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Historians and Consciousness: The Modern Politics of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom

BY ROBERT P. WELLER

ACADEMIC discourse in the People's Republic of China is strikingly political by comparison with Western standards. Chinese readily read historical accounts as political metaphors, the historiography of many fields tends to follow changes in the political line, and analyses of seemingly distant and trivial events have occasionally set intellectual heads rolling. The political weight of history in China relates in part to a willingness to take history seriously as a teacher for the present and in part to a strong recognition that intellectuals are influential actors whose statements have social and political roots and consequences. Yet this day-to-day recognition of the dialectical relationship between historian and society exists alongside an explicit theory of the primacy of a material base over a superstructure. This theory dominates direct discussions of the role of ideas, and the result is a kind of contradictory consciousness about the historical relation of ideas to society that pervades a great deal of Chinese historical

research. Like any discourse,¹ Chinese writing about ideas and society can be deconstructed to show internal contradictions rooted in the social organization of scholarship.

The historiography of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom accounts for only a small part of this Chinese discourse, but the political and historical importance of the rebellion makes it a good example of processes that characterize a great deal of social research in China. Using just a few aspects of the voluminous Taiping literature as example, this article will address the political grounding of Chinese social research and the contradictory way in which that research addresses the relation of consciousness to social relations. Finally, it will suggest some of the ways that the social experience of Chinese scholars themselves helps to support the particular structure of their discourse.

Historical Discourse

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was a huge, avowedly Christian rebellion of the nineteenth century. The Taiping rebellion has been important in modern politics ever since Sun Yat-sen marked it as a crucial precursor to his own nationalist, anti-Manchu (and thus anti-Qing dynasty) ideology. The frequent appearance of major statements by important Taiping scholars in newspapers like the *People's Daily* provides one clear sign of its continuing political importance. Such publication implies government ratification of particular theories or certain lines of research, and has provided a major forum for topics like the peasant nature of the rebellion, the role of certain leaders (especially Li Xiucheng, to be discussed below), and more recently the role of religion. The major historical questions have also moved with the political times.

¹ See, for example, Michael Ryan, *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 11-22.

Just after the 1949 revolution there was a strong attempt to show that the rebellion (like the Communist revolution) was based in the peasantry. Luo Ergang, one of the leading Taiping historians, for example, argued in his early work that the Taiping was nationalist and democratic (more or less the Nationalist, Sun Yat-sen line), but after the revolution stressed instead the egalitarianism and revolutionary nature of the movement.² More radical periods in the People's Republic praised the egalitarianism of the movement, which was seen as a precursor to socialism. That same egalitarianism is now often condemned as backward, reflecting peasant utopianism and recalling the "leftist excesses" of the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution itself made clear that the major leaders of the Taiping (Hong Xiuquan and Yang Xiuqing) were to be read as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and that certain other leaders were in fact capitulationists (as were those scholars who wrote more flattering analyses of such leaders). Current trends include criticizing the Taiping for failing to use its intellectuals well, just as China is putting new emphasis on the importance of intellectuals for economic development.

The political load that the Taiping carries in China is by no means unique. Newspapers and editorials treat historical subjects much more frequently than in the West, and nearly anything can become a metaphor for the present. The most striking example in recent Chinese history was the historical play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*, which helped catalyze the Cultural Revolution. The play depicted a loyal Ming official who was unfairly dismissed by a too-powerful emperor. One interpretation read the emperor as Mao and Hai Rui as the purged Peng Dehuai. Mao insisted that the play be criticized. The initial result was an "objective" criticism of the play on the grounds of historical inaccuracy. Mao refused to accept this

² Luo Ergang, *Taiping Tianguo Shigao* (Beijing: Kaiming Shuju, 1951), p. 1; Vincent Y. C. Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967), p. 447.

criticism, and criticized the critics for not making the politics of historical interpretation be explicit. Understanding historical interpretation as political analogy gives historical discourse broad social power in China, even as it makes the intellectual's own position more precarious.

Such readings of history are not simple manipulation of the past to serve present ends, in spite of occasional accusations to the contrary from a Western scholarship that claims to have sterilized its politics. They recognize instead that history has real implications for contemporary society. Chinese Marxism insists that past events are evidence for general principles of social life, and historical interpretation can thus make direct contributions to current policy. This contrasts with the more purely historicist view that all past events were unique and could not have happened other than they did, while the present, apparently qualitatively different from the past, provides us with a wide range of options on which to exercise our free will.

By recognizing the politics of history, the Chinese also recognize the social grounding and social influence of the scholar. Historians' interpretations, their choice of questions, and their selection of data out of the infinite possibilities indicate their social and political positions. Just as Chinese scholars agree that historical ideas relate to social contexts, they recognize that their own ideas also exist against a social ground. Yet if ideas reflect the society, they also affect it. Indeed, the Chinese government would not have put nearly the pressure it has on intellectuals if it did not see a dialectic between scholarly ideas and the society—ideas reflect the position of the scholar in society even as they alter that society.

