

Taiping Pipe Dreams: Women's Roles in the Taiping Rebellion

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
graduation with distinction in History in the undergraduate
colleges of The Ohio State University

by

Adrienne Johnson

The Ohio State University

June 2006

Project Advisor: Professor Cynthia Brokaw, Department of
History

Contents:

Introduction – 1
Rules for Women in Imperial China - 5
Women in the Qing - 12
Origins of the Taiping Rebellion – 17
The Taiping Social Program – 23
Women’s Lives Under the Taiping – 27
Conclusion - 36

A twenty-year-old woman is hunched over, digging a ditch in the hot sun. She stands unsteadily on her feet, a mere four inches in length, stunted and gnarled from years of being tightly bound. The cloths that cramped their growth since she was a child have now been removed. This is the first manual labor she has done in her life; any work before this day had been within the home, cooking, cleaning, weaving, caring for the children. In fact, it is the first time she has been outside in the last ten years, save only for holidays and very special occasions. The army that has invaded her village tells her that she is now equal to men. She may go outside when she wishes, she may work in jobs previously delegated only to men, she may own property. Years of oppression have been lifted from her shoulders. She is free.

Or is she? Yes, she stands outside when her life before had been cloistered within a household, but what on what does she stand? Feet so small that she has difficulty walking, let alone digging a ditch. Her difficulties are met with no sympathy from those who have assigned her work. Outside, under the eyes of men who are not her family, she feels exposed and vulnerable, even filthy and licentious. When she goes home, she will not return to her husband and children. Instead, she will go to barracks that have been set up in her village, strictly separating men from women, even small boys from their mothers. What of the claim that she is now equal with men? As she looks around her, she witnesses little evidence of this. Nearly all of her overseers are men. The occasional woman stands supervising other women, but never seems to bark her orders at any men. Men still gaze at her with superiority in their eyes. She turns back to the work that she cannot escape, wishing that she had never been liberated at all.

In the mid 19th century, the lives of Chinese women remained much as they had been for the past millennia. Women were considered inferior and held little power in society. Under the Qing dynasty, in power at the time, this subordination of women continued, enforced by both the laws of the Qing and societal norms and mores. Seemingly out of the blue, a rebellion appeared to challenge Qing rule in 1847. Spawned by a southern agrarian subculture and led by a failed scholar, the rebellion promoted an ideology that melded Christianity with popular Chinese religious beliefs. The Taipings, as they called themselves, offered many novel ideas that promised to drastically restructure Chinese society. Among these beliefs was a new vision of gender roles. As the Taipings conquered territories they implemented their policies, leading to a dramatic change in the lifestyles of the women now under their rule. The rebel leaders and some subsequent scholars have claimed that these new roles for women liberated the subjugated female population of China. One Chinese scholar goes so far as to assert that the Taiping movement was a “historically unprecedented, glorious, and progressive liberation of women.”¹ This paper studies that assertion, analyzing the Taiping ideology and the actual effects that they had on women’s lives.

In order to assess the Taiping influence on women, I will compare women’s roles under the Qing dynasty to women’s roles under the Taiping Rebellion. First, I will describe the role of women in imperial China and, specifically, women under the Qing. Then, after a brief discussion of the Taiping movement, I will describe the Taiping program for women. Finally, I will compare the program to the reality faced by women under Taiping rule. This thesis will address a number of questions. Was the Taiping Rebellion truly feminist, as its leaders and some historians claim? Why and how did the Taipings develop this novel concept of gender roles?

¹ Fan Wenlan, *Zhongguo jindai shi* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1952), in Ono Kazuko *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 22.

Were women's lives improved by their actions? How did the reality of women's lives differ from the rhetoric espoused by the rebel leaders? Why did this reality fall short of the promises made to women? If the rebellion had succeeded, would female gender roles have been permanently improved?

The questions will be answered by looking at a number of sources. All sources used were either written in or translated into English. Those relating to women under the Qing dynasty include writings by both men and women of the period and Qing legal codes. Primary sources regarding the Taipings are much scarcer, and many do not exist in English translation. Missionaries serving in China at the time left extensive records of their experiences with the Chinese; these provide some background for understanding the rebellion. A number of Europeans recorded their own accounts of the rebellion. One, Augustus Lindley, actually lived and worked among the Taipings. His accounts give an outside perspective on the inner workings of the Taiping culture. Contemporary historians also wrote narratives of the rebellion. In addition to European writings, some records written by the Taipings, including religious and official documents, have been directly translated into English. In some instances these even include the words of Taiping leaders, such as one general who, upon arrest by the Qing government, gave a deposition relating his experiences in the rebellion. Some of these primary sources must be viewed skeptically, as they reflect obvious biases. For instance, many writers affiliated with the Qing dynasty claim that the Taipings were nothing but ruthless barbarians, while men connected to the Taiping Rebellion say that it was a flawless crusade.

I have also consulted some secondary sources, which have been extremely helpful in its development. Susan Mann's *Precious Records* describes women's lives under Qing rule, and the power relationship between men and women. Mann uses the writings of elite women during the

Qing dynasty to give an insider's perspective on the effects of the patriarchal rules that prevailed in the period. Jonathan Spence's *God's Chinese Son* is an account of the Taiping Rebellion, including its development, beliefs, military actions, and ultimate demise; this topic is also well covered in Franz Michael's *The Taiping Rebellion*. The topic of this paper is more directly dealt with in two sources, John Withers's *The Heavenly Capital: Nanjing Under the Taiping, 1853-1864*, and Ono Kazuko's *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution; 1850-1950*. In the first work, Withers addresses women's roles under the Taiping Rebellion. However, he does not clearly compare and contrast these roles with the roles of women before and outside of the rebellion. Kazuko also considers women's roles in the rebellion, but her work is centered on the "feminist" ideals that initially defined those roles, not the reality of hardship faced by most women. Her work highlights the policies of equality, rather than considering the actual impact of these policies on the women who were affected by them.

Drawing on these secondary and primary sources, I look at the Taiping Rebellion from an angle that has not yet been fully explored in English-language writings. While others speak to the roles of women and statements made by Taipings, I address the attitudes and underlying causes of the new gender roles. I also focus on the changes in women's quality of life to answer the question of whether the Taipings efforts had a positive or negative effect on women. This will shed new light on the roles of women in a massive rebellion that, some have claimed, was the first women's liberation movement in China.

Rules for Women in Imperial China

The rules that dictated women's position in the Qing dynasty had been in place for thousands of years. Classical writings established women as lesser beings by omitting them from all discussion. All leaders, sage rulers, and other people of power were men; women held no place in Confucius's view of the Chinese power structure. The relative weakness of women was reinforced by cosmology, in the view of the relationship between *yin* and *yang*, the substance of which the entire universe was made. According to the *Classic of Change*, the *yang*, the masculine entity, was strong and rigid. The *yin*, representing the feminine, was weak and yielding. This balance of power existed throughout the universe, but was most personified in the roles of men and women. The man was the rock to which the woman molded herself.

These ideas were so prevalent that even women scholars embraced them. Ban Zhao (1st c. AD), a highly educated woman, furthered the role presented in the Classics. In her writing *Lessons For Women*, which she drafted as a teaching tool for her own daughters as they came of age, Ban Zhao clearly defined the position of Chinese women in society. Her writings did not disguise the hardships that lay ahead for her daughters. She wrote, "Let a woman modestly yield to others; let her respect others; let her put others first, herself last. Should she do something good, let her not mention it; should she do something bad, let her not deny it."² A woman's life was one of service and silence; her work was never done, but she should never complain.

