

Reconsiderations the Taiping Rebellion of the Early Modern China: From the Perspective of Millenarianism^{*}

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Millenarianism refers usually to a radical mass movement which reflects a particular mode of thinking and action with a sense of redemption. Taiping Rebellion is considered as a millenarian movement due to its “Taiping” ideal, coming of the savior, mass appeal and crusade against evil. However, the millenarianism exemplified in the Taiping Rebellion should not be regarded as a pure Western Christian Millenarianism. Instead it should be viewed as a particular kind of theology derived from Hong Xiuquan’s combination of traditional Chinese culture and Christianity. A political-regional comparative study engaging worldwide millenarian movements of the 19th century reveals that Taiping Rebellion actually represents Chinese people’s own particular response towards the coming of modernity which was stimulated and encouraged by the western power’s invasion.

Keywords: millenarianism, Taiping Rebellion, God Worshippers (拜上帝教)

Millenarianism as a doctrine and mass movement is widely believed to be derived from the prophetic tradition of Jews and early Christians. Originally referred to a particular kind of religious fundamentalism, it now includes some key elemental conceptions and principles such as prophecy, the expectation of the Second Coming, the establishment of a Kingdom of God on Earth, and the destruction of the present world. Vaguely denoting a thousand years, it actually means the fulfillment of the prophecy after a long period of waiting and does not require a strict application of an apocalyptic timetable. It has been categorized as a particular intellectual tradition in social and political theory.

There are certain core points which a school of thought, in my view, should satisfy in order to be regarded as a kind of millenarianism. First, it should include a strong expectation towards the establishment of a utopian kingdom or paradise on earth; second, the arrival of this perfect kingdom should represent the ultimate fulfillment of humanity and the end of history; third, such an utopian project is believed to be realistic and achievable on earth; fourth, it has immense appeal towards the mass and could hence lead to a radical social movement; sixth, it needs to pose serious threats to the present system and status quo; seventh, it should include a prophet who first realizes the coming of millenarianism and hence becomes the leader of the millenarian movement. However, as Norman Cohn points out, millenarianism does not necessarily mean a

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materialistic project of building “paradise on earth”; it could be highly spiritual and solely focus on an ideal spiritual world. It does not have to be violent as there also is a moderate and pacific millenarianism. What different kinds of millenarianism all share in common is a set of concrete behavioral and thinking modes (Cohen, 1961, p. xiv).

Since 20th century, many scholars have interpreted modernity from a millenarianism perspective. Millenarianism has also become especially useful for an intellectual understanding of Nazism in the 20th century. Norman Cohn is a prominent scholar in studying millenarianism. Although his works concentrate on the western millenarian movements from the 11th to the 16th centuries, modes of behaviors and actions discussed by him could also be seen in other modern historical events such as Nazism (Cohen, 1961, p. xiii). Through a study of Joachim of Fiore, Eric Voegelin pointed out that it was Joachim who went against the conception of an Augustinian Christian community and divided trinity into three historical periods with the belief that a new millenarian leader would rise between the second and the third periods. Voegelin also believed that Joachim had created a set of dominant symbols for the self-explanation of modern political society. They included a concept of history both divided and in progress, “prophet”, “leader”, and “the brotherhood of autonomous person” of the new millennium. The millenarian prophecy held by Hitler also belonged to such symbols proposed by Joachim (Voegelin, 2009, p. 139). James Rhodes, one student of Voegelin, then followed the direction of his teacher and argued that Nazism was, in fact, a millenarian movement (Rhodes, 1980, p. 29). Eric J. Hobsbawm has also made important contributions to the study of millenarian movements. He has done intensive research on three millenarian movements which are Lazzarett religious movement of Southern Tuscany in Italy, the anarchy movement in Andalusia of Spain, and “peasant communism” of “Fasci” Sicily. He criticized Cohn for confusing millenarian movements with modern revolutionary movements, emphasizing the primitiveness of millenarianism. While acknowledging the presence of millenarian elements in modern revolutions and the revolutionary, rather than reformatory, character of millenarianism, Hobsbawm still believed that there was a grey area between the pure millenarian movements and revolutions (Hobsbawm, 2014, pp. 67-69).