None of this is to claim, of course, that Chinese academics and politicians have never manipulated the past for present purposes, but the Chinese themselves see such pure manipulation as an abuse. If history indeed provides lessons for the present, then it should not be toyed with cynically. Still, the party and the central government retain tight political control

in China, and the result is regular pressure on academics toward certain lines of interpretation, and occasional powerful academic reactions against the government when it seems relatively safe.

These attitudes have both new and old roots in the social organization of knowledge in China. Scholarship always intertwined with politics in late imperial China. Officials were by definition scholars, and the goal of scholarship was assumed to be public service. The occasional refusal to serve in the government by an accomplished scholar who preferred a quiet life of art and study was itself a political act. The twentieth century and the end of the imperial examination system saw a continued political role for intellectuals, now often in opposition to the government. Universities provided the fomenting grounds for the May Fourth Movement of 1919 (a broad reform movement that called for the use of colloquial Chinese), for the Chinese Communist Party, for the Cultural Revolution, and for the recent wave of protests in China. Intellectuals today continue to call on this powerful political tradition, which provides both justification and impetus to continued action. Marx's grounding of ideas in social experience³ further reinforces the Chinese emphasis on the political role of the intellectual. In addition, throughout most of the current period of reform, the government has wooed intellectuals, in many cases offering almost automatic party membership to academics. While politics is no longer said to be in command, the stress on the important political and social role of intellectuals has not decreased.

Yet as Chinese scholars write explicitly about the relation of ideas to society they tend to abandon a more dialectical approach for a simple base/superstructure metaphor that separates idea and society. Ideas often appear in this discourse as mere reflections of class position, or else as hermetically

³ For example, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part I (New York: International, 1970).

sealed entities floating independently above the real society. On the one hand, for example, the emphasis on forces of production as the historical engine of progress, which has characterized China's new impetus toward economic development, encourages scholars to dismiss ideas completely. On the other hand, intellectuals remain, for many people, a kind of separate and superior group. Indeed, intellectual snobbery can be powerful enough to make foreign visitors wonder whether the constant worker and peasant rhetoric of the revolution and especially the Cultural Revolution has had any effect at all. China stresses individual scholarly achievement and fame as much as the West, and jealous guarding of scholarly resources typifies much research in China.

A number of strands thus make up much writing about the relation of ideas and society in China—a political tradition that recognizes the social power and social grounding of ideas and intellectuals, a sort of traditional intellectual position that knowledge follows its own course separate from the society,⁴ and a reductionist claim that ideas simply reflect class. Overlying all this is a base/superstructure metaphor that is little analyzed but widely accepted.

The real social experience of scholars tends to pull apart the poles of the most dialectical position about the mutual influence of idea and society. Current arguments about "communist education" illustrate some of the problems this causes as China attempts to adopt some liberal economic measures while avoiding "bourgeois liberalization" of thought. Communist education—intended as a movement in the superstructure only—is supposed to succeed no matter what is happening in the economic base. On the one hand, the movement teaches Marxism—including as a basic principle the determination of the superstructure by the base. On the other hand, the very idea that an educational campaign can

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971), pp. 5–23.

completely counteract the social and ideological implications of economic transformation rebuts the theory it teaches.

As I will show for the Taiping, the same kinds of complexities show up as inconsistent formulations about the class basis of the movement on the one hand, and a determined emphasis on great men and great ideas on the other. Scholars of the Taiping are political actors in their own right, but the social organization of knowledge in China also encourages them to see themselves as Chinese Marxist populists (who analyze the Taiping as a reflection of peasant interests) and at the same time as a kind of traditional intellectual elite (who analyze the Taiping through its great ideas and acts). Like any discourse, Taiping history contains its contradictions and inconsistencies; this paper will explore some of their social roots.

Idea and Society in the Taiping Rebellion

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom shook China from about 1850 to the demise of its capital in 1864. The number of casualties is usually said to be well over 10 million; the number of articles on the movement written in the People's Republic is said to be over five thousand. The movement began with a prophet named Hong Xiuquan. Hong was a scholar who repeatedly failed the examinations for the lowest official degree. During one of his unsuccessful trips to Canton to take the exams, he received a copy of an early missionary tract called *Quanshi Liangyen* ("Good Words to Exhort the Age") but apparently did not read it. Later, back home in the countryside of Guangdong Province, he fell into a delirium and had visions of himself being carried to heaven by divine maidens. There he met a man in a dragon robe with a great white beard. The man explained that he was Hong's true father, that the world had once recognized him as its true lord, but that these immoral times had replaced him with idols and imps. An elder

brother of Hong's had once tried to cleanse the world of its sins. Now he gave Hong a sword and a seal of office, and instructed him to reform the world.

