Theatre and the Taipings

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The Taiping uprising of the period 1850 to 1866 represented by far the largest social upheaval in Chinese history before our own century. In fact, in his monumental work on the subject, Franz Michael (1966: vii) states that it was "as violent and complete a social revolution against an existing order as was ever attempted; indeed it can serve as a case study of revolution." As befits so important a movement, the Taiping revolution has attracted a great deal of comment and research, both in its own and more recent times.[1] The present article aims to fill in one lacuna: the relationship between the theatre and the Taipings. It is a topic worth consideration because the theatre has always represented an important social force in China and it was as a *social* movement that the Taipings were most interesting and significant

It will be useful to review the situation of the Chinese theatre in the middle of the nineteenth century especially in the areas affected by the Taiping wars. The aristocratic drama called *Kunqu* which had been very popular indeed among the educated and official classes, as well as the richer commercial

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groups, was in sharp decline. Its literature, which had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries produced some very great works and dramatists, was drying up rapidly. The nineteenth century spawned not a single Kunqu playwright who could compare in reputation with many of the earlier period. Kunqu was found everywhere in China, but its heartland was Suzhou and the Lower Yangzi Valley, the areas most affected by the Taiping wars.

In contrast to the sagging fortunes of the Kunqu, the innumerable different styles of Chinese regional opera—most of them beloved in one region or one province only—were in a flourishing condition. As an artistic form, the regional theatre of China had reached its apogee in the eighteenth century, but in terms of variety and the number of local styles in existence, the nineteenth century was an even finer period. The regional theatre was a popular, not an elitist, art form and remained an important social force among the Chinese masses. Wandering companies ensured that even poor peasants could occasionally watch open-air performances in the villages. In the cities there were numerous teahouse-theatres and, in addition, temporary stages could be put up at almost any open space for a performance.

Some of the main types of regional theatre belonged to a system of drama which combined two basic sets of melodies known as *Erhuang* and *Xipi*, collectively termed *Pihuang*. By far the most important kind of Pihuang theatre was the Peking [Beijing] Opera, which had originated at the end of the eighteenth century when famous actors from Anhui had entered the capital. These Anhui companies or *Huiban* became synonymous with Erhuang and Xipi acting and the Pihuang operas are often simply referred to as Huiban. The Peking Opera derived from the Anhui companies and reached a peak of excellence in the middle of the nineteenth century; that is, at about the time the Taiping uprising began. So great indeed were the actors who performed it that in 1860 the court itself invited some of them to give performances within its hallowed halls. Such a daring experiment, which contravened all the rules about the relative

social positions of Kunqu and popular opera, lasted only a few months, but it did foreshadow a time only 24 years later when the Empress Dowager Ci-xi became a regular patron of the Peking Opera in the court.

There were other types of regional theatre which used the Erhuang and Xipi melodies and they included some very popular in the Taiping areas. The most important examples were Anhui and Hubei Opera, which at the time of the Taiping uprising were more or less at their height in Anhui and Hubei provinces. In Guangdong, *Yueju* or Guangdong Opera had developed in the eighteenth century and was still in a flourishing condition in the mid-nineteenth century. The Hunan Opera was also among the many regional Pihuang styles. At the same time there were numerous forms of small-scale folk opera found in the villages and in the cities, especially those of the Lower Yangzi Valley. These involved only two or three actors.

The stories of the dramas performed in all these regional forms came from older Kunqu operas or from novels, although there were a few specifically local folk stories. The performers would select one episode from a novel and dramatize it for the people. Of course it was also possible to act out a series of connected episodes. In the traditional Peking Opera repertory there were well over 100 items with stories taken directly from the *Sanguo yanyi (Romance of the Three Kingdoms)* and some forty from the *Shuihu zhuan (Water Margin)*

The actors who performed the operas were of a very low social status. They were regarded as the riff-raff of society, with a reputation for extremely low morals. Recruitment of actors was through a system of training schools *(keban)*, each normally attached to a specific company Trainees were very young boys bought on contract for a limited period from their parents. These children had no legal rights, and were even lower in social status than the older actors. They could expect nothing but extremely harsh treatment, and beatings to death were not unknown.

THE INFLUENCE OF POPULAR LITERATURE ON TAIPING IDEOLOGY

Society despised these unfortunate people but did not hesitate to derive enjoyment from their art. More important, it paid attention to the lessons played out on the stage. Among the many groups influenced by the theatre have been rebels against the Confucian order and, in particular, the Taipings. According to Vincent Shih (1967: 285-296), one of the sources of the traditional Chinese nonestablishment element in Taiping ideology was the novel, but it is difficult to distinguish between novels and popular dramas in this context because the stories and content of both forms of literature were the same. Thus ideas conveyed to the Taipings or strengthened in their minds could usually have come through the medium of either novels or dramas.

Of course the most important stories and characters to influence the Taipings were *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin*. The Taipings almost certainly learned a great deal about strategy from them. Zhang De-jian, who was chief of the intelligence Bureau in Zeng Guo-fan's headquarters, wrote (1855: 154):

> The bandits have no set methods . . . everything they do is trickery Their military tactics and strategy are lowly and very meagre. What then is the basis of the bandits' tricks? Military intelligence is selected by two or three shrewd bandits from historical novels, they then imitate it in practice Frequently this is effective, so they regard it as precious and a secret not to be divulged. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin* are particularly important sources [for their tricks].

Zhang's comments are applicable also to the popular dramas, which follow the novels very closely in terms of strategy and portray it even more vividly.

The Taipings regarded the heroes of these novels and dramas as models and praised them for such virtues as courage, loyalty, and persistence. Three Kingdoms heroes such as Zhang Fei

could not fail to leave their mark on the military attitudes and behaviour of Taiping soldiers and leaders.

