Historical Voice and Narrative Power:
Religion, the West, and Storytelling in *God’s Chinese Son*

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China’s Taiping Rebellion (1845-64) has been a fruitful source of research since the 1950s. The historical approach to the rebellion has ranged from social and economic analysis to examinations of its leader’s mental health.\(^1\) Through the 1980s, the Chinese Communist Party’s understanding of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom as a proto-socialist movement fueled research.\(^2\) *God’s Chinese Son*, Jonathan Spence’s interpretation of the Taiping Rebellion is a holistic narrative approach that consciously avoids a theoretical framework. Instead, Spence tells a story that begins in the tumultuous world of the port city of Canton in the 1830s, and adds increasingly complex layers of political, economic, cultural and, of course, religious detail. The inherent strengths of Spence’s narrative structure also draw criticism: what is for some readers an exciting tale which keeps them awake all night, is to others a rudderless account of events that leave the reader hopelessly adrift to interpret them. Spence’s account is not without intent, but his use of sources—specifically the sources documenting heavenly visions, biblical translations, and scriptural reinterpretations of the Taiping believers—allow the historical figures of the Taiping movement to speak for themselves. Indirectly, but through Spence’s particular choice of sources, the reader is asked to draw his or her own conclusions about the meaning of the Taiping movement.

The book’s structure provides a subtle guide for interpretation. Through skillful, detailed narrative, Spence illuminates the world that allowed the Taiping movement to gain momentum. He begins with a description of the walled foreign settlement of Canton, in which the lucrative but controversial opium-trade accompanied the mundane business in tea and silk, and he documents the Qing government’s anger and disillusionment with the exploitative business practices of the British East India Company. Proselytizing by western missionaries created divisions in Chinese communities around the port city, and invited persecution of Chinese converts to Christianity. In addition, ethnic tension existed not only between Han Chinese and the Hakka (or “guest people”) but also between both of these groups and the Manchu Qing government, who were perceived since

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the mid-17th century as barbarian usurpers of the Ming throne. Spence portrays the Opium War as the final straw for the rural and ethnic populations who faced pressure from all sides.

Hong Huoxiu, who will become Hong Xiuquan, the Taiping Heavenly King, has taken and failed several Confucian state examinations in this setting. Hong’s subsequent religious fervor, which eventually leads to the formation of the Taiping Army, is often attributed to a spiritual vision he has while ill, and the biblical translations and interpretations of Liang Afa, in his Christian tract “Good Words for Exhorting the Age.” Spence acknowledges the vision and the tracts without drawing outright conclusions about them. Instead, Spence creates a picture in which it is possible to understand Hong’s motivations.

In Hong’s native province of Hua, Spence writes that “heat, hunger, dampness and diseases are never far away,” and the local religious festivals “take on a special urgency.”3 The political environment in which Hong is taking his state examinations is tense; angered by the perceived capitulation of the officials to the British in 1841, “enraged scholars . . . hurl their only available projectiles, the carved ink stones . . . [at] the Prefect She Baoshun.”4 An entire chapter, Sky War, is devoted to the specific, numerous, and sometimes contradictory local faith practices of Hua, and chapter seven, The Base, introduces the pirates, bandits and the Heaven and Earth Society that preyed upon local populations, while offering them “protection and support in harsh and troubled times.”5 Without being explicit, Spence shows how the declining Qing state, the unsettledness of the region, and the vice and violence in the area would have led Hong to interpret the Christian theology he encountered in a very literal way.

Although it is not the sole focus of the book, Taiping religious texts play a large role in God’s Chinese Son. Generally speaking, new histories of popular subjects are accompanied by newly discovered or reinterpreted primary sources. Spence’s own justification for a new work on the Taiping Rebellion, and the justification cited by reviewers of God’s Chinese Son, is the appearance of two previously undocumented Taiping texts.6 These texts, which were found in the British Library in the 1980s, “recorded a protracted series of heavenly visions said to have been relayed through Jesus and his father to their faithful Taiping followers on earth.”7 Spence notes that these texts “are not historical sources in any precise sense of the term.”8 However, Spence defends his use of sources like these in a conversation with Hanchao Lu, for the Chinese Historical Review. Spence

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3 Spence, God’s Chinese Son, 35-36.
4 Spence, 54.
5 Spence, 85.
7 Spence, xxv.
8 Spence, xxv.
suggests that historians “need to let the Chinese tell us their story,” without “telling them what to tell us.” The heavenly visions of Taiping leaders can shed light on the mentalities of Hong and his Taiping converts, and raise new questions that other sources cannot.