This vision puzzled Hong for some years until (after yet another examination failure) he carefully read the missionary tract and realized that the old man in the vision was God and his elder brother was Jesus. He and several new followers baptized themselves following instructions in "Good Words to Exhort the Age," and began to proselytize in their home county of Huaxian. Before they had gained much of a following, however, the elders of the community asked them to leave due to their anti-Confucian sentiments. Possibly inspired by stories of prophets in the wilderness, they wandered west into increasingly peripheral areas. They finally settled in a very poor, mountainous area of central Guangxi Province.

Here the movement really began to grow. With Hong and his right-hand man, Feng Yunshan (also from Huaxian), frequently away, local leaders occupied increasingly important positions. Under their influence, the movement grew rapidly in size and changed quickly in character. Spirit possession by God and Jesus became common, and the movement became increasingly militant, attacking a number of local temples. Boosted by several thousand armed Hakkas, who had just lost one of the endemic local ethnic battles, and having antagonized much of the local elite, the uprising itself began in 1850. Besieged in the northern Guangxi town of Yung'an, they organized the apparatus of state, from imperial titles to official printings of their books. After breaking the siege, they began a stunning march north and then east down the Yangzi River. The government seemed helpless against them as their army grew to over a million. Finally, in China's commercial center at the lower Yangzi River, they captured Nanjing and declared it capital of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Unable to capture Beijing or later Shanghai (where foreigners actively opposed them), victim of vicious internal fighting, the Taiping lost their capital a decade later and the movement collapsed.

The flood of twentieth-century writing about the movement stems from more than its huge scale. Taiping writings⁵ called for a major restructuring of the society with land held communally and parceled out equally to all (men and women getting equal shares, and children getting half-shares). As the movement advanced, it also developed a strong anti-Manchu (and thus anti-Qing dynasty) sentiment, seeing the Manchus as the imps in Hong's early rhetoric. Toward the end, one of the movement's leaders also attempted to introduce many Western reforms, including suggestions for building telegraph and railroad systems. The modernizing reforms and the anti-Manchu sentiment made the Taiping an appealing reference point for the Nationalist revolution of 1911; their egalitarianism and origins in the rural periphery appealed to the 1949 revolution.

Religion. My own research in China during 1984–85 on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom concentrated on the role religious ideas and rituals played during the early organizing days in rural Guangxi. A great deal has been written in the West about the nature of Taiping religion, looking especially for its various roots in Christianity and Confucianism. Indeed, with Hong as God's younger son and the constant Taiping use of religious texts and ritual, the subject cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, Chinese scholarship tends to give religion relatively short shrift, and neither Chinese nor Western literature pays much heed to how these radical new beliefs really worked at the local level. Two major oral-history projects conducted in the middle and late 1950s in the original Taiping base areas in Guangxi,⁶ for example, provided very little information on religion, with

⁵ Especially the *Tianchao Tianmu Zhidu* in Franz Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Comments*, vols. 2–3 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971).

⁶ Guangxi Sheng Taiping Tianguoshi Diaochatuan, *Taiping Tianguo Qiyi Diaocha Baogao* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1956); Guangxi Zhuangzu Zizhiqu Tongzhiguan, ed., *Taiping Tianguo Geming Zai Guangxi Diaocha Ziliao Huibian* (Nanning: Guangxi Zhuangzu Zizhiqu Renmen Chubanshe, 1962).

the exception of some exotic rituals (flags that raised themselves on poles, seen as a ruse to suck in the superstitious masses or as evidence for contact with the Triads) and some discussion of temple destruction (seen as an attack on the superstructure of feudalism). Although both studies had long sections on economic conditions and class struggle, neither dealt separately with any issues of ideology (including religion). When I suggested to some of the scholars who had been involved in the original research that they must have gathered significant information on religion in this area where popular ritual remains very strong, they answered that they had made no effort at all to record such information because the emphasis at the time was on showing the peasant base of the movement, and religion was a secondary element that distracted from the real issues. Their fairly close concern with pre-Taiping social conditions did not lead to any concern with pre-Taiping ideological conditions.

While religious ideas were never research priorities, Chinese scholars could not simply ignore them completely—Taiping religious rhetoric infused its writings and guided its actions (like attempts to ally with Europeans) too much to pass over unmentioned. Chinese scholarship addressing the issue usually begins by citing Engels on the German Peasant War of 1525⁷ to the effect that religion is an outer garment cloaking class interest. There is little attempt to prove the assertion for the Taiping; many scholars instead assume that such a progressive movement must have been motivated solely by class interest. Seeing Taiping religion as a mere outer garment, as a simple metaphor for politics, resonates with Mao's 1927 indictment of religion as one of the feudal ropes (along with landlords, lineages, and, for women, men) binding the Chinese people, and with the Maoist view that religion in China would gradually fade away as the mode of production moved toward

⁷ Frederick Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (New York: International, 1973).

socialism and communism.⁸ Some scholars in the early 1950s thus argued that Taiping monotheism helped unite the peasants, while others argued that the religion, as a subjectivist error, held the movement back in every way. Neither argument addresses religion directly as a meaningful system; instead, they reduce it to politics.

