

## A Study on Political Thoughts Produced in the Taiping Rebellion

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### Abstract

The Taiping Rebellion which happened in the past China lasted fifteen years, during which a wealth of political thoughts have been produced and these thoughts have promoted the development and progress of China's politics as well as inspired the morale of poor masses in that period to fight against imperialism and feudalism. In general, the political thoughts produced during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period have undergone a process of gradual development, which are of great significance and inspiration to the development of contemporary Chinese politics. Hong Xiuquan and Hong Rengan are two main representatives of this Rebellion, with *The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* and *New Administrative Paper* as the main works.

**Key words:** Taiping Heavenly Kingdom; Hong Xiuquan; Hong Rengan

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### INTRODUCTION

On January, 1851, the Taiping Rebellion broke out in China, which was the result of the acuteness of class conflict between landlords and peasants in the late feudal Chinese society, and was also the reflection of the sharpening of social conflict between the invading forces of capitalism and the masses. Besides, the Taiping

Heavenly Kingdom was a regime established by farmers in the late Qing Dynasty through peasant uprising, the largest peasant war in the history of China. The Taiping Rebellion lasted fifteen years, during which a wealth of political thoughts have been produced and these thoughts have promoted the development and progress of China's politics as well as inspired the morale of poor masses at that period to fight against imperialism and feudalism. In general, the political thoughts produced during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period have undergone a process of gradual development, which are of great significance and inspiration to the development of contemporary Chinese politics. Hong Xiuquan and Hong Rengan are two main representatives of this Rebellion, with *The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* and *New Administrative Paper* as the main works.

### 1. SOCIAL BACKGROUND

The political thoughts produced in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom are closely related to China's social background at that time. Therefore, before analyzing these political thoughts, it is highly necessary for us to briefly review the situation in all aspects of Chinese society.

#### 1.1 Economy

In the *Highlights of Chinese Culture*, Liang Shuming points out that we can witness a periodic law existing in China's feudal history—"Peace follows turbulence and turbulence follows peace". The main reason is that since the Qin and Han dynasties, China had not gone through any major revolution in terms of production mode, and the national economic situation depended on the concentration and distribution of land. In Qing society (1940s & 1950s), the arable land was limited and concentrated in the hands of few wealthy landowners; population was on a rise, and a large number people became unemployed, so the disparities between the rich and poor were very

large. Meanwhile, the massive importation of opium led to an outflow of silver and devaluation of coins, which further led to soaring prices and oddly heavy land tax. Peasants led an increasingly impoverished life. Moreover, what is worthy of mentioning is that at that time floods and droughts frequented China for successive years. And disaster-afflicted areas were so vast that they even included the provinces in the Yellow River Basin and the Yangtze River Basin. All the above-mentioned circumstances are from the perspective of economy.

## 1.2 Politics

During the period of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Qing government can be regarded as an absolute monarchy. Its political organizations were more complete than those in the previous dynasties with the emperor holding all the military and political powers. As far as the autocracy is concerned, if the leader was honest and open, the country would thrive; If the leader was incompetent, the country would decline. Unfortunately, since the ruling of Emperor Jiaqing, all the emperors had been incompetent. So we can easily understand the decadent of Qing government—the monarchy. Besides, Western imperialism started to invade China, so China's monarchy began to fade away. While disturbance and unrest repeated in China, corruption problem worsened among Qing government officials, hence public discontent continued to accumulate. This is the social background from the perspective of politics.

## 1.3 National Conflict

Ever since the demise of Ming dynasty and the rise of Qing dynasty, the thought of “rebellious the Qing dynasty and rebuilding the Ming dynasty” had been existent. Moreover, after the occurrence of Opium War, the corruption of Qing government inspired Han people to overthrow the ruling of Manchu people. In this sense, the national conflict between Han and Manchu reached an unprecedented level. This is the background of ethnic relations.

# 2. THE POLITICAL THOUGHTS OF HONG XIUQUAN

## 2.1 Religious Thoughts

Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864) was a farmer born in Hua County, Guangdong Province. Since he used to work as a farmer and had a better understanding of farmers' sufferings and needs, a solid foundation was laid for him to mingle with the farmers. At the first beginning, Hong Xiuquan intended to seek fame through the imperial examination, but he repeatedly failed, which made him discontent with the ruling of Qing government. What is more, his dissatisfaction with the Qing government was enhanced by the incompetence and corruption of the government, so he joined in the peasants' struggle to fight against the ruling of Qing government. In 1836, he got

an unexpected pamphlet—“Good Words to Persuade the World”, which was aimed to spread Christianity, but he did not pay much attention at the very beginning. Later, he went through a turning point of his life in 1837 when he became seriously ill after failing the imperial examination. During that period, he dreamed a lot of weird dreams. And he reread the book—“Good Words to Persuade the World”. Soon he founded the Society of God Worshippers. Hong took in and made some changes about certain doctrines and rituals of Western Christianity, creating an organizational tool and a form of ideology adapted to the uprising of Chinese peasants.

