

Here is disclosed  
 one of the most  
 astounding  
 episodes of  
 modern history. It  
 is like reliving  
 the experiences  
 of the judges and  
 prophets of old!

THE  
 DRAMATIC STORY OF  
**CHINESE**  
 SABBATH KEEPERS

BY HERMAN L. HOEH

**O**ur dramatic account commences with the year 1813. It begins in a small village some little distance from Canton, China.

Here the chief character in the drama, Hong Xiuquan, was born. For ease of pronunciation, I shall call him Hong.

Hong came from a royal family. His father and mother, as well as many other relatives, had fled to South China because of the Manchu invasion.

By the time Hong was 16 he had become proficient in the usual course of Chinese education. At 18 years of age he was appointed schoolmaster of his native village by unanimous acclamation of the townspeople.

Five years later he was given a set of books. Translated into English, the title of these books was *Good Words for Exhorting the Age*. At the time, the books appeared of little value to Hong.

The next year, 1837, Hong lost an advancement in his scholastic rank because his Manchu superiors were jealous of his ability and fearful of his ancestral background. This loss so upset him that he became quite ill.

During the period of recuperation, Hong had an extraordinary vision. A record of the vision is preserved in Theodore Hamberg's booklet, "The Visions of Hung-siu-tshuen."

Mr. Hamberg was a missionary of the Basel

Evangelical Society to China (a Swiss institution).

In the vision Hong was seemingly transported to the presence of a great sovereign ruler. There he was confronted by an old woman—women at that time were regarded lower than animals—who said to him, "Thou dirty man, why hast thou kept company with yonder people and defiled thyself? I must now wash thee clean."

Hong was then, in vision, taken to a river and washed in the water. After this he was conducted into a large building where his heart and other inward parts were removed and replaced by new ones! Then he was given a sword, a seal and, to eat, fruit that he found sweet to his palate.

Upon awakening, he was astounded at the vision, but could not determine the meaning. When Hong fully regained his health, he began to reform his conduct as best he knew.

Hong Xiuquan continued as a village schoolmaster for several years more, giving the vision no further thought.

Then, one day, his cousin Le searched through Hong's bookcase and noted the unusual contents of the volumes *Good Words for Exhorting the Age*. In them were a number of whole chapters of the Bible (according to the translation of Robert Morrison), many sermon-essays on varied Bible



texts and other statements founded on Scripture.

Le told his cousin Hong what he had found. Hong then began to look through the books that had lain untouched on the bookshelves for seven long years. He was amazed to find that in the quoted chapters from the Bible there was a partial explanation of the vision he had received six years before.

#### Discovering the Bible

In those parts of the Scripture he possessed, Hong found the heavenly Father described—the great sovereign ruler revealed in his vision years before. Then he read of Jesus, the “elder brother of many brethren.” In our versions it is rendered “the first-born among many brethren” (Romans 8:29).

He learned that Jesus was sent as Savior and as messenger. He read that one needs to repent and be baptized to obtain the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). From these verses he understood the meaning of being washed in water and of having his heart and inward parts renewed.

Hong and his cousin Le then baptized one another. They prayed to God, promised not to worship evil spirits and cast away their idols.

After destroying his idols in the little school in which he taught, Hong and his few friends were forced to flee into the interior of China. He preached what little he knew as he journeyed into the south-central provinces of China. Again he became a schoolteacher (between 1845 and 1846).

#### Visits a missionary

At the close of 1846 Hong journeyed to Canton after hearing that a Christian missionary

from the West resided there. He studied there under Issachar Roberts, the missionary, for almost a month, and read new portions of the Bible.

Young missionaries from abroad, also studying under Mr. Roberts, were jealous of Hong's talents and earnestness. They brought about his removal! Hong left the city somewhat saddened.

Returning to south-central China, Hong found that the number of villagers who listened to him and were baptized soon numbered almost 2,000. They had to form congregations among themselves, and became known as “the congregations of the worshipers of God.” For short, they were dubbed “God-worshippers.”

Continuous study of the Bible convinced Hong that his people should not smoke tobacco or opium—which the British were selling to the Chinese—that they should refrain from intoxicating drinks

except under special circumstances and that the *Sabbath* should be observed on the *seventh* day.

The missionaries were quite displeased about the fact that “the Sabbath is observed not upon the same day as in Europe, theirs being the Saturday of our reckoning.”