More important is the influence which certain items in popular literature, especially *Water Margin,* exercised on the overall social and moral ideals of the Taipings. *Shuihu* was "the politico-literary 'model' of rebellion" (Chesneaux, 1971. 4) The concepts of "loyalty and fraternity" (*zhongyi*), much stressed by the Taipings, certainly derive from novels, in particular *Shuihu.* Indeed, the hall where the heroes of *Water Margin* foregathered to swear eternal ties to one another was called Zhongyi In Shih's words (1967 293-294), "The political mission of the Taipings in acting for heaven to make the heavenly way prevail was a distinct feature of the rebel society as described in *Shui-hu chuan* [*Shuihu zhuan*]."

Although the Taipings thus clearly owed some of their ideas and attitudes to popular literature, Shih's interpretation of how this inspiration came about has not been universally accepted. In a recent study, C. A. Curwen (1972. 66) comments·

> Like the secret societies, the Taipings were influenced by popular novels, but there seems to be little reason to suppose (as V Y C Shih does) that this was the result of direct influence, since novels like *Shui-hu chuan [Shuihu zhuan], San-kuo yen-i [Sanguo yanyi], and Feng-shen yen-i [Fengshen yanyi]* were also part of the Chinese "little tradition" and had long served rebels as sources of inspiration and even as military handbooks

In a sense this is hardly a fair statement. The influence was direct in that the Taiping leaders had, like all Chinese, absorbed the stories of the dramas/novels by seeing them played out on the stage. Yet Curwen may well be right in his implication that the Taipings did not consciously take over important ideas from novels. It is, for example, worthy of note that it was an enemy source (Zhang De-jian) and not the Taipings themselves who should point out the influence of novels on the rebels in the field of tactics. Considering the highly ambivalent attitude which the Taiping leaders took towards theatre in their public statements, it would be even more difficult to see a direct, rather than an indirect, influence from dramas. To clarify this

remark let us consider in detail the theory and reality of theatrical life among the Taipings.

THEATRE POLICY AND PRACTICE UNTIL 1859

The policy of the Taiping government towards the theatre falls into two periods. The dividing point is 1859, the year when Hong Ren-gan (1822-1864), the cousin of the "Heavenly King" Hong Xiu-quan (1814-1864), arrived in the Taiping capital Nanjing [Nanking] and set about trying to revive administration and morale. Before 1859 official policy towards theatre was suspicion, but from that year on it was outright condemnation.

According to Xie Jie-he (1857: 659), a hostile contemporary of the Taipings referring to the year 1854, "the bandits had said that performing dramas was heterodox." Xie stops short of claiming that they formally banned theatrical performances. Sources on the early Taiping period which list their many prohibitions make no mention of theatre.[2] The argument from silence is of course never very strong Perhaps more persuasive is the mention in the "Rules of Conduct" which applied to the Taiping court and army and are preserved by Zhang De-jian (1855 232)· "All depraved songs and depraved dramas shall be generally stopped If there should be anybody who gathers together other people to perform [such] dramas, all of them shall be beheaded." The implication is certainly of fierce censorship exercised over the theatre, especially to prevent heterodox or obscene content, but the passage suggests strongly that there was no total ban on operas. The very fierce punishment reserved for those who disobeyed was typical of Taiping law, which was extremely harsh.

The literature on the Taipings tells us very little about their theatrical life in the early years. Two records must suffice to show that both the troops and the court retained some enthusiasm for drama despite official attitudes.

One report concerns the city of Wuchang during the Taiping occupation from January 12 to February 9, 1853. During that

time "they got over 200 actors of some ten drama troupes which they had searched out and seized in Hankou to perform and sing for them day after day. Bandits on the city walls would be sent in turns to look down [at the shows]" (Wang Kun, 1854· 367). Hankou, very near Wuchang, had fallen to the Taipings on December 29 1852. In the case described, theatre performances clearly fulfilled the functions of morale-booster and entertainment interlude for soldiers engaged in the difficult and constant task of watching out for enemy troops.

On March 19, 1853, a little more than a month after abandoning Wuchang, the Taipings took Nanjing, where their leaders set up court. Among the most dominant of them was the commander-in-chief and "Eastern King" (Dongwang) Yang Xiu-qing, whose challenge of Hong Xiu-quan's leadership in 1856 was to lead to a murderous power struggle and a serious decline in Taiping morale.

> They continued to obtain several tens of theatre boxes from Chizhou [in Anhui], and when they returned to Jinling [Nanjing] they thereupon summoned actors to put on dramas. The Eastern Bandit [i.e., Yang Xiu-qing] tried them out and was extremely pleased with them. There was a false [i e , Taiping] proclamation to build a stage in the false [i e , Taiping] court and to take them within the walls to prepare for the staging of the opera However, it happened that the bandit's [i e , Yang's] eye-trouble recurred, so they stopped [Xie, 1857 659]

It is clear from this passage that the early Taiping leaders were prepared to organize drama performances on an ad hoc basis However, they differed sharply from the Manchu court, having no formal theatre organization to arrange shows or train actors

Although the Taipings thus clearly allowed and occasionally even encouraged the theatre before 1859, the emphasis they laid on purity and the severe punishments threatened to those sponsoring indecent or subversive drama shows that the authorities retained a lively suspicion of actors and dramatic performances generally In this respect the Taiping leaders were like their imperial counterparts One of the reasons for the ambivalent attitude in both cases was the reputation which

actresses had gained for prostitution and actors for homosexuality (see Mackerras, 1972: 44-47, 150-152). The Taipings of course condemned these two deviations under the "Seventh Heavenly Commandment" which read: "Thou shalt not commit adultery or be licentious" ("Tiantiao shu," 1852: 79). A proclamation of late 1853 or early 1854 specifically prohibited prostitution and prescribed that offenders "will be exterminated with their families, and the neighbors who seize and apprehend them will be rewarded" (Zhang De-jian, 1855: 225). The "Rules of Conduct" mentioned earlier say of homosexual acts, "if the men are above the age of thirteen, both shall be decapitated. If below the age of thirteen, only decapitate the homosexual. If it is a case of mutual homosexuality, both shall be executed" (Zhang De-jian, 1855: 231; translated in Michael, 1971: 580).

