

BUILDING A HEAVENLY KINGDOM ON EARTH: A STUDY ON TAIPING PRIMERS

Tay Wei Leong - *Independent scholar*

Abstract: *Durante il loro tentativo di governo (1850-64) i Taiping promulgarono tre testi per l'infanzia: Poemi per bambini (Youxue shi 幼學詩), Classico dei tre caratteri (Sanzijing 三字經) e (Classico) dei mille caratteri redatto per editto imperiale (Yuzhi qianzi zhao 御製千字詔), più a fine propagandistico-religioso che come supporto all'apprendimento della lingua. L'articolo ne rintraccia le origini nell'appropriazione, da parte dei protestanti, delle tradizionali tecniche pedagogiche cinesi per finalità di conversione ed evidenzia le prospettive teologiche, soteriologiche e storiche dei leader Taiping, i quali combinarono elementi della cultura cinese con la letteratura protestante vernacolare.*

This is the extended version, which includes original citations in Chinese characters, of the article published in the journal *Sulla Via del Catai*, 25 (2021), ISSN 1970-3449.

Introduction

The Taipings promulgated three primers, namely the *Youxue shi* 幼學詩 (Ode for Youth), the *Sanzijing* 三字經 (Trimetrical Classic), and the *Yuzhi qianzi zhao* 御製千字詔 (Imperially Composed Thousand Character Edict), during their bid for power between 1850 and 1864. These primers have been neglected in the previous scholarship on the Taiping Rebellion. They are studied not in their own right, but towards an exposition of the revolutionary ideology of the Taipings. This paper aims to examine the history, purpose, uses, content, and rhetorical style of the primers against the backdrop of the religious-educational mission of the Taipings. It argues that the primers are religious texts or sacred scriptures through which the Taipings intended to communicate their unique theology to the public to effect a conversion. They were crucial pedagogical devices in the construction of the Heavenly Kingdom in Taiping theology. This paper shows that these primers effectively propagated the Taiping religious message, not only due to their simple and rhythmic style but also because they rendered the foreign Christian

creeds in terms that were comprehensible to the Chinese masses. Scholars have noted the connection between the vernacularization of the Bible and the localization of Protestantism in China, and the role played by missionary translators and their Chinese assistants as cultural mediators.¹ This paper explores the role played by Taiping ideologues in the further indigenization of the Christian doctrines that they garnered from vernacular Christian texts. It highlights the importance of historical knowledge and narratives as a rhetorical device for the Taipings to accommodate Protestant teachings with Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全's (1814-1864) messianic visions and theological understandings, and the popular religious culture of the littoral region from which, the movement had arisen.

History, Purpose, and Use of Taiping Primers

These three primers are part of a list of books authorized to be printed by the Taipings. The *Sanzijing* and *Youxue shi* were first published in 1851 after the Taipings inaugurated their government at Yong'an 永安. The *Yuzhi qianzi zhao* was first published in 1854, a year after the Taipings established their capital at Nanjing.² The primers are believed to be composed by Hong Xiuquan with the assistance of his literati aides Lu Xianba 盧賢拔 (fl.1851-1856), Zeng Shuiyuan 曾水源 (?-1855), and He Zhenchuan 何震川 (1826-?).³

The eminent historian of the Taiping movement Luo Ergang 羅爾綱 classified the three primers primarily as educational texts for children. The literary scholar Yao Dadui 姚達兌 also considered the Taiping primers as children's books. In his study of the *Sanzijing*, Yao describes the Taiping primers as "a new type of propaganda text that draws from both Chinese sources and Protestant writings, especially writing styles, structures, words, and modes of propaganda".⁴ Yao argues that the Taiping *Sanzijing* was inspired by the Protestant *Sanzijing* composed by missionary Walter H. Medhurst (1796-1857) in

1816. He contends that Medhurst appropriated the *Sanzijing* in composing his religious tract because of its appealing style, as its simple structure could be easily adapted by substituting the Neo-Confucian moral values with Protestant theology.

For Medhurst, the primary appeal of the *Sanzijing*'s style was not the malleability of its structure, but its effectiveness for propagating Christian doctrines. Medhurst's *Sanzijing* "is well calculated to instil (*sic*) into the tender mind of Chinese children correct ideas of the true God, and the Saviour of men".⁵ The trisyllabic structure of the primer makes it easy to recite and memorize the characters. The learner can readily internalize the content through rote recitation and listening. Medhurst imitated the *Sanzijing* when composing his tract to capitalize on the primer's popularity. He also knew that this format was most suitable for propagating Christianity among the mostly functionally literate Chinese public.⁶ Medhurst used his *Sanzijing* in the Chinese missionary school in Batavia and for his periodic preaching at the Chinese settlement near the city.