In addition to being subordinated to men, women were separated from men in their roles in life. Chinese society was divided into two spheres: the inner sphere (*nei*), and the outer sphere (*wai*). The outer sphere consisted of all actions in public life. Politics, academia, trade, and labor, all fell within the *wai*. This was an exclusively male domain. Women could only function

² Ban Zhao, "Lessons for Women", In Nancy Swann, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar Of China* (New York, NY: The Century Co., 1932), 83.

within the inner sphere, tending to the home and the family. They were responsible for cooking, cleaning, sewing, and caring for the children and the elderly. Only in the most extraordinary circumstances was a woman ever allowed to step outside of her sphere and invade that of men. A proper Chinese woman of the time would not even think beyond matters that involved the home; the men's world was none of her business.

The progression of a woman's life was guided by a series of relationships, known as the "three submissions," defined by three phases in a woman's life: childhood, married life, and finally widowhood. First, as a child, girl was subservient to her father. He had control over all decisions in her life. When she came of age, the girl would be married off, and control would transfer to her new husband. Even if the woman happened to outlive her husband, she still lacked true freedom. Despite her greater age and experience, a widow was officially under the control of her son. These "three submissions" to father, husband, and finally son, mapped out the course of a woman's life.

Childhood

Subordination of women truly began at birth. When a boy was born, it was cause for great celebration within the household. A boy would bring strength and prosperity to a household. However, when a girl was born, the reaction of the family was one of resignation. They had hoped for a boy, but instead were saddled with a child who would grow up, leave the home, and contribute nothing to their wealth or their lineage. One Chinese custom, outlined by Ban Zhao, was to place the female baby beneath her crib. This indicated that she was "lowly and weak, and should regard it as her primary duty to humble herself before others."³

³ Ban Zhao, "Lessons for Women," 83.

For a short period, a girl's life would be much like that of a boy. As young children, girls could play outside the household. However, this period did not last long. Beginning as early as



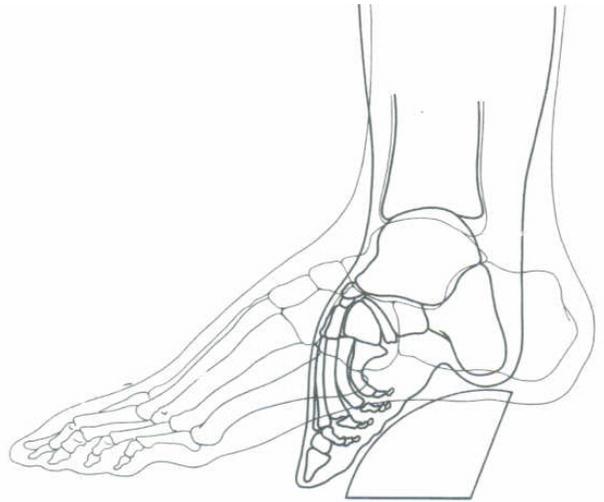
five years old, Chinese girls experienced the practice of foot binding. This practice originated among the elite of the Song dynasty (960-1279), and its popularity grew into the Qing. The custom involved wrapping a girl's feet tightly in cloth, with the intent of preventing growth. The first binding was a type of ritual procedure performed by the

girl's mother and other female relatives (Picture: Young girl having her feet bound). Her four smaller toes would be bent underneath her big toe, and the entire foot would be bent so her heel met the ball of her foot. The cloth would then be used to secure the foot in this excruciating position. While the foot was growing, the pain could be almost unbearable. One woman living under the Qing reign recalled that for years of her life she was unable to walk, and was forced to crawl through the house on her hands and knees.⁴ The ideal foot size was only three inches, and such a result would require years of diligent and torturous binding. Once completed, a woman's mobility would be severely impaired. Augustus Lindley, a European living among the Taipings in China, commented that a woman with bound feet "even when standing still, has a very unsteady appearance," and when walking was "apparently in danger of rolling over at every step."⁵

⁴ Ida Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han; The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1945), 22.

⁵ Augustus Lindley, *Ti-Ping Tien-Kwoh: The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution* (London: Day and Son, Lithographers and Publishers, 1866), 303.

Given the almost unbearable pain and limiting effects of foot binding, one would think that the practice would be unattractive for women (Picture: bone structure of a bound foot over the structure of a normal foot). However, most women in the period embraced the custom. In a society where social mobility for women was limited, foot binding gave women a chance to improve their



status. Small feet were seen as “a bodily marker of status, purity, and good breeding.”⁶ Even if she was without other attractions, such as physical beauty or wealth, a girl with small feet could hope to marry well. When men sought appropriate girls for marriage, the size of the foot was one of the greatest enticements. As a Chinese woman recalled, “Matchmakers were not asked, ‘Is she beautiful?’ but ‘How small are her feet?’”⁷ Bound feet were also thought to be very attractive. Men thought the feet themselves were attractive, and the stilted gait of a woman with bound feet was very erotic. Chinese described the walk of a bound foot woman as “swaying elegantly from side to side like the graceful waving of the willow tree.”⁸

Soon after reaching the age to have their feet bound, women under the Qing experienced another restriction. As soon as women were considered nubile they were secluded inside the inner chambers of their houses. A woman outside of the household was considered shameful and inappropriate, even licentious. A respectable woman was not to be seen, for fear that she would be easily seduced by strange men. From as early as the age of ten, sometimes until their death,

⁶ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 27.

⁷ Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han*, 22.

⁸ Lindley, *The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution*, 303.

Qing women remained within the confines of the household. On rare occasions when women ventured outside the house, they were heavily veiled, or confined within sedan chairs. Rich households had separate quarters for women, called the “inner quarters,” far back where no guests could see them. There they were to remain, safe from the dangers presented by men from outside their household. Even poor families kept their daughters inside. One woman from a poor family recalled being secluded in her home at the age of thirteen. She reported, “When a family wanted to know more about a girl who had been suggested for a daughter-in-law and asked what kind of a girl she was, the neighbors would answer, ‘We do not know. We have never seen her.’ And that was praise.”⁹

Women who functioned outside the home were immediately suspect. If the women were not under the control of a man, it was thought that they had been indulging in morally corrupt behavior. Even Buddhist nuns, who were unmarried and devoted their lives to religion, were often accused of lecherous behavior. If a woman had to work outside the household, it was a disgrace to her family. Though it often seemed economically foolish, women remained within the confines of their home; if a woman had to work outside the household, it was a disgrace to her family. The only respectable work for women, besides household chores, was to weave textiles and sew within the home. They would spin, weave, and embroider cloth for their own family and to be sold. Poor women would weave cotton cloth. If they had the funds, they would raise silk worms and spin silk thread. Only the very richest women had the means and the time to embroider, as such a skill took much time and training, neither of which were available to the lower classes.

Seclusion of women was diligently practiced because chastity was highly revered in Chinese culture. A woman who was not a virgin was not marriageable. An unmarried girl,

⁹ Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han*, 29.

though she could work around the house and do some textile work, could not significantly contribute to the family economy. More importantly, since China was a patriarchal society, she also could not contribute to the family legacy. She was, in a sense, of no worth to her natal family. Her ability to marry well was all that she offered her family, so her chastity had to be guarded vigorously.