Taiping Rebellion has long been viewed as a millenarian movement. Political scientist Michael Barkun has done a comparative study of religious fundamentalism in Mediaeval Europe, ghost dance among American Indians, the Melanesian cargo cults, and the Taiping Rebellion in his cross-culture analysis of millenarian movements. He believed that people who participated in those events held same beliefs and hopes and that the outbreak of millenarian movements was related to the occurrence of natural disasters (Barkun, 1974; Rhodes, 1980, p. 17). Rudolf G. Wagner chose to emphasize the religious side of the Taiping Rebellion, claiming that Hong Xiuquan himself was influenced by a millenarian Christianity which was a branch of the enthusiastic brand of evangelical Christianity (Wagner, 1982, p. 17). American intellectual Jonathan D. Spence believed that Hong Xiuquan held a millenarian belief and “God Worshippers” contained enthusiastic redemptive elements. The *Revelation* vision of Hong and his followers was derived from both the Western Christian tradition and the Chinese traditional classics like *The Book of Changes* and *Lao Zi* (Spence, 2011, pp. 1-5). Another American scholar, Frederic Wakeman argued that personal values held by Hong had changed before his acceptance of Christian millenarianism. Influenced by the Gongyang commentary, Hong used the concept of “Great Harmony/Da Tong” and “Great Peace/Taiping” to establish a Chinese utopia of his own (Wakeman, 1988; 1966). Lu Ruizhong from Taiwan also acknowledged the millenarian elements in the Taiping Rebellion

and traced its origin to the Christian Millenarianism tradition (Lu, 1985, p. 326). When it comes to scholars in mainland, China, Cai Shaoqing has written articles about analyzing the Taiping Rebellion from a millenarianism perspective. Using *The Book of Revelation* as an example to prove the influence of millenarian kingdom on Hong's rebellious thoughts, he believed that the purpose of establishing the capital in Nanjing was to create a millenarian kingdom. "The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom", according to his view, then represented a proposal regarding how to establish a millenarian kingdom and could be seen as reflecting the typical views held by Chinese peasants, namely their hope of achieving equalitarianism (Cai, 2002). Recent publications of Zhou Weichi also put the Taiping Rebellion in a millenarianism framework and saw the ideal of Hong's heavenly kingdom as a Christian millenarian society where only sincere believers were permitted to enter. The origin of Hong's thoughts could then be traced back to Protestant Millenarianism he inherited from Christian missionaries in China. Therefore, "Hong's 'heavenly kingdom' was only a wave produced by American and British millenarianism in China" (Zhou, 2013, p. 122).

As the analysis above has shown, distinguished from the Marxist historical materialist interpretation of the Taiping movement which has orthodox status in China and focuses on the version of the Taiping Army in destroying the old land system and establishing some kind of public ownership system of a communist nature, many intellectuals have attempted to understand this movement in a broader theoretical perspective and come to link the Taiping Rebellion with the millenarian movements. However, to what extent do we see the Taiping Rebellion as a millenarian movement; where does the millenarian origin of the Taiping Rebellion come from and what implications does the Taiping Rebellion have for the rise of modern Chinese revolutions? These are questions worthy of further exploration and hence becoming the focus of this essay.

Millenarianism in the Taiping Rebellion

Taiping Rebellion was not solely derived from the pursuit of equalitarianism, nor could it be explained through the logic of regime change which argued the rotation of the ruler and denied the existence of a natural hierarchy. Instead, it contained a comprehensive set of social political ideal and originated from the hope of a bright future. While denying the legitimacy of Qing Dynasty, it mobilized the mass through the promotion of God Worshippers, the belief in the Truth, and the negation of false idols and common feelings. Combined with a military campaign against the Qing, Taiping Rebellion conquered a large part of China and established their capital in Nanjing. The regime of Taiping Rebellion had lasted for more than 10 years and had a large impact on Chinese society. Religious factors played a role in energizing such a rebellious movement, helping its leaders to overcome obstacles and making them believe that they were heavenly blessed and destined for success. The millenarian character of the Taiping Rebellion is revealed in the following perspectives:

1. The ideal of Taiping and Heaven Kingdom: Utopian thinking regarding a beautiful world is a must for any millenarian movements. The Taiping Army aimed to build a bright and harmonious world that had never existed on earth before. In such a world, "all could enjoy the blessing of the God and share land, meal, clothes and money in common; there would be a complete equality and no one would starve or freeze to death" (Hong, 1985a, p. 168). Oppression among human-beings would be abolished and people would be emancipated from human suffering. Relationship between strangers would be transformed into a relationship of universal brotherhood. "All men on earth are brothers while all women on earth are sisters; there will be no conception of private possession and acquisition" (Liang, 1979, p. 100; Hong, 1985b, p. 12).

“Taiping”, which referred to Great Peace and fairness, presents a peaceful and happy world without military conflicts. According to the *Taiping Jing* of Han Dynasty, “Tai means great while Ping denotes rightness”. Zhang Jue, the leader of the peasant uprising in Eastern Han, was inspired by such a concept and used it to create his “Tao of Taiping” (太平道). According to a poem written by Hong in 1837, “a world united around Tai Ping will enjoy thousands of years of happiness”. Hong’s writing in 1848, which was created due to the suffering of Feng Yunshan, also contained the theme of Taiping: “all men share the universe in Taiping”. Even *Good Words to Admonish the Age*, a book which had a large impact of Hong, promoted the ideal of Taiping as it argued that “the happiness of Taiping will lead to a peaceful world where no one picks up things not belonging to himself and no family needs to close their door at night” (Liang, 1979, p. 100).