These rules do not appear to have applied equally to all Taipings. One contemporary, Wang Kun (1854: 376), reported that the Taiping leaders got hold of "more than 100 prostitutes" and "more than 200 actors" just after the taking of Nanjing; Yang Xiu-qing then inspected them and distributed them among the court. According to Jen Yu-wen (1973: 119), "Practically all contemporary records, official and private, agree that the Taipings continued in Nanking to be extremely strict in their moral discipline, especially in regard to adultery and rape. Any offender was beheaded on the spot." Jen Yu-wen presents a picture of a very orderly takeover of Nanjing. Wang Kun was clearly very hostile to the Taipings and would hardly have hesitated to exaggerate stories showing them in an unfavourable light. Yet it is well known that Hong Xiu-quan and other leaders set down a code of sexual ethics for their followers different from that which they followed themselves, and Wang's story is thus perfectly credible.

THEATRE POLICY AND PRACTICE 1859-1864

The belief that the threatre world and loose morals are closely connected was undoubtedly one of the reasons why Hong Ren-gan adopted a more rigid attitude towards theatre

In his *A New Work for Aid in Administration,* which he wrote in 1859 in his attempt to revive the flagging Taiping spirit and reorganize its administration (p. 536), Hong Ren-gan specifically forbids dramatic performances—adding that "Those with deluded minds should first be transformed, so as to divert their donations to such institutions as hospitals, welfare homes, and schools." The proposal was specifically endorsed by the Heavenly King, Hong Xiu-quan.[3] Ren-gan was obviously expecting some resistance to this edict because he instituted a special mechanism to get it accepted. "In opposition to dramatic performances and plays, . . . and other such perversions, pastors and educational officials should be appointed in order to educate, sympathize with, and righteously rebuke the public, and to remove doubts from the people's minds and rescue them from superstitions" (Hong, 1859: 525-526; translated in Michael, 1971: 755). These strong descriptions of theatre as "perversion" and "superstition" are backed up also in one of Hong Ren-gan's poems where he comments that "[d]ramatic performances . . . lead only to misfortune" and brackets the practice with the squandering of wealth and the wasting of energy (Hong, 1861· 604).

Hong Ren-gan's suggestion that money given for drama should go instead to welfare homes and such social services and his remark in the poem just cited suggest that one of his main reasons for banning theatrical performances was because they were wasteful and took up energies better devoted to religion or high pursuits. There is a clear similarity here with the Protestant fundamentalists of the time Hong's ideas and "all the reforms that he wanted to introduce were based on his missionary educational background and his view of the West that he had gained in the treaty ports" (Michael, 1966 140) The source of his extremely puritanical notions on drama is thus quite obvious.

Presumably the ban was not altogether ignored However, there is also evidence that dramatic performances persisted all over the Taiping-controlled area One contemporary writer, who kept a diary covering his experiences in Taiping-held Shaoxing, Zhejiang, in 1861 and 1862, notes having gone one evening to

the Temple of the Water God (*Shuishen*) and found that operas had been performed during the day (Lu, 1896 801). Shaoxing was traditionally famous as a theatre centre, and was later to spawn the famous regional style Shaoxing Opera. It is perhaps not surprising that a short period of Taiping rule there failed to stamp out the age-old custom of giving popular opera shows in temples.

Other examples show the survival of traditional popular practices relating to theatre. In Jiaxing, Zhejiang, which remained in Taiping hands from June 15, 1860, to March 25, 1864, a sympathizer called Guan Qiu-quan married his daughter to a rebel follower and, to celebrate the occasion, had firecrackers let off and drama performed on March 2, 1862. When asked about the motives for his actions he replied that he "was paying respect to the Heavenly Father" (Shen, 1860-1864: 133). Early in 1863, a few months before Wuxi, Jiangsu, fell to Qing troops (December 12), an inhabitant of the city mentions seeing a noisy performance in one of the main streets, a high stage having been erected for the occasion (Zhang Nai-xiu, c. 1864: 611). The circumstances in both these cases suggest no attempt to conceal infringement of the law nor any trace of shame at having operas performed.

More striking is the following passage, which refers to the Taiping capital Nanjing in the middle of 1861. It is from the brush of a native of the city called Li Xiao-chi (1879. 488).

> Some actors whom the rebels had gathered were performing dramas outside the walls of the city . Many of the actors were from Anhui They were in the prime of life and had long hair Many of the *sheng* and *dan* [i.e , actors of male and female roles] were catamites. Their shocking behaviour was fully exposed. I found it repulsive.

Considering the rigidity which the Taipings demanded of their followers in sexual matters, Li's shocked reaction comes as no surprise. He might have added that in the Qing-controlled areas everybody would have taken it for granted that actors "in the prime of life" should be catamites (see Mackerras, 1972 151-153).

The remark that the actors "had long hair" deserves comment. From the very beginning of the rebellion, long hair had been a characteristic of the Taipings. It carried a definite political significance, being contrary to the Manchu custom of shaving the head and face. Their enemies frequently described the Taipings as "long-haired bandits" (*changmao zei*).[4] To quote Shih again (1967: 136), "To refuse to shave was . . . an open declaration of the intention to take revenge for the wrong the Tartars had done the Chinese." It may not be too far-fetched to suggest that the long hair of the actors to which Li Xiao-chi refers was a symbol of their identification with the Taipings, even though they were openly flouting Hong Ren-gan's law by plying their trade.