Married Life

Marriage did not provide a great improvement to a woman's life, as Ban Zhao's writings again suggested. "Lessons for Women" provided a definition of the relationship between husband and wife. The husband's main objective was to be able to control his wife, while his wife was to serve him. Ban Zhao wrote, "If a husband does not control his wife, then the rules of conduct manifesting his authority are abandoned and broken. If a wife does not serve her husband, then the proper relationship (between men and women) and the natural order of things are neglected and destroyed."¹⁰ The implication of this statement is clear: if a wife held power in the relationship, it was dangerously out of balance. Women's lower status was more than a man's exertion of power over his wife; it was a social norm that, when disobeyed, would spell disaster for both parties. Even a sympathetic husband who perhaps did not wish to control his wife felt the pressures of society to maintain the specified social roles.

Ironically, one of the greatest foes of a young wife was her new mother-in-law. A new wife who had not provided an heir was seen as a nuisance, just one more mouth to feed. Mothers-in-law were notorious for abusing their new daughters-in-law, often because the girls were the only family members over whom mothers officially held any power. The girls were open to any abuse their new mother might wish to bring down upon them. Because of filial piety

and respect for her elders, a wife would have no recourse against her mother-in-law. The only sure way to end abuse was to have a son. With the birth of a male child, a woman's worth rose significantly. She had proven herself worthy by continuing the family line.

Widowhood

Even after the death of her husband, a woman was expected to remain faithful to his memory. The Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723-35) wrote, "As for the duty of women to follow one [husband] and never marry again, this is indeed the orthodox way for all under heaven."¹¹ Remarriage was seen as betrayal of one's original husband. At the same time, a widow was an unwelcome part of the family. If she were to remain in the household, her husband's family would have to support her. Many families would marry off their departed sons' wives and keep the bride price. The situation was rarely to the young woman's advantage. A widow was seen as an unattractive match because she had lost her virginity. Some believed that her husband's death was a sign that a widow was cursed.¹² The men to whom she would be married were often undesirable to other women and took widows out of desperation. Thus, instead of running the risk of being forced into a second marriage, many wives chose to follow their husbands into death by committing suicide

¹⁰ Ban Zhao, , "Lessons for Women," 84.

¹¹ In Janet Theiss, "Female Suicide and Statecraft in Mid-Qing China" *Passionate Women; Female Suicide in Late Imperial China* (Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill, 2001), 55.

¹² Paul S Ropp, *Passionate Women: Female Suicide in Late Imperial China*, 5.

Women in the Qing

These rules for women continued to define women's place in society in the Qing, many centuries after they had first been formulated. This is not to say that the lives of Chinese women did not change at all between the Han dynasty and the Qing. Qing women in differing situations and socioeconomic backgrounds found different freedoms than were depicted in traditional writings. There was, in truth, considerable variation in the degree to which women were able to follow Ban Zhao's "Lessons" and the three submissions.

Women in extremely poor households had more freedom, simply out of necessity. Although it was socially unacceptable, some of these women would work outside of their households in order to support their families. They could become beggars or servants in wealthy households. Sometimes poor women would even work in fields alongside men.

Even women secluded inside their homes often found certain power to hold over their husbands. While the man alone held control of the outer sphere, his wife would often dominate the inner sphere. The wife would run the household, performing all duties, or delegating work to servants in the case of wealthy families. Men had little control over the inner workings of their homes. Though it was certainly not the most glamorous job, when it came to cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children, the woman was in control.

Often, wealth afforded women certain freedoms. Though a son was valued more than a daughter, it would be wrong to assume that fathers had no love for their daughters. In families of means, this love sometimes translated into opportunities not normally afforded to women. Some women were educated in the arts of calligraphy, painting, and poetry. They would be taught certain of the Classics, and though they could never take exams, many proved to be capable scholars. Ban Zhao was an excellent example of a woman breaking the boundaries of gender

roles. Born to a wealthy family, she was educated alongside her brothers. She excelled at her studies and became a respected female writer in the male dominated society. Beyond her revered *Lessons for Women*, Ban Zhao supposedly took over for her failing brother in writing the Han dynastic history.¹³ Such a responsibility would never have been conferred upon a woman, but Ban Zhao proved competent at the task. In addition to Ban, there are many examples of wealthy women who learned to write poetry and paint. Though they hardly broke down the walls between genders, these women enjoyed freedoms theoretically not open to them.

Women also found greater liberty in old age. Chinese culture placed great value on elders; they were to be revered and respected. Though in theory a widow was subordinated to her son, many sons treated their mothers with great piety and sought guidance from them. Mencius (4th c. BC), a great Confucian scholar, allowed his mother to influence all aspects of his life, from his education and profession to his relationship with his own wife. Her superior age and wisdom made her a person to be venerated, despite the fact that she was a woman.

There are many ways, too, in which the Qing marks a special period in the history of women in China. From the seventeenth century on, there is evidence that women enjoyed greater opportunities for education and self-expression than had been available in early periods. The dynasty saw a significant growth in the number of female writers and poets, indicating an increase in education for women, and an increase in women's literacy. Scholars and literati, especially in the wealthy Jiangnan area, initiated debates on the roles that women could play in family education and literature. A few male writers even challenged the practice of footbinding.¹⁴

¹³ Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, 80.

¹⁴ Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, 8.

These changes, however, took place in a very limited part of Chinese society. They were isolated mainly to the elite sector and to the Jiangnan region, which was known for being extremely wealthy and culturally advanced. Susan Mann estimates that they represented 0.1 percent of the total female population of China.¹⁵ The greater interest in female education and literary production did not touch the vast majority of women, most of whom were illiterate.

There were ways in which the Qing government reasserted traditional rules for women and even presented new challenges for them. Female chastity was highly valued in the Qing. In order to maintain their chastity, women were expected to do far more than avoid engaging in affairs. They had to protect themselves at all costs, or else they would be held responsible if they were victimized by men. The Qing government celebrated women who died while trying to resist rape.¹⁶ Women who survived rape had to have physical evidence of their resistance to the rape.¹⁷ If she could not prove that she had been raped, it was assumed that a woman had consented to the sex.

Prostitution was detrimental to the societal status of young women. For much of the Qing dynasty prostitution had been legal, and, though outlawed in 1723, the practice continued to thrive. Once entering into the realm of the courtesan, a woman could never hope to fully recover. She would be considered tainted because of her sexual work. Even if a courtesan were to find a man who wanted to marry her, she would be unable to reinsert herself into conventional society. Though they could be taken as concubines, a courtesan could never become a respectable man's wife.¹⁸ Their chastity had been lost, and because of this a courtesan could never again be seen as a good woman.

¹⁵ Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, 4.

¹⁶ Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, 25.

¹⁷ Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, 26.

¹⁸ Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, 136.

A woman's subservience to her husband was also officially observed in the laws of the Qing empire. One reflection of this was in the empire's policies on divorce. Men, with proper reason, could choose to legally end a marriage. Women, however, could not leave their husbands unless the men consented. If a woman was to run away from her husband, she could be beaten and her husband would have the right to sell her to another man. If she was to run away a second time, she could face the death penalty by strangulation.¹⁹ All possessions belonging to a woman when she was married automatically became the property of her husband. The only item that belonged to a woman was her dowry, which rarely consisted of much, and which she was often compelled to contribute to the family. If a divorce occurred, the woman would have no right to reclaim her possessions; her former husband could do with them what he wished. Even more devastating was the empire's legal definition of women themselves. The government officially recognized women as property of their husband or father, depending upon marital status. Legal codes of the period address a man's right to sell his daughters, wives, and concubines.²⁰ Women were treated as a commodity, and often not a terribly valuable one at that. Augustus Lindley wrote of seeing women sold off like cattle. He had seen "comely young maidens from twelve to twenty years of age, offered for sale by their mothers, or speculators, at prices varying from six to thirty dollars, so that, as I have frequently heard the Chinese say, 'you may sometimes buy a handsome girl for so many cash as a catty (weight of one pound and a third) less than pork.'²¹ If a woman was unhappy or mistreated in her husband's family, not even his death could alleviate her misery, for when a husband died, his wife was not allowed to return to her natal family. She automatically became the possession of his family.