Due to its pursuit of a heavenly kingdom, the Taiping ideal is widely regarded as something utopian, which then means it is practically unachievable. However, it is worthy of notice that the heavenly kingdom of Taiping is entirely different from the paradise on earth in Nazism or totalitarianism. The secular order in Taiping is based on its religious belief where the heavenly kingdom is still a part of the world created by God. In explaining the “coming of heavenly kingdom” described in the Bible, Hong saw it as a prophecy of his religious predecessors and to be fully realized in the regime of Taiping Rebellion (Luo & Wang, 2004a, p. 117). He even gave the order that the name “Taiping Kingdom of Heaven” should be changed into “Kingdom of Heaven under God” so as to prove his religious belief in the heavenly Father (Hong, 1985c, p. 209)¹. God Worshippers believed that the souls of their believers would go to heaven after death, which was another obvious Christian tradition. Nanjing was only called “little paradise” rhetorically and was never meant to be the real paradise on earth. Hong Xiuquan believed that “the real paradise in heaven is the place for the happiness of God while the little paradise in Nanjing is the place where men’s physical bodies get blessed by God” (Luo & Wang, 2004a, p. 274). In short, the Taiping Rebellion had never abandoned God, so it should not be regarded as a kind of Gnosticism which aimed to bring paradise to earth solely through the efforts of men (Voegelin, 2000a). Its efforts in revising social customs did not include any compulsory transformation of people’s mind and thus should not be interpreted as aiming to change human nature. Actually, many of God Worshippers knew little about Christianity besides certain core religious beliefs and hence carried out simple religious rituals (Luo & Wang, 2004b, p. 262). Their expectation of going to heaven and worship of God are not only revealed in religious ceremonies, but also shown in their sacrifices for the Taiping Rebellion. Hence, religious beliefs became something political rather than personal for God Worshippers. As the East King of Taiping Rebellion, Yang Xiuqing, who was known for being practical, once said, “showing respect to Hong Xiuquan will make one see the God” (Wang, 1986, p. 48). He also said that “our king (Hong) is the second son of God, fighting for him will then show your piety to the heavenly father and brother” (太平救世歌). Taiping Rebellion paved a way for the souls of Chinese to enter the Christian paradise. Hence, even if we acknowledge utopian thinking in its ideal, it is still a very thin utopianism.

¹ The edict to change the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom to God’s Heavenly Kingdom read, “I now think about God and Jesus Christ came down to lead me, the younger as the Lord, and the heavenly dynasty is named the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, although the father is the father of the Lord of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, brother is the brother of the Lord of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, in the end, the father is the supreme, and with all respect to God, to change the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom to God’s Heavenly Kingdom is more in line with the truth”.

2. The Savior and the redemption: Another proof of millenarianism in Taiping Rebellion is its concept of the Savior and sense of redemption. After Jintian Uprising, Hong Xiuquan was known for “Mr. Hong” and called himself “the King of Taiping and Heaven” who was the second son of God, brother of Jesus and would save Chinese people from their suffering. He then was an incorruptible savior who would “free the whole nation from the shackles of Manchu” (Luo & Wang, 2004c, p. 41). Hong dreamed about entering the paradise during his illness in the Dingyou year, which then perfectly represented the prophetic tradition of millenarianism. In addition, such a prophecy was also revealed in Hong’s interpretation of both the Old and the New Testaments. Hong believed that his wild dream meant he was the Savior and the Bible contained the prophecy of his career. While his brother Jesus was sent to the western world by God, he came to China under God’s command. He changed his name from Hong Huoxiu into Hong Xiuquan due to violating the taboo of Ye Huohua. The Chinese character “Quan” in his name also contained the meaning of “the King of men”. His mission was to kill the demon and revive people’s belief in God. God forced him to come down to earth and finish his mission despite his original unwillingness after entering the paradise (太平天日). According to “Taiping Tianri”, Hong Xiuquan established the Kingdom of Heaven so as to fulfill his obligation to God rather than to satisfy his own lust for power. His rulership on earth was then derived from the command of God, the so-called “glory granted by God”. Moreover, his cause received helps from both God and brother Jesus and was interpreted as “being determined by heavenly father and brother”. However, it was improper to say that Hong had deified himself to fool the masses as he did not establish his own personal cult. Taiping Army’s loyalty to the King of Heaven was never due to the worship of himself. Religious ceremonies were entirely different from court ceremonies and the King of Heaven did not accept godly worship (Luo & Wang, 2004b, p. 263). In the minds of Taiping Army, only God deserved and was allowed to be worshipped. One of its members said, “Although our leader is great, He is still a human being like us” (Lindley, 1985, p. 66).

