

The Failure of China's First Modernization Plan

The roots of the failure of Hong Rengan's Taiping reforms

Scott Plencner Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL (14 April 2014)

By all accounts, when Hong Rengan finally succeeded in his mission to reconnect with his infamous cousin Hong Xiuquan, it was a joyful experience for both men. They hadn't seen each other in over a decade and much had changed since they studied with Western missionaries in Hong Kong. Circumstances lifted Xiuquan to god-like status among the Christian converts he and his fellow Feng Yushan gathered at an isolated settlement on Thistle Mountain. Xiuquan was considered by his followers (and himself) to be God's second son, the younger brother of Jesus Christ, come to earth to establish a just heavenly kingdom. Rengan, more modestly, spent those years as a promising assistant missionary in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Living with and working with Westerners, Rengan became educated in Western science, theology, politics, and literature.¹ Xiuquan, who recently survived attempted coups and assassinations, was most likely glad to see the face of a trusted relative who had been there at the start, when his Heavenly Kingdom was yet a germ. Rengan, with his education and connections, seemed to have much to offer Xiuquan who was struggling in 1859 to re-energize and redefine his stalled and splitting revolution.

Rengan's elevation to the top of Taiping leadership was as swift as it was unprecedented. The day of his arrival to the Taiping capital in Nanjing, he was given a minor title in the "Heavenly Kingdom," and every other day Xiuquan bestowed even greater titles including that of *generalissimo*. Before two weeks passed, on May 11, 1859, he received his highest title, *Kan Wang*², and was vested with powers like that of a prime minister or premier.³ Before the end of May, Rengan composed a pamphlet for Xiuquan entitled *A New Treatise on Aid in Administration*, which outlined a modernizing reform



agenda for Taiping-held China.⁴ Rengan hoped these reforms would be refreshing both to the Taiping followers and to nervous Western observers. The reforms were wide-reaching and meant to breathe life into the movement, which seemed to have slowed under the weight of its own success since their capture of Nanjing in 1853.⁵ Xiuquan accepted the memorandum and read it carefully. His notes in the margins of the document implied support for almost all of Rengan's sweeping reforms, but provided no timeline for their implementation.⁶ Nothing could be done until the other "princes" and "kings" returned to Nanjing. The reforms were a product of Hong Rengan's extensive Western education and aspirations, and would not find as welcome a reception from these princes as it had from their master.

Rengan's plans were optimistic, but were doomed even as he put them into writing. In the end, China's first modernizing reform package was hampered by escalating war, jealousies among the Taiping upper echelon, and the breakdown of potential cooperation with Hong Rengan's Western

¹ Lutz, Jessie Gregory. *Opening China: Karl F.A. Gützlaff and Sino-Western Relations, 1827-1852*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008, 272.

² This translates to "Shield King." His complete title was "Founder of the Dynasty and Loyal Military Advisor, the Upholder of heaven and Keeper of the Order of Court: The Shield King." (Platt, 55.)

³ So Kwan-wai and Eugene Boardman. "Hung Jen-kan, Taiping Prime Minister, 1859-1864." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 20, no. 21 (Jun., 1957), 273.

⁴ So & Boardman, 263.

⁵ Platt, Stephen *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Vintage, 2012, 57.

⁶ Spence, Jonathan D. *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*. New York: Norton, 1996, p. 274.

contacts. The greatest obstacle, however, was the Heavenly Prince Hong Xiuquan himself. The source of Xiuquan's charismatic authority and his unwillingness to surrender his power to over-arching concepts would provide the bluntest obstacle to his cousin's well-meaning attempt to energize and organize the revolution. Hong Xiuquan became a mirror image of the bloated, unmoving Manchu tyrants he supposedly was sent by God to destroy.

Western inspiration for Hong Rengan's *Aid in Administration*:

When Hong Xiuquan was forced, due to his attacks on Confucianism⁷, to remove himself from Kwangtung to a more remote area, he invited cousin and fellow iconoclast Rengan to follow him. Rengan followed the wishes of his family and stayed away from Xiuquan and Feng; but continued, as long as he could, to send funds to the duo.⁸ In 1851, as the Qing began to move against the thousands of "God-worshippers," as they were then called, Rengan further retreated and ended up in Hong Kong. Here he was baptized by and studied under Swedish missionary to the Hakka people⁹, Theodor Hamberg, an ancillary associate of Gützlaff's China Union.¹⁰ Hamberg seemed sympathetic with Rengan and tried to help him and another marooned God-worshiper Li Zhenggao return to Xiuquan in 1854 armed with a complete translation of the Bible, among other Western items.¹¹ Li and Rengan's efforts were stalled by the 'Small Sword Rebellion' in Shanghai.¹² A lack of communication upriver with the Taipings in Nanjing forced them to give up hope of a reunion.

