

HUMAN NATURE, SUFFERING AND HOPE: SINO-CHRISTIAN ELEMENTS IN THE APOCALYPTIC VISION OF HONG XIUQUAN AND THE TAIPING TIANGUO REBELLION OF THE 19TH CENTURY CHINA

Tianyi YUAN¹

*Harvard Divinity School &
Institute for Peace Studies in Eastern Christianity,
United States of America
tyuan@hds.harvard.edu*

Abstract:

The scope of this paper is to review the interplay between apocalyptic narratives emerging from Christianity, Confucianism and Chinese folk religion in the vision of Hong Xiuquan (a charismatic rebel leader during the 19th century China), and the eruption of the bloody Taiping Tianguo rebellion. While offering a short historical and theological synopsis, I argue that Hong Xiuquan's apocalyptic rhetoric and the Taiping Tianguo rebellion were ignited by the actual suffering of the Han peasants at the hand of Qing government, and was ideologically informed by the Chinese and Christian doctrines of suffering and hope for a free, fair and flourishing world of grand peace; a world which can only be sustained by God Himself.

Keywords: Apocalypse, China, Christianity, Confucianism, Folk Religion, Hong Xiuquan, Millennialism, Taiping Tianguo Rebellion.

Introduction

Can the Kingdom of God be established on earth through human hope and power? The quick answer is “no” because human beings are simply lim-

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Giovanni B. Bazzana for his patience and encouragement in his course, where a more expanded version of this paper was presented; I would like to thank Dr. Marian Gh. Simion for his conscious editing work and generous guidance; and I would like to thank Mr. James K. Fanning for his painstaking help on correcting my English grammar and syntax.

ited in their capacity and persistence. There are many lessons from our human history about the disasters of attempting to build a perfect, post-millennial, utopian society in this world. In addition, as an Anglo-American proverb says, “the road to hell is paved with good intention.” Although good intention is a crucial source for the betterment of the world, it has to be materialized with balanced, pragmatic, and realistic methods to alleviate people’s suffering. Nevertheless, the hope to establish the Heavenly Kingdom on the earth can still be a vision and spiritual framework in our minds.

I saw my speculative worldview more concretely in the Taiping Tianguo rebellion 太平天國運動/起義 (1851–1864), which this paper attempts to explore. The name Taiping Tianguo means The Heavenly Kingdom of Grand Peace. As the name indicates, Taiping Tianguo carries a universal hope. However, Taiping Tianguo became one of the deadliest historical events in human history. Taiping Tianguo rebellion occurred in China, during the late Manchu-founded Qing Dynasty (1644–1912); an era of suffering exhausted by the growing population, hunger, poverty, and imperialist encroachments. In my view, the Taiping Tianguo rebellion was a disastrous millennium movement not only in the eve of modern China, but also one of the most fatal events in human history. The Taiping Tianguo rebellion was originally one of the many small-scale village rebellions rooted in an otherworldly, anti-social, and egalitarian cult. This sort of anti-imperial uprising happened almost in each imperial dynasty of China, e.g., Taiping Dao 太平道 rebellion during the Late Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) and Red Turban Maitreyan rebellion 紅巾起義 during the Mongol-Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE).

Before Hong Xiuquan chose to rebel against the imperial government, there were already two other large-scale *Han peasant rebellions*,² which were led by secret cults, against the Manchu imperial regime, i.e., 白蓮教起義 White-Lotus Rebellion³ (1796–1804) and 捻軍起義 Nian-Jun

2 農民起義 (nong-min-qi-yi), or peasant rebellion against imperial class and bureaucracy. It is a term favored by Chinese communist intellectual system.

3 白蓮教起義 (bai-lian-jiao-qi-yi) (1796 – 1804), or *White-Lotus Rebellion*, was a rebellion centered on the cult of White Lotus (Bai-Lian-Jiao) that was based upon the Chinese version of Maitreya 彌勒 belief. The millennial teaching was that Maitreya, or the Buddha of the future and of the world of Long-Hua, will deliver all the faithful from the world of suffering, to his own cosmos of Joy and peace. Interestingly enough, one of their soteriological teachings of Maitreya Buddhas, which says that “Maitreya’s coming

Rebellion⁴ (1851–1868). Essentially, these two rebellions were composed of peasants who suffered from hunger and were attracted by their *charismatic* leaders who took *cult-religious* and almost always *millennial* authority to renew to current world-order. After the death of Hong Xiuquan, there was also a more universally notorious religious rebellion against Qing Empire, i.e. 義和拳 (團) 運動, i.e., Yi-He-Quan (Tuan) or the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901).⁵ These cult rebels believe that their devotion and courage will help them to defeat the Manchurian imperial forces and western rifles and battle ships. As Scott Lowe suggests in his article, “Chinese Millennial Movement,” China, especially during the late Qing era, was “a hotbed of peasant unrest” or a cradle for millennial movements, since it was never lacking suffering and disappointment, and secret religious societies that often planned to replace the current governmental force in the light of a mystical world order.⁶

will bring *years of great peace and prosperity* (i.e. 太平之年, *Tai-Ping-Zhi-Nian*),” also used the same terminology, Taiping, with Hong Xiuquan. In addition, much as Hong’s millennial dream to *renew the sinful world according to an otherworldly world-order*, the cult of Maitreya also teaches: “Establish another universe and changes the world, and again lays down the principles of human relationships.” / “to rule the world on he half of heaven.” (Daniel L. Overmyer, 126, 128) Quoted in Sponberg, Alan., Helen Hardacre, and Princeton University. *Maitreya, the Future Buddha / Edited by Alan Sponberg, Helen Hardacre*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