Li's remark that many of the actors came from Anhui is also of great interest. That province, and in particular its capital Anqing, had for some time been an important source of actors for such important theatre centres as Beijing and Yangzhou (Li Dou, 1794: 131). Anhui was a Taiping stronghold and Anqing remained in Taiping hands from June 10, 1853 to September 5, 1861. It was the most important city in the Taiping zones, apart from Nanjing, and its fall to Qing forces was a major turning-point in the war. Because of the uprising Anhui and other southern districts discontinued their supply of actors to Beijing. However, Li Xiao-chi's comment is important evidence that the province continued, for a few years at least, to provide actors for Nanjing. Considering that the recruiting of catamite actors involved the buying and selling of boys and was thus a form of slavery—forbidden by Taiping law (Hong, 1859: 536), the survival of Anhui as a source of actors at a time when its capital had been under Taiping control for so long, suggests that the stamping out of the trade in boy actors did not occupy a very high place in the Taiping scale of priorities.

The same seems to be so of Hong Ren-gan's edict against dramatic performances in general. After all, Li Xiao-chi's comments refer to a period well before the time the Taiping collapse was sealed. Most significant of all, no ordinary city is in question, but the capital itself—when the law could be most effectively implemented.

Li Xiao-chi's mention of Anhui as a source of actors for Nanjing raises the question of training schools among the Taipings. One specific example is known to us through information handed down from Zhao Song-shou, who graduated from the school and went on to establish a whole family of fine actors in Shanghai. Like many others in the non-Taiping regions, this training school and the company to which it was attached were mobile. "Whenever the Heavenly Army conquered a region, the actors would perform dramas as entertainment; they put on Huiban operas, and at the same time also emphasized Kunqu" (Kan-wai ren, 1973 159).

Two interesting points emerge from this quote. It implies that the Taiping armies at least sometimes brought actors with them to entertain and boost the morale of the troops and also encourage the local people of the areas affected to support the Heavenly Kingdom. This was a system which Mao Ze-dong and his followers were later to formalize and use extremely effectively in their struggles against the Japanese and the Guomindang.

The second point concerns the types of dramas the actors performed. The Huiban were popular and the Taiping drama company was thus clearly aiming at the ordinary folk, from whom it might expect its greatest support. More striking is the reference to Kunqu, the drama of the aristocracy. The fact that the Taiping company should have "emphasized Kunqu" suggests that one of its functions was to try to appeal to members of the educated class. The success of this particular theatre troupe is not recorded, but historians generally accept the fact that one of the reasons for the Taipings' overall defeat was their failure to attract support from the educated.

The ability of Zhao Song-shou and his colleagues to perform a variety of different opera styles no doubt made it easier for them to find a job after their troupe/training school disbanded Zhao led quite a number of his actor friends to Shanghai and many of them did well there. What is perhaps more relevant to the present topic is that the training school appears to have lasted until the defeat of the uprising. In fact, Hong Ren-gan's law not only failed to stop theatrical activity, but also did not

prevent the continued training of actors in Taiping-held territory.

LITERATURE AND THE TAIPINGS

To bring the Taiping theory and practice in theatre matters into sharper perspective it will be useful to review briefly their attitude to literature in general. Just as with the drama, the arrival of Hong Ren-gan in Nanjing in April 1859 was of decisive importance for Taiping literature. Hong was the only Taiping leader who has left behind writings showing some consistent ideas on the subject of literature.

Hong's major statement was published in 1861. His basic doctrine is that literature should be a practical tool, and the aesthetic aspect must take second place to the utilitarian. In his view "the written word is to record facts" (*wen yi ji shi*). It follows from this assumption that language should be a direct and easy means of communication. Of memorials and public notices, Hong writes that they should be "simple and clear and should never contain to the slightest degree words which are inciting or agitating, or which would set people against each other, thereby deliberately causing surprise or fear among the people." Sincerity is also of the utmost importance "superficial language, wherever it exists, must be eradicated; words are more noble when spoken from the heart, and artful words should always be prohibited" (Hong 1861 616-617; translated in Michael, 1971. 857-858).

Hong is clearly suspicious of elegance and anything which might be regarded as wasteful. Elsewhere he writes (1859: 526) "In China, people have always cherished extravagant habits, while beautiful poetry, elegant paintings, and exquisite articles of gold and jade are not without value, they are nonetheless merely precious things of a lower order" (translation in Michael, 1971: 755).

One basic point which Hong Ren-gan shared with his imperial counterparts was the concept that literature (and other forms of art) influence the mind of the people. He writers (Hong et al.,

1861: 551). "Arts and letters, although trifling, have really a great bearing upon character and knowledge. Even in little things, such as a word or sentence, we must avoid heresies and paradoxes and be accurate in the heavenly teachings and true principles" (translation in Michael, 1971: 883). Literature is thus a form of propaganda; the practical purpose it serves is specifically the furthering of the religious, social, and political goals of the Taiping movement.

Hong Ren-gan probably carried on the Taiping policies of the decade before him, developing rather than changing them. The emphasis on literature understandable to the masses is clear from the punctuation of some very early Taiping documents which are provided with commas and full stops; the authors have indicated proper nouns in such a way as to make the distinction between names of people on the one hand and those of places, dynasties, and states on the other (Luo, 1955: 229; 1956: 3; 1960: 14). Early Taiping writings show signs of attention to simplicity and easy understanding by the ordinary people. Indeed, Xie Jie-he (1857: 656), commenting on the style of one book by the early Taiping military organizer Feng Yun-shan (1822-1852) and others which describes Taiping history from 1848 to the taking of Nanjing, points out its great similarity to a novel—in other words, its simple style written so that the ordinary uneducated person could understand it Evidence of this sort has led one scholar of the People's Republic to conclude: "we can see that the idea of opposing classical articles already existed in the early period of the revolution" (Li Chun, 1963 454). Hong Ren-gan's notion that literature should serve the Taiping movement was also undoubtedly a feature of the period before 1859.