Disappointed, Rengan returned to Hong Kong in 1855 and seemed resigned to the life of a translator and catechist within the ranks of the London Missionary Society. Missionaries were almost totally dependent on translators like Rengan to communicate

with potential Chinese converts.¹³ Rengan worked under Scottish missionary James Legge, who took a great liking to his assistant. Legge wrote that Rengan "was the only Chinaman with whom I ever walked with my arm round his neck and his arm around mine."¹⁴ Legge taught Rengan Protestant theology, science, and literature; while Rengan helped Legge translate Confucian classics. Another LMS missionary, J. Chalmers, said that when one saw Rengan they could "be sure something good is going on in him."¹⁵ Among the LMS, Rengan not only found friendly mentors, but also found success preaching. He was never far from crowds. His popularity with curious Chinese neighbors grew as the Taipings saw military success along the Yangtze to the northeast.¹⁶ He used this popularity to help the LMS negotiate the opening of Protestant chapels in Chinese-controlled areas of Canton.¹⁷

It was during his short exile in Hong Kong when Rengan became acquainted with the cosmopolitan and Western concepts that inspired the reforms in *Aid to Administration*. He witnessed the visit of Lord Elgin's deadly steamships in 1857 and likely was the Chinese companion that received Legge's comment that those steamships were "the knell of the past of China." Legge concluded that China "can do nothing against these leviathans."¹⁸ This likely inspired Rengan's suggestion to Xiuquan two years later that the Taiping government establish steamship companies and shipyards.¹⁹ His education in science and admiration of English technology led Rengan to suggest the establishment of offices to issue ten year patents for useful inventions. Rengan envisioned a future Taiping-led China as an industrial giant that could take its place among the likes of British, Germans, and Americans.

The efficient Hong Kong post office, with its connection to Bombay, probably inspired Rengan's

⁷ In 1851, Rengan and Xiuquan removed idols from the classrooms where they were employed to teach. (So & Boardman 265.)

⁸ So & Boardman, 267.

⁹ Spence, 270. (Note that Hong Xiuquan, Hong Rengan, and most of the earliest Taiping followers were of the displaced Hakka ethnicity. It is suggested by Lutz (285) that the Hakka found value in a cosmology which set them apart as God's chosen people against the evil of Manchus.)

¹⁰ Lutz, 272.

¹¹ Lutz, 272.

¹² So & Boardman, 269.

¹³ Rapp, John A. "Clashing Dilemmas: Hong Rengan, Isaac Roberts, and a Taiping 'Murder' Mystery." *Journal of Historical Biography* 4, (Autumn, 2008), 42.

¹⁴ Spence, 270, and Platt, 20.

¹⁵ So & Boardman, 270.

¹⁶ Platt, 22.

¹⁷ Lutz, 273.

¹⁸ Spence, 271.

¹⁹ So & Boardman, 271.

suggestion to his cousin, the Heavenly Prince,” that the Taipings establish a modern post office. He spared no details, suggesting that the deliveries are made via steamship which should stop for no one until the letters are delivered.²⁰ He suggested a structured monetary policy and the implementation of paper bank notes as a security measure. He also hoped paper currency would add to liquidity and reignite the stagnant markets along the Yangtze.²¹ He even made architectural suggestions about the building of new homes and the development of welfare programs for widows and the sick.²² The reform program touches on every aspect of life. It reformed tax collection by a more pragmatic and less ideological method.²³ It introduced a solar calendar to replace the traditional Chinese lunar calendar.²⁴ It suggested bans on laziness, dramatic plays, infanticide, even slavery. He advocated the establishment of a local police, responsible to the law only, to enforce these bans.²⁵

The suggestions about government are most derivative of his experiences in Hong Kong. Rengan lived in Hong Kong during a time when the British were experimenting with democratization in their colony. His *Aid for Administration* spoke highly of the kind of system in the United States. Much of his knowledge of the U.S. came from meetings he had with Yung Wing, the first Chinese student to graduate from an American university. Yung returned to China in 1858 and met with Rengan in Hong Kong explaining his own goal of reforming China with the adoption of Western administrative structure.²⁶ So in *Aid for Administration*, an informed Rengan extolled the virtues of the separation of powers and even suggested a limited bill of rights for the Chinese.²⁷ He disagreed with the earlier Taiping policy in which the state controlled the distribution of property.