4 捻軍起義 (nian-Jun-qi-yi) or Nian-Jun Rebellion, (1851 – 1868), was centered on a secreted Chinese folk sorcery, that was originally meant to bring health to people. However, it assimilated some basic of teachings of White-Lotus Rebellion and developed into an anti-Manchu rebellion that is contemporary to Hong Xiuquan’s Tai-Ping Tianguo Rebellion (1851 – 1872). Members of two rebellions occasionally jointed together, regardless of their distinct theist background, to crash the imperial force. For example, in the Battle of Gaolouzhai,

5 義和拳 (團) 運動, the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), it is better to be translated as *the Movement that is United By Righteousness*. It is rooted in Chinese occult martial art and religious society. It developed into the anti-imperialist, anti-invasion, and anti-Christian movement. Its basic teaching can be explained by one of its poems: 1) China’s drought, hunger, and moral decadence, were caused by the building of Churches, and demonic western facilities, e.g. railroad, and electric lines. 2) Martial arts such as *Qi’gong*, as acts that unite the natural force of human beings and the nature, can help each believer to become invulnerable to sabers, spears, and the bullets (刀槍不入). 3) Help the Qing empire to create an eternal peaceful and united regime by expelling all the demonic force of the Western imperialists.

6 Scott Lowe, “Chinese Millennial Movements,” in Catherine Wessinger, *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 307, 310.

However, what makes the Taiping Tianguo interesting and perhaps unique is the fact that it was anchored into an indigenized Christian cult. The Taiping Tianguo regime quickly gained power with several successful campaigns against the almost useless imperial army, and established its “Heavenly Capital” in Nanjing. Yet, as their vanity grew in the comfort and wealth provided by the rich city of Nanjing, the Taiping Tianguo regime instantly lost its capacity to judge realistically and to remain faithful to its original ideals. Furthermore, it became a most corrupted, complacent, and blood-thirsty regime that ever existed in the Chinese history. Taiping Tianguo was eventually crushed by a militia led by straight-headed peasants and Confucian generals 鄉勇 such as Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 and his brothers’ Hunan Army 湘軍 and Li Hongzhang 李鴻章’s Anhui Army 淮軍. After the rebellion was completely crushed, more than fifty million Chinese people were killed, many historical sites were burned down, and many cultural legacies were torn into pieces on account of their idolatries. Furthermore, the Qing dynasty lost its remaining energy to revitalize and modernize itself.

Objectively speaking, the Tianping Tianguo rebellion—which was composed of hungry peasants, talented village-gang leaders, and religious charlatans—was triggered by famine and economic decadence following the imperialist intervention, and dissatisfaction with the corrupted Qing government. However, idealistically speaking, the Tianping Tianguo rebellion strove to remove suffering and establish a perfect, egalitarian, and all-righteous heavenly kingdom of God on earth with a militant millennial ideal inspired by Christianity. The “heavenly” regime was theocratic and, in many ways, it was anchored in Christian religious ideals such as mutual love between the poor and the rich, and equality between men and women. Yet, the reality was different as the Tianping Tianguo rebellion failed to implement such ideals, was short-lived, and it quickly became much more corrupted than the Qing government.

The Taiping Tianguo (1851–1864) rebellion was led by a man named Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1814–1864). Hong Xiuquan was a poor man of Hakka/Kejia 客家人⁷, who lived in the mountainous area at the border between today’s Guangdong and Guangxi providences. Hong was a poor student and village tutor, who could not pass the im-

⁷ Hakka/Kejia is a subgroup of Han ethnicity.

perial exams to be qualified as a candidate for mandarin-ship. He tried four times to pass the imperial exams, as a young man and as a man of middle age. However, Hong failed. He was disenchanted, traumatized, and tattered; finding his refuge and comfort in an impending apocalypse, which would eventually restore his dignity. Hong's apocalyptic vision was actually a mixture of Chinese folk beliefs in the existence of trials after death, and some Christian beliefs that he heard from some unknown Protestant missionaries. For instance, Hong was inspired by one of the first Chinese protestant missionary's catechist booklet titled 《勸世良言》 or the *Good Words that Exhort the Mundane*. As he often fell into comas, Hong claimed to have had paranormal experiences and apocalyptic visions of *Yesu Jidu* (Jesus Christ) several times. Hong was informed by *Yesu Jidu*, or his heavenly older brother 天兄, that he is the younger brother of Christ, born of the same heavenly father 天父. Hong was given a heavenly demon exterminating sword, which was named Snow in the Cloud 雲中雪, to kill all the "Manchurian demons/monsters" 滿妖, and establish a Heavenly kingdom 天國 for his Heavenly Father 天父 that is full of grand peace 太平 on earth. Among his fellow countrymen, and in his village, he declared himself to be *the brother of Jesus Christ* and the *Heaven King* 天王. Hong instantly attracted many poor people with the slogan "We will all eat rice together; we will all dress up with clothes together; and we will all spend money together," as well as the promise of his *Heavenly Kingdom of Grand Peace*.

Since Taiping Tianguo rebellion has some eclectic/loosely indigenized Christian elements and was considered by many historians as an extremely harmful event for the modernization of China, Taiping Tianguo rebellion is also an internationally studied topic. For instance, American Sinologist Dr. Jonathan Spencer wrote a comprehensive book called *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*, which elaborates upon the historical and religious aspects of Taiping Tianguo and upon Hong Xiuquan. Based upon Dr. Spencer's book, the Taiping Tianguo rebellion is to be understood as a millennial movement led by a charismatic leader, because at its foundation, the movement presented features such as: 1) a vision of cosmological renewal, 2) an aim to end the suffering of this world, 3) and a purpose to establish a Heavenly society that has no suffering, hunger, and selfishness.