The Protestant *Sanzijing* was not necessarily the sole inspiration for the Taiping primers. Because of their popularity and influence in popular culture, primers had been used as a vehicle for moral propaganda by elites to shape the mindset and behavior of the plebeians of late imperial China.⁷ What impressed the Taipings most about the Protestant *Sanzijing* was perhaps not its appropriation of the traditional primer form, but the missionary blitz-conversionary tactic of mass printing and distribution of religious tracts. Hong had been introduced to Protestantism by Liang Fa's 梁發 (1789-1855) *Good Words to Admonish the Age*, which he received from a missionary in Canton in 1836. Hong began to imitate the missionary method of mass printing and distribution of tracts when the Taipings acquired the printing presses at Yonggan. The Taipings set up woodblock carving and printing bureaus in the Heavenly Capital

and staffed them with hundreds of craftsmen requisitioned from Yangzhou.⁸ The Taiping printers worked non-stop even as the regime engaged in incessant warfare with the Qing forces from 1853 to 1864.⁹

The vast variety and quantity of propagandistic materials produced and distributed by the Taiping regime amazed observers. The imperial spy Zhang Dejian 張德堅 (fl.1853-1856) reported in 1853 that "[their books] are so numerous that [as the proverb says] 'the oxen bearing them sweat and the house they are stored is full of rafters'; every single person [outside the Taiping camp] is used to seeing them".¹⁰ The Taipings not only circulated their publications within their territories but also distributed them in areas outside their control. The Taipings appointed special printing officers within their armies and established printing facilities wherever their forces went. In 1955, a carved woodblock used to print the *Yousue shi* was discovered in a farmer's home in Linfen 臨汾, Shanxi, which is believed to have been left behind by the Taiping northern expeditionary force.¹¹

Taiping primers were intended to propagate the movement's belief system, which developed in the crucial period 1849-1850 when the nature of the movement shifted from religious iconoclasm to political rebellion. The core beliefs were derived from the Bible, Hong's visions and interpretations, and revelations spoken to the Taipings by God and Jesus through the mouths of Yang Xi-qing 楊秀清 (1826-1857) and Xiao Chaogui 蕭朝貴 (1820-1852).¹² The chief tenets are God as the creator and moral judge of the world; Taiping eschatological and millenarian beliefs centered on the messiah Hong; and the individual and collective religious-ethical duties of mankind based on the Ten Commandments and the classics.

Theologically, the primers are central to the grander religious-educational mission of the Taipings. In his fascinating analysis of Taiping's propagandistic efforts, Rudolf Wagner convincingly shows how Taiping

educational strategies were shaped by Hong Xiuquan's vision. In the vision he received in 1837, God commanded Hong, his second son, to descend unto the world and awaken those who had been deluded by the demons. Hong's mission was primarily a religious-educational one, involving the re-education of the fallen masses with regard to the necessary beliefs and values for them to return to the path of God. According to Hong's vision, there were primarily two main addressees of Taiping propaganda and educational efforts, the first group being those who were receptive to Hong's message. These were to be first converted through exposure to Taiping propaganda and then by undergoing a strict educational program, which would transform them into a committed God-worshipping constituency and prevent them from falling under the spell of the demons. The second group was the recalcitrant people who sided with the Manchu demons. They had to be conquered and coerced into joining the Taipings before undergoing re-education.¹³

The Taipings had to step up their propaganda efforts in the contest for the hearts and minds of the masses with the Qing court after the rebellion broke out.¹⁴ The primers were devised to educate and maintain the enthusiasm of the uninitiated masses that had swelled the ranks of the insurgents, and to convert those who were ambivalent or sympathetic to the Qing. Following the founding of the Heavenly Kingdom in Nanjing, the Taiping primers were intended by Hong to supplant the entire set of culturally warped Confucian rhymed books with similar titles and instruct his subjects in the orthodoxy of the theocracy.¹⁵ The primers were treated as religious scriptures as they contained the God's divine commandments (zhao 詔) for mankind. Thus, they were written in the *wen-li* 文理 style. Both soldiers and the general populace were required to memorize them by heart. August F. Lindley (1840-1873), a British naval officer and Taiping sympathizer, observed that the *Sanzijing* was read by a Taiping

pastor to his congregation on the Sabbath day.¹⁶ Taiping law stipulated that the sergeant serves in the role of pastor, supplying religious instruction to the commune under his charge. He was also responsible for teaching the Bible and other Taiping religious texts to the children gathering daily at his chapel. The Taiping primers were likely to be among the chief texts used by Taiping leaders for the religious education of their flock. The primers were also taught to the children of prominent Taiping leaders by a private tutor or women of the household. In a visit to the home of a Taiping leader, the missionary Joseph Edkins (1823-1905) observed that the *Sanzijing* and other religious writings of the Heavenly King were used for the education of the leader's eleven-year-old son.¹⁷