He admired the pride and power of the British and wrote about the power of British virtues such as equal status, friendship, harmony, and affection.”²⁸

These over-arching concepts and virtues seemed a good structure upon which to hand an ever-lasting legal-rational state; but the Taipings under Hong Xiuquan were not interested in Constitutions or unchanging principle. Xiuquan’s rule was based on charisma and the tides of the Taiping state were pulled by war and the leader’s whim. In order for any of Hong Rengan’s new policies to take root, there would first have to be a period of peace.

The obstacles of intramural jealousy and questions of loyalty:

As his reforms were presented to the “Son of God,” Rengan met the other princes of the Taiping state. They were young as he was, but many had experienced almost a decade of war and were deep in the veteran fraternity of the Taiping. Questions swirled among top brass as Rengan publically accepted his seal from Xiuquan in a solemn ceremony.²⁹ Rengan then spoke to the princes on doctrinal issues and recent Taiping politics. Not everyone was sold on their leader’s new advisor. Rengan complained to foreign visitors that the princes disrespected the authority placed in him by his cousin.³⁰ Many of these princes saw Hong Rengan as the next East King.³¹

The Taiping armies were originally commanded by “kings”: these represented the North, South, East, and West. There was also a Wing King. Each “king” shared responsibility for the administration of Taiping government, while Xiuquan spent his days writing religious proclamations. All owed allegiance to God’s Second Son, Hong Xiuquan, who it was believed spoke to God and was the sole source of theology and law.³² After the conquest of Nanjing and the establishment of the city as the capital of the Heavenly Kingdom, the East King, Yang Xiuqing, was able to seize control of Xiuquan’s government both with his military prowess and because of frequent possessions he began

²⁰ Spence, 274.

²¹ Spence, 274.

²² So & Boardman, 288.

²³ Bernhardt, Kathryn. “Elite and Peasant during the Taiping Occupation of the Jiangnan.” *Modern China* 13, no. 4 (Oct., 1987), 401, 405.

²⁴ So & Boardman, 277.

²⁵ So & Boardman, 288.

²⁶ Lutz, 273.

²⁷ So & Boardman, 271-2.

²⁸ Spence, 277.

²⁹ Platt, 57.

³⁰ So & Boardman, 275.

³¹ Yuan Chung Teng. “The Failure of Hung Jen-K’an’s Foreign Policy.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 28, no. 1 (Nov., 1968), 133.

³² Spence, 218.

experiencing in 1853 during which he claimed to speak with the voice of God.

Only by claiming to speak with God's voice was Yang able to question decisions made by God's son, Hong Xiuquan. He accuses Xiuquan of "harshness and indulgence" and even orders the leader to receive forty lashes. At one point, Xiuquan was forced to kneel before his upstart subordinate.³³ Yang pronounced himself the "Holy Spirit," and soon seemed to have wrested the charismatic authority from Xiuquan because of his extraordinary ability to speak with God's voice. No longer do the Taiping believers need Xiuquan to interpret God's words. God speaks through Yang.

Yang proceeded to reintroduce traditional Confucian values, rejecting many of Xiuquan's puritanical rules as indulgent self-promotion. This shedding of Taiping Christianity proceeded rapidly since most Taipings did not have a deep understanding of Christianity beside the rituals forced upon them by Xiuquan's edicts; such as the saying of grace, recitation of the doxology, and the keeping of the Sabbath.³⁴ Even sincere converts refused to reject Confucianism out of hand, considering Christianity merely the fulfillment of Confucian ideals.³⁵ Most of the revolutionary reforms that were core to the Taiping system were enacted in its earliest years. As conquest became the focus, revolutionary aims such as land reform, sexual equality, and communistic distribution of wealth took a backseat and were forgotten.³⁶

Another reason most Taiping subjects were quick to accept Yang's "heresies" is that they never were true believers. Beside from the original group from Thistle Mountain, most Taipings were more or less kidnapping victims, impressed during the sacking of cities along the Yangtze. The extent of their "Taiping-ness" was usually the red cap they were issued and the crosses branded onto their cheeks.³⁷ Many of these "converts" quickly found themselves in positions of authority, something historian Elizabeth

Perry sees as a major weakness of Taiping power.³⁸ This lack of loyalty at the top and the bottom strata of the Taiping realm also acted as a nagging hindrance to the implementation of Rengan's reforms.