As China has relaxed its policy toward religion of all kinds during the last few years, Taiping scholars have begun to look more seriously at religion. I sat in on a graduate seminar on the Taiping in 1985 at Nanjing University, one of the major centers of Taiping studies. One day the professor asked the class whether they felt that Hong had really believed in his religion. Most put forward the standard outer-garment theory, holding that Hong had not believed. Several seemed stunned that any other view would even be considered; the outer-garment theory is so thoroughly part of the literature that most students simply take it for granted and do not see it as an issue. This typical picture of religion as the sheep's clothing draped over a political wolf implies a mixed view about the relations of ideas to society. For some it says that real people are not taken in by mere ideas; peasants are natural materialists. (Why they bothered with the religious rhetoric at all is less clear.) For others, however, the theory implies a very low view of the masses as superstitious sheep taken in by clever great men of the movement. The religious ideas are either transparent, "mere" metaphor, or they are powerful determiners of social action. Either way, the dialectic of idea and society has been pulled apart.

The professor of the Taiping seminar, who was himself an important Taiping scholar, was much more open than many of his students to the possibility of Hong's real belief in his religion, and the matter has seen increasing investigation from a number of leading Taiping scholars. Duan Benluo, for

⁸ Mao Zedong, "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan," in *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), pp. 23-59.

example, has argued more dialectically that Taiping religion both had roots in local economic conditions (making it fundamentally different from Christianity) and had an important function in organizing and centralizing Taiping power.⁹ Typically, his articles can also be read in relation to a current political campaign, in this case Duan's criticism of Taiping overcentralization recalled the effort to decentralize many economic functions in the 1980s.

The new interest in religion has led to examination of some topics that had been almost entirely ignored, even in the voluminous literature on the Taiping. One of these is spirit possession, an area that forces concentration on the interaction between Hong's original beliefs (which did not include possession) and local religious traditions.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the outer-garment theory of religion is far from dead even in this newer literature, as seen for example in the title of Xing Fenglin's 1981 article, "On Certain Questions Concerning Yang Xiuqing Pretending to Be Possessed by the Heavenly Father."¹¹ Local traditions of spirit possession were very strong in the early Taiping base area, and the original leaders found themselves forced to allow it, and even to recognize the authority of two locals (Yang Xiuqing and Xiao Chaogui) to speak as God and Jesus, respectively. Using this power to attack their enemies, to prevent their rivals from using the same possession techniques against them, and to aggrandize their own positions, both individuals became Taiping kings. Xiao died in an early battle, but Yang developed into the most

⁹ Duan Benluo, "Bai Shangdi Jiao' yu Taiping Tianguo de Xingwang," *Jiangsu Shiyuan Xuebao*, no. 4 (1980): 34-45; "Lun Bai Shangdi Jiao de Chuangli," in Nanjing Daxue Lishixi Taiping Tianguoshi Yanjiushi, ed., *Taiping Tianguoshi Xintan* (Suzhou: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 1982), pp. 135-146.

¹⁰ Xing Fenglin, "Yang Xiuqing yu 'Jiangtong'," *Guangxi Ribao*, August 17, 1980; "Guanyu Yang Xiuqing Jiutuo Tianfu Fushen Chuanyan de Ruogan Wenti," in Guangxi Taiping Tianguoshi Yanjiuhui, ed., *Taiping Tianguoshi Yanjiu Wenxuan* (Nanning: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1981); Wang Qingcheng, "'Tianfu Shengzhi,' 'Tianxiang Shengzhi' he Taiping Tianguo Lishi," *Jindaishi Yanjiu*, no. 2 (1985): 191-239.

¹¹ Xing, "Guanyu Yang Xiuqing."

powerful person apart from Hong himself. While he was possessed by God, no one—certainly not his filial son Hong Xiuquan—had power over him. As the movement grew, Yang's use of this power became increasingly obviously self-serving. Having berated Hong a number of times, God finally requested that Yang be addressed with imperial titles that had been reserved for Hong. His murder at the hands of other Taiping kings followed soon afterward. Possession is thus an area where it is possible to trace some of the organizational consequences of religious ideas for the movement as a whole, but the research will require a social theory of ideas that neither makes ideas transparent metaphors nor sees them as easy tools for manipulation of the masses.