¹⁹ Chiu Vermier, *Marriage Laws And Customs of China* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1967), 95.

²⁰ Chiu, *Marriage Laws And Customs of China*, 81.

²¹ Lindley, *The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution*, 304.

Widow suicide was celebrated by the Qing government. Though support for widow suicides wavered during the Ming and Qing dynasties, in 1851, the Tongzhi emperor (r. 1862-74) proclaimed that widow martyrs should be celebrated upon their deaths.²² It was seen as appropriate, even honorable, for a woman to hang herself upon the death of her husband in order to preserve her purity. She was to remain faithful to her husband, even after he died.

Qing women took the idea of the widow suicides in different directions. Some took a step back, and instead of killing themselves would disfigure themselves when their husbands died. They would cut their faces and even remove their noses or ears to prevent being remarried. This succeeded both because it rendered the woman unattractive to potential suitors, and because it made her body “un-whole” and unworthy for ancestral rituals.²³ Other women would take widow suicide a step further. In a few rare cases, young girls would commit suicide when the men to whom they were betrothed would die. Their sense of fidelity to their would-be husband was so strong that they felt it was disloyal to find someone new. Though they were still virgins and could have found other husbands, these girls chose to take their own lives rather than risk betraying their men.

Thus, despite the advances enjoyed by the elite women of the Jiangnan area, most women continued to live lives of seclusion and subservience, with little opportunity for personal freedom in the Qing. Instead of legally possessing material wealth, women were considered to be the property of the men in their lives. The opportunities in their lives were limited to what they could do within their households; they would cook, clean, weave, and sew, but nothing more. Such was the role of women in the Qing dynasty, and for centuries preceding it. In 1847, a rebellion arose that challenged this role.

²² Theiss, *Passionate Women; Female Suicide in Late Imperial China*, 74.

Origins of the Taiping Rebellion

In the early nineteenth century, an event occurred that challenged Qing rule and the social and legal restraints on women that the dynasty supported. A scholar and failed examination candidate named Hong Xiuquan raised a rebel army that competed with the empire that had ruled China for almost two hundred years. Hong was from a Hakka community, a distinct subculture of the Chinese people. The Hakkas, meaning “guest people,” had migrated from Northern China to the south as early as the 12th century. They were known for their loyalty to Chinese rule. They had opposed the Mongol rule during the Ming dynasty, and were against the Manchu rule of the Qing.²⁴ Despite this strong loyalty to the Chinese state, there were many prejudices against the Hakkas. They were often thought of as “semi-barbarians, living in poverty and filth.”²⁵ It was true that the Hakkas were in large part a poor group. The Hakkas were mainly an agrarian group that had settled in a number of areas, one of which was around the city of Canton, where Hong was raised. This subculture of the Chinese population had a number of customs that differed from those conventional Chinese communities, and these differences affected Hong and the rebellion he established.

As the Hakka community was quite poor, they needed to utilize all available labor that they could. For this reason, Hakka women worked alongside men in the field. Such a practice was almost unimaginable in mainstream Chinese culture. In fact, the Hakkas were the only subculture to routinely permit women to work.²⁶ Women were not only allowed to work in agrarian settings, they could also work in construction and other forms of manual labor. This

²³ Grace Fong, “The Cultural Significance of Suicide Writings,” *Passionate Women; Female Suicide in Late Imperial China*, 106.

²⁴ William G. Skinner. “Origins and Historiography.” *Migration and Ethnicity in Chinese History; Hakkas, Pengmin, and Their Neighbors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 29.

²⁵ Nicole Constable. “Poverty, Piety, and the Past; Hakka Christian Expressions of Hakka Identity.” *Guest People; Hakka Identity in China and Abroad* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1996), 109.

improved the status of women in two ways. Firstly, it suggested greater equality between men and women, though this equality did not extend far beyond work for many Hakka women. Secondly, it increased work options available to women, beyond simply spinning, weaving and embroidering. In the Hakka culture, far fewer women turned to begging and prostitution when in need of money.²⁷ Instead, they could find legitimate jobs in their enhanced sphere.

Perhaps even more startling from the viewpoint of most Chinese, Hakka women did not bind their feet. With women in the labor force, the small feet of most Chinese women were simply impractical. It was difficult enough to walk on a bound foot, let alone spend day after day toiling in a field. However, the Hakka people contended that the lack of a bound foot was not solely for practical purposes. Even in households wealthy enough that women did not need to work, the feet were still left unbound.²⁸ The practice of cramping the feet was not an expectation. Hakka men did not find small feet attractive as most Chinese men did, which was the only benefit to the torturous process. There was therefore no reason for the women to continue the practice.

It was from this poor community that one of the most influential Chinese rebels, the leader of the Taiping Rebellion, came. Hong Xiuquan was born in a small Hakka village in 1814, the third son of a simple farmer. As Hong was an intelligent child, his family hoped that he would become a scholar-official. Such an occupation would open doors to Hong that a farmer's son would never have otherwise. At seven he began his education, and at fifteen he made his first attempt at the imperial examinations that tested the merit of potential officials. Though he passed the preliminary exam, he failed the main exam. Despite his failure, Hong

²⁶ Sow-Theng Leong. *Migration and Ethnicity in Chinese History: Hakkas, Pengmin, and Their Neighbors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 9.

²⁷ Constable, *Guest People; Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*, 118.

²⁸ Constable. *Guest People; Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*, 118.

attempted again and again to pass the examinations. In 1837, his studies came to an abrupt halt; Hong fell ill with a disease that would change his life and the lives of hundreds of thousands of other Chinese.²⁹

After his second failed attempt to pass the imperial examinations in Canton in 1837, Hong Xiuquan became very ill and slipped out of consciousness. In this state, he had an elaborate dream in which he imagined himself as the second son of the King of Heaven. In his dream he met his father, mother, wife, and older brother. Together, he and his older brother vanquished the evil demons in Heaven, forcing them to return to the world below. His father then insisted that Hong return to Earth to continue fighting there. Hong consented, bade farewell to his heavenly family, and returned to Earth. There, his dream ended and Hong awoke (Picture: artistic rendition of Hong Xiuquan, leader of the Taiping Rebellion).



For some time after he regained consciousness, Hong ran about his house, insisting that he was the son of the King of Heaven and that he had to destroy evil on Earth. His family thought he had gone crazy. However, as Hong regained his health, he eventually settled down

²⁹ Franz Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1966), 21-22.

and returned to normal. He came to believe, as one would rationally do, that these visions were nothing but fever-induced madness. Still he kept memories of his strange and inspiring dream in the back of his mind. One day, a friend encouraged Hong to reread a text that he had only glanced through when he received it years before. The text was by a Chinese convert to Christianity, Liang Afa. Many European missionaries had flocked to China to convert what they believed to be the lost souls of the empire. They were met with some success, convincing some citizens such as Liang to adopt the Christian faith. Liang wrote the text *Good Words to Admonish the Age*, which was published in 1832. Though officially Christian, *Good Words* combined Liang's Christian teachings with traditional Chinese philosophy.³⁰

As Hong read the work, he was overcome by the similarities between his dream and the Christian tract. He believed that he, just like Jesus Christ, had been born to protect and assist mankind. Instead of a simple disease-induced coma, Hong now believed that he had truly been in Heaven and had been sent back by God, his father, to destroy all evil on Earth. Showing his incomprehension of true Christianity, Hong grossly misinterpreted one major point: that Jesus is God's one and only son. Hong came to believe quite adamantly that he was Jesus's younger brother. Though he had an earthly father, he considered his true father to be God. The Virgin Mary was his heavenly stepmother. Hong became so deeply convinced of this fact that he set out to create his own theocratic rebellion to save mankind from the evils of the world.