3. A populism movement: One of the characteristics of millenarian movement is its populism root, which then helps to turn it into a movement of mass participation. With the great number of its participants, it has covered many aspects of the society, brought both the old and the young together, and broke the limits of class and family hierarchy. The Chinese tradition which regards heaven worship as the exclusive domain of the emperor is abolished as it claims “all men have shared the blessing of the God in common since ancient time and the emperor should not be the sole worshipper of heaven, both the emperor and common men have the right to worship the God” (天条书). If we accept French political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville’s argument which sees democracy as “equality of conditions” (Tocqueville, 1988, p. 4), then the Taiping Rebellion is the earliest “democratic” movement in China. Augustus Frederick Lindley, the British citizen who participated in the Taiping Rebellion, called the Taiping Army “the true liberator of the people” (Lindley, 1985, p. 128). Through worshipping the true and the only God, the heavenly father, the Taiping Rebellion replaced the traditional family hierarchy with a relationship based on universal brotherhood. Its proclamation, aiming to calm the population, clearly revealed the concept “the Chinese people” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952a, pp. 160, 166)².

There are several things which we need to understand regarding the populism in the Taiping Rebellion. First, its participants included not only the poor people, who made up the majority, but also the rich. People like

² For example, “besides, the original people are the Chinese people” and “the Chinese people capture and kill the leader of the demons and beasts”.

Shi Dakai and Wei Changhui were already rich before joining the Taiping Rebellion. While Yang Xiuqing and Xiao Chaogui were poor, Hong Xiuquan and Hong Renxuan were definitely not poor. Second, the Taiping Army was different from the Boxers in that they were not believers of anti-intellectualism. The intellectual who was taking side of the Qing Dynasty once said “the rebels like the uneducated people the most, whom they could easily fool around” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952b, p. 293). However this only meant that there were few educated people and lots of illiterate peasants in the Taiping Army. In fact, the Taiping Army had never regarded intellectuals as someone against its cause and treated them very nicely. After conquering Nanjing, it claimed that “the intellectuals and gentries should not be frightened, we only killed corrupted governmental officials” (Li, 1956, p. 94). Any educated person who joined the Taiping Army would be called a “gentleman” and given “civil post” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952c, p. 768). “Provided with generous supplies and positions, but were very strict in monitoring and lived in seclusion” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952b, p. 294). Ordinary Taiping soldiers walked on their own feet while those intellectuals were carried in sedan chairs. County officials who had served the Qing Dynasty previously were also employed in handling the public documents. “There are six executive departments called Zhang Shu where all previous county and province officials would work” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952d, p. 709). In order to win support of the cultural elites, the Taiping Army held civil examination in its jurisdictions. Although majority of contents was related with God Worshippers, the restriction on participants was abolished and people from all social classes could take part in it. The proportion of those admitted was also higher than that of imperial examination and sometimes all those who finished the exam would be admitted. Third, the Taiping Army was different from mercenaries of Qing Dynasty. It was a people’s army combining the military and civilians together. Those who could join the warfare wore the cloth of “general” while those could not wore the cloth of “holy soldier” and cheered for the Taiping Army in battles. The Taiping Army did not distribute provisions to soldiers directly. Instead all soldiers, together with their families, lived in military camp under a planned distribution system. Fourth, the populism elements began to fade away after the establishment of the capital in Nanjing. The relationship between the Taiping Army and civilians living in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces was turned into a relationship between the ruling class and those who were ruled. Even poor people in those two provinces did not see the Taiping Army as an army fighting for their cause. Contrary to the voluntary scheme based on propaganda in its earlier period, lots of people were forced to join and work for the army under the pressure of constant warfare. Those who did not obey would be punished to death. Being a member of “Long Hair” became a means of livelihood while paying taxes under the rule of the Taiping Army turned into something involuntary.

4. A crusade against the devil: Rather than solely relying on the religious preachment, the Taiping Rebellion and the following Chinese revolutionary movements always established regimes through military crusades. Hong Xiuquan and Feng Yunshan originally only focused on religious activities. It was under Qing Dynasty’s religious suppression including the death of their believers in jail that finally turned them into rebels (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952e, p. 827). The official document of the Taiping Rebellion “The Story of Hong Xiuquan” claimed that “the rebellion was never Hong’s original intention, but was forced upon him due to the oppression of Qing Dynasty” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952f, p. 689). Hong Renxuan also said that “we did not have a revolution plan at the beginning, we became rebels in the end because the oppression from both governmental and military officials left us with no ways out besides succumbing

ourselves to their power” (Roberts, 1952, p. 822). However faced up with such a situation, Hong Xiuquan did not necessarily need to choose rebellions as there were other options such as moving religious activities underground and tolerating minor humiliations. The key motivations behind his uprising were his “heavenly dream” where he received the command of the God and his own rebellious thoughts. In his poem, he said, “with the power of killing and destroying in my hand, I will cut down the evil and keep the righteousness to relieve the people’s suspense” (“Poem on Cutting Down the Evil and Keeping the Righteousness”), which shows that he had the idea of armed struggle for a long time. Other documents traced Hong’s rebellious thoughts back to the time when he was teaching in the temple of lotus. Li Fangqun, someone who once lived with Hong in the same village, once said “according to the elder generation, Hong’s teaching was merely a cover during his stay in Hansheng Ligong Tempel in Lianhuatang”.