Another religious topic has seen more discussion in China, but brings up many of the same issues. This is the question of whether Hong's motives were always entirely political and revolutionary. Luo Ergang had established what became the standard view after the Communist revolution—that Hong's ambition to rebel had been born with his original vision and that he never wavered from this political course. During the early 1960s (one of China's less radical periods), however, several authors suggested that Hong's motives may have been religious in the early years, turning rebellious only in the late 1840s. Historically, the argument centered on the dating of a few poems; theoretically, it centered on whether religious ideas could ever motivate a progressive movement. The new arguments were discredited during the Cultural Revolution, which adopted the outer-garment theory with a vengeance. Hong's God became a purely political metaphor, and Hong himself was really an atheist and materialist. Indeed, they argued that no workers' movement (as the Taiping was classified) could contain major idealist elements. The arguments of the early 1960s have returned during the reforms of the late 1970s, with a new emphasis on the transformation of Hong's Christianity after the establishment of the base in Guangxi. A number of senior Taiping scholars are now willing

to argue that Hong's early motivations were religious, and that his destruction of Confucian tablets was more a personal act of frustration in the imperial examinations than an act of revolution. Some have even suggested that Hong became rebellious only as a result of quite local developments of the movement in Guangxi.¹²

Most work on religion has been caught in a mechanical reading of Marx's base/superstructure metaphor. During the most radical periods, increased rhetoric praising the historical role of workers and peasants, and extolling their naturally progressive (read materialist) thinking, has led to a virtual dismissal of the role of religion in the Taiping rebellion. More conservative periods, which have generally accompanied a more relaxed policy toward religion, have encouraged scholars to bring religion back into their interpretations. This change is part of a less strictly utopian Marxism, along with the more obvious daily experiences of scholars who see a lively popular religion going on around them that becomes invisible in more radical periods. Yet for all this new examination of religion, and in spite of the more dialectical view of ideas and society implied in the day-to-day treatment of the political implications of scholars and their works, the mechanical base/superstructure model still cannot be challenged explicitly, and the new research does not receive an adequate theoretical formulation.

E. P. Thompson spoke at Nanjing University while I was there, and his presence aroused considerable interest from the Chinese, excited about the chance to hear an official "revisionist" who had not previously been welcome in China.

¹² See, for example, Li Feiran, "Hong Xiuquan Zaoqi Sixiang Pouxu," in Guangxi Taiping Tianguoshi Yanjiuhui, ed., *Taiping Tianguoshi Yanjiu Wenxuan* (Nanning: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1979), pp. 120-146; Mao Jiaqi, Fang Zhiguang, and Tong Guanghua, *Taiping Tianguo Xingwangshi* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1980), pp. 11-23; Wang Qingcheng, "Lun Hong Xiuquan de Zaoqi Sixiang ji Qi Fazhan," in Zhonghua Shuju Jindaishi Bianjishi, ed., *Taiping Tianguoshi Xueshu Taolunhui Lunwen Xuanji* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), pp. 243-280.

The major point of his public lecture was that the base/superstructure metaphor was neither very important in Marx nor very useful. The result was a fairly cold reception and limited discussion that did not address the major points. Several more senior historians seemed to find his points simply wrong and possibly rude, and a number of the graduate students would have been much more interested in a less Marxist speaker.

Great Men. I had originally expected to find a great deal of work on the political economy of the Taiping areas of Guangxi. Although some interesting work has been done, many studies are content with broad generalizations about centralization of land tenure, usurious interest, and other factors across China as a whole. Surprisingly little is known about specific political economic conditions in Guangxi. Even extended arguments about whether peasants, protoproletarians (silver miners and charcoal burners had important roles), or some combination of the two led the Taiping movement have not encouraged detailed studies of local labor processes and relations of production.

I asked in Guangxi, for example, whether any systematic effort had been made to find surviving land records. While no such effort had apparently been made, local scholars had instead looked for and found some records relating to the top leaders of the movement. Indeed, for scholars committed entirely to social history, the size and detail of the literature on great men is surprising. Biography, for example, is a very popular genre,¹³ and it always stars the great leaders of the Taiping. The kind of biography of little known followers that is becoming popular in the West remains unpopular in China. Nearly all Chinese works on the Taiping claim to place the

¹³ Some recent examples include Peng Dayong, Li Feiran, Zhu Zhefang, and Deng Jiezhong, *Hong Xiuquan Zhuan* (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian Chubanshe, 1982); Su Shuangbi, *Taiping Tianguo Renwu Lunji* (Fuzhou: Fujian Renmin Chubanshe, 1984); Zhong Wendian, *Taiping Tianguo Renwu* (Nanning: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1984).

movement on an economic base, but many concentrate on Hong Xiuquan and the other top leaders in practice. Much of their oral history—probably the best chance of learning about the lives of the followers instead of the leaders—also seeks to trace the actions of the great ones, and to clarify the military history of the movement. They teach us disappointingly little about the everyday lives of most of the Taiping camp.