In 1844 Hong left his home in southeastern China in hopes of raising a following. He was quickly met with success, as he converted many Hakkas to his new religion. The members of this religion were initially called the God Worshippers. Though the religious content of the movement did attract some, many came seeking protection from the oppression and exploitation

³⁰ Suzanne Wilson Barnett and John King Fairbank. *Christianity in China: Early Protestant Missionary Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 15.

from non-Hakka Chinese communities. Conflicts between Hakkas the original settlers of the area, the Punti, drove many Hakkas to align themselves with the God Worshippers.³¹ Still, the religion remained the uniting factor in the group, in part because the God Worshippers faced persecution from the Qing government.

At first the Qing, preoccupied with challenges presented by the imperialist designs of Britain and France, did not consider the God Worshippers to be a real threat to the imperial system. The Qing government never made a forceful attempt to put down the growth of the religion until it had grown so large that the task of quelling the uprising was more difficult than they were prepared to handle. In 1850, imperial forces attempted to raid a settlement of God Worshippers in Jintian.³² The movement was strong enough to push back the attack. In fact, the attack galvanized the God Worshippers, and they began to organize themselves into a true army.³³ In early 1951, Hong declared that the movement was a new dynasty, the Taiping Tianguo, meaning the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. He then assumed the title of Heavenly King, further solidifying his role at the apex of the revolution.³⁴

The Taipings, now mobilized into a true military force, pushed northward through the Chinese countryside. Their campaign was largely successful; in many instances they destroyed the Qing forces sent to block their path. The Taipings continued north until they met the Yangtze River. They then moved eastward, following the river to Nanjing, an important city at the mouth of the river. Though he had originally planned to create his capital city in Beijing in northern China, Nanjing was a major administrative, commercial, and cultural center in the heart of the prosperous Jiangnan region and seemed an excellent choice for the rebel capital. Upon

³¹ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 40.

³² Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 42.

³³ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 43.

³⁴ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 42.

reaching Nanjing in 1853 he temporarily halted his forces to create a home base in the city. There he established his “Heavenly Capital,” a city that was to be reorganized to reflect Taiping principles. The city had of course been ruled by the Qing previously and had to undergo complete societal reconstruction. The Taipings quickly set to the task of recreating Nanjing in their image. Here, Hong’s vision of Taiping society took shape.

The Taiping Social Program

With their control of Nanjing, the Taipings began to implement their ideas for social restructuring. The program for social reform drew on a number of sources beyond the Taipings' stated Christian influences. The military structure was based in large part on the *Zhou li*, one of the ritual classics of the Confucian canon, and a text that Hong had read as a student. The *Zhou li* outlined a utopian society that blended civilian and military organizations.³⁵ As well, Hong was aware of a series of Daoist movements that, throughout Chinese history, had pursued a



utopian vision an egalitarian society of “great peace” (*taiping*). This was reflected in the very essence of the rebellion, as Hong named his rebellion “Taiping tianguo,” meaning

“Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace.”³⁶ In addition to Christianity, Confucianism, and Daoism, Hong was influenced by his Hakka upbringing. All of these influences melded into the new Taiping social order.

In the city, the Taipings set up a community treasury in order to redistribute wealth in an equitable fashion. The Taipings took what assets they had and put them in this treasury. Both men and women, of all status levels, were to receive funds from the treasury, according to his or her need. This stemmed from the idea that all Taipings were the children of God, and therefore

³⁵ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 43.

they were one large family.³⁷ Land, too, was distributed evenly among the followers (Picture: official document from Taiping government). Every person above the age of sixteen was given a certain plot of land, regardless of gender. Those under sixteen were also given land, though only half of what adults received.³⁸

In addition, all children were expected to attend school. The idea of universal education was a far cry from the elitist education system previously in place. Most Chinese families could afford an education for only some of the children, if they could afford any. Reinforcing the Taipings' Christian background, every person in the community was expected to attend churches set up throughout the city. Their goal was to drastically change Chinese society.

One of the most noticeable aspects of Taiping social reform was the position of women in society. Hong ignored the social norms and mores that were embraced by the Qing dynasty. This was in large part due to Hong's own upbringing. Raised among Hakka women, Hong had a view of women's roles that was very different from that of conventional Qing Chinese. His mother, sisters, and neighbor women had experienced greater physical freedom and expanded work opportunities than most Qing women. Hong envisioned a society that reproduced the gender roles and relationships that he had experienced in his young life, and his views were reflected in the practices of the Taiping rebels.

Hong developed many novel policies regarding women. One European working with the Taipings, Augustus Lindley, commented, "During my intercourse with the Ti-pings, if one part of their system and organization appeared more admirable than another, it was the improved

³⁶ Vincent Shih. *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1967), 236.

³⁷ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 47.

³⁸ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 85.

positions of their women, whose status, raised from the degrading Asiatic regime, approached that of civilized nations.”³⁹ Hong himself wrote a letter to the President of the United States, stating, “I have heard that your country emphasizes the importance of the people, that in everything they are considered equal...and that there are no obstacles in the association of men and women. In these things, I am greatly delighted to find that your principles agree completely with those upon which we have based the establishment of our dynasty.”⁴⁰

In some respects, the Taiping government gave even more equality to women than the contemporary United States government. At a time when equality between American men and women was barely a consideration, the Taipings were striving toward equal rights between their genders. According to the Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty text, written in 1853, land was granted in an extremely fair manner. It stated, “The distribution of land is made according to the size of the family, irrespective of sex.”⁴¹ It goes on to say, “No matter whether man or woman, everyone over sixteen years of age shall receive land.”⁴² In a complete reversal from the Qing policies, women were allowed, even expected, to own land. This was a large step toward the freedom and equality that Hong so proudly claimed.

Hong placed great emphasis upon maintaining women’s virtue. In order to do so, he had to restructure the traditional Chinese culture that often sexually victimized women. One way in which women were often abused was through forced concubinage. A second wife had even less power than the first, and abuse of these women was common. Following his Christian teachings, Hong outlawed multiple marriages that would place women in such undesirable positions. This put a stopper in one source of the abuse that women faced under the Qing.

³⁹ Lindley, *The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution*, 300.

⁴⁰ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, 47.

⁴¹ J.C. Cheng. *Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion, 1850-1964* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1963), 39.

Prostitution was also banned under Taiping rule. Among Hong's many reinterpretations of the Bible, he rewrote the Seventh Commandment to say "Thou shalt not commit adultery *or be licentious*."⁴³ Hong took his distaste for lechery to an extreme, condemning those who engaged in illicit sex. He rewrote the Bible to emphasize his distaste. The rewritings of the Bible say, "Men or women who commit adultery or who are licentious are considered monsters; this is the greatest possible transgression of the Heavenly Commandments... If you wish to enjoy true happiness in Heaven, you must curb your desires and painfully reform."⁴⁴ Sex between unmarried partners was strictly prohibited. Taiping documents stated, "Prostitution should by all means be abolished...Should persons indulge in immoral conduct, or should any officers, soldiers, or common people secretly go to sleep in houses of prostitution and violate the regulation [they shall be punished]."⁴⁵ The act of prostitution was, like many other Taiping offenses, punishable by death.⁴⁶

⁴² Cheng, 40.