Not only were most subjects not sold into the revolution, the Taipings usually maintained existing power structures and Qing borders in conquered areas. Kathryn Bernhardt argues that this was done to prevent disruptions in the production of war supplies.³⁹ The near constant war, then, prevented the real implementation of the revolution that Hong Xiuquan claimed to bring to earth from heaven. Natives were in full control of local affairs through a unit known as *xiangguan*, made up of a hierarchy of families.⁴⁰ These *xiangguan*s were prone to corruption and the Taiping authorities had as much success as the Qing authorities in stomping out graft.⁴¹ Any reforms like that Rengan or pronouncements like those of Yang had no effect on most Taiping subjects and were felt only by members of the armies.

The North King, Wei Changhui, who had been with Xiuquan since the heady days at Thistle Mountain, was humiliated by Yang on more than one occasion and took it upon himself in 1856 to inform Xiuquan of a Yang-led plot to assassinate the Heavenly King. The East King had begun implementing his own series of unauthorized reforms and was executing any resisters. These executions coincided with Qing mass executions of Taiping supporters in Canton.⁴² Xiuquan ordered the East King's death after Yang asked (in the voice of God) why he should be called "Lord of 9,000 Years," when Xiuquan is called "Lord of 10,000 Years."⁴³ Wei complied with the order and saw to the assassination of Yang and the murder of his entire household.

Soon a bloodbath ensues, known to history as the Tianjing Incident. When the popular Wing King, Shi Dakai, heard of the battle, he arrived with 100,000 alienated Taipings and members of Triad groups and saw to it that Wei was killed in retaliation for the murder of Yang.⁴⁴ When Shi, known for his fair and

³³ Spence, 219.

³⁴ Lutz, 284.

³⁵ Lutz, 281.

³⁶ Lutz, 288.

³⁷ Perry, Elizabeth. "When Peasants Speak: Sources for the Study of Chinese Rebellions." *Modern China* 6, no. 1 (Jan., 1980), 79.

³⁸ Perry, 81.

³⁹ Bernhardt, 380.

⁴⁰ Bernhardt, 382. A belief also held by Historian Frederic Wakeman.

⁴¹ Bernhardt, 389.

⁴² Platt, 21.

⁴³ Spence, 237.

⁴⁴ Spence, 244.

prosperous rule of Anqing, confronted Xiuquan in Nanjing, he was offered titles and given a heroic welcome instead of a fight. Xiuquan never repudiated Yang's possessions and was careful not to anger Shi, who left Nanjing for good in 1857.

So as Rengan arrived two years later, he found an impatient Hong Xiuquan weakened, in over his head, in need of loyal allies, but still in power. Xiuquan spent the years issuing religious edicts to undo the damage done by Yang's divine voices, including a ban on all Confucian books. Xiuquan was also busy working on a new edition of the Bible.⁴⁵ The rebellion was stalled and the capital of Nanjing was under siege by Qing troops. It did not seem, rightly so, to the princes of the Heavenly Kingdom that the Shield King's reforms such as railroad building and industrialization was possible.

The chief opponent to Hong Rengan and his reforms turned out to be Li Xiucheng, the Loyal King, who concluded that Rengan "contributed nothing to the welfare" of Nanjing.⁴⁶ Li, unlike Rengan, was successful on the battlefield and commanded a loyal fraternity of soldiers.⁴⁷ Li and the princes of the Taiping accused Rengan of amassing too much power in his position as prime minister. Comparisons were made between Rengan and the heretical and treasonous Yang, an argument that would not be dismissed by Xiuquan.⁴⁸ Rengan, like Yang, publically questioned the religious authority of the Heavenly King, saying to foreign visitors that he did not agree with all of his cousin's religious pronouncements and tinkering with Scripture. Hong Rengan, unlike Yang though, was loyal to the Taipings, even until his execution at the hands of the Qing in 1864. Rengan was the only top leader that refused to repudiate the cause of instituting a holy kingdom when asked to by his captors.⁴⁹ He did not go to Nanjing to seek power for himself, it seems, but only to lay the groundwork for a new and modern China, based on the Taiping model.⁵⁰