Some of Hong's ideas on literature, including the emphasis on intelligibility to the masses and the function of literature as propaganda, are close to those of some May Fourth thinkers or of Mao Ze-dong. For this reason, writers of the People's Republic have expressed considerable enthusiasm over Taiping literature. In particular, Luo Er-gang, possibly the foremost contemporary authority on the Taipings, sees "the literary revolution" of the Taipings as being "in all ways extremely

significant in the history of Chinese literature." This was the first time in Chinese history that anyone had "suggested opposition to the feudal ancient writing or advocated vernacular literature from the standpoint of the people." Luo also considers that Taiping literature "reflected the people's demands, whether in the aspect of the form of the language or its ideological content" (1960: 14-15), and sees it definitely as the forerunner of the May Fourth literary revolution (1956: 5).

Because of their encouragement of literature, albeit of their own particular kind, the Taipings did their best to attract the services of literary people. The Taipings were enthusiastic publishers. It has been suggested that this interest was the result of the impression which the pamphlets, tracts, and other literature put out by the early missionaries to propagate Christianity had made on Hong Xiu-quan (Jen, 1973: 153). Whatever the reason, the Taiping output was large. It began in 1852 and within ten years produced a total of 44 known official works, including religious books, military regulations, and so forth. The Taipings even had their own government printing agency (Jen, 1973: 153-154). Perhaps most remarkable of all were the efforts the Taipings made to ensure that their books were widely read. Augustus Lindley, the British admirer of the Taipings who served with them from 1860 to 1864, remarks (1866: 147) that "they circulated the Scriptures and all religious publications entirely free of charge, a circumstance unparalled in the history of the world "

Lindley's mention of "religious publications" leads to the general problem of the content of Taiping literature. Although this lies outside the main scope of this article, it will be worth glancing briefly at the types of topics treated in one branch of literature, poetry.

The best known Taiping poet was Hong Xiu-quan himself, and a considerable number of his attempts have survived. Virtually all are either heavily religious or political, since it is very difficult to separate these two concepts in the Taiping context, Hong's poems fall into the range of propaganda literature favoured by the Taipings. They deal with such matters as the happiness of the righteous, the joy of the penitent, and

the greatness of God and Jesus. Many are self-aggrandizing and represent efforts to assert Hong's own leadership more forcefully; others celebrate victories over the "imps"—that is, Qing forces—or they praise the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and its power. On a more tender note, some of Hong's poems also look forward to a future era of peace and happiness. A number are moral exhortations to the followers or to specific groups among them. Such poems demand the separation of the sexes or denounce opium, and may threaten punishments for any who disobey. Very rarely indeed does Hong sing of the benefits the ordinary follower may expect in the present or near future from his/her devotion to the cause. The following specimen is a moral exhortation in a sympathetic vein. It was written in the context of a serious grain shortage in Nanjing to cope with popular complaints at being forced to eat congee. Hong explains that congee is but a trial sent by the Heavenly Father and exhorts the people to remain optimistic and accept sacrifice:

> God (*Shenye*) is trying our hearts, we cannot fathom his reasons.
> How is it that eating congee can alter your hearts!
> Did not the Heavenly Elder Brother lay down his very life for us,
> And did not His blood drip [as He hung] on the cross!
> Have you forgotten the vanguard and front guide,
> Who established merit towards the Heavenly Kingdom and are popularly respected!
> [Zhang Ru-nan, 1890 711-712, Luo, 1960 193]

The references to the vanguard and the front guide are to Xiao Chao-gui and Feng Yun-shan, both of whom died in 1852 in battle on behalf of the Taipings They occupied respectively the positions of "general of the vanguard army" and "front guide and first deputy chief of staff "

Hong Xiu-quan was not the only poet among Taiping leaders Yang Xiu-qing, Hong Ren-gan, Shi Da-kai and others have also left behind poetic works. These also tend to be didactic in content although often with a slighter intensity than is found in Hong Xiu-quan's poems. Among other topics, they express loyalty to the leadership, issue moral exhortations to the troops or civilian followers, or denounce religions and ideas other than those of Taiping orthodoxy.

Perhaps more interesting is a number of simple folk songs/ poems from the Taiping period. These praise popular Taiping leaders; delight in the overthrow of tyrants, harmful customs, and superstititions; or rejoice in Taiping victories. The following example was transmitted orally by an old poor peasant from a village north of Yangzhou, Jiangsu. It concerns the defence of Yangzhou against Qing troops through the use of a watchtower called Siwang Pavilion, which the Taipings built north of the city after they had taken it for the first time (April 1, 1853):

> The Siwang Pavilion, three-storeyed tower, we stand on top and keep watch for horse's legs [i e. enemy troops]. The enemy troops arrive, we blow our horns to give the alarm, we beat back the Qing soldiers so that they run away in retreat. Yangzhou City has a red-headed army, we frighten them so the Qing troops dare not come near. [Luo, 1960: 208]

The "red-headed" army is of course the Taiping. It is given the name because its soldiers used red turbans to wrap their heads.

The existence of a folk poetry among the Taipings is evidence that the ideas of the leadership on literature did not go quite unheeded. Poems such as this are simple, unsophisticated, good propaganda, and probably stirring to the masses. How extensive this kind of literature was is unclear. It was not written down and would most certainly have died had not scholars of later times, especially those of the People's Republic, taken interest in preserving it. For every one which survives there are many which do not.