In fact, he was practicing martial arts there; he read books during daytime while practicing martial arts at nights. The place where he had once practiced martial arts now became a cowshed. Hong originally had known nothing about martial arts and learnt it from our great grandfather Li Daizai. He then organized students to practice martial arts at nights where people from other villages also joined. He even talked with students in the courtyard of the temple at nights where he once confessed to his close friends: “when others rose up, I keep quiet. If I took into action, killings in the large scale will happen”. (Hong, 1985c, p. 240)

Li Yangming and Li Chensen also proved that Hong Xiuquan once said so during his stay in the lotus temple. It could be said that Hong wanted to rebel but did not do so due to the lack of power at that time. Once he had enough men and equipment, he began his mass killing of governmental officials (Hong, 1985c, p. 240). It was such a military rebellious thinking that turned God Worshippers from a religious force into a political one. Violence was permitted under the command of God to get rid of all evils. Hong actually knew benevolence of Christianity. The Ten Commandments of the Taiping Rebellion included six laws commanding people not to kill and do harm to others. The Sixth Heavenly Commandments: Thou shalt not kill or injure. He who kills another kills himself, and he who injures another injures himself, whosoever kills or injures another breaks the Heavenly Commandments. A poem reads: The world is one family and all men brothers. How can man be permitted to kill and harm the living? The outer form and the inner nature are both heaven-given. Let all be at peace, enjoy the Great Peace (Hong, 1985c, p. 240). However, just as Western Christians had never given up crusades against heresies with their proclaiming of fraternity, Hong and his followers did not apply the principle of loving your neighbors to their political enemies.³ In reviewing “New Administrative Papers” (《资政新篇》) written by Hong Rengan, Hong Xiuquan said

the imperial edict proposed by you aims to get rid of evils and regards killing demons as something unlawful which could not be eradicated; the prohibition of killing means that people should not murder others; it does not mean evil people should not be eliminated according to the law of heaven.

According to one soldier of the Taiping Army, a person who strongly refuses to pray to god is an obstinate one and thus does not deserve to be called our brother; however we will not make excessive demands of him if he destroys his idols out of battlefields (Luo & Wang, 2004d, p. 112). A violent crusade against devil was then merely “execute reverently Heaven’s punishment” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952a, p. 163).

³ Critics may say that the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom is inconsistent in its words and deeds, and does not know the difference between public and private enemies. When Christianity says love your enemy, the enemy refers to the private enemy, not the public enemy.

The Taiping Rebellion called upon people to “adore the True spirit, reject corrupt spirits; be men for once and cease to be imps of the devil” (Jian, 1967, p. 133). The devil in their minds referred to the religious devil, the red-eye snake (from the Bible). The sculpture of non-Christian gods worshipped by people was called “dead gods” while politically the devil meant the civil servants of Qing Dynasty. “Those who occupy civil offices are the devil” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952g, p. 790). Wei Changhui told his subordinates that they should “kill the devil, save the people and bear in mind to get rid of the entire evil environment so as to leave nothing immoral behind” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952b, p. 195). The Taiping Army suppressed the devil who served the Qing Dynasty severely, “wherever they conquered, all the people who serve the Qing Dynasty, including both the military and civil offices, would be killed” (Luo & Wang, 2004d, p. 37). “Those rebels recognize civil officials through the hats they wear and then kill them” (Wang, 1979, p. 22). Those dead bodies with hats on their heads would be cut off. However, it was also true that the Taiping Rebellion had employed the majority of the officials previously serving the Qing Dynasty who then surrendered to them.

5. The moment of awakening has come: The Taiping Rebellion argued the salvation lie in the present rather than the next life or the future, pushing people to come to their senses and act immediately. It claimed that “only through awakening could the man come out of the devil” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952h, p. 356) and that “the soul originally belonged to the heavenly father, what kind of people will one become if he does not awaken himself today” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952h, p. 392). Thus it combined revolution with the awakening of inner-consciousness. The slogan of Taiping Army declares that “everyone who worships the God will go to the heaven, so come and pray to the God” (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952d, p. 695). According to the imperial edict of the Taiping Rebellion,

“God had mercy on the people of the world, who were entangled by the demons, and in March God came down to earth, and in September Jesus, the Savior, came down to earth, showing innumerable powers and killing countless demons. How can the demons defeat heaven in every battle? And why is God angry? He is angry with the world for worshipping evil gods and doing evil deeds, which is a great violation of the laws of heaven. Have you not woken up yet? How fortunate is the world to see the glory of God? How fortunate is the world to be born at the right time, and to see the day of peace? Wake up, wake up!” Be born in the right day, be born in the right time, realize immediately, act immediately, regret and change quickly. (Association of Chinese Historians, 1952h, p. 381)

Such concepts are necessary for establishing a millenarian new world on earth.