⁴³ Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son* (New York, NY: WW Norton, 1996), 150.

⁴⁴ Spence, *God's Chinese Son*, 150.

⁴⁵ John Lovelle Withers II. *The Heavenly Capital: Nanjing Under the Taiping, 1853-1864* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Service, 1988), 126.

⁴⁶ Lindley, *The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution*, 302.

Women's Lives Under The Taiping

A Bright Outlook

Hong's initial intentions toward women did make an impact on their status in society. Foreign observers commented most particularly on the lack of footbinding in the rebellion. Augustus wrote, "The Ti-pings have abolished the horrible custom of cramping and deforming the feet of their women...All children born since the earliest commencement of the Ti-ping rebellion have the natural foot."⁴⁷ As the rebellion had originated in the Hakka culture, the first women rebels had large feet. As they conquered new territories, they imposed their beliefs and practices, including the prohibition of footbinding, upon the conquered populations in attempts to increase the Taiping following. The Taiping soldiers would often forcibly unbind women's feet. Women who had led the majority of their lives with feet wrapped in cloth suddenly found their bonds torn off by rebel invaders.

Women in the Taiping Rebellion also experienced very different roles in terms of the jobs that were available to them. While a proper Qing woman would only tend to the household and weave, Taiping women experienced a whole host of work opportunities. In one instance, twenty thousand women were employed in the daily work of digging ditches in the Heavenly Capital of Nanjing.⁴⁸ They took on many other typically masculine roles, including carrying rice, bricks, salt and water, harvesting and pounding grain, to name just a few.⁴⁹ Demonstrating the influence of women's new roles on men, men too were adopting work that they would not have done previously. The textile work was no longer placed on women's shoulders; even that job was distributed evenly. Men and women shared the responsibility for sewing and weaving uniforms for the king's bodyguards, sewing insignia patches onto soldiers' jackets, creating banners and

⁴⁷ Lindley, *The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution*, 301.

⁴⁸ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, 65.

paraphernalia for state occasions, and other tasks.⁵⁰ Women even found jobs in the military. Though female military units primarily performed other duties, there were some women with unbound feet who fought on the front lines of battles against the Qing armies.⁵¹

The expansion of women's work was not limited to menial jobs. Some women found their place in the political sphere, an idea truly unheard of in mainstream China. Taiping women were allowed to take the imperial examinations. The Qing imperial bureaucracy held examinations, but not only were women prohibited from taking the tests, it was also considered improper for women to study many of the Confucian texts. Only the most elite women or those who were lucky enough to attend a missionary school received even the most basic education. In contrast, under the Taiping government, women were allowed to receive education. Lindley observed, "Woman is by the Ti-pings recognized in her proper sphere as the companion of man; the education and development of her mind is equally well attended to."⁵² The women took the examinations, and the most talented women were given official positions. One woman named Fu Shanxiang had the top score in the state examinations. Because of her exceptional performance, Fu was made an officer and was put in command of twenty thousand women.⁵³ Many ranks of official women existed, from a position as a Chief of Staff all the way down to the Women Corps Superintendent of the Embroidery Camp.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Withers, *The Heavenly Capital: Nanjing Under the Taiping, 1853-1864*, 130.

⁵⁰ Withers, *The Heavenly Capital: Nanjing Under the Taiping, 1853-1864*, 129.

⁵¹ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 46.

⁵² Lindley, *The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution*, 302.

⁵³ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, 63.

⁵⁴ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, 64.

The Shadow Cast Upon Women

Hong Xiuquan promised women new lives, far better than those they experienced in the mainstream Chinese tradition. They were to have new roles, in both the inner and outer social spheres of Chinese life. They were to have equality with their male counterparts. They were to be granted the right to own property, to get an education, to work in whatever field they chose. Simply listening to the promises, one would certainly assume that the Taipings were truly concerned with improving the lives of women. However, reality rarely matched rhetoric. Many of the claims for improvement of female roles never came to fruition. Some did materialize, but were to the detriment of the women they affected. The lofty claims of gender equality made by the Taipings proved to be little more than unfulfilled promises.

Hong had promised women new power and equal opportunities with men. However, the power structure of Taiping society suggested that no women ever matched the power granted to men. Though Hong had claimed that men and women were equal, it was clear that in his



government no such equality existed. Hong's closest subordinates were all men (Picture: artistic rendition of Taiping leaders). No woman could aspire to be a true Taiping leader. In the Edict of the Heavenly King, Hong listed those who were closest to him in the Taiping government. In the extensive list, Hong noted that everyone was either

his brother, son, or nephew. There were no nieces, no sisters, and no daughters on the list.⁵⁵

There was no true equality between women and men when it came to real power in the Taiping government.

Even in their work, women had trouble attaining the positions of power that were promised to them. The majority of women did not have any control over men in the society. Female commanders held power only over women. There were separate women's work groups and separate parts of the military strictly for women, and the oversight of these was only the command position granted to women. Women of status would have authority over battalions of other women, but it was extremely rare for such power to extend over men. They had male counterparts that served the same roles, commanding men.⁵⁶ If the reforms of Taipings had been implemented fully, they would have had implications for more than the roles of women. By raising the status of women, the status of men was implicitly lowered. Men would no longer hold power over women as they had been accustomed in normal society. Taiping men had to be willing to concede their superiority over the female gender. For many, this was too difficult a feat to accomplish. In a step frighteningly reminiscent of Qing attitudes, many men claimed that these new powerful and independent women were amoral and sexually promiscuous. They claimed that the women were not actually officials. According to many men, these powerful women were in fact the kings' concubines, claiming that any power they might have was illegitimate.⁵⁷

When looking at Taiping writings, it is obvious why women had difficulty reaching positions of high status. Though Taipings claimed to advocate equality between the sexes, a

⁵⁵ Cheng, *Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion, 1850-1964* , 69.

⁵⁶ Withers, *The Heavenly Capital: Nanjing Under the Taiping, 1853-1864* , 134.

sense of male superiority remained strong in the culture, just as it existed in the Qing government. Discrepancies in the status of women existed since the inception of the rebellion. Hong spoke of equality, but Taiping religious texts explain women's roles in a light very familiar to what they had experienced before. In the *Ode For Youth*, a text published first in 1851, it states under the heading "On The Wives' Way", "The wife's way lies in the three obediences; Do not disobey your husband. If the hens crow in the morning, There will be self-sought misery for the family."⁵⁸ The mention of the "three obediences" clearly references the classic Chinese tradition that a woman must submit to her father as a child, to her husband when married, and to her son as a widow. As for the comment about the hen, it is meant to symbolize the separate roles of men and women, and when women adopt the roles of men, only unhappiness can ensue.

Hong himself often wrote of the basic subservience of women. In one of the poems in his collection, "Poems by the Heavenly Father," Hong wrote, "Women in the rear palaces should not try to leave; If they should try to leave it would be like hens trying to crow. The duty of the palace women is to attend to the needs of their husbands; and it is arranged by Heaven that they are not to learn of the affairs outside."⁵⁹ Clearly, Hong still held the opinion that women should remain in the inner sphere. Further expressing the differences between men and women, the Taiping Edicts, written in 1852, in a passage that lists correct and incorrect actions, claimed that "Incorrect men are not human beings," but incorrect women were "evil spirits."⁶⁰ Women were expected to be held themselves to a higher standard, lest they be labeled demons.