Unfortunately fate has not treated the Taiping drama as well as their poetry No operas written specially by Taiping followers have survived, either orally or in writing. Certainly none of the 44 official published works of the Taipings was a drama. Worse still, as far as I am able to ascertain, the sources are silent on the content of the operas performed in Taiping territory. In one way this is not too surprising. None of the authors who mention drama was an enthusiast of the popular theatre. They probably did not differentiate clearly between specific items of so low-brow a form of art

Despite the lack of documented evidence, however, one cannot but suspect that the operas performed in Taiping-held territory, like the poetry, tended to follow the general rules laid down for literature as a whole. The emphasis on simplicity and ready intelligibility to the masses, on sincerity, and on propaganda content for the religious, political, and social goals of the Taipings were almost certainly present at least as long as theatre was a tolerated art form. A number of works in the standard repertory, especially those with rebellious themes, may well have continued performance in the Taiping areas; probably the *Water Margin* operas persisted on the stage. Even after 1859 the Taiping authorities may have been prepared to turn a blind eye to dramatic performances so long as the content and style were in accord with Hong Ren-gan's literary ideas and actively supported the Taiping movement. This would go some way towards explaining the evident paucity of effort devoted to enforcing Hung's ban on theatrical performances.[5]

THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY ROLE OF ACTORS

Apart from the influence of the drama over the Taipings and their apparent attempts to use it on occasion to attract and hold support, the Heavenly Kingdom was also to obtain the services of the theatre world in the form of actors who played a significant role not on the stage but as soldiers and political leaders.

The outstanding example was in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. When Hong Xiu-quan had begun his uprising he had received help from the forces of the Triad secret society. After he took Nanjing in 1853 he attempted to renew contacts with the Triad forces in Guangdong. From July 5, 1854 to January 17, 1855 (Guo, 1946, I 326, 368), the Triad leader Chen Kai occupied the wealthy Guangdong city of Foshan with 100,000 troops while nearby Guangzhou was besieged for five months in 1854-1855 by a similarly large force led by Li Wen-mao, also

called Yun-mao, an actor fron Heshan county, Guangdong (Jian, 1962, II· 828 ff.).

Strictly speaking, Li Wen-mao was a leader of the Triads rather than the Taipings. The two movements were quite distinct from each other. However, it was in response to a specific appeal from Hong Xiu-quan that Li Wen-mao mobilized his armies. Moreover, he undoubtedly saw himself as fighting in support of the Taipings. He is therefore entitled to consideration here.

The official gazetteer of Nanhai county (Nanhai xianzhi, 1872, 26: 22a) describes Li thus "He was simple and courageous. He was a skilled swordsman, and practised every day.' The acting populations had joined Li Wen-mao in large numbers in support of the Triad-Taiping alliance. He formed them into three armies according to the category of the role they performed. The *wu-sheng* actors—that is, those who performed male military roles—were among those formed into the Wenhu Army, and so forth. They put on their opera regalia to show their opposition to the Manchus.

Despite the courage and fighting spirit of Li Wen-mao and his acting troops, the siege of Guangzhou did not lead to its capture by them. The Governor-general of Guangdong and Guangxi, Ye Ming-chen (1807-1859), fought fiercely against them. The British, anxious to protect their commercial interests in the area, gave him military equipment and supplies such as food, and also stationed their gunboats to prevent Li's forces from approaching Guangzhou on the Pearl River (Jen, 1973· 254). Li was forced to retreat to the southern bank of the Pearl, where his troops fought bitterly against the Qing army for a period. They then withdrew to Zhaoqing on the West River about 80 kilometres west of Guangzhou, but a further successful onslaught against them forced them to retreat into neighbouring Guangxi province.

Together with Chen Kai and other secret society leaders, Li Wen-mao advanced up the West River and attacked the city of Guiping, very close to Jintian, where the Taiping uprising had broken out in 1850. After a long siege, lasting some three months, Guiping finally fell to Li's forces on September 27,

1855. They then set up a new kingdom, which they called Dacheng. After further successful military exploits Li's troops seized Liuzhou in central Guangxi, about 120 kilometres northwest of Guiping. He established a hierarchy of officials, including a prime minister (*chengxiang*), governors (*dudu*), generals, and so on, and even minted his own currency.

At this point success followed Li everywhere. His troops took several other counties. His rule appeared welcome to the inhabitants of the area. According to the modern scholar Ou-yang Yu-qian (1957: 117), "the officials under Li Wen-mao would go barefooted on the streets every day carrying baskets to buy vegetables, and the masses called Wen-mao's wife 'sister-in-law'; so we can see how well grounded in popular affection his government was."

Unfortunately Li's success did not last. In the spring of 1858 he was wounded in an attack on Guilin. He returned to Liuzhou. The Qing army then occupied that city, forcing Li to flee. He took his remaining followers into Guizhou province but was defeated there yet again. Finally he took refuge in the mountains some distance east of Liuzhou and there died in 1861.

The reaction of Ye Ming-chen and the Qing court against the theatrical world of Guangdong because of Li Wen-mao's activities was swift and severe. Many actors were killed. Their guildhalls in both Guangzhou and Foshan were destroyed. Moreover, an edict of the Qing court ordered that all Guangdong Opera companies should disband and forbade all performances of Guangdong Opera. Even informal open-air performances in the streets suffered interference; actors were arrested and punished. (See Mai, 1941: 152-154, Jian, 1962, II· 835-838.) Fortunately, however, the proscription against the Guangdong Opera companies did not last long. The Nanhai gazetteer comments (Nanhai xianzhi, 1872, 26. 22a). "It was not six or seven years before they were back as of old. Such is the difficulty of removing corrupt practices." (See Mackerras, 1975. 148.)