It is on the basis of the five perspectives discussed above that we come to see the Taiping Rebellion as a millenarian movement. However there are still several points needing to be emphasized: First, this movement left a place for God; second, it is a violent millenarian movement which aims to establish a new world, rather than a peaceful millenarian movement which looks towards a new world, in practice, due to the ongoing battle with the Qing Dynasty, the establishment of the new world became something unfulfilled; third, it includes both political and religious, instead of mere religious elements in itself.

The Origin of Millenarianism in the Taiping Rebellion

The Taiping Rebellion claimed that the kingdom of earth had arrived on earth. It was their mission to overthrow Qing Dynasty and restore the worship of the true God. As a result of their efforts, there would be a new world in which the kingdom remained united and people enjoyed the true and forever happiness, in both this life and afterlife. It was a violent millenarian movement crossing the social, cultural, political, and

economic spheres. According to the discussion above, it has the following key features: a vision of pure land rooted in perfectionism, the coming of the Savior on earth, the inclusion of the poor mass, a violent crusade against evil with military campaigns, and the present awakening. Through a comparative study of those five elements, we could see where the origin of millenarianism in Taiping Rebellion comes from.

There are generally four sources for Hong Xiuquan's ideas: the peasant rebellion of the ancient China, Heaven and Earth Society, Confucianism, especially the ideal of a common world in *The Book of Rites* (Hong, 1985c, p. 12),⁴ and Christianity (Chen, 1985). The tradition of peasant rebellion, which is included in those four sources, could only bring the change of dynasties rather than a wish to end the old era of oppressions. Although it contains a plan for an equal distribution of wealth and social ranks, revealed in peasants' pursuit of justice, such plan does not equal to a complete negation on the whole social and political structure. The ideal of a common world is a Confucian utopianism instead of a radical millenarianism. Confucians could never imagine the coming of a savior from paradise as it only cared about personal virtues, family, nation, and all-under-heaven. Heaven and Earth Society aims to overthrow Qing Dynasty and restores Ming Dynasty. Hence it lacks an ideal for a future world founded on perfectionism. "Those social associations in the Southern China had no ideology to show that they prepared to destroy the old world. Their thoughts were not only about restoration but also contained certain conservative elements" (Fairbank & Liu, 1993, p. 143). Although Heaven and Earth Society used to use the word "Taiping" (Chen, 1985, p. 6), it did not signify the same meaning as the Taiping Rebellion. Some scholars believed that "the use of brotherhood" in the Taiping Rebellion "did not derive from Christianity, but came from Hong's own ideas" (Tao, 1985, p. 7). However this is a wrong view, for it fails to distinguish the "brother" relation in ancient China's social associations from its use in the Taiping Rebellion, namely that "all men on earth are in a universal brotherhood". The use of "brotherhood" in the former case only applies to those who are already in a close relationship while the one in the latter includes every individual and shows a universal fraternity. Hence, we could not even trace the millenarianism in the Taiping Rebellion to the Heaven and Earth Society.

Hong was heavily influenced by Western Christianity. His first encounter with Christianity happened when he read "Revelation of the World" written by Liang Fa. He then studied the Bible for three months under the guidance of the American priest Issachar Jacob Roberts in the Christian church located in Eastern Stone Corner near southern gate of Guang Zhou. During this time, he read the Chinese version of the Bible translated by German missionary Karl Gutzlaff and British missionary Walter Henry Medhurst. God Worshippers was founded by Hong Xiuquan and Feng Yunshan based on Christianity. Hong knew God Worshippers was different from western missionaries' understanding of Christianity. However, when it came to breaking down idol worship, worshipping the true God, praying for one's soul to enter the heaven and religious baptism, those two were the same. Such a common ground existed between the two has rendered some scholars to attribute

⁴ Hong Xiuquan's "Original Way to Wake up the World" wrote: "Therefore, Confucius said: 'When the Great Way is practiced, the world is for the public. Those with virtue and those with ability are chosen and used. People value trustworthiness and cultivate harmony with each other. Thus people do not treat only their parents like parents, nor do people treat only their sons like sons. That makes the aged have the appropriate last years, those in their prime have the appropriate employment, and the young have the appropriate growth and development. Elderly men with no spouses, widows, orphans, elderly people without children or grandchildren, the handicapped, the ill—all are provided for. Males have their station; females, their places to belong to. Money is thrown on the ground and thus despised; it is not necessary to store money on one's body. Labor is despised if it does not come from oneself, and it does not have to be on behalf of oneself. Therefore people don't engage in intrigue or trickery, nor do they engage in robbery, theft, and rebellion. Thus, though people leave their houses they don't close their doors. This is called the Great Together'".