Taiping Sanzijing: Authenticating Hong's Heavenly Visions and Mission

The Taiping *Sanzijing* comprises 1056 characters, which are organized into 352 rhymed stanzas of 3 characters each. Like Medhurst's *Sanzijing* from which it drew inspiration, the primer begins with an exposition of the Genesis. But the Taiping *Sanzijing* differs from Medhurst's primer in that it does not continue the narration with an account of the Original Sin and the role of Jesus in human redemption. Instead, it tells the biblical stories of the Exodus and Jesus' crucifixion, and then it recounts the blasphemy of the imperial institution and the spiritual fall of China, followed by Hong Xiuquan's visions, and God and Jesus' revelations to the Taipings between 1848-1852.¹⁸

Yao Dadui argues that the primer creatively interwove biblical history and Chinese history into a coherent and unique soteriology. The text asserts that China had been walking the same path as other foreign nations (in the worship of Shangdi 上帝) since the time of Pangu 盘古 (whom Taiping identified as Adam) till the ancient three dynasties. The Chinese had committed the original sin when

perverse earthly rulers since Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 (259-210 BCE), due to being deluded by the Yanluo 閻羅 demon, had blasphemously assumed the title of God and patronized the false teachings of the Buddhists and Daoists. As a result, the Chinese had forgotten God and strayed onto the demonic path. Like his Heavenly Elder Brother Jesus, who had been sent down earlier on by the Heavenly Father to save the western nations, Hong had been tasked with descending unto China to eliminate the demons and save the Chinese people. Jesus and Hong, the Messiahs that God had entrusted to create and rule the Heavenly Kingdom on earth, are described as his imperial heirs. This shows, as Yao rightly asserts, the merging of Christian messianism and the Mandate of Heaven ideology in Taiping soteriology.¹⁹

Taiping soteriological vision is presented as accurate history by the text. Yao argues that for the Taipings the function of history was to teach people the special knowledge of God's salvation plan. This is true, however, the Taiping *Sanzijing* states that the esoteric knowledge was intended by God only for Hong, who would rouse his unconscious brothers and sisters once he had been awakened to his mission. God instructed Hong to study histories intently as his primary task when he sent him down to China. Thereafter, in the Dingyou 丁酉 year (1837), Hong was fetched back to Heaven by God, and "the divine plan was pointed clearly to him".²⁰

History functions as an important instrument for Hong in making sense of the bizarre visions that he received in 1837. The validation of Hong's visions was crucial for Taiping leaders as the vigor and persuasiveness of the whole movement hinged upon this aspect. As Rudolf Wagner highlights in his trailblazing study of the Taiping rebellion, the Taipings based their entire worldview and actions on Hong's visions. The Taipings meticulously authenticated their leader's visions against Chinese and Western sources to convince themselves that their mission was

indeed divinely mandated.²¹ Though Hong's demeanor changed markedly after the 1837 incident, he could not make sense of his visions until he carefully read and studied *Good Words* in 1843.²² Hong found the evidence provided by the book compelling since his visions and the text fit each other perfectly "like two halves of a tally."²³ Using the work, he was able to discern the key elements of his soteriological vision: the main protagonists— Old Father is God/Shangdi, Yanluo demon is the devil, Elder Brother is Jesus; the problem—humans rebelling against God under the influence of the devil; and the solution—God sending his son to the world as the redeemer.

As Yao Dadui has pointed out, the classics (*jing* 經) were considered historical documents during the Qing dynasty with the prominence of evidential learning. The eighteenth-century historian and philosopher, Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738-1801), famously asserted that "the six classics are all history". Zhang viewed the classics as a collection of historical facts by Confucius that show the realization of the moral principles of Heaven or the Dao in antiquity. This immanentist idea of history is also articulated in the *Good Words* and Chinese Bible (translated as *shengjing* 聖經 or sacred classic). These Chinese-language Protestant texts which were in the possession of the Taipings amply document events of divine intervention.

Drawing from both Chinese and Protestant sources, the Taipings perceived history essentially as proof of God's commands and actions in the world to enforce his will. Paraphrasing a passage from the *Book of Documents*, the *Sanzijing* states "The laws of Heaven above have no sympathy. On the good, (God) sends down blessings. On the evil, [He] sends down calamities". In Taiping historical lore, God intervened in the human world on four occasions because of his great anger at the prevalence of demonic influence in the world and the rebellion of humans: first, when he caused the Great Flood; sec-

ond, when he delivered the Israelites to the Promised Land; third, when he sent Jesus down to awaken the people and cleanse their sins through his sacrifice; and fourth in 1837, when he summoned Hong to heaven and commanded him to exterminate the demons and be the sovereign of the world.²⁴