“God is the only power”. This is the core of Hong Xiuquan's religious thoughts. Hong Xiuquan established God as the representative of Chinese farmers' interests, and made advantage of it to fight against the tyrannical ruling of the Qing monarchy. Hong was convinced that God was the only immortal. So according to him, the ruler of Qing dynasty blasphemed God by falsely claiming that he was the God; instead, Hong believed that the ruler was a “demon” in essence who must be completely eradicated. Hong Xiuquan self-proclaimed that he was the second son of God, the Jesus' brother, who had the overwhelming power to eradicate demons and was assigned to the earth to get rid of demons.

## 2.2 Thoughts on Equality

By associating the equality teachings of Christianity with China's traditional family ethics and the demand for equality from the majority of farmers, Hong Xiuquan put forward four equality thoughts with the characteristics of the times, namely, political equality, economic equality, gender equality and ethnic equality. Hong Xiuquan regarded that people in the world were all the children of God, so people should be on an equal footing, enjoying political rights and sharing public wealth. Moreover, he believed that nations should live in harmony. In short, Hong Xiuquan moved the equality in heaven down to earth and criticized the privilege of feudal monarchy, by the means of which he inspired Chinese peasants to fight against oppression and exploitation from Qing government.

## 2.3 Thoughts on Reform

Shortly after completely abandoning the fantasy of gaining fame through imperial examination and creating his own religious thoughts, Hong Xiuquan accomplished three famous books which were *Yuan Dao Jiu Shi Ge*, *Yuan Dao Jing Shi Xun* and *Yuan Dao Jue Shi Xun*. In the three books, we can see his major thoughts on reform from Hong. In general these are as follows:

### 2.3.1 Promoting Reforms

Hong Xiuquan once wrote in *Yuan Dao Jing Shi Xun* that the brutal social reality and people's coldness and hatred were all owing to the private ownership of land. In this kind of society, people fought each other for land, and no light could be seen. Therefore, only by reforming would

we see light. Besides, Hong pointed out that in order to build a harmonious society where people would become members in a big family, staging reforms could play a part, so that a disturbing society could turn into a decent and fair one. In this sense, we can understand that Hong Xiuquan advocated reforms so as to change the “disturbing and treacherous society” into a “fair and decent” one so that people could love each other.

### 2.3.2 Opposing “Six Immoral Behaviors”

Hong Xiuquan considered that a decent person had high morality, and would not do bad things. In his *Yuan Dao Jiu Shi Ge*, “Six Immoral Behaviors” have been summarized: the first one is lust; the second one is to be disobedient to parents; the third is killing or slaughter; the fourth is to steal or rob; the fifth is to purposely make a mystery out of simple things; the sixth is to gamble. If a person behaved improperly by committing such six behaviors, he would be an immoral person. So this person should get rid of these bad habits without delay.

Later on, *Ten Dogmas* were formulated in *The Laws of God* whose main contents are: worship God; do not worship evils; do not easily mention the name of God; praise God’s kindness on Sundays; be filial to parents; do not kill or murder anybody; do not be treacherous and licentious; do not steel or rob anything; do not lie; do not be greedy. The first four dogmas have religious overtones, while the latter six ones make use of the “Six Immoral Behaviors” without any change. So *Ten Dogmas* is the supplement of the “Six Immoral Behaviors”.

### 2.3.3 Anti-Qing Thought

In the *Yuan Dao Jing Shi Xun*, Hong Xiuquan articulated his theory on “Killing demons as requested by the God”, which is also the main content of the anti-Qing thought. In this book, Hong divided the social forces in the world into two camps: kindness versus evilness. Farmers are the representatives of kindness, whose leader is Hong Xiuquan, the God’s second son and the brother. Nevertheless, demons are the chief representatives of evilness, and the Qing ruler is the best exponent. Later, such papers as *Feng Tian Tao Hu Xi Bu Si Fang Yu*, *An Oracle of Killing Demons and Saving people*, and *Saving All the Chinese People Supported by God* were produced by Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, vigorously exposing the conflict between Manchu people and Han people, so as to stimulate Han people’s nationalism. As a result, these papers have largely motivated Han’s nationalism hidden for a long time, thus becoming the spiritual weapons to mobilize farmers to join in the peasant uprising army.