The obstacles of war and religion:

Li Xiucheng, the Loyal King, would see to it that Hong Xiuquan found no use for his cousin. Li was part of the movement since 1851 and had been a Taiping eight years longer than the perceived usurper Rengan. (What he and the other princes did not seem to care about was that Hong Rengan was with Xiuquan at the very beginning.) Li played on Xiuquan's fears and tried to prove Rengan a failure and a threat to Xiuquan's authority as *Tien Wang*. Eventually, Li seems to have succeeded in this, although particular reasons for Rengan's rapid demotions are not known. In 1861, it seems as if Li was making the decisions formerly vested in the Shield King and Rengan was only exercising the powers of a foreign affairs minister. By 1862, Rengan was demoted again and served merely as protector of Xiuquan's son and heir. He lost the ear of his cousin, and lost any chance for his reforms to be implemented.

Even if Xiuquan was paying attention to these reforms, most historians argue that the die in the Taiping Rebellion had already been cast. The Heavenly Kingdom was doomed. When the 2nd Opium War concluded in late 1860 with the help of Lord Elgin's steamships (as Legge predicted⁵¹), the British and other foreign interests stepped away from the Taiping and toward a conciliatory and humiliated Qing dynasty. The final straws for the British were Li's attack on Shanghai and the insulting way that Xiuquan treated his foreign teachers, as if they were his subjects.

The usefulness of the Taiping Rebellion for foreign powers had waned and consuls and foreign ministers once enamored with the idea of a Christian Chinese state soon saw the deadly and endless rebellion as a serious threat to potentially profitable trade with the interior.⁵² The roads between Shanghai and Nanjing were littered with bones⁵³. It did not help that the Taiping banned their subjects from partaking in opium. Despite this, Rengan the foreign minister truly believed he could win the neutrality of Christian

⁴⁵ Spence, 253.

⁴⁶ So & Boardman, 274.

⁴⁷ Rengan, the former missionary and preacher, wrote that he hated war and tried to "make it as little terrible as possible." (So & Boardman, 280.)

⁴⁸ Yuan, 133.

⁴⁹ Rapp, 47.

⁵⁰ Rengan compared himself to Chou Kung, the prime minister of the first Chou emperor, famous for setting up the long lived Chou dynasty. (So & Boardman, 275.)

⁵¹ See page 4 of this paper.

⁵² So & Boardman, 280.

⁵³ Spence, 304.

Western powers, if not their support. He made trade overtures that seemed to fall on deaf ears.⁵⁴ He was so bold, at one point, he even asked for steamships. Missionaries from the LMS and Basel Societies were permitted to visit Rengan often. Joseph Edkins even secured an audience with Xiuquan himself, the result of which was a theological debate that alienated Edkins.⁵⁵ He returned to Hong Kong proclaiming that the Taipings were not Christian and that their conversion was hopeless.

Rengan's bold military strategy in the summer of 1860 was successful in relieving Nanjing of the Qing siege and crippling inertia under which it had been suffering. Li executed the plan flawlessly, drawing the Qing into a corner and away from the Heavenly capital. Rengan then planned a bold strike at the wealthy and ever-growing port city of Shanghai down the Yangtze from Nanjing. The plan rested on the neutrality of Western troops in the treaty concessions outside Shanghai. This was a Chinese fight and did not have to involve Christian or Christian violence. Rengan and Li sent word that churches and Western buildings should display yellow banners to avoid destruction by the invading Taiping armies.⁵⁶ All of these entreaties and notes were ignored by Western authorities, much to the displeasure of the Shield King.⁵⁷

As Li approached Shanghai he was shocked to find that French and British forces were shooting at the Taipings.⁵⁸ Li ordered his troops not to return fire. He was resting on Rengan's contacts to clear a path for him to take the city and was highly disappointed that he had to turn around. When Li returned to Nanjing, it seems as if Rengan's influence took another nose dive. There were no further attempts to reach out to the people Rengan warned should no longer be called "barbarians."⁵⁹

The last Westerner to visit Nanjing was the Tennessee-born missionary Isaachar Roberts. His arrival in the fall of 1860 would prove detrimental to

Rengan's diplomatic career with the Taipings. Roberts was the first Western minister to meet with Xiuquan, Feng, and Rengan in a Canton chapel almost a decade prior. Xiuquan, at that time, fell out with Roberts because the missionary refused to baptize him.⁶⁰ His missions in Canton failed due to his failure to communicate in local dialects and so he struck north to visit his old friends and make one last attempt to right the theological wrongs of the Hongs and to satisfy the contributors to his failed ministry in China.⁶¹