The primer draws a direct connection between the Biblical stories of Exodus and Christ with God and Jesus' visits to the Taipings between 1848 and 1852 in its historical narrative, to demonstrate that their uprising was divinely mandated. In his annotation of the New Testament, Hong Xiuquan claims that "Undoubtedly there must be evidence in the action of Heaven. The Father's earlier descent onto earth to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt provides the proof for his current coming to the world to take command in establishing the kingdom of Heaven. The earlier birth of the elder brother among the Jews and his sacrifice to redeem the sins of mankind provides the proof for his current descent onto the world to take command of the great mission".²⁵ On the divine visits, the *Sanzijing* writes:

戊申歲/子煩愁/皇上帝/乃出頭//率耶穌/同下凡/教其子/勝肩擔//帝立子/存永遠/散邪謀/威權顯//審判世/分善惡/地獄苦/天堂樂//²⁶

In the year Moushen (1848) the Son (Hong) was in distress, the august Lord-on-High appeared to help him out of his predicament. He brought Jesus and they came down to the world together. God instructed his Son how to overcome the burdens on his shoulders. He appointed his Son to remain eternally (as the ruler of the world). God defeated the evil plots (of traitors) and had his authority and power demonstrated. He came to judge the world and differentiate the good from the wicked (for blessing and condemnation). Hell is suffering and Heaven is blissful.

The passage documents the crucial period in which the Taiping movement shifted

from religious iconoclasm to armed revolt. Yang Xiuqing and Xiao Chaogui were instrumental in directing the movement during this period. Under increasing government pressure between 1848 and 1850, Yang and Xiao speaking as God and Jesus, instructed Hong and Hakkas, who were in disarray, to prepare for an armed conflict against the Manchu government, whom they identified as earthly demons and declared Hong as the "True Sovereign of the Taiping Era" (*Taiping zhenzhu* 太平真主). After the uprising was staged in 1851, Yang/God and Xiao/Jesus continued to issue commands to the Taiping host, directing the military campaign, maintaining troop discipline, and uncovering turncoats within the movement.²⁷

Taiping Youxue shi: God's Ethical Injunction for Mankind

The Taiping *Youxue shi* is a didactic text designed to teach the core religious and moral values and duties of the regime. The primer has 14 folio pages and consists of 170 characters arranged into 34 five-character verses dealing with the subjects of religious worship, social ethics, and individual moral cultivation. The book is structured into three main parts. The first part explicates the foundational religion and moral obligations of the God-worshippers that is the veneration (*jing* 敬) of God, Jesus, and corporeal parents. These three entities are venerated because humans owed them a debt of gratitude. *Shangdi* is the principal object of religious worship and reverence because He is the True God and the creator and nurturer of humans. Jesus is revered on account of his exalted position of "crown prince" (*taizi* 太子) and for the sacrifice he made to cleanse the sins of humans. The *Youxue shi* explains that honor (*jing*) is owed to parents by their progeny for raising them, not for giving birth to them.²⁸ This suggests that the rightful recipient of people's filial reverence is God, the true parent of humans.



The term *jing*, which connotes an inner attitude of awe, dutifulness, and obedience, was the foundational value of the Taiping ethical system. *Jing*, in Taiping discourses, is more accurately translated as “filial reverence.” It is a distinct religio-moral precept created by Hong Xiuquan by his interpretation of Old Testament ethical monotheism, centered on God as a strict father that he received from Liang Fa,²⁹ through the Confucian ethical framework centered on the virtue of filial piety that he learned from the classics. The attitude of filial veneration can be extended to other social relationships and developed into the values of *zhong* 忠 (dutifulness) from a subject towards the ruler, *cong* 從 (submissiveness) from a wife towards her husband, and *ti* 悌 (brotherly affection) from younger brothers towards their elder brothers.

This point is explicated in the second part of the text, which elucidates the specific ethical duties of a ruler, minister, father, mother, son, daughter-in-law, elder brother, younger brother, elder sister, younger sister, elder brother’s wife, younger brother’s wife, relatives by marriage, husband, wife, man and woman. The *Youxue shi* emphasizes the authority of social superiors and the subservience of their inferiors in the construction of a moral and harmonious social order. The primer explains that the primary ethical responsibility of superiors is to act as exemplars and adjudicators of God’s Ten Commandments and to lead the subordinates in moral cultivation. The ethical duty of the social inferiors is obedience and deference to their superiors.

All social ethics described in the text deal with roles drawn from the two cardinal social institutions of the state and family, except for the general roles of men and women. The *Youxue shi* maintains that the core principle governing the relationship between man and woman is the strict segregation of men and women:

乾剛嚴位外/道在避嫌疑//女道總宜

貞/男人近不應/幽閒端位內//³⁰

Qian (the male element) is firm by nature, his place is strictly outside (the inner quarters) and his duty lies in avoiding suspicion (of sexual misconduct). A woman’s duty is at its core the preservation of chastity; she should distance herself from men; gentle and quiet, her place is properly in the inner quarters.