Hong Xiuquan and his Traumatic Experience

Within this hopeless historical context, Hong also suffered from an individual trauma or deep disappointment, which was a *direct* and proximate cause and sustaining dynamic for his life-long apocalyptic vision. Like the historical context, the early story of Hong Xiuquan also tells that suffering was a fundamental cause for his apocalyptic vision. As a poor Confucian student from a poor family, Hong Xiuquan aspired to and was expected by his large family to pass the *Keju*, 科舉, or the “Imperial Civil Service Examination.” The *Ke Ju* was the only daunting path in China after Song Dynasty (960–1279) for sons of commoners to demonstrate their merits and work ethics to win their opportunities to be selected as *scholar-officials* and *mandarins*, who were the ruling elites in China after the 10th century.⁸ Like most of the other impoverished rural students who were burdened with agrarian family duties, Hong was not fortunate or prepared enough to pass the second level of the “Imperial Civil Service Exam.”⁹ Therefore, Hong had to work as a rural Confucian teacher to earn living substance for himself and family by teaching other poor family’s children Confucian classics, while working hard to pass the examination. However, the examination only took place once every three years, and after he failed it for the fourth time, Hong lost his hope for better life. According to Spence, after he failed the exam the third time, he *fainted*, and had his first apocalyptic vision.

In some sense, Hong Xiuquan’s apocalyptic vision was also an experience of conversion, which happens organically from its root, namely suffering, to its fruit, i.e., the hope to establish a better world for the Christian God. At first, Hong Xiuquan experienced a traumatic disappointment

8 A verse from a folk poem indicates: “Not until I have experienced the loneliness and bitterness of my humble studio for ten years, I could demonstrate my talent’s altitude and my intellect’s vastitude.”

In order to win the hearts of their hardworking and wise subjects, even the Manchurian leaders permitted the continuance of this practice in order to select qualified Han scholars from commoner as their secondary co-rulers.

9 The Imperial Service Exam was divided into four steps with four degrees. The first and lowest degree is called Xiu-Cai after a Confucian scholar passed the exam in his home district (Xian), which is often rural. The second degree is called Ju-ren, after a Xiu-cai passed the exam in his department (Fu). Then there is an exam in the capital, called Jin-shi, and the highest level for the most prestigious scholars in the Royal court—Hanlin.

that was caused by failing four times to pass the Imperial Service exam. Then, he saw an *unknown* white beard man, who was dressed in pre-Qing style black robe, who gave him the sword to slay all the demons in China.¹⁰ According to Theodore Hamberg, who was a missionary who actually met and had theological conversations with Hong, Hong's vision started with the grotesque vision of Yang-Luo-Wang 閻羅王, or the Chinese Lord of Death, during his long coma after his failure of the examination.¹¹ According to Chinese folk beliefs, facing Yan-Luo-Wang in dream predicts forthcoming death.

Individual Experience vs. Social Context

It is both a Chinese and western misconception that Hong Xiuquan's individual apocalyptic experience is essentially Christian, which abruptly intervened in his humble life. However, borrowing from Michael Stone's theory of apocalyptic visions, Hong Xiuquan's apocalyptic vision demonstrates was a developmental and dialectic interplay between Hong's own suffering and his Chinese cultural context, which was also formed by China's long history of suffering. In addition, it is worthy to highlight that Hong Xiuquan was exposed to Protestant missionary influences in particular ways, which could not be presumed or speculated.¹²

To continue with Stone's theory, Hong's apocalyptic vision is both individual and societal, and both Chinese and Christian. Hong's intellectu-

10 Mentioned also in Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 221.

11 Theodore Hamberg, *The Visions of Hung-Siu-Tshuen and Origin of the Kwang-Si Insurrection*, 9.

12 Michael E. Stone, *A Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions*, HTR 96 (2003), 169 – 170.

A point must be made clear: Hong Xiuquan was not uneducated, incorrigibly mad and totally ignorant of basic Christian doctrines. He might have better-than-average understanding of the Book of Revelation, as he was able to discuss and impressed American Protestant missionaries such as Issachar Robert with his interpretation of the Scripture. In addition, Hong Xiuquan had thorough knowledge of Chinese Christian Liang Afa's evangelizing booklet *Quan-shi-Liang-Yan*. Nevertheless, Hong was still deeply entrenched in Chinese folk religious concern and spiritual practice. Although Hong held governing millennial ideal and commitment to purify China, as the second brother of Jesus Christ, Hong eventually acted for his selfish benefit as a rebellious bandit. For instance, he selected more than a hundred concubines as his "heavenly concubines" after he was stupefied by his own successes.

al and religious foundation was formed by three sources: First, Confucian intellectual framework which was left from his education during his youth. Second, complex and deeply entrenched folk Chinese beliefs and practices, especially those which are associated with the culture of suffering. Third, Hong's not perfect understanding, yet deep and sufficiently speculative approach to Christianity was rooted in some Protestant missionary teaching which spread throughout 19th century China. Within Hong's mind and hope, these three sources create a dream and self-righteous confidence to renew the world. Nevertheless, suffering is still a dynamic foundation. Stone's theory of the dialectic or interaction between individual apocalyptic vision or experience, and social-cultural context and symbols helps to elucidate Hong Xiuquan's eclectic and developmental apocalyptic visions and experiences.