⁵⁷ Withers, *The Heavenly Capital: Nanjing Under the Taiping, 1853-1864*, 137.

⁵⁸ Franz Michael. *The Taiping Rebellion; History and Documents*. Vol. II, "Documents and Comments" (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1971), 166.

⁵⁹ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, 73.

⁶⁰ Cheng, *Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion, 1850-1964*, 75.

The Taipings' overzealous implementation of their beliefs negatively affected women in other areas as well. Despite the fact that Hong and other Taiping leaders had little concern for the virtue of their women, they went to extreme lengths to ensure the chastity of regular women in their society. In the Taiping Kingdom, "Every woman...must be either married, the member of a family, or an inmate of one of the large institutions for unprotected females, existing in most of their principle cities, and superintended by proper officials; no single woman being allowed in their territory otherwise."⁶¹ These "institutions" were meant to protect the women from abuse and licentious behavior, but had the effect of tearing families apart. According to accounts of the Taiping conquests, the Taipings would "no sooner arrive at a town than they would erect houses of refuge for young females."⁶² These homes were for women only, and were strictly maintained as such. Men were strictly warned off entering such houses by signs, such as one that read, "This place is sacred to young girls; whoever has the audacity to cross the threshold with any evil purpose will be beheaded."⁶³ The Taiping religious doctrine considered all men and women to be brothers and sisters, and sexual relations even with husbands was prohibited. The women had no freedom to see even their fathers, brothers, or husbands.

The policies were, however, never consistently applied. Though Lindley commented that "A plebian Ti-ping was allowed but one wife, and to her he must be regularly married," the same did not follow for Taipings who possessed any type of higher status.⁶⁴ Despite the emphasis on chastity, high officials did in fact have a number of concubines, and they made no attempt to hide this fact. Women were still treated as sexual objects for men, especially the wealthy and

⁶¹ Lindley, *The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution*, 302.

⁶² MM and Yvan Callery. *History of the Insurrection in China with Notices of the Christianity, Creed, and Proclamations of the Insurgents*. Translated by John Oxenford. (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1853), 232.

⁶³ Callery, *History of the Insurrection in China with Notices of the Christianity, Creed, and Proclamations of the Insurgents*, 232.

⁶⁴ Lindley, *The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution*, 301.

powerful. Hong himself broke many of his own rules, keeping an extravagant number of female consorts, perhaps as many as eighty-eight.⁶⁵ One could not say that monogamy had been originally enforced and simply waned in the later years of the rebellion. Hong never respected his own doctrines, and as early as 1851 he had already established a harem of thirty-six women.⁶⁶ To the officials, women were still seen as objects to be possessed by men. Women were given as gifts to men of high stature. In one of Hong's many annotations to the Bible in 1853, he stated, "God has sent an edict to the effect that high officials may marry more than one wife."⁶⁷ In certain instances, even men without official positions were promised permission to marry additional wives if they displayed valor in battle. The women were considered rewards for loyalty and hard work.⁶⁸ When the Taipings conquered Nanjing, the local women were distributed among the soldiers. One observer reported, "The number of women a man was to receive was determined by his rank; the highest-ranking men received more than ten women, and the number decreased as the rank lowered." Not only were they being doled out as the spoils of war, many were forced into concubinage by becoming secondary wives.

Many women refused to accept the loss of virtue that was being thrust upon them. After spending most of their lives secluded from the eyes of men, many women of the conquered populations were unable to cope with their forced marriages. "When the order [that women would be married to soldiers based on their rank] was proclaimed, many of the women committed suicide by hanging themselves, jumping into wells, cutting their own throats, or taking poison...[there were] more than nine hundred women who died thus."⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Spence, Jonathan. *The Taiping Vision of a Christian China 1836-1864* (Waco, TX: Markham Press Fund of Baylor University Press, 1998), 52.

⁶⁶ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, vol. II, 191.

⁶⁷ Cheng, *Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion, 1850-1964*, 87.

⁶⁸ Withers, *The Heavenly Capital: Nanjing Under the Taiping, 1853-1864*, 133.

⁶⁹ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, 68.

Even the abolition of footbinding had its negative aspects. The penalty for continuing the practice was extremely severe. According to one account, “When the rebels reached Nanking, all women were prohibited from practicing footbinding. Violators were to be executed.”⁷⁰ As explained previously, many women embraced footbinding. The practice was so ingrained in their culture that they were repulsed by the idea of unbinding their feet. A tiny foot was a sign of status. One of the few means women had of advancing in society was through a good marriage, and a bound foot greatly increased the chances of finding a desirable match. Many women were quite reluctant to throw away this key to social mobility, simply because their conquerors had differing social views.

Furthermore, Taiping women who had never experienced footbinding had little pity for their Qing counterparts. When faced with the threat of execution, women who had not had their feet unbound since childhood were suddenly forced to unbind them. Many women were unable to walk because their tiny feet could not support their bodies.⁷¹ Women were expected to perform manual labor, regardless of their physical condition. One account reported the difficulty that this posed for Qing women. It read,

“The rebels came originally from the mountainous regions, and their womenfolk were used to farming, weaving, dyeing, and so forth. They did not realize that the women of Jinling were not used to doing work like this. Thinking that whatever they could do others could do too, the rebels ordered the [Jinling women] to do their share of the work...Since their bound feet made working hard for these women, they were ordered to loosen the bindings on their feet. The rebels did not realize that their feet would not grow again once they had been bound. For this, the rebels were called cruel and heartless.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, 77.

⁷¹ Shih, *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences*, 77.

⁷² Withers, *The Heavenly Capital: Nanjing Under the Taiping, 1853-1864*, 130.

Though the intentions in the prohibition of foot binding were good, the sudden implementation of the restriction caused many problems for the Taipings.

It is true that the Taiping Rebellion addressed issues of women's status and position that were unheard of in China before they emerged. Women were promised property rights, expansion of their job sphere, and leadership positions in society. By looking at their stated goals, one might believe that the Taipings greatly improved the lives of women. However, even the rhetoric of the rebellion reflects a more confusing notion of women's rights. The writings of the Taiping leaders reveal a peculiar mix of a desire of gender equality and a pervasive sense of female inferiority. Finally the actions of the Taipings show that the promise of women's liberation never truly materialized. The benefits of their actions were almost always paired with losses: Taiping women were not respected for their work efforts, and women in the conquered populations were forced to work at jobs for which they were not prepared. There was no opportunity for women to gradually acclimate to their new roles; they were thrust into lives that they neither wanted nor were capable of handling.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Taiping Rebellion was unsuccessful. Hong Xiuquan was once again stricken by illness, with far less impressive results than he experienced when he fell ill as a young man. Instead of communicating with God and returning to Earth to destroy the infidels, Hong died on June 1, 1864. His heir was still quite young, and though he was recognized as the Young Monarch, he served as little more than a front for the policies of other generals in the movement. Hong had been the unifying force of the rebellion, and upon his demise his subordinates struggled for power and essentially ripped apart the structure of the rebellion. In addition to the infighting



and confusion over power, the Taiping Army was over-extended from a campaign into northern China (Picture: map of the greatest extent of the Taiping Rebellion). As early as 1860, the Qing armies had begun to gain the upper hand over the Taipings. Less than two months after Hong's death, Nanking fell to the Qing. Over 100,000 Taipings were died, most massacred by the invading armies, though many committed suicide rather than surrender. As the infrastructure collapsed and the capital was destroyed, the remaining military leadership disintegrated. In October, the Young Monarch was captured and executed, symbolically ending the rebellion that had already fallen in shambles.⁷³