The gender division of social spaces, and the feminine virtues of chastity, submissiveness, and quietness remained cardinal tenets of the Confucian gender system.³¹ It is clear that the Taipings had been heavily influenced by the dominant gender-related discourse of the time and understood the strict segregation of men and women as an observation of God’s Seventh Commandment that prohibits adultery and lascivious acts.

The last part of the primer concerns moral self-cultivation through disciplining of one’s heart/mind, eyes, ears, mouth, hands, and legs. The Taipings’ practice of self-cultivation was adapted from the moral treatise *Liu zhen* 六箴 (Six Admonitions) written by the Tang scholar Pi Rixiu 皮日休 (834–883). The treatise emphasizes rectification of the heart/mind (*xin* 心), the cognitive and affective intelligence had been endowed by heaven with the ability to discriminate between moral good and evil, and the importance of this vital organ in disciplining the other sense organs, which were susceptible to sensual pleasures.³² Similarly, the *Youxue shi* reads:

一身誰管轄/上帝賦心靈//心正能真宰/官骸自順承。//³³

Who is in control of the whole body? God has given to man an astute mind. When the heart is upright, it becomes the true governor. To which the senses and members are naturally obedient.

The theory that underlies *Liu zhen* is the Mencian notion of inborn goodness of human nature, as embodied by the innate moral

heart/mind. In accepting the Mencian notion of human nature, Taiping moral theory departs from the core Christian belief of the original sin of Man.

The discipline of the eyes, ears, mouth, and four limbs in *Liusiben* is an amplification of the Confucian notion of restraining the self. This notion comes from the famous passage in Book XII of the *Analects* in which Kongzi 孔子 (551-479 BCE) teaches Yan Hui 顏回 (521-481 BCE) that restraining the self is the key for attaining virtue, and by that he meant acting according to propriety.³⁴ For the Taipings, self-restraint meant disciplining and conducting oneself according to God's moral code. The Taiping *Youxue shi* stresses the importance of abiding by the Ten Commandments in a steadfast manner to gain God's favor and enter heaven.³⁵

Yuzhi qianzi zhao: *Articulating Taiping Eschatology*

This primer consists of 1104 characters, arranged into 276 rhymed stanzas, each verse comprised of four characters. Unlike the other two texts, the purpose of this primer was not only to teach Taiping moral and theological ideas but also literacy and general knowledge. Most of the characters in the text do not appear more than once and it contains numerous names of mythical beasts, wild and domesticated animals, birds, insects, freshwater and deep-sea creatures, plants and vegetables, condiments, and human organs.³⁶ The primer belongs to a special genre of Taiping writings call *zhao* 詔 (edicts). Edicts are proclamations issued by the Heavenly King or religious texts such as the New and Old Testaments. The Taiping Old and New Testaments are titled *Jinyizhao shengshu* 舊遺詔聖書 (*The Old Sacred Book of Imperial Will*) and *Qianyizhao shengshu* 前遺詔聖書 (*The Former Sacred Book of Imperial Will*) as the Taipings deemed them to be books of divine revelations passed down by the Lord-on-High and Crown Prince Jesus when they descended

to earth in history to perform miracles and make their commands known to human beings. The Taiping Bible also includes the True Testament, also titled *Tianming zhaozhi shu* 天命詔旨書 (*Book of Heavenly Decree and Imperial Proclamations*), which contains the revelations of God and Jesus as decreed to God-worshippers through Yang and Xiao. It may be surmised that the primer is a condensed version of the lost *Zhaoshu* 詔書 (*Book of Edicts*). According to Luo Erkang, the missing work contains the revolutionary history of the movement and was treated with great reverence by the Taipings.³⁷ The *Yuzhi qianzi zhao* belonged to the corpus of sacred texts or scriptures that the Taipings had to memorize and study reverently.

The *Yuzhi qianzi zhao* is comprised of three main segments: a summary of the Old Testament, the life of Jesus in the New Testament, and history of the Taiping movement from 1837, when Hong was summoned to Heaven, to 1853, when the Taipings captured Nanjing, renamed it New Jerusalem and made it the capital of their new earthly Heavenly Kingdom. It was written a year after the Taipings banned all Confucian books and installed a Christian orthodoxy based on the Taiping Bible for their newly founded theocracy. The *Yuzhi qianzi zhao* is an exposition of the unique Taiping eschatology. Like the *Sanzijing*, the *Yuzhi qianzi zhao* also emphasizes historical understanding. However, unlike the former which looks back on China's past to identify the reason for the fall of the Chinese nation and the Exodus and the passion of Christ to validate Hong's messianic visions and mission, the historical narrative provided by the primer is linear and global in perspective. The text strings together the biblical stories of the two Testaments and the development of the Taiping movement to demonstrate the unfolding of God's plan and intervention in human history from the Genesis to the coming of Jesus, culminating in the end of history with the founding of the universal Heavenly Kingdom of Great

Peace (*Taiping tianguo* 太平天國).

