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Chinese Cultural Studies: The Taiping Rebellion, 1851-1864



Hung Xiu-quan (1814-1864) was the son of a farmer and an aspiring Chinese bureaucrat. He came under the influence of Christian missionaries, and reached the conclusion that he was the younger son of Jesus sent to found the Heavenly Kingdom on earth. Faced with the collapse of Qing dynasty rule (under Western onslaught), Hung tapped into the deep millenarianism of the Chinese peasantry (previously expressed in Buddhist terms) and began a rebellion - the Taiping Rebellion ("Taiping tien-quo" means the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace").

There were many other revolts, but this was by far the most serious. Lasting from 1851 to 1864 it took control of large swerves of south and central China, including the southern capital of Nanking. There a theocratic-military government was established.

Although it was millenarian in form, the Taiping leaders adopted many policies which would later become the marks of modernizers in China: prohibition of opium-smoking, gambling, the use of tobacco and wine, polygamy, the sale of slaves, and prostitution. They promoted the equality of the sexes: they abolished foot-binding and appointed women as administrators and officers in the Taiping army. They also tried to abolish the private ownership of land and property, and they developed a program for the equal distribution of land.

The following is an excerpt from the basic document of the Taiping Kingdom, called "The Land System of the Heavenly Kingdom." published in 1853.

All fields are to be divided into nine grades: every mou [6.6 mou equal one acre] of land, which during the two seasons, both early and late, can produce 1,200 catties [of grain] shall be ranked as a superior field of the first class; every mou that produces 1,100 catties as a superior field of the second class; and every mou that produces 1,000 catties as a

superior field of the third class. Every *mou* that produces 900 catties shall be considered as a medium field of the first class; every *mou* that produces 800 catties as a medium field of the second class; and every *mou* that produces 700 catties as a medium field of the third class. Every *mou* that produces 600 catties shall be considered as an inferior field of the first class; every *mou* that produces 500 catties as an inferior field of the second class; and every *mou* that produces 400 catties as an inferior field of the third class. One *mou* of superior field of the first class shall be considered equal to a *mou* and one-tenth of a superior field of the second class, and to a *mou* and two-tenths of a superior field of the third class; also to a *mou* and three-and-a-half tenths of a medium field of the first class, to a *mou* and five-tenths of a medium field of the second class, and to a *mou* and seven-and-a-half tenths of a medium field of the third class; also to two *mou* of an inferior field of the first class, to two *mou* and four-tenths of an inferior field of the second class, and to three *mou* of an inferior field of the third class.

The division of land must be according to the number of individuals, whether male or female; calculating upon the number of individuals in a household, if they be numerous, then the amount of land will be larger, and if few, smaller; and it shall be a mixture of the nine classes. If there are six persons in a family, then for three there shall be good land and for three poorer land, and of good and poor each shall have half. All the fields in the empire are to be cultivated by all the people alike. If the land is deficient in one place, then the people must be removed to another, and if the land is deficient in another, then the people must be removed to this place. All the fields throughout the empire, whether of abundant or deficient harvest, shall be taken as a whole: if this place is deficient, then the harvest of that abundant place must be removed to relieve it, and if that place is deficient, then the harvest of this abundant place must be removed in order to relieve the deficient place; thus, all the people in the empire may together enjoy the abundant happiness of the Heavenly Father, Supreme Lord and Great God. There being fields, let all cultivate them; there being food, let all eat; there being clothes, let all be dressed; there being money, let all use it, so that nowhere does inequality exist, and no man is not well fed and clothed.

All men and women, every individual of sixteen years and upwards, shall receive land, twice as much as those of fifteen years of age and under. Thus, those sixteen of years of age and above shall receive a *mou* of superior land of the first class, and those of fifteen years and under shall receive half that amount, five-tenths of a *mou* of superior land of the first class; again, if those of sixteen years and above receive three *mou* of inferior land of the third class, then those of fifteen years and below shall receive half that amount, one and one-half *mou* of inferior land of the third class.