## 3. THOUGHTS ON GOVERNING A STATE

### 3.1 The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom—Economic Equalitarianism

*The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* was issued in 1853 when Taiping army built their capital in Nanjing.

The central issue of this document is to solve the land problem of farmers. It is the first land program for peasant revolution in modern Chinese history, and is also the program guiding Taiping Heavenly Kingdom to build its country in terms of politics, economy, culture and other aspects. So this document has included almost all the thoughts on governing a state during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period. To be more specific, it could be summed up mainly as follows:

#### 3.1.1 Land Policy

As the land program of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, *The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* has abolished the land ownership of feudal landlords, but stipulated that the ownership of land should be public. In this sense, all the land and property were owned by the Heavenly Kingdom, which then distributed the land to farmers. The land which was divided into nine levels in according with the annual production was assigned to each household according to population. When the state allocated the land to farmers, men and women were on an equal footing; good and bad land were mixed up; the assigned land of people who were under the age of sixteen should be the half of that of adults. Moreover, *The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* also determined that every twenty-five households should organize a rural community, presided over by two “Liang Si Ma”. A treasury and a church should be built. In addition, each household should grow mulberry and raise silkworm, as well as weave and make clothes. Therefore, each family became the basic unit of a combination of agriculture and handicrafts.

#### 3.1.2 Distribution System

The core of distribution system of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom is equalitarianism. Once each person was distributed enough rations, the rest of products from agriculture, sideline, and handicraft industry were often returned to the treasury. A variety of expenditures such as on marriage and funeral were all paid in line with the standards set by the treasury. Besides, the treasury was also responsible for taking care of the sick and elderly people. If there were natural disasters, the treasury would allocate subsidies and abolish the commodity circulation. In all, *The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* is intended to achieve an ideal state that “every people can share land, food, clothes, and money” by virtue of eliminating the private ownership and implementing equal distribution.

#### 3.1.3 Structure of Political Power

*The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* proposed the establishment of local levels of militarized peasant government, namely, the bureaucratic system for defending the local territory. The political power of regions could be divided three parts which were province, prefecture, and county. Generals were appointed to administer the provinces; governors were in charge of prefectures; inspectors were assigned to rule counties.

Under the position of inspector were army commander, division commander, brigade commander, soldier, “Liang Si Ma”, and instructor. All these were called local officials, publicly elected by the people. Under the soldier set four “Liang”, in which there were 25 households and two “Liang Si Ma”. The latter was to be in charge of the politics, economy and people’s daily life, and implement armed protection, judicial administration and cultural education. Furthermore, one person from each household was appointed as a “instructor” who became a soldier commanding people in disorder and a farmer instructing people in peace. So the system is a unity of soldiers and farmers. Apart from those, *The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom* also entailed a system of recommendation, promotion and demotion for all levels of officials. It provided that annual imperial examination should be held to elect people to fill in the vacant posts. Public election or recommended election should be supervised at each level, and the person who was recommended should be talented. Those who were recommended but turned out to be of low quality should be punished. The promotion and demotion of officials were given once every three years.

### 3.2 Autocracy

Anti-autocracy had won loudest voices when the Taiping army were in revolt. However, after the army made Tianjing as the capital, the leaders tried to make use of “Three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues”—principles of Chinese feudal moral conduct to maintain their ruling order. Hence, farmers’ equality thoughts were replaced, and leaders’ imperial mentality rapidly took hold. First, autocratic monarchy was established to concentrate power. The “Heavenly King” enjoyed the overwhelming power and could appoint anyone as officials at all levels. There was a division of officials and common people. Anyone whose ranks were higher than “Liang Si Ma” could be regarded as officials, while those whose ranks were lower were common people. Common people had the obligation to support officials but they did not have the right to play a consultative part in politics. Therefore, we could see that a pyramid of feudal bureaucratic system was established which went from “Heavenly King” down to “Liang Si Ma”. Second, privilege thought pervaded and the status of farmers was rather low.

## 4. POLITICAL THOUGHTS OF HONG RENGAN

Hong Rengan (1822-1864), the brother of Hong Xiuquan, was born in Hua County, Guangdong province. He attended the Society of God worshipper at an very young age. Later he removed to Hong Kong to learn astronomy, mathematics, medicine and other scientific and technical knowledge, understand the international situation, and explore the Anglo-American political system, so as

to look for the causes of their prosperity. So he was an intellectual who was deeply influenced by Western capitalist ideology. In 1858, Hong Rengan left Hong Kong and reached Tianjing. Hong Xiuquan crowned him as “Gan King” to take charge of national political affairs. Rengan spared no efforts to make the state prosperous, and wrote the famous *New Administrative Paper*, in an attempt to formulate a series of political, economic and cultural measures to make Taiping Heavenly Kingdom powerful and prosperous by learning from the experiences of the rich and powerful capitalist countries in Europe and America. In general, the political thoughts contained in the book are mainly as follows:

### 4.1 Centralizing the Power

After the Tianjing Incident, the vitality of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom had been badly harmed and people were divided in public opinions. So the failure of forming a powerful central leadership became a serious problem for Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in its late period. To deal with this situation, Hong Rengan made a proposal to centralize the political power, and made a series of specific measures as follows:

#### 4.1.1 Establishing Discussion System

In order to improve the monarchy, Hong Rengan made a recommendation that the king should not be arbitrary when deciding on major national policy; instead, the topic should be handed to “Gan King” who would led Six Departments to have a discussion, and then handed over the result to the decision of “Heavenly King”.

#### 4.1.2 Strengthening Press Supervision

In order to step up the centralization of power, Rengan proposed to develop postal services and journalism like the Western capitalist countries. He advocated the creation of newspaper offices, using newspapers to expose the conspiracies of local officials in a timely manner. Besides, he advised to build correspondence offices, so that the upper levels could have a better communication with the lower levels avoiding any congestion of information between them. What is more, he recommended the establishment of dark cabinets, namely, suggestion boxes, to receive accusation reports from the masses.

#### 4.1.3 Opposing the Rule of Man but Advocating the Rule of Law

Hong Rengan was convinced that the prosperity of British was due to its “good laws”. Therefore, Taiping Heavenly Kingdom should attach great importance to the development of legal system, but at that time this understanding did not reach a high degree of awareness of the rule of law. He believed that attention should be paid to enlightenment, which could enhance high moral characters of people. If there were any violation of laws, penal codes should be used to deal with it. We thus can have a clear understanding that Hong Rengan tried to use laws to maintain a good ruling order and make officials to



have a clean governance, remedying the gloomy politics in the late Taiping Heavenly Kingdom..

## 4.2 Developing Capitalism

### 4.2.1 Learn Advanced Techniques From Western Countries

Hong Rengan believed that the lack of advanced technology was the reason for China's backward economy development. At that time, although China's technological level lagged far behind Western countries, Chinese people were still proud of being living in a "country in the heaven". They were conservative and unwilling to move forward. And the Qing government implemented a closed-door policy, believing that Western science and technology was "apparently marvelous but useless", and did not worth mentioning. Rengan strongly criticized this view, but vigorously advocated developing science and technology, allowed foreigners who had skills to enter into the mainland China to enlighten people and give suggestions for national development. In order to reward and protect inventions, Rengan also called for introducing patent laws, in the hope of mobilizing the enthusiasm of people and stimulating the development of various undertakings.

### 4.2.2 Promoting Social Undertakings

Based on the studying and understanding of developed countries, Hong Rengan recognized that in order to develop production, one must firstly develop transportation. To this end, he attached great importance to the development of the transportation industry, and put forward specific advices for the land and water transportation respectively. He promoted the development of modern transportation business in China, building of railroads, and making trains available everywhere. Besides, he also supported manufacturing vessels, unblocking inland waterways and maritime transportation, and clearing the Yellow River, Yangtze River, and Huaihe River. Furthermore, water conservancy projects were given emphasis to by Rengan and smooth flow of merchandise was also stressed to help prevent disasters and reduce damages. Apart from this, he proposed to open banks, issue banknotes, and develop financial and monetary undertakings. While suggesting developing mineral resources, he also advocated setting post offices, setting up various types of insurance companies, building

newspaper offices, and promoting public social welfares, such as hospitals, schools, foundling halls, and so on. Such a series of economic development plans reflected Rengan's appreciation of the enterprises as well as science and technology in Western capitalist countries. As for the mode of operation, Hong Rengan deemed that banks could be run by three or four rich people, or be run by one person alone. Rengan encouraged private capital and capital accumulation. He also allowed employment of workers, so that the scattered labor resources could be centralized into social work. In terms of the social phenomenon, Rengan proposed a series of plans to blow away the old and bring in the new, in an attempt to change social customs and turn China into a country with new custom, morality, and look.

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## CONCLUSION

In short, a major feature of the political thoughts in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom is the adherence to the traditional Chinese feudal political system. There is no denying that its decline from prosperity is closely related to its insistence on the backward political system and governing philosophy, for political system, as the superstructure, will exert a profound influence on the economic development. Therefore, for today's China who is in a crucial stage of socialist modernization, the development of national governance system and governance capabilities is of great significance. The Chinese government should learn from the lessons from Taiping Rebellion, and strive to advance its social development through continuous political reforms.

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