One good example of this is the Taiping literature written during the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution insisted fervently on the leadership of the movement by the peasant masses. Yet arguments about the motivations of a single secondary leader absolutely dominated the scholarly literature of the time. The person involved was Li Xiucheng, a minor leader during the early days of the movement who developed into one of its most important generals. He is famous especially because of a lengthy confession he made after his capture during the final battles of the rebellion. The confession provides much information on the development of the rebellion, but was controversial because of Li's extremely accommodating attitude toward his captors. The early 1960s brought a few suggestions, including a *People's Daily* editorial, that Li had been a capitulationist, although others argued that Li's captor had edited the confession to suit his own purposes. The real campaign on this issue began in 1964, and by the time the Cultural Revolution was in full swing (1966 on), attacks on Li's moral character riddled the Taiping literature. At the beginning of the campaign in 1964–65, one provincial newspaper (*Guangxi Ribao*) alone ran over forty articles and editorials on Li Xiucheng.¹⁴ Some of these articles described such events as discussions of the opinions of a certain scholar on Li Xiucheng by elementary school students and by People's Liberation Army units. I have already mentioned how this

¹⁴ See Guangxi Zhuangzu Zizhiqu Di'er Tushuguan, ed., "Guangxi Youguan Yanjiu Taiping Tianguoshi de Wenzhang he Zhuzuo Mulu," in Guangxi Taiping Tianguoshi Yanjiuhui, ed., *Taiping Tianguoshi Yanjiu Wenxuan* (Nanning: Guangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1981), pp. 339–359, for citations.

campaign fit with Cultural Revolution policies as a critique of those who wished to surrender the revolution instead of carrying through Mao's radical policies. Here I want to stress how the Cultural Revolution remained caught on the horns of the usual dilemma—an insistence on both the material and social base of the movement alongside concentration on only the great men.

When the Cultural Revolution dealt with other aspects of the Taiping, it usually involved drawing parallels between Hong's anti-Confucianism and the "Criticize Confucius and Lin Biao" campaign of the early 1970s. Much of the implicit (and frequently explicit in later years) Taiping adoption of Confucian ideas went unsaid during this period. Once again, the individual philosophies of two great men (Hong and Confucius in this case) came to dominate a discourse dedicated to broad social and economic analysis. In fact, the Cultural Revolution drew to extremes the internal contradictions between great men and social analysis that typify the entire postrevolutionary period. The Mao cult existed alongside an insistence on the natural correctness of the proletariat as a class, just as Taiping historiography put tremendous emphasis on Hong's personal philosophy (at least the anti-Confucian and egalitarian aspects of it) as the primary aspect of the rebellion, alongside an analysis that treated the rebellion as an outpouring of the peasants as a class. The Cultural Revolution drew to extremes the problems inherent in the discourse that preceded and followed it.

The Role of the West. Evaluation of the role of the Western powers in the Taiping rebellion provides a final example of this contradiction in the historiographical discourse. The Taiping originally adopted a pro-Western stance. In fact, they appeared to expect the British, as their Christian brothers, to ally with them. The British, however, apparently had a different idea of brotherhood. The foreign community actively resisted a Taiping approach to the city of Shanghai. The

Taiping army, which had expected to be met with fraternal embraces, stood dumbfounded, and then retreated without returning fire. Later in the rebellion, the British took an active role in defense of the Qing Dynasty against the Taiping. The British were not thrilled with Hong's claim to be God's son, but worried primarily that the Taiping (who banned opium smoking) might interfere with trade.

Most Chinese evaluations of the foreign role thus take a negative view. They emphasize the nationalist character of the movement, downplaying Taiping attempts to ally with their "overseas brothers." At the same time, they rightly point out the reactionary role of the British, who supported the Qing against the Taiping while also fighting the Qing in the Second Opium War. Some authors also mark this period as China's entry into the position of a "semifeudal semicolonial" state, meaning that a successful revolution would have to oppose both traditional social relations and foreign domination.

Yet a parallel literature also exists, extolling the contributions of certain foreigners to the success of the rebellion. The most press is usually reserved for Augustus Lindley, a British adventurer who fought alongside the rebels for many years, and who published his memoirs as a long apologia for the movement and criticism of the role of the British government.¹⁵ Tang and Dai, for example, commemorate the sacrifices of Lindley and other foreigners.¹⁶ Implicit in this and other articles is a comparison to the role of the West in the revolution of 1949, where the Western powers played generally reactionary parts but certain individuals were enormously helpful and were honored in China throughout the decades that followed.

¹⁵ Augustus F. Lindley, *Ti-ping Tien-Kwoh: The History of the Taiping Revolution, Including a Narrative of the Author's Personal Adventures*, 2 vols. (London: Day & Son, 1866).

¹⁶ Tang Mingzhu and Dai Baozong, "Linli yu Taiping Tianguo," in Nanjing Daxue Lishixi Taiping Tianguoshi Yanjiushi, ed., *Taiping Tianguoshi Xintan* (Suzhou: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 1982), pp. 100-109.

Once again, this literature shows a general distinction between the broad social analysis of whole groups (foreigners in this case) and the powerful role of certain special individuals. Does the material base determine all, or do guiding individuals and guiding ideas move history? Chinese theory emphasizes only the first possibility, but Chinese practice recognizes both.