millenarianism in the Taiping Rebellion to western missionaries. They even argues that all early missionaries coming to China held the view of millenarianism and God Worshippers was an example of western millenarianism spreading into China (Zhou, 2013, p. 122). However, I do not consider such an argument as justified. First, neither Liang Fa's "Revelation of the World" nor Luo Xiaoquan's explanations for the Bible contained religious doctrine of millenarianism. In fact, Liang Fa's work asked one to abide by the law and behave himself (Liang, 1979, pp. 100, 137).⁵ Its central teaching was to persuade one to cultivate virtues, be good, and believe in the true god; it did not contain religious overtones regarding establishing a kingdom of heaven. Liang's explanation for "kingdom of heaven" (kingdom of God) is the following:

the word "kingdom of heaven" has two meanings, first it means forever happiness on the heaven, which could only be enjoyed by people's soul after their bodies are dead; second, it refers to the associations of worshippers on earth who truly believe in Jesus the Christ. (Liang, 1979, p. 21)

Such an explanation is not special. Even Hong's teacher, Luo Xioquan, did not agree with his views. Although he had interpreted the Bible for both Hong Xiuquan and Hong Renxuan, he had refused to baptize Hong Xiuquan. After his several days' visit of Nanjing, he even condemned Hong harshly on the newspaper, despite the hospitality from Hong and their teacher-student relationship (Luo & Wang, 2004e).⁶ Moreover, Hong Renxuan had also told Hong Xiuquan that the God Worshippers differed from authentic Christianity in certain key perspectives. Hong Xiuquan, however, refused to change his mind. In fact, the idea of establishing a new Jerusalem in China could be derived neither from the teaching of Christian missionaries and their religious handouts at that time. One thing particularly worthy of our attention is that unlike Western Christianity, Hong and his God Worshippers aimed to establish a kingdom worshipping the true God in China through violence. It is clear that western missionaries could accept neither their means of violence nor their regime for believers.

From my own perspective, it would be better to say that the millenarianism which included in the Taiping Rebellion mostly came from Hong's creative interpretation and revision of Christianity. It is both the result of combining foreign religion with local culture and Hong and his followers' response to China's backwardness and deep crisis in the face of modernity which originated in the west. This kind of millenarianism is clearly revealed in Hong Xiuquan's account of the strange dream "entering the heaven". The dream itself was not an artificially created myth. After his failure in the imperial examination, Hong, feeling depressed, suffered from a terrible disease for months. It was during this time that he dreamt about entering the heaven. Not only did he see his heavenly father, mother, brother, and aunt there, but he also witnessed the punishment of Confucius. In the end, he was forced to descend to earth due to the Heavenly father's command and given the name "the King of Taiping". Official accounts in the Taiping Rebellion had described such a dream for several times (Wang, 1986, pp. 3, 7, 11; Hong, 1985c, p. 34; Office of Local Chronicles Compilation of Guangxi Dong Autonomous

⁵ For example, "A poor man's heart is always at peace when he keeps his duty; a rich man's heart is always happy when he admires goodness and righteousness", and "It is in accordance with the Lord's commandment that all people at the top and bottom should keep their duty".

⁶ A letter from Reverend Luo Xiaoquan was published in the "Beihua Jie Bao" on February 4, 1862. After living in Tianjing for 15 months, Luo Xiaoquan changed his past support for the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. He said, "I am not opposed to Hong Xiuquan from a purely personal standpoint, for he has always been very kind to me", but that he considered Hong Xiuquan a "madman" and that the leaders of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom were incapable of forming a government that would be better than the aging Qing government in protecting the interests of the people. Their religion was "at best an ornament to promote and spread his (Hong Xiuquan's) own political religion".

Region, 1961, pp. 1-2).⁷ It is such a dream that made the Taiping Rebellion to meet the general criteria of millenarianism. It included both a definition of the “evil” and a sense of “redemption”. It also pointed out a Savior who, under the command and the sword given by the God, was permitted to bear the task getting rid of the evil existed on earth. Originally Hong did not understand the meaning of such a dream. It was not until six years later when his cousin borrowed “Revelation of the World” from him and then recommended him to read it carefully that he realized how the book perfectly resembled his wild dream. He then came to believe that he had received God’s teaching and command. Since then, his dream became mixed up with Christian Bible. The dream itself occupied a higher position than that of the Bible. Hong made effort to understand the meaning of such a dream in detail and did not forget it even near the end of the Taiping Rebellion and his own life. He constantly used his new dreams to justify his own actions (Luo & Wang, 2004g, p. 74; 2004h, p. 77). When the text of the Bible and the interpretations Christian experts contradicted with his own dreams, Hong always held on to his dreams, rather than revising them based on the Bible (Luo & Wang, 2004a, p. 346).⁸ There is no doubt that God Worshippers could not be entirely separated from Christianity. However, the millenarianism in the Taiping Rebellion arose from its difference with Christianity. What made it different, then, is Hong’s own unique theology. Both Hong and followers believed that such a theology came from God’s guidance for Hong. One soldier in the Taiping Army said Hong’s authority over the Bible was due to the fact that his guidance came after the Bible (Luo & Wang, 2004f, p. 122).