Rengan saw Roberts' visit as the Taipings' last chance to make a good impression on Westerners since no one else was talking with Rengan and he introduces the old teacher to Xiuquan, who received Roberts enthusiastically granting him titles,⁶² all of which he refused.⁶³ Xiuquan asked his old teacher to preach to the Taipings. It was a dream come true for Roberts until, during a ceremony before the court, he refused to kneel before Xiuquan as the Son of God.⁶⁴ The Heavenly King ordered him to preach only the Xiuquan-centered Taiping version of Christianity. Roberts is repeatedly insulted, but he works hard with his Chinese assistants to translate the King James Bible for the Taipings so they could tap into its universal truths.

He began preaching through his interpreters, but refused to preach the words given him to preach by the Heavenly King. Instead, Roberts' assistants could be heard explaining to the people of Nanjing that God had only *one* son and that he was Jesus Christ and not the *Tien Wang*.⁶⁵ Rengan, hearing the words of Roberts' Chinese assistants in the streets, was horrified. Rengan was lucky that Roberts was unable to speak the Mandarin dialect and was probably unintelligible to the residents of Nanjing.⁶⁶ Rengan vouched for the missionary and would certainly feel the wrath of Xiuquan if word got to him about what Roberts was teaching or if any of the

⁵⁴ Spence, 279.

⁵⁵ Yuan, 136.

⁵⁶ Spence, 281.

⁵⁷ Yuan, 130.

⁵⁸ Yuan, 131.

⁵⁹ So & Boardman, 290.

⁶⁰ Spence, 285.

⁶¹ Rapp, 39.

⁶² Yuan, p. 134-135.

⁶³ So & Boardman, 278.

⁶⁴ Spence, 287.

⁶⁵ From Rengan's 12/27/1861 letter to Josiah Cox, quoted in Rapp, 34.

⁶⁶ Rapp, 44.

Taiping subjects harmed their guest.⁶⁷ Rengan felt he had no choice and ordered one of Roberts' assistants beaten near to death. Roberts fled and within days of his flight became an ardent spokesman against the Taipings.⁶⁸ He proclaimed that they were cruel heretics and should not be trusted. Even though Roberts was something of a joke to his fellow missionaries,⁶⁹ they lapped up his words, words that justified Western resistance to the Taipings.

Rengan's goal of Western and Taiping harmony failed completely and he was further demoted by Xiuquan at Li's advice.⁷⁰ Soon it was Li and not Rengan entertaining the few foreign dignitaries who came to Nanjing.⁷¹ His connections with Westerners were now useless,⁷² and in fact, dangerous to the religious homogeneity being pushed by the Taiping court. Rengan advised an English friend that "missionaries ought not to come, for the doctrines are different and the heavenly King will not allow other doctrines than his own."⁷³ As his influence waned, Rengan's once promising administrative and economic reforms withered away.

The biggest obstacle to reform was Hong Xiuquan's charismatic authority:

The biggest obstacle to Rengan, then, was not the West, but was his all-powerful cousin. As the Taiping world began to crumble following the failure of the 1860 Shanghai invasion, the Heavenly King retreated more and more into his spiritual visions and grew ever more hostile to anyone who questioned him. His vision was universal and so was his gold-bearded Father God. His Father was *Shangdi*,⁷⁴ the god over all the world, and Hong Xiuquan was his Second Son. Xiuquan was sent to bring about a Heavenly Kingdom and re-establish *Shangdi* in China. He saw God. He trained with his elder brother Jesus under the direction of God, the Father. These were not questions to Xiuquan or his most loyal followers.