Chinese and Protestant Symbols in Hong Xiuquan's Apocalyptic Vision

Hong Xiuquan's apocalyptic vision is eclectic. In their foundational stage, Hong's apocalyptic visions were caused by the Chinese symbols from folk religions and beliefs which had a long period of association with Chinese history of suffering, poverty, and millennialism. As aforementioned, Hong Xiuquan started to have his apocalyptic vision *before* he recognized that the old man in black with white beard, who commanded him to slay demons, is the Christian God Jehovah, or 耶和華, Ye-He-Hua, in Chinese.¹³

Hong Xiuquan's rebellious principles were heavily inspired by the darker aspect of Chinese cultures that took its shape during the extensive period of suffering, e.g., famine, disease, war, corruption, within Chinese history. As Spence has pointed out from a developmental psychologic aspect, Hong's childhood was filled with Chinese folk beliefs, and these cultural religiosity and mentality had been stamped in the mind of Hong, even though he converted to Christianity. Suffering and disappointment are also embodied in many parts of the folk culture of China, which equally shaped Hong's apocalyptic vision. According to a popular Chinese folk

13 Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*, 1st ed, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2012, 16.

theist anthology, which is called 《玉錄》 *Yülu*, or *Jade Record*, Yang-Luo-Wang 閻羅王, or the Chinese deity of death and judge of the deceased in the underworld, will severely punish each doer of venial or fatal sins. There will be harsh and meticulous *trials* or *inquisitions* of each deceased person.¹⁴ Those who were greedy, arrogant, and negligent of the poor during their life will received correlating punishments, e.g., peeling of the skin, having one's belly and chest cut and pulled out of his or her heart while he or she is still alive. Meanwhile, Yang-Luo-Wang rewards those who are good but meek in their lives. Interestingly, *Yülu* suggests that those who will be rewarded are severely outnumbered by those who will be punished. However, besides those extremely gruesome and violent punishments, those posthumous rewards for good people suggest that within the Chinese folk beliefs and legends, there are always dim but dynamic hope for the reward for the good and punishment for the evil. Hong likely inherited this Chinese sense of the need of merciless punishment of those who refuse to submit to justice, which imprinted itself upon Hong's apocalyptic mentality.

Interestingly, Hong's entering into the palace of Heaven in his dream during his post-failure soma is parallel to an entering into the torturing house of Yan-Luo-Wang. For instance, rather than being disemboweled, Hong Xiuquan has all his inner organs renewed with heavenly new ones.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Hong Xiuquan was theologically inspired by Christianity via Protestant evangelic texts in Chinese, e.g., Liang Afa's 《勸世良言》 *Quan Shi Liang Yan*. According to Spence, Hong Xiquan received *Quan Shi Liang Yan* from a foreigner, who dressed untimely yet graceful like a Pre-Qing Han Chinese, when he was twenty-two and before he failed the examination the third time in 1836.¹⁶ The influence of those

14 (Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 45) (I can include a photo here.)

15 *Taiping Tianri*, as reproduced in *Taiping Tianguo yinshu*, vol. 1, item 3m p. 4. Also quoted Spence, *God's Chinese Son* 47

16 梁(阿)發 Liang Afa (1789 - 1855) is the second Chinese Protestant convert, and first Chinese Protestant minister and evangelist. He was from a poor family and had only very preliminary Confucian *paideia*. However, under the support of Scottish protestant missionary William Milne, Liang became versed in the Bible and Protestant teaching, and also became a co-missionary to Minister Milne. Liang is the author of *Quan Shi Liang Yan*, "Good Words for Exhorting the Age," which is a Protestant evangelic text that inspires Hong Xiuquan to delve into the teaching of Christianity. 《勸世良言》 *Quan Shi Liang Yan* is an anthology of Liang Afa's evangelic articles, which discuss fundamental Christian scriptural teaching, theology, ethics, and condescending criticism of

evangelical texts upon Hong Xiquan is hard to evaluate. As Spence has speculated, *Quan Shi Liang Yan* introduced Hong Xiuquan some Christian interpretation of the *earthly sin* and the notion of the trial of Jehovah, which may echo *Hong Xiuquan's* native millennial framework and root, which can be found in *Yülu*. Therefore, Christian and native apocalyptic and millennial culture mixed within Hong Xiuquan's mind and together engendered his determination to cleanse the idolatrous and sinful world via his own force and brutality.¹⁷

Hong Xiuquan's Heavenly Brotherhood with 耶穌基督 Yesu Jidu, i.e., Jesus Christ

Hong Xiuquan also had a highly speculative interpretation of the paternal relationship between Christ and Jehovah, and the Christian notion of the brotherhood between Christians and also between Christians and Christ. Hong seems to believe that *he himself* took the place of a typical Christian apocalyptic hero to inform and renew the world with the Heavenly order.¹⁸ Hong Xiuquan also declared that Christ spoke to him direct on the Pingnan Mountain, in the autumn of 1848. Ye-Su, the "Heavenly brother" says,

"Hong Xiuquan, my own younger brother, can it be you do not know the astral prophecy of the dragon demon? The dragon of the sea is this same leader of the demon devils, and he that the people of world call the devil Yan Luo (Wang)¹⁹ is that same dragon of the Eastern Sea. He is the one who can change his form, and deceives the souls of those who live on earth. When you, some time ago, came up to Heaven, and together with the great army of the

Chinese native religious practice and superstitions. I surmise that if Hong Xiuquan has understood the whole anthology, he must have substantial understanding of Christianity. I fortunately found a full original Chinese version recently (See the final index attached to a Biography of Liang Afa):http://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/HKBUC/CCLOC/c260_lolf.pdf (Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 30 – 31)

17 Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 32; Also see the last chapter of *Quanshi Liangyan*, which address the trial of God on each human being.

18 *Ibid.*, 373; This also echoes DiTommaso's definition of an apocalyptic mind set, that is to "transmit information from the heavenly/transcendent reality to this (world's) transcendent reality" (DiTommaso 447)

19 Or the Chinese deity of death.

Heavenly host fought against the square headed right red eyed demon devil leader that tool was him. Have you now forgotten that?²⁰

Hong Xiuquan's anti-Manchurian; anti-demon; and anti-idolatry principles, were ideally supported by his complex apocalyptic visions. The dragon of the sea, which deceives the Chinese, might be comparable to the apocalyptic dragon and Satan, who was released and was deceiving the nations during a millennial year (Rev. 20:2, 8). However, the description of the dragon also follows the Chinese astrological beliefs and folk religious veneration of Yan Luo Wang, or the god of death and posthumous punishment. Furthermore, Hong Xiuquan even gives his reply to "Jesus Christ," as the record continues,

and as the heavenly King (i.e., Hong Xiuquan) replied: "I would have forgotten had my heavenly elder brother not reminded me."²¹

By articulating his apocalyptic vision, Hong Xiuquan seems to declare that he alone as an individual, was warranted as the agent to slay the devil or the dragon, which can be disguised under various forms such as Manchus or Yan-Luo-Wang, in this world being corrupted by them.