The primer begins by narrating the primeval history of the Genesis and Great Flood in the Book of Genesis. The text stresses the omnipotence and beneficence of God in creating heaven, earth, and humans. The apocalyptic event of a great flood was sent by God to punish mankind for their disobedience.

洪水退後/悲憫約誓/永不沈滅/虹為號
記。//³⁸

After the flood had receded, in pity and compassion he made a covenant that there would never be drowning or deluge, and that the rainbow shall be the sign.³⁹

Hong interpreted this as a prophecy for his subsequent descent to the world as the sovereign of the heavenly kingdom. In his annotation of the story of the Noahic flood and covenant, Hong draws a connection between himself (*bong* 洪, which literally means flood) and the heavenly portent of the rainbow (*bong* 虹): “Father established an eternal covenant through the phenomenon of a rainbow. The rainbow is bending like a bow. (Also) Curving and bending with a dot in the middle is Hong, the Sun.⁴⁰ I am the Sun and this is why my surname is Hong. Father is using the symbol to herald my descent to the world to become its ruler.”⁴¹

The primer then provides an enigmatic and prophetic account of Hong’s apocalyptic battle with demonic forces and his founding of a millennial kingdom on earth:

誅妖戮鬼/雷轟電掣/霜寒雪白//霧集
露零/電重霞紅/煙斜霧橫/鬥杓所豎//
節序以更/乾旋坤轉/夏熱冬冷//銅關
鐵卡/湯池金城/江帶山礪。//⁴²

He exterminated the devils and killed the demons; Thunder roared and lightning struck. Frost was cold and snow was white; Sleet coagulated and dew drops separated. Hail was heavy and sunset red; Smoke curled and fog drifted. When the ladle of the dipper turned, the season changed.

Heaven revolved and earth turned; Summer was hot and winter cold. There were passes of copper and gates of iron; There were boiling moats and cities of gold; The rivers were like belts and the mountains like honing stones.⁴³

The terms “passes of copper and gates of iron” and “boiling moats and cities of gold” alludes to the impregnable New Jerusalem built by the Taipings in 1853. The phrase “The rivers were [...] honing stones”, as C. T. Hu points out, is from the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of Han) and is “used to convey the idea of the perpetual existence of a country or dynasty.”⁴⁴

The above passage demonstrates the centrality of demons in Taiping messianism and millenarism. Wagner and Weller have shown the significance of the belief in demons in popular religion on Taiping theology. Barend Ter Haar has identified the demonological paradigm as the ideological substratum of the Taipings. The demonological paradigm, as Ter Haar points out, is a distinctive type within Chinese messianic traditions. The characteristics of the paradigm include the understanding of apocalyptic disasters as demonic; the savior as a youthful prince who will usher in a new era of Great Peace; the expulsion of demons by the savior through the aid of divine armies and exorcist techniques; and a haven for the chosen people to avert the apocalypse. Ter Haar convincingly demonstrates how the demonological paradigm structured the visions of Hong Xiuquan and Taiping millenarism, which evolved between 1848 and 1852 under the core ideological leadership of Hong, Yang, and Xiao. He argues that the paradigm formed the basis on which the Taiping ideologues received and interpreted the demonological elements in Protestant messianic and millenarian beliefs.⁴⁵ Taiping interpretation was also shaped by the Chinese-language Protestant works in their hands, which translated Protestant demonology in the idiom of demonic in Chinese popular religion.⁴⁶

The second segment of the primer focuses on narrating the miracles, preaching journey, betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, and the propagation of the Gospel by Jesus' disciples after his ascent to heaven. The account of Jesus is more comprehensive in the primer compared to the *Sanzijing*.⁴⁷ This demonstrates that the educational objective of the primer in instructing religious knowledge was as important as its political design of legitimating Hong and the Taiping regime.

The last segment of the primer narrates the history of the Taiping movement. This is the first official history of the movement before the publication of the *Taiping Tianri* 太平天日 (Taiping Heavenly Chronicle) in 1862.⁴⁸ In contrast to the *Sanzijing*, which places Hong in the center of the narrative, the *Yuzhi qianzhi zhao* emphasizes God's role in the founding and direction of the Taiping movement. The narration begins with God's summoning of Hong to heaven in the spring of 1837 to instruct him on the "roots and branches" of his mission. The confused Hong was awakened to his mission after he was conferred a book in the Guimao 癸卯 year (1843), in which he found evidence for his earlier bizarre dreams.⁴⁹

The primer makes clear than the Taiping hosts were under divine direction and assistance. In the spring of the Wushen 戊申 year (1848), God descended and issued his orders to the God-worshippers through the mouth of the East King. In autumn, Jesus also descended and spoke through the West King. God had been "providing support since his spring visit; his unseen exploits and protection abundant." The Taiping armies were confident and committed and ever victorious with divine guidance and assistance in the major battles against the demonic Qing at Jintian 金田, Yiyang 益陽, and Lake Dongting 洞庭.⁵⁰ The primer concludes its historical narrative with the establishment of the regime at Nanjing. The Heavenly Kingdom founded by the Taipings under God's auspices is pre-

sented as rich, powerful, and serene, with the Chinese people within and the myriad foreign nations without submitting to its rule.⁵¹ The Taiping millennium is presented as a return to the golden age of the Great Community (*Datong* 大同) in ancient China as recorded in the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites).

