted and approved of them to a large extent; for Confucian classics, although there was a change in policy from “burning and banning” to “censoring”, the ban continued throughout. Therefore, the “anti-Confucianism” of the Taiping Rebellion only opposed the ideological authority of Confucius and Confucianism, which manifested itself in the form of a policy of banning and destroying Confucian memorial tablets, Confucian temples, and Confucian classics, but not opposing Confucianism in essence.

In the end, Hong Xiuquan only smashed the Confucian memorial tablets but retained the soul of Confucian culture. Although the official books published by the Taiping Rebellion after the capital was set were no longer directly quoted from the ancient books as before, many words and phrases could still be traced back to the Confucian classics. The key was that the core elements of Confucianism were inherited and retained by Hong Xiuquan. For example, Hong Xiuquan attached importance to these ideas: He emphasized ritual, righteousness, and human relations; he thought highly of loyalty and filial piety; he urged the military and people to learn “rituals” and instilled the concept of abstinence, patience, and happiness in poverty to them; he advocated the imperial power, maintained the ritual system, and preached the hierarchical and hereditary system. All of these above were still essentially Confucianism’s three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues. The representative works of Hong Xiuquan’s preaching on the ideology of the rules of morality and ethics were the *Youxueshi* (《幼学诗》) published in 1852 and the *Tianfushi* (《天父诗》) published in 1857, in which Confucianism’s orthodoxy and the rules of morality and ethics were reflected thoroughly. Hong Xiuquan’s acceptance and approval of the core ideas of Confucianism were closely related to his personal experience of long immersion in Confucianism. Therefore, Confucianism, together with Christian thought and folk religious thought, constituted the main source of the ideology of the Taiping Rebellion. It was the influence of Confucianism and folk religious thought on Hong Xiuquan that gave the idea of worshipping God a localized character and made a new type of religion that combined Chinese and Western elements. Analyzed from its ideological origin, the anti-Confucianism movement of the Taiping Rebellion was mainly in form rather than in content, and mainly in action rather than in thought. Hong Xiuquan was committed to subverting Confucius’ position as the cultural authority of Chinese society, not Confucianism, which had long been regarded by people as the quintessence of Chinese culture.

In terms of Zeng Guofan’s *Taoyuefeixi* (《讨粤匪檄》) which produced a great shock and rallying cry among the literati and officialdom, cultural antipathy was an important factor that led the literati and officialdom to the antagonism of the Taiping Rebellion. Although the Taiping Rebellion made institutionalized attempts to organize the imperial examinations and recruit talents, they failed to gain a wide response from intellectuals. Compared with the Hunan army with a galaxy of talents (including Li Shanlan, Xu Shou, Hua Hengfang, and so on), few intellectuals in the Taiping army were famous. After being captured, Li Xiucheng said that “the government and military used intellectuals, but there were no intellectuals among the rebels”, which was a major shortcoming of the Taiping Rebellion. The loss of the hearts of the world’s intellectuals, to a certain extent, led to the ultimate defeat of the Taiping Rebellion.

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