THE IMPACT OF THE TAIPING WARS ON THE THEATRE

The fate of the Guangdong Opera companies at the hands of the Qing authorities leads to the general problem of the impact which the Taiping wars created on the Chinese opera. Although so large-scale an upheaval could hardly be beneficial overall to any art form, there were instances where the Taiping rebellion or persons connected with it brought about some gain to particular styles of regional opera to balance the loss.

In the case of the Hubei Opera, one of the main people responsible for the revival which followed the end of the Taiping war was a military officer who succeeded in escaping from the Qing authorities to northwestern Hubei, and he lived there under a different name. A great devotee of Hubei Opera, this man was concerned at its decline due to the war, so he gave some money toward the setting up of a training school. The enterprise proved an immense success and turned out many first-rate exponents of the Hubei Opera—the basis of a new upsurge in its popularity (Zhou, 1960 329-330)

Moving south to Hunan we find also that disaster due to the war for one form of local opera worked to the benefit of another.

The Taiping army entered Hunan from Guangxi in 1852 and took a number of cities, including the strategically important Yuezhou on the eastern edge of the north end of the Dongting Lake on December 13. In 1854 Hunan was the scene of fierce conflict between the Taipings and Zeng Guo-fan's Hunan army Despite initial reverses Zeng's forces were finally victorious, taking Xiangtan on May 1 and Yuezhou on July 25 (Jen, 1973 97-101, 234-239). The fighting, however, was extremely deleterious in its effects on the merchants and the Kunqu companies which they patronized. Especially in centres like Xiangtan and Changsha, the Kunqu declined rapidly.

After 1860, with the Hunan Taipings suppressed, there was a revival of drama. This was especially so because the Acting Governor of Hunan, Di Hao, was a great enthusiast of opera.

Indeed, in the three months after he took up office he had dramas put on every day in the yamen, an excess which resulted in his dismissal (Huang, 1957: 65).

After Nanjing, the Taiping capital, fell to imperial forces on July 19, 1864, the Hunan army, which had been largely responsible for the defeat of the rebels, returned home to Changsha and other parts of the province. According to the Xiangtan regional gazetteer (Xiangtan xianzhi, 1889, 11· 4a), they "competed with each other in gambling and [patronizing] actors and actresses. Such was their wasteful extravagance that it was known to lose enormous sums of silver in a single night." The great companies of Changsha—the Renhe, Qinghua, and others—and those of Xiangtan, in Huang Zhi-gang's words (1957: 65), "all at once began to flourish like spring bamboo shoots after rain."

However, the revival did not leave the state of the drama the same as before the rebellion. The Kunqu actors were slow to respond to the new situation and found their place taken over by actors from nearby villages. These performed not the aristocratic Kunqu, but the popular opera which can be categorized here as Hunan Opera.

The situation in Hunan contrasted with that in Guangdong where, in the aftermath of the Taiping war, the government banned the popular regional opera—leaving the Kunqu temporarily without a major rival. But it is important to note that, in fact, the pattern in Hunan was much more common throughout China than in Guangdong; in other words, the popular local opera was hit less severely than the Kunqu

Indeed, most theatre scholars regard the Taiping uprising as a great blow to the Kunqu, amounting almost to its final deathblow. It is interesting to speculate whether Taiping policy itself may not have weakened the Kunqu. The only concrete evidence on the aristocratic drama in the Taiping areas is that Zhao Song-shou's training school taught it in addition to the popular Huiban. However, it is worth noting that Kunqu would have been much more offensive to Hong Ren-gan than regional operas. Intentionally elegant, difficult for the masses to understand, and often artificial, Kunqu literature certainly

broke all of Hong's main rules on writing to a far greater extent than did the popular opera. If the Taiping authorities chose to enforce the rule against dramatic performances on a given occasion they would be more likely to tread on Kunqu than on the regional opera of the masses.

A more important reason for the rapid decline of Kunqu was that the region which had long been the centre of this elegant art was also among those most affected by the military campaigns of the Taipings. Yao Hsin-nung writes (1936. 81-82):

> Those long years of gruesome struggle [between the Taipings and the Manchu Government forces] reduced many prosperous cities to ruins, and Soochow [Suzhou], the home of the K'un Ch'u [Kunqu] and nursery of its stage artists, was one of the victims. A perusal of pre-Taiping sketch-books will show us a gorgeous picture of the Kiangnan district at its best in contrast with its present state. It is not that the destruction of war was so thorough and tremendous that even three-quarters of a century have not been sufficient for recovery and restoration It is rather that economic conditions had changed before the process of recuperation has half completed

A new element is here introduced. The growth and economic rise of Shanghai, caused in part by the attentions of the Western powers and in part by the large numbers of refugees who fled there to escape the ravages of the Taiping War, resulted in the replacement of cities like Suzhou and Yangzhou by Shanghai as cultural and economic centres.

It is true that many people migrated from Suzhou and other places to Shanghai and a few brought their love for Kunqu with them. Yet the damage done in the Kunqu heartland and the entirely different cultural surroundings in Shanghai caused the patronage of the elegant Kunqu to fall off seriously. Rich merchants and educated bureaucrats no longer ran their own private troupes.

Earlier I called the Taiping wars almost the final deathblow for the Kunqu In fact it had been declining for some time, not only in Beijing but even in the Lower Yangzi Valley An edict dated 1798 and found in a Suzhou temple laments the decline of the elegant drama and comments that, even in Suzhou and

Yangzhou, actors have been "suppressing the old [Kunqu] and enjoying the new [popular opera]" (Zhou, 1958. 231).