Conclusion

In this paper, I proposed that Taiping primers were sacred texts articulating God's ethical injunctions and plan for the salvation for mankind. The primers were crucial pedagogical devices, intended by the Taiping ideologues to convert the deluded plebeians and build the kingdom of heaven on earth. The effectiveness of Taiping primers as religious educational materials stemmed from their broad circulation, simple and easy to memorize structure, and most importantly, the indigenization of Christian tenets through terms comprehensible and plausible to the Chinese. Taiping indigenization of foreign ideas was done through the skillful manipulation of historical knowledge and narratives. The Taipings used history to defend themselves against the charge that they were xenophobic (*congfan* 從番). The primers used the classics to show that China, like foreign countries, had worshipped the same God during antiquity.⁵² They also drew from both Chinese and biblical histories to support their claim that the religion they were preaching was the true Way because it was universally valid in time and space.⁵³ Taiping ideologues regarded the classics as history, the record of God and Jesus' command and intervention in the world. As the content of the primers show, they drew from both the Chinese and biblical canons as historical evidence to validate their ethical teachings, theology, and the revelations of truth derived through spirit mediumship. Lastly, the historical narrative presented by the Taiping primers had the effect of instilling a sense of common identity and purpose in the God-worshippers, not un-

like the teleological nationalist historiography of the later era, by constructing a common mythic past and a divinely authored utopian future for the movement.

Selected Bibliography

Ter Haar, Barend, "China's Inner Demons: The Political Impact of the Demonological Paradigm," *China Information*, XI, 2/3 (1996), pp. 54-85.

Wagner, Rudolf, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision: The Role of Religion in Taiping Rebellion*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982.

Wagner, Rudolf, "Operating in the Chinese Public Sphere: Theology and Technique of Taiping Propaganda", in Huang Chun-Chieh and Erik Zürcher (ed.) *Norms and the State in China*, Leiden, Brill, 1993, pp. 104-140.

Weller, Robert, *Resistance, Chaos, and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen*, London, MacMillan, 1994.

Yao, Dadui, "The Power of Persuasion in Propaganda: The Taiping Three Characters Classic," *Frontiers of History in China*, 13, 2 (2018), pp. 193-210.

Note

¹ See Carl Kilcourse, *Taiping Theology: The Localization of Christianity in China, 1843-64* (NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 38-44.

² Luo Ergang 羅爾綱, *Taiping Tianguo shi* 太平天國史 (History of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace) (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1991), pp. 1566-68.

³ For their biographies see *ibid.*, pp. 1949-55, and pp. 1959-60.

⁴ Yao Dadui, "The Power of Persuasion in Propaganda: The Taiping Three Characters Classic", *Frontiers of History in China*, 13, 2 (2018), p. 175.

⁵ Walter H. Medhurst, *China: Its State and Prospects* (Boston, Crocker and Brewster, 1838), p. 269.

⁶ On the level of literacy in Qing China, see Evelyn Rawski's seminal study, *Popular*

Education and Literacy in Ch'ing China (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1979).

⁷ On elite use of colloquial primers to civilize the lower classes, see Bai Limin, *Shaping the Ideal Child: Children and Their Primers in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2005), pp. 149-174.

⁸ Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (NY, W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), pp. 177-79.

⁹ Vincent Shih, *Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1973), pp. 148.

¹⁰ Quoted and translated by Rudolf Wagner, "Operating in the Chinese Public Sphere: Theology and Technique of Taiping Propaganda", in Huang C., E. Zürcher (eds.), *Norms and the State in China* (Leiden, Brill, 1993), p. 126.

¹¹ Luo, *Taiping Tianguo shi*, p. 1532.

¹² Robert Weller, *Resistance, Chaos, and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen* (London, MacMillan, 1994), pp. 86-112.

¹³ Rudolf Wagner, "Operating in the Chinese Public Sphere", pp. 120-21.

¹⁴ On the propaganda wars during the conflict, see Tobie-Meyer Fong, *What Remains, Coming to Terms with Civil War in Nineteenth-Century China* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 21-64.

¹⁵ Wagner, "Operating in the Chinese Public Sphere", pp. 130-31.

¹⁶ Augustus F. Lindley, *Tai-ping Tien-kuoh: The History of the Ti-ping Revolution*, vol. 1 (London, Day & Son, 1866), pp. 320-21.