Shaping the Discourse

I have so far argued two main points: first, that scholarship in China explicitly recognizes its political roots and effects much more than Western scholarship, and thus implicitly recognizes a kind of dialectic between historians' ideas and their social positions; second, that where Chinese historians explicitly address the relation between idea and society, they tend to lose sight of the dialectic, splitting between interpretations that see ideas as transparent metaphors for class interests and those that see great men and great ideas as determiners of historical development. Such an inconsistent treatment is rooted as much in the social experience of Chinese scholars as in the version of Marxism with which they work.

Citizens and Bureaucrats. Intellectuals are now officially a kind of worker in China. Seeing themselves as ordinary citizens, in a country where ordinary citizens are even now very politicized, intellectuals have to recognize in part their own social grounding and social influence. China's system of small group meetings, which discuss current events and current politics,¹⁷ reinforces the grounding of the intellectual as citizen. Small groups are expected to address how current political campaigns affect their members. Each individual should take an active part in these discussions. During any of the frequent

¹⁷ Martin King Whyte, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

political campaigns, participants evaluate their own performances in relation to the new political goals, criticize their errors if necessary (*ziwo piping*), and think through how the new campaign should influence their future work. For academics, such discussion may include analysis of their past writings that makes explicit their current political implications. This system thus holds historians responsible not just for the factual accuracy and innovative interpretation in their works, but also for the social grounding they reveal and the political conclusions they imply.

Much of the daily experience of scholars in China thus reinforces their view that ideas, including their own ideas, reflect social life. The Chinese Marxist theory on which most of these scholars have been raised, the close links between scholarship and power that have characterized China from imperial times on, and the regular experience with political campaigns and small group meetings combine to root their historical works in class position and political stance. One consequence of this is an intelligentsia that feels its relation to the rest of society more strongly than scholars in many other systems, and which thus sometimes willingly takes great risks for politics. This has occurred in this century from the May Fourth Movement to the dissident journals of today, and crops up periodically in events like the petition (signed with many real names) that many Chinese studying in the United States sent to China in support of the student demonstrations of December 1986. The action the government takes against especially active intellectual critics, and in favor of those whose ideas strike politically consonant chords, further supports this politicization of academics.

While so much daily, historical, and theoretical experience of Chinese scholars supports the view that ideas reflect social life, still other experiences support instead the other view that often crops up in their analyses of the Taiping—that great men and their ideas are guiding influences. Intellectuals are highly respected, and while I was there party membership was

nearly automatic for those intellectuals who wanted it. The academic system itself places very high value on big names, who attract top graduate students, who in turn are asked to remain in the university as junior faculty. Departments can thus easily develop powerful, inbred factions built around senior scholars. These scholars control crucial resources, including library collections, access to university libraries, and connections to other universities.

Information is tightly controlled, with access to university library collections strongly hierarchized by rank. Undergraduates have only very limited access to libraries, graduate students have more, and so on up through the top professors. Control is parochial as much as hierarchical. Even senior scholars may not get access to libraries and collections outside of their home university. People who control collections often guard them jealously as resources for personal advancement in the scholarly hierarchy. Some of these problems may not seem totally foreign to Western scholars, but they can be acute in China. This aspect of the social organization of knowledge in China acts against the idea that scholars are all equally citizens, working together as parts of the society. Instead it teaches scholars that they are indeed privileged, that success in the realm of ideas translates into very real power, and that their claim to control innovative ideas places them to an extent over the rest of the society. From such a standpoint, historical concentration on great men and their ideas is sensible.

Chinese Marxism. Virtually all scholars in China accept and share a form of Marxism that they have learned throughout their educations. Just as most departments include faculty to teach foreign languages, most also have their own faculty to teach required courses in Marxism. Among the shared assumptions in explicit theoretical discussions are the priority of material over ideational factors and the determination of the superstructure by the base. Many articles begin with

standard citations from Marx, Engels, Lenin, or Mao to this effect. These assumptions are rarely questioned explicitly.

Yet Chinese Marxism, more than most other versions in socialist countries, also has a streak that strongly emphasizes human agency. When a young Mao Zedong in 1926 analyzed rural class structure in China,¹⁸ he drew his class lines not just by control over the means of production but also by asking whose side various classes would take in the coming struggle. This more voluntarist aspect of his thought grew into the Cultural Revolution idea that class membership lay as much in how people thought as in how they worked. Thus, even in socialist China where labor power was no longer bought and sold, people could still be labeled as capitalist roaders. The Red Guard effort to wipe out parts of China's historical legacy again speaks to the power they granted to "subjective," cultural factors, even if they did not really build such a power into their base/superstructure model. The Mao cult itself, which burgeoned during the Cultural Revolution to the point where waving the little red book was supposed to surmount all kinds of difficulties, implied a kind of great men and great ideas view of the world that rested only uneasily with a strong emphasis on determination by a material base. As I have shown, the Taiping historians offer the same awkward combination of a reduction of ideas to mere metaphor, along with an augmentation of ideas (and their originators) to great heights. Strict training in the Marxist classics along with grave political consequences for questioning theoretical dogma, however, have prevented an explicit and thorough theoretical consideration of this awkward combination.