Following Lorenzo DiTommaso's description of a *horizontal apocalypse*, Hong had an apocalyptic vision from Jehovah within many *Heavenly Journeys during his dreams*.²² According to the long passage cited above, another central theme of Hong's vision is his kinship and abiding intimacy with Jesus, as Hong Xiuquan claimed that he was informed by both Ye-he-hua, or Jehovah, and Ye-Su, or Jesus, that he is the other Son of the Christian monotheistic God.²³ In other words, Christ Jesus is Hong's *biological brother*, who has His inalienable support every minute.

In addition, according to another one of Hong's *Heavenly* apocalyptic visions during his retreat in the winter of 1848, Confucius was punished in Heaven, and even whipped publicly by the Heavenly God the

20 《天兄聖旨》 *Tianxiong Shengzhi* (lit. *The Sacred Edict from (my) Heavenly Older Brother*), 1:3b-4, Quoted Spence 221. Italics added

21 《天兄聖旨》 *Tianxiong Shengzhi* (lit. *The Sacred Edict from (my) Heavenly Older Brother*), 1:3b-4, Quoted Spence 221.

22 Lorenzo DiTommaso, "Apocalyptic Historiography", EC 10 (2019), pp. 435-460, 441, 456.

23 《天兄聖旨》 *Tianxiong Shengzhi* (lit. *The Sacred Edict from (my) Heavenly Older Brother*), 1:3b-4, Quoted Spence 221.

Father for “descending” into the human world to spread imperfect teachings.²⁴ In addition, in the same vision, Hong Xiuquan was informed that all the teachings of Confucius and Confucianism must be burned during the era of Taiping Tianguo that will come. This apocalyptic vision is also an epitome for Hong’s break from his Chinese background, and perhaps personal past as a rural Confucian teacher who was disappointingly unable to use Confucian teaching to pass the Imperial Service Exam.²⁵ Therefore, with the constant direct reminders from Christ Jesus and those Chinese popular other-worldly symbols, which are often associated with suffering and supernatural power to quell the force of evil, Hong recalled his duty to cleanse the sins of world.

Hong Xiuquan’s Apocalyptic Hope

The apocalyptic visions of Hong Xiuquan, which were triggered by suffering, developed into Hong’s apocalyptic hope, confidence, or sense of being *elected* for the mission to *renew* the world. This apocalyptic confidence or millennial fortitude was spread by Hong Xiuquan to his followers. According to many poems that were written by Hong Xiuquan, Hong had a vivid belief that he was appointed by Jehovah as the Heavenly King, or 天王 (Tian-wan) in Chinese, on the earth to slay the Manchurian demons and all the Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian idolators.²⁶ Hong’s “Demon exter-

24 *Tianxiong shengzhi*, 1: 5b – 6; Spence, *God’s Chinese Son*, 226.

25 Liang, *Quanshi Liangyan*, 25 – 26 (1/5-6), Quoted Spence 59 and 60. In addition, according to *Quanshi Liangyan* (see footnotes 22), which Hong Xiuquan most likely understood very well after he failed the fourth time, Confucianism, which has been utilized and ruined by the Royal Service Exam, became a bane of many scholars. Many scholars, or perhaps most of the scholars who could not pass the exam, pray vainly to Wenchang and Kuixing, or two Chinese deities of Confucian students and literature, throughout their entire life, yet they never passed the exam. Interestingly, Confucius and Confucianism, was also condemned and chastised by many young Chinese students during the New Culture Movement or a possibly cultural millennial decade in China (1910s – 1920s). Hong’s break from Confucianism in some sense suggests his liberation from a decaying tradition and wish to cling to a new other-worldly tradition. I think Hong’s rejection of Confucius and embracing of “new” Jehovah is parallel to many young Chinese during the New Cultural Movement, who believe that breaking from an old tradition and clinging to science and democracy, which were introduced from the West, will save themselves and all the Chinese.

26 Spence, *God’s Chinese Son*, 48.

minating Sword,” which is named poetically as 雲中雪 (Yun-Zhong-Xue) or “Snows-in-the-clouds,”²⁷ was also recorded by a Protestant missionary, Hamberg.²⁸ The poem of Hong Xiuquan’s sword says,

With the three-foot sword (Jian) in our hand,
Do we quiet the sea and the land.
Surrounding by ocean, all forming on clan,
Dwells man in harmonious union.
We seize all the Demons, and shut them up
In the cords of the earth,
We gather the traitors, and let them fall
In the heavenly net.
All the four parts of the world
Depend on the sovereign pole.
The sun, the moon, and the stars
Join in in the chorus of triumph.
The tigers roar, the dragon sings,
The world is full of light.
When over all Great Peace (太平) prevails,
O! what a state of bliss.²⁹

As aforementioned, Hong Xiuquan’s vision has to be understood in Chinese religious terms and symbols, as well as a little recognition of some basic apocalyptic ideals. According to Hong Xiuquan’s early apocalyptic vision, the long-cherished Chinese hope of 太平, *Taiping*, or the *Grand or Great Peace of Equity* has to be reached by the Sword through Hong Xiuquan’s own diligence, hope, and power. In Chinese culture, 劍 *Jian*, or straight sword, on account of its straight, long, and lean double blades, is the weapon that is often associated with the force of justice and refined virtue. *Jian*, or slender double-bladed light sword, was also a weapon favored by historical Han-Chinese generals,³⁰ wandering vigilantes, as well as many Chinese martial deities and protectors, e.g., Zhen-Wu-Da-Di or the protector of Ming Dynasty.³¹ In Hong Xiuquan’s vision, the “Demon

27 Which is very white, and probably represents purity and sinlessness.

28 Hamberg, *The Vision of Hung-Siu-tshuen*, 11.

29 Hamberg, *The Vision of Hung-Siu-tshuen*, 24.

30 The Manchurian warriors, on the other hand, on account of their favor of cavalry warfare, preferred curved single-blade horse sabers (Yaodao).