Conclusion

The Taiping Rebellion is a radical mass movement with the sense of redemption. However, it has never become a full-millenarian movement. Contrary to the popular belief, Confucianism and Christianity restrained, rather than helped, it became a typical millenarian movement. The Confucian conservatism and secularism rendered the rebels to be unwilling to break away completely with the existing institutions and ideas. Christianity prevented the rebellion from becoming a totalitarian movement based on one particular closed ideology, and centering on one particular charismatic leader. Moreover, after establishing the capital in Nanjing, the demand for public administration institutionalization also tempered the original radical element of the movement.

Hong Xiuquan said that like other parts of the world, Chinese people had once worshipped the true God. It was China’s divergence from such a path after Qin Dynasty that led to its present rule under the devil. “Chinese people now do not know and fear the God” (原道觉世训). Such an argument was made with the clear aim of

⁷ See the Taiping Heavenly Chronicle. In the dialogue between Heavenly Father, Heavenly Brother, and Heavenly King, there are also several references to Hong Xiuquan’s experience in heaven (Wang, 1986, pp. 3, 7, 11). *The Thousand Character Imperial Edict* made by Hong wrote as the following: In the spring of Dingyou Year, it was warm and comfortable. I was invited by God, my Father, guided and lifted into the heaven. Father sitting there waiting for me. He pointed to me the roots and causes of the current crisis and ordered me to wipe them out and clear off them with sword. Father also gave me some sweet fruits to eat and talked with me. It was not until one morning of Guimao Year that I wake up from that long sleep. The details of the Dream fit up with the Bible I found. From then on I started to travel around and try to wake up all the heroes of our nation (Hong, 1985c, p. 34). Li Xiucheng’s description is different in detail, “One day the King of Heaven suddenly fell ill, this was the year of Dingyou. He came back to life seven days after he died. Since his resurrection, he has been speaking the words of heaven, with few words of this world, urging the world to worship God and advising people to practice goodness” (Office of Local Chronicles Compilation of Guangxi Dong Autonomous Region, 1961, pp. 1-2).

⁸ For example, regarding the explanation of the “Trinity”, the description of God’s appearance and the members of God’s family, Hong Xiuquan insisted that “I have personally gone to the high heavens and have seen much of the Heavenly Father, much of the Heavenly Mother, much of the Brotherhood, and much of the Sisterhood, and it is the same in heaven and on earth. To see is better than to hear”.

converting the mass, since otherwise people would hate God Worshippers for their promotion of a foreign religion. However, Christianity is a universal religion and for Chinese people in the 19th century, especially the poor mass, it is not difficult to accept worshipping the true God. Therefore, Hong's purpose was never solely to spread Christianity, but to establish a new political world ruled by Chinese themselves, feared the authority of the God and inhabited by virtuous people. So Hong's God Worshippers religion may be regarded as some type of political religion in the sense of Eric Voegelin (Voegelin, 2000b).

The Taiping Rebellion is China's earliest experiment on its road of modernization and hence becomes a milestone in Chinese revolutionary movements. We have to analyze the Taiping Rebellion, which happened in the mid-19th century under a framework of modernization and the adjustment of relations between politics and religion. What made this period special is not merely the expansion of world capitalism and the breakdown of agrarian society, but also significant political and regional challenges faced by the old ruling structure of a royal dynasty and the awakening of the intellectuals and the mobilization of the popular. At that time, there were different forms of millenarian movements around the whole globe. All of them allowed the ordinary mass to enter the historical stage and promised a perfect earthly kingdom in the future. Although they adhered to different religions and ideologies, such as Protestantism, anarchism, socialism, and communism, their basic mode of thinking and acting were nearly the same. We could say the millenarianism in the Taiping Rebellion was derived from a Sinization of Christianity in some sense, but we could not say it was only a result of the spread of western millenarianism. The millenarianism in the Taiping Rebellion helped to pave the way for the following Chinese total revolutions. It devoted to saving the nation and provided a way out of the crisis, but meanwhile brought about another type of political and social disaster with its violent fanaticism. We could attribute the populism, radicalism, and comprehensiveness or totalism in the following modern Chinese revolutions all to the millenarianism in the Taiping Rebellion.

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