I do not mean to imply that Chinese Marxism is simply a mental straitjacket. Like any discourse in the West, it provides people with a set of assumptions, within which they argue and most of which remain invisible to people within the discourse.

¹⁸ Mao Zedong, "Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society," in *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Zedong* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1971), pp. 11-22.

Indeed, some of the arguments that stem directly from Chinese Marxism and its ties to current politics have been very fruitful in studies of the Taiping rebellion. Chinese scholars of the Taiping, for instance, have produced a large literature on the class base of the revolution—was it purely peasants (and if so was it by definition reactionary and feudal?), peasants with some capitalist influence, protoproletarians, proletarians, or some conjunction of these already compounded classes?¹⁹ This may seem like counting Marxist angels on the head of a pin, but the argument faces important issues even within the base/superstructure metaphor that all versions assume. At heart, the argument is over how participants in the rebellion fit into the larger society—as feudal underlings, as self-sufficient farmers who produced some commodities on the side, as workers with only their labor to sell, and so forth. The implied issues are similar to many questions that Western scholarship regularly addresses: how and when do capital and labor separate, and how does the separation affect the people directly involved?

Even the question of the value judgment (*pingjia*) to be placed on Taiping egalitarianism—branding it as backward and hopelessly feudal, or praising it as progressive and modern—implies important issues, even if placing value judgments on history seems very odd to “objective” history in the West. First, of course, it emphasizes again the political value of history in China, where the idea of learning from the past is taken very seriously. Second, it questions the relation of consciousness to mode of production, asking whether peasant egalitarianism is simply a reflection of the peasant’s position in

¹⁹ For a set of articles edited together, which exemplify some of the arguments involved, see Guo Yisheng, “Shi Minzhuxing de Jinghua, haishi Fengjiansing de Caobo? Guanyu ‘Tianchao Tianmu Zhidu’ de Pingjia Wenti,” in Nanjing Daxue Lishixi Taiping Tianguoshi Yanjiushi, ed., *Taiping Tianguoshi Xintan* (Suzhou: Jiangsu Renmin Chubanshe, 1982), pp. 7–22; Han Ming, “‘Tianchao Tianmu Zhidu’ zhong Pingfen Tudi Sixiang Yuanliu Chutan,” *ibid.*, pp. 23–35; Su Shuangbi, “Shilun Taiping Tianguo Geming de Xingzhi,” *ibid.*, pp. 60–80.

feudalism (and should thus be judged harshly) or whether peasants can begin to develop oppositional alternatives even from within the feudal system (and should thus be praised).

The base/superstructure metaphor has pushed scholars of the Taiping in certain directions, and it has helped create an inconsistent theoretical treatment of the relation between ideas and society, but it has by no means squelched insightful debate. The Chinese discourse may seem biased (or just odd) to non-Marxists in the West—it is overtly political and seems caught in a stilted and limiting jargon. To Western Marxists, the discourse may be simply disappointing—it offers very little insight into the search for alternative views of the relation between consciousness and society that is so common now in the West. In many ways, however, the Chinese discourse is much like any Western discourse; it is very difficult to rework the system from within its own guiding principles, it tends to generate its own, internally invisible inconsistencies, and yet it also produces a range of very fruitful argument.

Perhaps the greatest difference between this Chinese discourse and academics in the West is the much more explicit recognition of politics in China. Both government and scholars are very sensitive to the political implications of scholarship, and government reactions to departures from acceptable practice are more powerful than the more implicit, decentralized, and informal mechanisms of control in Western academe. While this has led to a strong continuation of China's tradition of intellectual activists, it also creates some problems. Dissent within the system is so difficult at times that people feel forced to abandon the system because reform seems impossible. Many younger scholars in China are not at all interested in Marxist theory—neither China's nor the very different Marxisms of the West. After years of required Marxism courses and endless quotes from the classics, they see Marxism only as a straitjacket and are far more interested in mainstream Western scholarship than in alternative Marxisms.

Western scholars often feel, and often are, caught in an

ivory tower, cut off from larger political processes. Chinese scholars undoubtedly share many of the same feelings—unique intellectual accomplishment is highly valued in both places—but they also have a side that recognizes the political background and political influence of everything they write and teach. This affects the willingness that many Chinese scholars have had to take bold political stands. Yet this double aspect of their lives also shows up in their analysis as a lack of clarity about the relation of ideas to society at other times. Just as they view themselves partly as special, powerful, intelligent beings and partly as representatives of a certain class and political position, the people they analyze tend to appear partly as great minds and great movers, and partly as agents whose ideas simply reflect broader class interests.