Hong further noticed that Jesus didn't rise on Sunday morning, but “three days after his death”!

Think, for a moment, of the earnestness of these gentile folk who lacked large portions of God's revelations. How thankful we ought to be to have the entire Word of God whenever we need to use it.

And remember, most of those whom Hong baptized could not

even read Chinese! They had to be taught orally each Sabbath—and that mainly from the Old Testament.

#### The marriage ceremony

The number of new converts steadily grew. Marriage ceremonies had to be performed. Hong examined the Bible and found the answer! Here is a description of their ceremony:

“When the bridal party are all met together, they proceed to the church . . . and after many prayers and a severe examination of the bride and bridegroom's theological tenets, the minister joins their right hands together, and when each have accepted the other, pronounces a concluding benediction. . . . Divorce is not only not permitted, but actually unknown or thought of” (from Lin-Le's book, *Ti-Ping Tien-Kwoh*, page 317).

How like the marriage ceremonies God has ordained in his Church today!

Does not this demonstrate the guidance of God?

Besides these changes, the Chinese converts of Hong ceased to practice the binding of women's feet, began to lay aside the custom of polygamy, ceased to deal in the slave trade and became obedient to the laws of God as revealed to Israel through Moses.

In order to be converted, they taught as follows:

“They”—the converts—“must kneel down in God's presence, and ask Him to forgive their sins.” Following baptism, the form of which Hong did not understand perfectly, “they must continue daily to supplicate Divine favour, and the Holy Spirit's assistance to renew their hearts, saying grace at every meal, keeping holy the Sabbath day, and obeying all God's commandments, especially avoiding idolatry. They may then be accounted the children of God” (from Lin-Le's book, page 315).

#### The next great step

To begin with, Hong and his converts were



JOE COSTANTINO



not fully acquainted with the instructions found in the New Testament. They had to be guided mainly by Moses' instruction found in the law. But notice what they did:

When the prosperity of the God-worshippers was noised about the countryside, many in distress sought the protection of these Sabbathkeepers. Whole families of afflicted and destitute came to them, as well as outlaws who fled from the power of the oppressive Manchu dynasty.

Again Hong looked into the Bible. He saw the example of David: "And everyone who was in distress, everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him [David]. So he became captain over them" (I Samuel 22:2).

Hong therefore became a captain over his fellows. He instructed them according to Moses' law and punished offenders accordingly. The malcontents, like those of David, were not converts, but merely willing to do as Hong instructed because they disliked the Manchu overlords.

Next, Hong remembered the sword that he had seen in the vision. He read in the Bible of "the sword of the Lord and of Gideon" (Judges 7:20). He felt responsible for his people as did the judges in Israel of old.

"Their government is a theocracy, the development apparently of what is believed by them to be a new dispensation. As in the case of the Israelites under Moses, they regard themselves as directed by one who has been raised up by the Almighty to be the executor of His will on earth" (page 211 of Lin-Le's work).

By 1851 the malcontents had increased by tens of thousands. They proclaimed Hong Xiuquan the ruler of a new dynasty administering a heavenly or Celestial Kingdom.

The new dynasty was entitled the "Taiping," meaning the kingdom of "our Sovereign," the One who created heaven and earth.

The malcontents, to

protect their domain, were at first conscripted for defense. Then Hong read in the law what Moses said: "When you go out to battle against your enemies"—the enemies of the Taipings already persecuted them for religious and political reasons—"the officers shall speak to the people, saying: 'What man is there who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house. . . . What man is there who is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go and return to his house'" (Deuteronomy 20:1, 5, 8).

Hong therefore made army service a voluntary matter!

### The hand of foreigners

Vast areas were freed from the Manchu oppressors. By 1860 the movement attracted international recognition. Several thousand became obedient, and upward of 50 million Chinese lived in prosperity and at peace under the Tai-

Photo at left: Bust of Hong at Taiping Museum in Nanking. Below: Relief at Tian An Men Square of Chinese burning opium. At bottom of pages 16 and 17: Sections of the border of Hong Xiuquan's seal (page 15).



FROM AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF CHINA

ping administration of God's laws.

In abolishing idols, the Taipings naturally destroyed the images of Mary and the saints, as well as those of the Buddhists. The ire of the Jesuits was aroused. They persuaded the French forces in China to support

the ruling Manchu dynasty with whom they had been quarreling.

Next, the British and American missionaries—who had obtained barely 1,500 converts through years of work—were jealous that so many people were looking into the Bible without their missionary activity.