31 玄 (真) 武大帝 Xuan (Zhen)-Wu-Da-Di is the personified astral god of Big

Exterminating Sword” given by Jehovah interestingly echoes the Sword of God in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1: 16; 19:19–21). In Hong’s poem, the sword that was given by Jehovah symbolizes his graced authority to cleanse the sins of the world. Rather than simply condemning the world, Hong determines to clean away its sin only by means of wars and punishments. The Chinese native cosmology might not separate the spiritual and the corporeal world, however, the verses by Hong do reflect his determination to create a “Heavenly kingdom” of peace, or *Tianguo* on the earth through killing the demons, namely the Manchus and idolaters.

Hong Xiuquan’s Charisma as the Chosen Heavenly King³²

Hong Xiuquan was a *charismatic apocalyptic* leader who earned the loyalty of people by means of sharing his apocalyptic vision as well as by appealing to the suffering shared by those impoverished peasants and other plebians. As a trained former Confucian scholar and teacher, rather than simply bearing his suffering alone, Hong Xiuquan was eloquent enough to teach and form thoughts to call the poor and uneducated peasants’ attention and loyalty. Hong Xiuquan often created the impression that his followers and himself were sharing the experience of suffering and were creating the single Heavenly Kingdom together. Among his supporters, Hong Xiuquan, the Heavenly King, was deemed moralistically confident and graced by Jehovah.³³

According to his apocalyptic vision, Hong Xiuquan was the “chosen one” to lead the apocalyptic or millennial work of Jehovah and Christ Jesus in China. In Hong’s vision, we also see the apocalyptic pattern of suffering and hope. In addition, Hong’s experience is not only an individual, but also Chinese and Christian. Despite of its utopian ideal and perhaps hypocritical disguise, Hong’s apocalyptic vision and millennial hope still reflect a

Dipper. He is also a just Chinese heavenly general who wishes to protect all from the harassment of demons. He was appointed as the national god of protection of the Ming empire (1368 – 1644), which was the last Chinese Dynasty established by the Han people before it was substituted by the Manchurian Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1912).

32 Dawson, “Charismatic Leadership in Millennial Movements,” 117.

33 However, Hong’s individual apocalyptic experience seems to convey a self-centered apocalyptic message, or individualistic apocalyptic duty against tyranny and evil. Nevertheless, Hong Xiuquan did not declare himself as the Messiah. In addition, the notion of prophesy in his apocalyptic visions seems to be absent.

robust confidence to represent Heaven on the Earth and to improve the world.

Suffering is the root of both the apocalyptic experience of Hong Xiuquan and the millennial development of Taiping Tianguo rebellion. Just as Hong Xiuquan chose to rebel on account of his personal trauma and disappointment, the Taiping rebellion was initiated on account of poverty and sufferings within the late-Qing society. Nevertheless, both Hong Xiuquan and Taiping Tianguo rebellion held a hope for a perfect and Godly world. If Hong Xiuquan was the “chosen one” or the appointed “Heavenly King” to carry on the work of God, those participants of Taiping Tianguo rebellion were the “elected people,” regardless of their humble origins. Hence, it is worthy to consider the Taiping Tianguo rebellion as a collective apocalyptic or millennial experience of many helpless Han Chinese, especially those who were too poor and illiterate to pass the imperial service exam to serve at the Manchu imperial court or regional positions. Like the individual vision of Hong Xiuquan, Taiping Tianguo shared the similar theologized foundation—that is to undertake God’s salvific or millennial work for the Chinese, by rescuing them from the torture at the hands of Manchurian “demons.” Therefore, much like the individual apocalyptic vision of Hong Xiuquan, the collective soteriological principles of Taiping Tianguo rebellion suggests that, first, suffering is the ground of apocalyptic rebellions that are supported by theist principles; second, the governors, namely the Manchus, were blamed as the source of suffering, they were also condemned as the apocalyptic others, or monsters and Satan, who embody the ongoing force of evil in the world. Therefore, a common Christian and Chinese millennial narrative was brought into reality.

Understanding the Taiping Tianguo Rebellion

First, Taiping Tianguo rebellion is a collective millennial rebellion against the Manchus imperial regime. Second, the rebellion is a result of the dialectics between Chinese religiosity and Protestant evangelist teaching. Third, the rebellion represented an incomplete theocratic utopia.

To reiterate, the full Chinese name Taiping Tianguo means “The Heavenly (Tian) Kingdom of Grand Unity.”³⁴ Ideally speaking, Taiping

34 In Chinese, the word 天, or Tian, has rather rich and cosmological meanings. Tian refers to sky, heavenly realm, cosmos, cosmological power, and the virtuous and spiritual

Tianguo aimed to actually *establish* the Heavenly Kingdom on earth.³⁵ In Lowe's words, Taiping Tianguo can be categorized as "catastrophic millennial movement" and a short-lived "millennial state."³⁶ There is no declaration of the last day. However, Taiping Tianguo rebellion aimed to establish an eternal heavenly kingdom on the earth. Theologically speaking, Taiping Tianguo rebellion was nothing more than a catastrophic millennial movement led by a charismatic figure. However, materialistically speaking, Taiping Tianguo was an initially a millennial secret religious society, which developed into a peasant rebellion during a dark age of instability, poverty and cultural crisis.³⁷ In addition, even though the movement is nominally Christianized, it has entrenched Chinese folk millennial beliefs and habits.