The Taiping Rebellion promised women new lives of liberation and equality. Though the new lives materialized, the factors that were meant to improve them fell short. Women's roles

were drastically changed, but the changes were often to the detriment of the women they affected. Chinese women never found the equality with men that had been pledged by the rebellion. They were thrust out of the world that they knew, the world that they were comfortable in, and placed in a harsh environment to which they could not adjust. The lives of women under Taiping rule were shaken to the core, and for what? Their subordination was replaced with hollow promises and hostility from men toward any woman who actually rose above her previous position. Seclusion in the inner chambers of the home was replaced with separation from family and imprisonment in gender specific barracks. Housework and textile manufacturing was replaced with manual labor that many women were physically incapable of performing. The women conquered by the Taipings did not see the rebels as liberators; rather they saw them as a new and often crueler form of oppression.

Why did the Taipings fail in their attempts to improve the lives of women? To this question, there cannot be any one definitive answer. A number of elements most likely played into the failure. An obvious reason was the ultimate failure of the Taiping Rebellion, a failure that naturally brought an end to their social program. In 1864, Hong Xiuquan died, and only a few months later, the rebellion was squashed by the Qing military forces. Most scholars consider the rebellion's inception to be 1847. When considering that they had less than twenty years to revolutionize gender roles, it is not at all surprising that the hopes for women fell short.

Related to the failure of the rebellion is the fact that the Taipings' views on gender relations was simply too ambitious. The proposed changes in women's roles would have completely meant changing the very foundations of Chinese culture. They faced enough difficulties raising an army and controlling conquered populations without having to completely

⁷³ Michael, *The Taiping Rebellion*, 169-175.

reinvent China's social system. As the rebellion waned and the obstacles grew, the idealistic hopes for women seem to have fallen by the wayside.

Moreover, the Taipings' plans for reform were unrealistic, lacking whole-hearted support from most sectors of Chinese society. Men had an obvious distaste for such changes, as they would remove men from their superior status over women. Because of this, conquered populations had little interest in respecting Taiping gender roles. Even the Taiping leaders were ambivalent about gender roles. Taiping religious texts maintained women's subordination to a certain extent, as did many of the Taipings' codes and practices. Though Hakka women were more liberated than many Chinese women, they were still considered lesser than men. Hong and the other leaders never seemed intent on reaching true equality between the sexes.

What is most surprising to a modern observer is the fact that women actually resisted the changes that were meant to improve their lives. Their social roles were so deeply ingrained in them that many women had no interest in leaving and working outside their homes. They had come to embrace the seclusion, the subordination, even the footbinding, as the practices of a proper woman. Many women actually appreciated footbinding, as it was one of a very few methods of social mobility. After thousands of years of such treatment, women did not know how to accept new positions in society. With no one truly on the side of these gender changes, their implementation proved to be a hopeless task.

Some modern scholars look to the Taipings as one of the first women's liberation movements in China. It would be unfair to say that this assessment is wholly unjustified. The Taipings set forth revolutionary changes to gender roles. After thousands of years of unmitigated oppression of women, the Taipings dared to challenge the gender boundaries. They

proposed many novel ideas that, perhaps with the time and the resources, would have improved women's lives. The abolition of footbinding was a step in the right direction and was mirrored in the successful women's rights movements of the twentieth century. The change in women's work would also have been very positive if the women had not been so forcefully and abruptly thrust out of the inner chambers. However, the way in which these novel ideas were put forth destroyed the lives of many women who had been content in their previous roles. In the short term, the Taiping Rebellion did more harm than good in the lives of women. Their promises of equality were, in the end, merely pipe dreams, disappearing as quickly as they had materialized.

Images

Page 7:

http://www.heritagemuseum.gov.hk/english/exhibition_highlight_file/lifeinchina/hist_2_12.html

Page 8: Fairbank, John and Edwin Reischauer. *China: Tradition and Transformation*.

Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.

Page 19: Zhang Haipeng, *Jianming Zhongguo jindaishi tuji [Collected Images of Modern Chinese History]*. Beijing: Great Wall pub, 1984.

Page 23: <http://www.nla.gov.au/pub/gateways/archive/50/p15a01.html>

Page 29: <http://www.usfca.edu/classes/AuthEd/immigration/chinainfo.htm>

Page 36: <http://www.jhu.edu/hurj/images/iss4/research-brown2.jpg>

Sources

Barnett, Suzanne Wilson and John King Fairbank. *Christianity in China: Early Protestant*

Missionary Writings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Callery, MM and Yvan Callery. *History of the Insurrection in China with Notices of the*

Christianity, Creed, and Proclamations of the Insurgents. Translated by John Oxenford.

New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1853.

Cheng, J.C. *Chinese Sources for the Taiping Rebellion, 1850-1964*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong

University Press, 1963.

Chiu Vermier, *Marriage Laws And Customs of China*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong,

1967.

Constable, Nicole. "Poverty, Piety, and the Past; Hakka Christian Expressions of Hakka

Identity." *Guest People; Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*. Seattle, WA: University

of Washington Press, 1996.

Fong, Grace. "The Cultural Significance of Suicide Writings." In *Passionate Women; Female*

Suicide in Late Imperial China, edited by Paul S. Ropp, Paolo Zamperini, and Harriet T.

Zurndorfer. Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill, 2001.

Lindley, Augustus. *Ti-Ping Tien-Kwoh: The History Of The Ti-Ping Revolution* London: Day

and Son, Lithographers and Publishers, 1866.

Mann, Susan. *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* Stanford, CA:

Stanford University Press, 1997.

Michael, Franz. *The Taiping Rebellion*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1966.

Michael, Franz. *The Taiping Rebellion; History and Documents*. Vol. II, "Documents and

Comments". Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1971.

- Ono Kazuko. *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989.
- Pruitt, Ida. *A Daughter of Han; The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1945.
- Ropp, Paul S. *Passionate Women; Female Suicide in Late Imperial China*, edited by Paul S. Ropp, Paolo Zamperini, and Harriet T. Zurndorfer. Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill, 2001.
- Shih, Vincent. *The Taiping Ideology: Its Sources, Interpretations, and Influences* Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1967.
- William G. Skinner. "Origins and Historiography." In *Migration and Ethnicity in Chinese History; Hakkas, Pengmin, and Their Neighbors*, edited by Tim Wright. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Sow-Theng Leong. *Migration and Ethnicity in Chinese History: Hakkas, Pengmin, and Their Neighbors*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Spence, Jonathan. *The Taiping Vision of a Christian China 1836-1864*. Waco, TX: Markham Press Fund of Baylor University Press, 1998.
- Swann, Nancy. *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar Of China*. New York, NY: The Century Co., 1932.
- Theiss, Janet. "Female Suicide and Statecraft in Mid-Qing China." *Passionate Women; Female Suicide in Late Imperial China*, edited by Paul S. Ropp, Paolo Zamperini, and Harriet T. Zurndorfer. Boston, MA: Koninklijke Brill, 2001.
- Withers, John Lovelle II. *The Heavenly Capital: Nanjing Under the Taiping, 1853-1864*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Service, 1988