The missionaries began a deliberate campaign against the Taipings. They accused them of rejecting the Bible, of denying Jesus Christ, of wanton slaughter of innocent victims. The true reports of honest missionaries were squelched!

British commercial agents, interested in selling opium to the Chinese, became concerned by the loss of revenue.

Remember, this was the era of the Opium Wars—when foreigners, particularly the British, sought to dominate the Chinese by forcing them to buy opium.

The British and other foreign elements forced the Manchus to sign treaties legalizing the opium trade. This placed the armies of the Taipings in a serious predicament.

The British assured the Chinese revolutionists that they would remain neutral and only

protect British property from destruction. In reality the British sent arms to the Manchus, and the Manchus imported arms in ships flying the American flag! (Within months of this action the Civil War—1861-65—began in America.)

During all this time those who followed

Hong were publishing the Bible as best they could. Time and again they implored their Christians across the sea to send them missionaries to instruct them better. Most missionaries refused to go.

### A plea refused

The Taipings also sought to trade with the British. They sent an army to Shanghai to open negotiations. Said the leader



of the Taiping regiments to the British, Americans, Portuguese and other foreigners in Shanghai:

"I came to Shanghai to make a treaty in order to see us connected together by trade and commerce; I did not come for the purpose of fighting with you. Had I at once commenced to attack the city and kill the people, that would have been the same as the members of one family fighting among themselves" (page 283 of Lin-Le's work).

Remember that these Chinese did not know the kind of Christianity professed by the Western world!

The extract quoted from a longer letter was sent to the foreign authorities in Shanghai for the following reason: When the Taipings, who assumed the British were neutral, came to Shanghai, they were fired upon by the British.

According to a correspondent of the *North China Herald*, "They [the Taipings] waved the hand, begged our officers not to fire, and stood there motionless, wishing to open communications and explain their object!"

Retreating for safety, the Taipings encountered a missionary, Mr. Milne. In order not to have him injured in any battle, they sent guards with him to the city of Shanghai. After delivering Mr. Milne safely, the guards were shot down by British soldiers!

#### A great mistake

Hong could not understand the action of the Christian nations from across the sea. In sorrow he withdrew from all contact with foreigners, but continued to study the Bible with the faithful.

He permitted his commanders to disperse their armies throughout the walled cities of his domain. The Manchus had been badly defeated and no attack was expected. This—plus a miscalculation of the British and French intentions—proved disastrous to the Taipings.

Although the official government statements from abroad implied that

England would remain neutral, the actual deeds perpetrated against the Chinese demonstrated the opposite. The British encouraged the Manchus against the Taipings and gradually brought about their retreat and downfall.

This article cannot contain all the information competent historians have amassed. But as Gladstone, a British prime minister, once said, this action will go down as a black mark in history against Britain.

Because of foreign intrigue, the Manchu army and religious persecution, most of these Chinese Sabbath keepers, including Hong, perished.

Long after the death of those Chinese to whom God revealed a measure of his truth, the malcontents who had associated with them arose again in rebellion against the Manchus. They called themselves "The Righteous Fists of Harmony"—or "Boxers." Their rebellion—the Boxer rebellion—was aimed at the foreigners and especially missionaries.

But the Sabbath and God's laws had been forgotten by them.

#### Why communism engulfs China today

We are reaping the reward of our sins in China today. To the Chinese the European nations seemed unprincipled, devoid of every virtue recognized by men.

From that time on the spread of the Word of God among the Chinese met with little success. By 1949 communism engulfed the country.

When thinking of the fate of those Sabbath-keeping Chinese and their ignorant comrades who sought their protection, I am reminded of Paul's exhortation in Hebrews:

"And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the

prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness... became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of aliens... Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword... of whom the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:32-38).

How unworthy the world truly is may be understood by the deliberate falsity of recorded history in describing the Taiping rebellion.

Missionaries and politicians alike have accused them of committing acts of which the enemies of the Taipings were guilty. The Taipings were maligned just as David and his followers were.

A most important summary of this drama of human experience—the book that is the basis for this little-known record—was written by a white man who used a Chinese name, Lin-Le. The work is titled *Ti-Ping Tien-Kwoh, the History of the Ti-Ping Revolution*. It was published in 1866 in London.

Here is a lesson we must never forget.

We ought to appreciate what we know of God's Word and realize this drama was occurring in far-off China when God's people in America were just beginning a new era in publishing the gospel.

