

[← Back to ""Charles Leary"" Search Results](#)

# KINGDOM COME

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By CHARLES LEARY Contributing writer March 3, 1996 Publication: Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) Page: E7 Word Count: 831

One of the most fascinating and enigmatic figures in China's lengthy history has until recently remained a mystery to us: Hong Xiuquan, a religious visionary who thought himself Jesus Christ's younger brother and went on to lead one of humankind's largest political rebellions. Hong founded the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom at the southern city of Nanjing in the mid 1800s, occupying large portions of China for a decade and a half in constant, bloody opposition to the ruling Qing dynasty.

Although the rebellion writ large constitutes one of the most studied events in Chinese history, the mental and moral life of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and of Hong himself have remained somewhat unexplored.

Now Yale University's Jonathan Spence, whose books include "The Search for Modern China," "Death of Woman Wang" and my two favorites, "The Question of Hu" and "The Gate of Heavenly Peace," has added another well-written, accessible and discerning volume to his roster. This new work enables the reader to ponder the origins and magnitude of the Taiping undertaking from the angle of its chief visionaries.

Hong Xiuquan could be adequately defined as a religious fanatic. Yet "God's Chinese Son" illustrates the ways such a lone zealot could construct an entire society, economy and policy of the stuff of Chinese culture and the peculiar alchemy of his own mental contact with Western religious thought.

In "God's Chinese Son" we do not hear arguments about the structural, environmental or even strictly political origins and means of the Taiping Rebellion, which shook the Qing dynasty to its foundation. In fact, the gravest criticism of "Chinese Son" is that Spence focuses perhaps too intently on showing the Taiping utopia's internal workings, without ever pointing out just how much of a singular event this was.

The Taiping Rebellion deeply affected the course of Chinese history, laying waste to huge territories, changing the Middle Kingdom's social and military structure, challenging the age-old dynastic system's orthodox institutions, promoting women's rights, greater social equity, and western technology, and leaving a few successful Qing dynasty generals with tremendous power. Yet Spence mentions these ramifications, if at all, with only meager interest. He gives bloody battles, massacres and death tolls passing

notice, despite the fact that millions of people perished in those years.

Yet, such material has been the purview of numerous previous historians, and Spence has chosen, with great effect, to lead us instead through the belief and culture, indeed the very "family values" of the Taiping "Christian" state. Spence's book is thus aptly subtitled "The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan," for he treats modern humanity's bloodiest rebellion as delimited by its chief ideologue's moral life.

Given Hong Xiuquan's self-designated kinship to God and Jesus, "God's Chinese Son" makes an intriguing place to re-acquaint oneself with the Bible, and from a unique angle. Spence deftly compares Hong Xiuquan's interpretation of biblical scene and meaning with that of Western missionaries then crisscrossing China to convert the multitudes. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, spawned from the visions of a young Chinese man influenced by translated Protestant tracts, grew over two decades into a bizarre and singular place in history.

One finds Spence writing of Confucius, God and Jesus as living, conflicted characters in Hong Xiuquan's mind. Hong's extraordinary faith in his own version of Christian belief formed the ideological basis for the daily practice of tens of thousands of followers. Even as the Taiping Kingdom and Hong himself face certain doom, he perseveres: "Starvation stirs no fears in the Heavenly King," notes Spence. "He has read the sixteenth chapter of Exodus with care, and knows God will preserve the Taiping faithful, just as He preserved the children of Israel for 40 years in the wilderness of Sinai, by scattering manna on the ground amidst the dew each morning."

Like Spence's other works, "God's Chinese Son" is at once an original contribution to the field of Chinese history and a wonderful entre into Chinese culture and politics for the general reader. Spence lives up to his reputation as a consummate storyteller, savoring the historian's craft in bringing the reader from Hong Xiuquan's earliest days as an aspiring bureaucrat to his defeat in 1864 at the hands of the "Ever Victorious Army" officered by a group of Western mercenaries (the manna, alas, failed to appear for Hong and his faithful).

At the same time he probes the inner workings of Hong's mind and beliefs, Spence presents a panorama of contemporary Chinese life and history. The reader will benefit from his ability to introduce the complex interaction between China and the West in resplendent and factual detail. Anyone who has enjoyed one of Spence's earlier works will find "God's Chinese Son" no disappointment.

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Illustration:

JONATHAN SPENCE

PHOTO

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**Page:** E7

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