Throughout the empire the mulberry tree is to be planted close to every wall, so that all women may engage in rearing silkworms, spinning the silk, and making garments. Throughout the empire every family should keep five hens and two sows, which must not be allowed to miss their proper season. At the time of harvest, every sergeant shall direct the corporals to see to it that of the twenty-five families under his charge each individual

has a sufficient supply of food, and aside from the new grain each may receive, the remainder must be deposited in the public granary. Of wheat, pulse, hemp; flax, cloth, silk, fowls, dogs, etc., and money, the same is true; for the whole empire is the universal family of our Heavenly Father, the Supreme Lord and Great God. . . . For every twenty-five families there must be established one public granary, and one church where the sergeant must reside. Whenever there are marriages, or births, or funerals, all may go to the public granary; but a limit must be observed, and not a cash be used beyond what is necessary. Thus, every family which celebrates a marriage or a birth will be given one thousand cash and a hundred catties of grain....

In every circle of twenty-five families, the work of the potter, the blacksmith, the carpenter, the mason, and other artisans must all be performed by the corporal and privates; when free from husbandry they are to attend to these matters. Every sergeant, in superintending marriages and funeral events in the twenty-five families, should in every case offer a eucharistic sacrifice to our Heavenly Father, the Supreme Lord and Great God; all corrupt ceremonies of former times are abolished.

In every circle of twenty-five families, all young boys must go to church every day, where the sergeant is to teach them to read the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as the book of proclamations of the true ordained Sovereign. Every Sabbath the corporals must lead the men and women to the church, where the males and females are to sit in separate rows. There they will listen to sermons, sing praises, and offer sacrifices to our Heavenly Father, the Supreme Lord and Great God....

In the creation of an army, for each 13,156 families there must first be a corps general; next there must be five colonels under the command of the corps general; next there must be five captains under the command of each colonel, altogether twenty-five captains; next each of the twenty-five captains must have under his command five lieutenants, altogether 125 lieutenants; next each of the 125 lieutenants must have under his command four sergeants, altogether 500 sergeants; next each of the 500 sergeants must have under his command five corporals, altogether 2,500 corporals; next each of the 2,500 corporals must have under his command four privates, altogether 10,000 privates, the entire army numbering altogether 13,156 men.

After the creation of an army, should the number of families increase, with the increase of five families there shall be an additional corporal; with the increase of twenty-six families there shall be an additional sergeant; with the increase of 105 families there shall be an additional lieutenant; with the increase of 526 families there shall be an additional captain; with the increase of 2,631 families there shall be an additional colonel; with the total increase of 13,156 families there shall be an additional corps general. Before a new corps general is appointed, the colonel and subordinate officers shall remain under the command of the old corps general; with the appointment of a corps general they must be handed over to the command of the new corps general.

Within [the court] and without, all the various officials and people must go every Sabbath to hear the expounding of the Holy Bible, reverently offer their sacrifices, and worship and praise the Heavenly Father, the Supreme Lord and Great God. On every seventh seven, the forty-ninth day, the Sabbath, the colonel, captains, and lieutenants shall go in turn to the churches in which reside the sergeants under their command and expound the Holy books, instruct the people, examine whether they obey the Commandments and orders or disobey the Commandments and orders, and whether they are diligent or slothful. On the first seventh seven, the forty-ninth day, the Sabbath, the colonel shall go to a certain sergeant's church, on the second seventh seven, the forty-ninth day, the Sabbath, the colonel shall then go to another sergeant's church, visiting them all in order, and after having gone the round he must begin again. The captains and lieutenants shall do the same.

Each man throughout the empire who has a wife, sons, and daughters amounting to three or four mouths, or five, six, seven, eight, or nine mouths, must give up one to be a soldier. With regard to the others, the widowers, widows, orphaned, and childless, the disabled and sick, they shall all be exempted from military service and issued provisions from the public granaries for their sustenance.

Throughout the empire all officials must every Sabbath, according to rank and position, reverently present sacrificial animals and offerings, sacrifice and worship, and praise the Heavenly Father, the Supreme Lord and Great God. They must also expound the Holy books; should any dare to neglect this duty, they shall be reduced to husbandmen. Respect this.

From Franz Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents*, vol. 2, *Documents and Comments* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), pp. 313-315, 319-320.