Xiuquan was an authority not only to the Taipings or Chinese, but also to the many Christian European visitors who were so lucky to have been graced by his presence. This assertion of spiritual authority rubbed Christian missionaries the wrong way. The few times Xiuquan entertained missionaries he instructed them that *he* was going to teach them and not the other way around. Missionaries, like Joseph Edkins who came to set Scripture straight with the leader, left insulted and wrote to their peers that the Taiping were "beyond repair of any human advisor."⁷⁵

These same missionaries, who once wrote so glowingly of the young preacher Hong Rengan, questioned their old friend. Rengan was forced by these foreign visits to play a dangerous game in which he often ended up as the Taiping apologist. But even Rengan, at least in private, questioned his cousin. "At dinner, he [Rengan] will tell you what difficulties he has to encounter in introducing reforms," observed visiting English consul R.J. Forest in 1861, "how the T'ien Wang's head is in the skies, while his feet are on the earth."⁷⁶

There were many reasons for the failure of the reforms proposed by Hong Rengan. They may have been introduced too late into a political system already ruined by treason and jealousy. The war was falling apart now that the Western powers, one by one, aligned themselves with the more malleable Qing government. The peace required to make such major changes was impossible even before Rengan was named Shield King. Even if the reforms got off the ground, by 1860 most rank-and-file Taiping subjects lacked sincere dedication to the Taiping state. They were simply obedient soldiers, not ideologues. The main reason that the reforms proposed by Rengan's *Aid to Administration* failed was because his reforms, if carried through, would result in a complete transformation of the legitimacy of the authority in the Taiping state.

⁶⁷ Rapp, 35.

⁶⁸ So & Boardman, 279.

⁶⁹ Rapp, 42.

⁷⁰ Rapp, 33.

⁷¹ Yuan, 138.

⁷² Rapp, 36.

⁷³ Rengan quoted by Yuan, 138.

⁷⁴ Lutz, 272. "Shangdi" is mentioned in pre-Confucian Chinese texts as a universal force. The Basel missionary Karl F.A. Gützlaff and LMS missionary James Legge used this term to define Christianity's God to the Chinese. Xiuquan shared Gützlaff's belief that China strayed from the true worship of God and that this worship remained (however corrupted) in Europe.

⁷⁵ Edkins is quoted in So & Boardman, 276.

⁷⁶ So & Boardman, 275.

Hong Xiuquan was the classic Weberian charismatic leader.⁷⁷ His unstable and revolutionary authority came from his unique and singular ability to communicate with God through visions. His mere gaze, according to Rengan, was “piercing and difficult to endure.”⁷⁸ When Yang, the East King, claimed to have similar powers, he was eliminated via the Tianjing Incident. Even the co-founder of the “Society of God-worshippers,” Feng Yushan, was pushed aside because of the perception that Xiuquan possessed the unique abilities to see the rebellion through to its revolutionary and celestial ends.⁷⁹ Xiuquan was a jealous leader, as most charismatic leaders are, and so he guarded the source of his legitimacy.

When the process of routinization began to set in, after the founding of Nanjing as the heavenly capital, it seemed a non-Xiuquan dependent concept of Taiping law and principles had evolved.⁸⁰ These could be used to shape law and administration without the use of special charismatic authority, and here is where Rengan’s ideas could have taken the Taipings to the next level. Xiuquan reacted to routinization and the diminishing of his charismatic power by focusing his efforts on the rewriting of Scripture and repositioning himself as the sole source of truth and authority, instead of finding a new place as a traditional or bureaucratic leader. The years he spent wrapped up in his own dogmatic reforms are not evidence of a man going insane, as some academics⁸¹ and even Rengan seemed to think. Xiuquan’s move toward social conservatism and away from institutional reforms and routinization fit into Weber’s model of charismatic leadership perfectly and could have been predicted.⁸²

So why didn’t Rengan proceed with the reforms despite his obsolete tyrant of a cousin? Historians have questioned whether Hong Xiuquan really had a grip on leadership during the trying later years of the Taiping Rebellion, but Rengan’s actions

during his decline prove that Xiuquan was still unquestionably *the* leader. He was to be feared and revered. As Glenn Trager wrote, “Any challenge to the center was met with immediate excommunication.”⁸³ With the Taiping kingdom falling apart around him and his reforms all but abandoned, Rengan decided to remain loyal to his cousin, resisting pleas from his Western friends to abandon the sinking Taiping ship. If Rengan did not sincerely respect Xiuquan’s authority and the role of the Taiping as God’s “chosen,” he didn’t show it. His missionary friends, along with historian Eugene P. Boardman⁸⁴, accused Rengan of selling out his Christian beliefs and Western outlook, particularly when Rengan started reporting his own visions from God toward the end of the desperate war.⁸⁵ It seemed as if Rengan had abandoned hope for his reforms and bought into the charismatic conservatism of his cousin.