The Chinese, for 200 years in bondage to the Manchus, looked to the Word of God as best they knew. "Their laws were framed and already constituted when the New Testament"—in its fullness—"came into their hands" (page 125 of Lin-Le's work).

Perhaps we can now realize the full weight of our responsibility in carrying the gospel of the kingdom of God to all nations. God has chosen us—his faithful few in an Israel filled with sin—to carry the light to those who abide in darkness. □



# TAIPING LEGACY

BY JOHN HALFORD

**N**ot so long ago, China was cut off from most of the world. It was not a member of the United Nations, nor did it have diplomatic relations with the United States. After fighting together as allies in the Second World War, the world's most populous nation and the world's most influential and powerful Christian nation became strangers.

Then, beginning in 1972, China cautiously began to open doors to the West. U.S. President Richard Nixon visited China, and diplomatic contacts were reestablished. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China began a series of liberalizing reforms.

The events of the summer of 1989, culminating in the crushing of prodemocracy demonstrations in Tian An Men Square, caused a temporary cooling of relationships. But China officially wants to continue an open-door policy, largely for economic reasons.

Christian missionary organizations have been eager to go through that open door. They are enthusiastic about the opportunity to reach the nearly one fourth of mankind heretofore cut off from the message of the Bible.

## Christianity's reputation in China

Herman L. Hoeh and I visited Nanking in 1984. This city, capital of the Taipings, is still the center for what remained of Chinese Christianity. We met the bishop of Nanking and the faculty and students of what was then China's only functioning seminary.

We found these people optimistic and grateful that contact with Western churches was again allowed. But they were realistic about the prospects of a large-scale resurgence of Christianity in their country.

Sincere and well-meaning organizations often overlook the reputation that Christianity has in Asia. Dedicated missionaries have often been followed by unscrupulous merchants, and, tragically, the preach-

ing of the gospel has come to be seen as the leading edge of a wedge of greed and exploitation.

The Chinese government today considers the Taipings as the fore-runners of the peasant revolution that overthrew the Manchus, and thus part of a chain of events that resulted in the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. They have not forgotten that Christian nations chose to support the Manchus rather than the struggling Taipings.

A current guide to Nanking points out that "the failure of the Taipings to obtain the support of the Christian world would play a decisive role in their eventual ruin" (*In Search of Old Nanking*, page 176).

The guide continues: "The Taiping Movement was a form of orthodox Christianity, so it is puzzling why the foreign Christian nations and missionaries spurned them and sided with the brutal idol-worshipping and anti-foreign Manchus. The foreign nations sided with the Manchus obviously because of the financial gains they could get from them; the foreign missionaries probably did not support the Taipings because they were afraid of this new form of Chinese Christianity and would not compromise with it but would insist that Christianity be introduced into China the only way—their way!" (page 178).

The Chinese have long memories, and they are steeped in tradition. Those who want to reach into the hearts of the Chinese people must understand this. The pragmatic Chinese are not hostile to foreign ideas when they see they are truly better. As Deng Xiaoping has said, "It doesn't matter what color the cat is as long as it catches mice."

Christianity sounds good, but, un-

fortunately, those who espouse it often fail to live up to its ideals.

## A new chance to preach the gospel?

In the last century Lord Elgin wrote to the merchants of Shanghai: "Christian civilisation will have to win its way among a sceptical and ingenious people, by making it manifest that a faith which reaches to heaven furnishes better guarantees for public and private morality than one which does not rise above the earth" (*Chinese Characteristics*, page 15).

Arthur Smith was a missionary who worked in China in the decades following the Taipings. In his penetrating book *Chinese Characteristics*, published in 1894, he wrote:

"China is not a country, and the Chinese not a people, to be taken by storm by anything whatsoever. The only way to secure the solid and permanent respect of the Chinese race . . . is by convincing object lessons, showing that Christian civilisation . . . accomplishes results which cannot be matched by the civilisation which China already possesses" (pages 105-106).

As communism collapses around the world, it seems the next decades will offer great opportunities for the Christian faith. Global communications networks can carry the gospel—both the true and the counterfeit—across frontiers and into the uttermost parts of the earth.

But in the final analysis, it is the conduct of Christian people that provides the most convincing testimony.

"By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another," said Jesus (John 13:35).

Unless so-called Christian nations live by this standard, should we expect other peoples to take the Christian faith seriously? □

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