In other words, Taiping Tianguo rebellion is a "hot millennial movement" that requires "strenuous human efforts," and also a "hierarchical millennialism," which is centered upon the on-going apocalyptic vision and authority of Hong Xiuquan.³⁸ The kingdom has to happen in close space and time, with predictable process that needs to be actualized via human force, i.e., rebellion permitted by Christ and Jehovah. Taiping Tianguo rebellion dualistically separates good and evil, we and "others."³⁹ In addition, parallel to the dialectic of individual apocalyptic vision and cultural context within Hong Xiuquan's mind, there are also interactions between the Chi-

force of nature. After Fr. Matteo Ricci S.J. (1552 – 1610) translated Catholicism to Tian-Zhu-Jiao (i.e. the religion of the Heavenly Lord) and the promulgation of Protestant Christianity during the late Qing era, Tian also has Christian connotation since the early modern era. Hong Xiuquan's Heavenly Kingdom is the Kingdom of the Jehovah that will be established by him on the earth.

35 I will address more the positive side of Taiping Tianguo rebellion, as a collective millennial movement which attempted to actualize its apocalyptic doctrines. The strategical and political failure of Taiping Tianguo, which interest more scholars, are not concerned in this paper.

36 (Cathrine Wessinger (1997), quoted Lowe 315)

37 Before Hong Xiuquan nominally founded Taiping Tianguo as the Heavenly King, he was more a like itinerant preacher, who preached to the poor and illiterate around poor counties, and thought himself the main preacher of his secret religious society called 拜上帝會, Bai-Shang-Di-Hui, which means "God-Worshipping Society." "God-Worshipping Society" was identified by the Qing government as a wanted anti-governmental cult which spreads anti-traditional, anti-Confucian, and anti-imperial teachings. In terms of function, Hong Xiuquan's Christianizing Bai-Shang-Di-Hui is similar to the Chinese Maitreyan Bai-Lian-Jiao, or the cult of White Lotus.

38 Wessinger, *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, 720.

39 *Ibid.*, 718

nese native religiosity and Protestant evangelist teaching in the principles of Taiping Tianguo.

The Native Element of Taiping Tianguo Rebellion & Dialectic Between Cultures

It is also both a Chinese and western misconception that Taiping Tianguo rebellion was essentially a millennial event triggered by Christianity. Nonetheless, just as we noted in the analysis of Hong Xiuquan's cultural context, Taiping Tianguo rebellion was also rooted in Chinese folk religious traditions and practices that had been developed correspondingly with the Chinese empire's long history of suffering.⁴⁰ However, it also adopted Christian element of sin, Christian God, and anti-idolatry, via the influence of Hong Xiuquan's apocalyptic vision and teachings.

The most explicit evidence for the interplay between Chinese native millennialism and Christianity is actually the integral meaning of the title "Taiping Tianguo." The meaning of Taiping Tianguo is both Chinese and Christian. Liang Afa, who is the aforementioned author of the evangelical booklet *Quanshi Liangyan* used the Chinese term 太平 Taiping to explain the Christian doxology.

Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth *Taiping* [peace], Great Peace and good will toward men.⁴¹

Liang asserts that Taiping is the peace in God. In addition, the term 太平 Taiping or Grand Peace, or Great Equity, is not an original invention of Taiping Tianguo rebellion. The concept or hope of "Taiping" has a long existence in the Chinese history and historiography. During the late Han Dynasty, where a disastrous drought took away the lives of millions and the support of the corrupted government, peasants rebelled under the religion of Taiping Dao, i.e., the Way of the Grand Peace (184 A.D.).

Therefore, similar to Hong Xiuquan's individual apocalyptic vision, the concept of the Peaceful and Heavenly kingdom, or "Tianguo" also has its precedent Chinese cultural heritage and context.⁴² However, with regards to its foundation on a radically sinicized Christian system, Taiping Tianguo was unique. Spence, in paraphrasing Liang Afa's rhetoric, affirms that:

40 Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom*, 160.

41 Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 57.

42 Stone, *A Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions*, 169 – 170.

Liang explains the [very Chinese] phrase “Tianguo,” Kingdom of Heaven. Liang shows that this can be used in two ways: one is the eternal happiness in paradise, which will be enjoyed by the souls of all the righteous people when their physical bodies have died; the other is a community within *this* world, formed by congregations who believe in Jesus and worship in the Lord of Heaven.⁴³

Obviously, participants of Taiping Tianguo followed the second path of “Tianguo” articulated by Liang Afa. They chose to actualize their abiding hope for their Heavenly Kingdom here and now in this world by replacing the current Manchurian imperial regime. Hence, just the concept of Taiping, the ideal of Tianguo is a long cherished Chinese pursuit of happiness and peace in the midst of suffering. Therefore, although they declared that they were fighting for the sake of Jehovah and striving to build His Kingdom on the earth, Hong Xiuquan and his followers instinctively adopted this native Chinese abiding hope for peace and happiness.

Taiping Tianguo’s Demon-Slaying/Exterminating or Anti-Manchurian Principle

Following Hong Xiuquan’s apocalyptic vision and principle of “Demon-Slaying/Exterminating” or “cleansing of sins on the earth,” the Manchus were demonized and used as targets for the supernatural concern of evil. Taiping Tianguo rebellion was meant to actualize the vision of Hong Xiuquan to launch the battles against the 清妖, *Qingyao*, or the Manchurian devils.⁴⁴ Under the leadership of the Heavenly brother who had the authority and Sword from God and Jesus, Taiping Tianguo also aimed to rescue China from its slavery under the Manchurian devils and their cronies.