Previously, Rengan had been in charge of the Taiping propaganda efforts and was surrounded by the least religious and best educated Taiping subjects in his press.⁸⁶ He even began leaking Confucian elements into the official Taiping doctrine. His presses focused on secular issues such as anti-Manchuism and nationalism as unifying concepts. These appealed to a wide array of anti-Qing Chinese and could have brought in many new followers, but Xiuquan’s controversial charismatic presence acted as an anchor for Rengan’s efforts. It seemed as if every time, Rengan stepped toward one of his modernizing reforms, his cousin pulled the leash and brought him right back to the Taiping orthodoxy which saw Xiuquan as the sole fount of truth.

This was not so much a character issue as Boardman contends⁸⁷, as it is a self preserving political decision. On the other hand, there were very real physical threats to resisting the Heavenly King. Rengan knew that challenges (like that of Yang and

⁷⁷ Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich, eds. New York, Bedminster Press, 1968, 1114.

⁷⁸ Rengan is quoted in Platt, 15.

⁷⁹ Platt, 18.

⁸⁰ Trager, Glenn A. “Loosing the Dragon: Charismatic Legal Action and the Construction of the Taiping Legal Order.” *Law and Social Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 348.

⁸¹ Yapp, P.M. “The Mental Illness of Hung Hsiu-chuan, Leader of the Taiping Rebellion.” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 13: 3 (1954), 287-304.

⁸² Marcus, John T. “Transcendence and Charisma.” *Western Political Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (Mar., 1961), 239.

⁸³ Trager, 348.

⁸⁴ This is part of the thesis of Boardman’s collaboration with So Kwan-wai, upon which much of my research is based. They also questioned Rengan’s pliable character and presented a rather weak and unsympathetic view of the Shield King.

⁸⁵ Rapp, 47.

⁸⁶ Platt, 160.

⁸⁷ So & Boardman write “It is surprising that Jen-kan could compromise his integrity.”, 283.

Wei before him) were met with assassinations.⁸⁸ There were, by 1861, daily executions in the Taiping camp for offenses much more minor than treason.⁸⁹ It should be noted, in fact, that one of two reforms Xiuquan did initially oppose was Rengan's idea in *Aid to Administration* to ban capital punishment.⁹⁰ Before long, Xiuquan disposed of his now useless cousin, sending him away to distant battlefields.

Because he remained firmly entrenched in his charismatic role and despite his expressed initial enthusiasm for Rengan's reforms, Xiuquan would eventually see Rengan and the modern state he represented as a threat to his charismatic authority. This partly accounts for Rengan's sudden and quiet demotion in 1861. Rengan, whether he knew it or not, wanted something his cousin couldn't deliver: a state in which law would rule, not the words that came out of Xiuquan's mouth. Xiuquan would refuse to submit to the rational, institutionalized legitimacy which would be required in the modern state Rengan proposed. The legitimacy of Rengan and his reforms, in the end, depended on the sanction of the charismatic leader⁹¹, not on the universality of other intangible principles.

As historian Stephen Platt put it, "Rengan's vision was one of stable transition, of endurance, of preservation."⁹² He promoted a centralized

government that would be made responsive to public opinion.⁹³ Unfortunately for Rengan, his eternal leader did not share this desire for change because change was a grave threat to his power. And this made all the difference in the world. The Taiping Rebellion was bound to fail in any modernizing efforts because it rested on the naturally unstable foundation of charismatic authority.

Xiuquan's last proclamation would be the one that did him in. As the siege around Nanjing tightened and starvation hit the city, he ordered his remaining followers to eat the manna that God would provide. Whatever that manna was killed Xiuquan. He succumbed to food poisoning just as Qing troops and their Western allies, the "Ever-Victorious Army" closed in to crush the Heavenly Kingdom. Even though the Kingdom was crushed and all of its leaders and subjects executed, the ideas of Hong Rengan's *Aid to Administration* did not fall on deaf ears. China would have to wait a few more generations to see its nationalist revolution come to fruition in the Revolution of 1911.⁹⁴ That revolution, from its beginning, was legitimized by rationality and universal concepts such as the rule of law, republicanism, and the right to self-rule.

⁸⁹ Rapp, 47.

⁹⁰ Spence, 274.

⁹¹ Trager, 342.

⁹² Platt, 161.

⁹³ So & Boardman, 286.

⁹⁴ Interestingly Sun Yat-sen was jokingly nicknamed "Hong Xiuquan" by some of his early compatriots. See Marie-Claire Bergère. *Sun Yat-sen*, tans. Janet Lloyd. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 33.