¹⁷ Jane R. Edkins, *Chinese Scenes and People: with Notices of Christian Missions and Missionary Life in a Series of Letters from Various Parts of China* (London, James Nisbet and Co., 1863), pp. 260-61.

¹⁸ *Sanzijing* 三字經 in Wang Zhongmin 王重民 et al., *Zhongguo jindaishi zhiliao congkan: Taiping Tianguo* 中國近代史叢刊——太平天國 (Collection of Materials on Modern Chinese History: The Taiping Rebellion), vol. 2 (Shanghai, Shanghai renmin chubanshe,

2000), pp. 229-38.

¹⁹ Yao, “The Power of Persuasion in Propaganda”, p. 205.

²⁰ *Sanzijing* in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, p. 226.

²¹ Rudolf Wagner, *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision: The Role of Religion in Taiping Rebellion* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982).

²² Theodore Hamberg, *The Visions of Hung-Siu-Tshuen and Origin of The Kwang-si Insurrection* (Hong Kong, China Mail Office, 1854), pp. 19-20.

²³ *Taiping tianri* 太平天日 (The Taiping Heavenly Chronicle), in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, p. 642.

²⁴ *Tianqing daoli shu* 天情道理書 (Book of Heavenly Will and Principles), in *ibid.*, pp. 361-63.

²⁵ Luo, *Taiping Tianguo shi*, p. 690.

²⁶ *Sanzijing*, in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, p. 227.

²⁷ God and Jesus’ revelations to the Taipings during this period are collected in *Tianming zhaozhi shu* 天命詔旨書 (Book of Heavenly Proclamations) and *Tianfu shengzhi Tianxiong shengzhi* 天父圣旨天兄圣旨 (Edicts of the Heavenly Father and Heavenly Elder Brother).

²⁸ *Youxue shi* 幼學詩, in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, p. 231.

²⁹ On the image of God as a strict disciplinarian portrayed in *Good Words*, see Kim Sukjoo, *Liang Fa’s Quanshi Liangyan and Its Impact on the Taiping Movement*, Ph.D. dissertation (Baylor University, 2011), p. 143.

³⁰ *Youxue shi*, in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, p. 234.

³¹ The enforcement of conservative gender norms and female virtues, especially female chastity, by the elites and Qing state is well documented by historians. See Chow Kai-wing, *The Rise of Confucian Ritualism in Late Imperial China: Ethics, Classics, and Lineage Discourse* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 204-22; and Janet M. Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Cen-*

tury China (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004).

³² Pi Rixiu 皮日休, *Liuwen* 六箴, <<https://www.pinshiwen.com/wenfu/js/20190929249164.html>> (accessed 23 August 2021).

³³ *Youxue shi*, in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, p. 234.

³⁴ James Legge, *Confucius. Confucian Analects, The Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean* (NY, Dover, 1971), p. 250.

³⁵ *Youxue shi*, in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, p. 235.

³⁶ *Yuzhi qianzhi zhao*, in *ibid.*, p. 409.

³⁷ Luo, *Taiping Tianguo shi*, p. 1543.

³⁸ *Yuzhi qianzhi zhao*, in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, p. 409. Translation from Franz Michael and Chang Chung-li. *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents*, vol. 2 (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1966), p. 409.

³⁹ Hong Xiuquan is likely alluding to the ancient script character for “sun”, which is written as a circle with a dot in the center.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Luo, *Taiping Tianguo shi*, pp. 689-90.

⁴¹ *Yuzhi qianzhi zhao*, in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, vol. 2, p. 409. Translation from Michael and Chang, *Taiping Rebellion*, p. 410.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 410, note 2.

⁴³ Barend ter Haar, “China’s Inner Demons: The Political Impact of the Demonological Paradigm”, *China Information*, XI, 2/3 (1996), pp. 68-79.

⁴⁴ Liang Fa, for instance, used the terms “snake demon” (*shemo* 蛇魔) and “demonic devil” (*mogui* 魔鬼) most often to translate Satan in *Good Words*.

⁴⁵ *Yuzhi qianzhi zhao* in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, vol. 2, p. 410.

⁴⁶ For the significance of Taiping Heavenly Chronicle as the first official history of the movement, see Huan Jin, “Authenticating the Renewed Heavenly Vision: The Taiping Heavenly Chronicle (Taiping tianri)”, *Frontiers of History in China* 13, 2 (2018), pp. 173-192.

⁴⁷ *Yuzhi qianzhi zhao*, in *Zhongguo jindaishi zhibiliao congkan*, p. 410.



⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 410-11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁵⁰ *Tiantiao shu* 天條書 (Book of Heavenly Commandment), in *Zhongguo jindaishi*

zhiliao congkan, p. 73.

⁵¹ *Yundao jueshi xun* 原道覺世訓 (Lecture of the Original Way to Awaken the World), in *ibid.*, p. 93.