The trend was unmistakable Fashions among the elite were changing away from Kunqu and toward the theatre of the masses. Under these circumstances, the Kunqu had no hope of surviving the new and most serious blow dealt it by the Taiping uprising. Although performances continued in some places, it enjoyed no real following and was to all intents and purposes a defunct form of art. It was thus the Kunqu which bore the full brunt of the devastation caused by the Taiping wars; the popular regional theatre was much less damaged, and in some places even emerged from the war stronger than before.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The effect of the Taiping wars was harmful overall to Chinese theatre. The converse, however, does not necessarily follow and would be, in my opinion, false; that is to say, the drama would have helped, rather than hindered, the Taipings. Let us conclude by reviewing the reasons for this statement and its significance.

Although the Taiping leaders were suspicious of the drama and formally banned it in 1859, the sources do not give any indication that theatre ceased While the authors of books recording the dramatic performances are uniformly hostile to the Taipings and could have been trying to suggest that the movement was a failure because the people did not obey its laws, there seems no reason to doubt the accuracy of their reports. Another interpretation is possible to explain the gap between law and practice. namely that the Taipings had a scale of priorities and took far more trouble to enforce some of their innumerable laws than others.

Given that Hong Ren-gan actually decreed in 1859 the suspension of all dramatic performances, one wonders how the acting profession reacted to the Taiping revolution as a whole. The evidence is meagre on whether or not actors supported the movement. Actors do not write source-books and we hear of their attitude only indirectly What signs do exist point to a

core of strong support for the Manchu government, but a much wider, possibly even mass sympathy for the Taipings in the areas they controlled

Several stories survive showing actors opposing or fleeing the Taipings as they conquered a given city. One example concerns the filial Li Pu of Suzhou who became an actor to be able to support his parents. When Suzhou fell to the Taipings on June 2, 1860, Li was captured—presumably being regarded as an enemy—and sent to Nanjing. He escaped on the way; however, "remembering his father and mother were still in the fallen city, he again entered the city but was murdered. When they searched his body they found a picture of his fathe, and mother which he had drawn" (Pan, 1884: 298-299).

All such stories concern individuals, not groups, and appear more interesting for what they show of the Confucian piety of their author than for their value as evidence of what actors felt as a professional grouping. The reader will recall the mention earlier of long hair among actors, a sign of identification with the Taipings. Moreover, the fact that actors as a body should actually form into an army to fight on the Taiping side suggests some measure of support. Clearly Li Wen-mao and his followers did not take up arms because of unemployment, since their initial actions preceded Hong Ren-gan's ban on their trade by several years.

The Taipings stood in the tradition of opposition to the Confucian bureaucratic state. In that social system actors occupied a status on a level with slaves. There undoubtedly was a side trend of actor support for the system, but it is surely quite natural that most of the performing profession should throw in their lot with a revolution aiming to overthrow the society which oppressed them so savagely.

We are faced here with a dilemma. If the acting community was prepared to support the Taipings, could it not use its influence to help them? All sides agreed that the theatre affected the thinking and behavior of the people. Hong Ren-gan made the point explicitly for literature as a whole and the plethora of edicts issued by successive governments on the conduct and content of dramatic performances shows that the

imperial authorities held the same view (see Wang Xiao-chuan, 1958). By their edict to ban the theatre the Taipings were actually depriving themselves of a valuable weapon for their revolution. Hong Ren-gan's ideological puritanism, which he owed to Protestant missionaries, either prevented him from realizing the loss to his cause such a law entailed or made him willing to pay the price it would cost.

What actually happened in practice was probably that the actors continued to make their contribution to the counter-culture. They did so by largely ignoring Hong Ren-gan's ban and by persisting in performances of dramas largely based, no doubt, on such novels as *Water Margin*—which the imperial authorities regarded as hostile to them and which had influenced Taiping culture in the first place. Recent research has shown a long-term trend during the Qing dynasty whereby the theatre and actors opposed the Confucian status quo and helped erode it through their influence as opinion moulders (Tanaka, 1972). The Taiping revolution itself represented a vital stage in this process of disintegration. Over a period of decades or centuries, the theatre world had contributed towards the climate of opinion which made so large-scale an uprising as the Taiping possible. Despite Hong Ren-gan's views, the actors' overall historical function was not to oppose the Taiping revolutionary movement, but to assist it.

NOTES

1. For a book-length study of sources on the Taipings, see Teng (1962). More recent bibliographies are included in Michael (1971: 1617-1771) and Jen (1973: 575-596). See also the extensive bibliography of Chinese-language primary and secondary sources in Volume 9 of the pirated Taibei edition of Xiang Da (1952)

2. See, for instance, the "Xingjun zongyao" (1952: 427-428), an official collection of regulations for troops on the march, dated 1855. See also the eyewitness account of the early Taiping occupation of Nanjing by Zhang Ru-nan (1890). The prohibitions are detailed on page 715

3. As noted above, private works from before 1859 fail to mention drama in lists of prohibitions. This is not the case after 1859 For instance see Yu (c 1861: 131-132), which includes, in its list of Taiping prohibitions, theatre, prostitutes

(actresses), and actors. Yu Yi-ao's is an eyewitness account being based on his experiences in Taiping territory in 1860 and 1861

4. Hong Ren-gan even developed ideological reasons against shaving the head. he argued that since hair was God-given, it was unfilial and a rebellion against Heaven to cut it off. See Hong and Liu (1861: 580).

5. One quasi-theatrical custom found in the Taiping areas was a form of preaching called "expounding the truth" (*jiang daoli*). A high stage was set up in an open place, and gongs were beaten to summon a crowd which could be several thousand strong. The speaker then harangued the masses on Taiping doctrines and morals (see Zhang De-jian, 1855: 266). Xie (1857: 650) describes one such occasion just after the Taipings took Nanjing. Outside the city walls, several of the Taiping leaders ascended a high platform and repeatedly "expounded the truth" on Taiping doctrine to the people: nobody would be saved without the Heavenly Father and the Heavenly Elder Brother, they would abolish poverty among their followers, and so forth. They then repeated the performance within the city.

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