As ruling elites and a minority above the massive Han-Chinese population, the exhausted and corrupted Manchu rulers were unable to protect their Han subjects. Hence, hatred, disappointment, and the desire to overthrow the Manchurian Dynasty arose.⁴⁵ The Manchus, who were the rulers of China during Qing dynasty, were not believed to be Chinese. In

43 Spence, *God’s Chinese Son*, 58.

44 (TR, 142-43; *Banxing zhaoshu*, in *Yinshu*, 1-2; TR, 143, 144 n. 4; quoted Spence, *God’s Chinese Son*, 144.

45 Spence, *Ibid.*, 55.

addition, the Manchurian people were *portrayed as the demons*, or invaders and parasites who barbarically dehumanized the (Han-)Chinese people, who used to consider themselves a much more civilized people. In other words, in Taiping Tianguo's millennial rhetoric, the Manchus were portrayed as the demonic *others*, or reconstructed as the embodiments of sins and evils that have been contaminating the world. All the hatred, pain of suffering, and efforts of evil, were added upon Taiping Tianguo rebellion's hostility against the Qing government. In order to clean and renew the world, a crucial step was to expunge all the Manchus from China. However, in fact, captured Manchus, regardless of their occupations, genders, and ages, were often brutally and barbarically butchered by the Taiping Tianguo rebels.

The Apocalyptic Hope and Morale of Taiping Tianguo Rebellion

To sum up abruptly, on the one side, Taiping Tianguo rebellion aimed to establish an egalitarian society on the earth, so that everyone is equal in the eyes of Jehovah. On the other side, the rebellion aimed to break an old social hierarchy and distribution of wealth and to replace it with its own egalitarian "heavenly hierarchy" on the earth. However, besides its quick inner corruption, the Taiping Tianguo rebellion was ironically crushed by the Pro-Qing Han militias 鄉勇, especially by Zeng Guofan's Xiang or Hunan armies 湘軍, who were well trained, and were led by educated officials, to protect Confucianism and Chinese culture, and ensure stability of the Qing Empire. Yet, Taiping Tianguo rebellion, as with the Book of Revelation and Daniel, suggested that there is always hope for a better and fairer world. Taiping Tianguo kept this hopeful ideal, and took the efforts to change the earth, which was unfortunately occupied by suffering and torture, and make it to be like the Apocalyptic Heaven.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Hong Xiuquan and Taiping Tianguo's apocalyptic goals did not aim to destroy the world, but to fix it. The hungry people were striking against the corrupted imperial government, poverty, foreign invasion, as well as natural disasters, but they never forsake their hope for a better world. In many ways, if the Taiping Tianguo rebellion was an em-

bodied apocalyptic rebellion, suffering is its soil which nourishes it and hope is the occasional sunshine which attracts the direction of its growth.

With regard to the human nature, one positive lesson we can probably learn from studying the Taiping Tianguo rebellion is that suffering, pain, and despair will always exist, as much as hope for a better and fairer world. Nevertheless, as Christians, even in our best intentions, perhaps we should not aim to establish a perfect society through rebellion. On the contrary, in our religious goals, we should strive to alleviate suffering and injustice. A Chinese maxim says that “I ought to use history as my mirror.” Many of us, holding our religious ideals in a heavenly kingdom, are on our way to renew our world. Based upon the lesson from the Taiping Tianguo rebellion, we may ask ourselves what we should do to avoid adding suffering upon suffering, or why should we really care to improve our imperfect world here and now?

Primary Sources:

- ✦ Taiping tianri, accessed December 20, 2020.
- ✦ <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=545929&remap=gb>
- ✦ Taiping Tianguo Yinshu, accessed December 20, 2020.
- ✦ <https://library.soas.ac.uk/Record/705649>
- ✦ Tianchao Tianmu Zhidu, accessed December 20, 2020.
- ✦ <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=739422>
- ✦ Liang, Afa, Quan Shi Liang Yan, “Good Words for Exhorting the Age,” Accessed December 19,
- ✦ 2020 http://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/HKBU/CCLOC/c260_lolf.pdf
- ✦ Zhang, Dejian Zei Qing Hui Zuan, accessed December 20, 2020
- ✦ <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=769971&remap=gb>
- ✦ <https://sou-yun.cn/eBookIndex.aspx?id=4574>
 (《賊情匯纂》 Zei Qing Hui Zhuan An anthology for situation and development of Taiping Tianguo rebellion, from the perspective of a Confucian scholar, who was trapped in the occupied territory of Taiping Tianguo. It was considered as one of most crucial primary sources for the studies of Taiping Tianguo rebellion.)

Secondary Sources:

- ✦ Spence, Jonathan D., *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*,
- ✦ Collins, John J., "What is Apocalyptic Literature?", in *Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, 2014, pp. 1-18.
- ✦ Lorenzo DiTommaso, "Apocalyptic Historiography", *EC* 10 (2019), pp. 435-460
- ✦ Mao, Yingzhang, *Tai Ping Tian Guo Shi Mo Zhi*. 二版, ed. Xin Ren Ren Wen Ku ; 126.
- ✦ Taipei, Daiwan Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1996.
- ✦ Platt, Stephen R., *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*, 1st ed. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.
- ✦ Pan, Xulan, *Tai Ping Za Shuo*, 第1版. ed. Tianjin, Bai Hua Wen Yi Chu Ban She, 2000.
- ✦ Sponberg, Alan, Helen Hardacre, and Princeton University. *Maitreya, the Future Buddha* /
- ✦ Edited by Alan Sponberg, Helen Hardacre, Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York,
- ✦ Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- ✦ Michael E. Stone, *A Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions*, *HTR* 96 (2003), pp. 167-180
- ✦ Lydia Gore-Jones, *The Unity and Coherence of 4 Ezra: Crisis, Response, and Authorial Intention*, *JSJ* 47 (2016), pp. 212-235.
- ✦ Wessinger, Catherine, *The Oxford Handbook of Millennialism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.