One of the more interesting questions the new sources pose concerns potential power struggles between leaders of the Taiping Heavenly Army. During the initial formation of the God-worshipping community at Thistle Mountain, new converts began to have celestial visions and experience spirit possessions—not by local deities, but by Jesus and God the Father. Hong Xiuquan accepts “that a Hakka charcoal burner called Yang Xiuqing . . . becomes the mouthpiece for God,” and that “Xiao Chaogui . . . also among the poorest of the poor and devoted to the new religion, becomes the vehicle by which Jesus Christ speaks to his younger brother Hong.” There were other visions at Thistle Mountain, but Yang’s and Xiao’s became the most important—both at this time, and later, when Xiao was appointed as the West King, and Yang the East King of the Taiping Heavenly Army.

Because God’s Chinese Son treats the visions of Hong, Xiao and Yang as reality (which is surely the way Hong perceived them as well), Spence leaves the interpretation of events to the reader—but not without guidance. At the beginning of the Taiping movement, there might seem to be only religious implications to the advice that Xiao and Yang gave Hong. As the Taiping Heavenly Army grew, however, the voices of Jesus and God, spoken respectively through Xiao and Yang, announced their “desire ‘to discipline those who disobey the Heavenly commandments.’” The increased power of Xiao and Yang in the Heavenly Army eventually resulted in what looks like a struggle between the two. After Xiao was wounded, but not killed, in battle, Jesus spoke once more through him and then “his voice falls silent” until Xiao’s death nine months later. Spence writes that herein lies a mystery, and asks, “has Xiao been silenced by a Taiping coup rather than by Qing spear thrusts or bullets?” There is, of course, no definitive answer, but some evidence for this conclusion when Hong granted Yang (through whom the voice of God has been heard) “‘supervisory power’ over the other four kings (including Xiao), clearly promoting him above the rest in the earthly Taiping hierarchy.”

The richness of Spence’s storytelling provides many potential answers to mysteries like these. There are moments, though, when Spence’s storytelling makes leaps of reason that are difficult to follow, though they may be supported with archival evidence. One such passage has to

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10 Spence, 107.
11 Spence, 134.
12 Spence, 147.
13 Spence, 147.
do with the former Taiping soldier (bandit and deserter) Big-head Yang. Spence writes that Big-head Yang, after defecting to the Qing army, discovered “that the Taiping presence help[ed] his own prestige,”\(^{14}\) and as a result, the Taiping forces proceed unimpeded to Guilin. It is potentially easy for an author to get caught up in a narrative, and miss a potential source of confusion. In this case, neither the text nor the notes offer any guidance as to why the unimpeded Taiping presence would have increased Big-head Yang’s prestige in the area. Spence also takes for granted the reader’s ability to identify the new sources used in *God’s Chinese Son*, or distinguish them from existing, better-known materials. Given that these sources form Spence’s justification for a new work on the subject, his use of them should be more transparent.

Furthermore, Spence’s outright rejection of (any) theoretical approach may be problematic for some historians. Spence makes an argument, however, for having a sense of the theoretical approaches currently in use, but incorporating them “anonymously,” by which he means without direct reference to theory in the text.\(^{15}\) His reason for the absence of theory in favor of narrative is that the “overstatement of a theoretical approach is . . . limiting.”\(^{16}\) In Spence’s view, the use of a strictly religious framework is less than useful to describe the confluence of religious fervor with the political and social upheaval that forms the basis of *God’s Chinese Son*.

Some readers may see the narrative structure of the book as lacking direction. Spence’s aim, when writing history, is to “structure a book . . . so that the words will be accurate . . . [but] will convey emotion . . . [to] give a richer background to a topic.”\(^{17}\) He likens this to approximating art. By specifically avoiding moral judgments or historical parallels, Spence attempts to “let the structure of the work create the moral commentary and environment.”\(^{18}\) How might the reader find that moral commentary? In “A Place for Stories: Nature, History and Narrative,” historian William Cronon writes that, “where one chooses to begin and end a story profoundly alters its shape and meaning.”\(^{19}\) In the case of *God’s Chinese Son*, the narrative begins with a corrupting Western influence on the Canton region, and ends with the Western expatriate merchants once again sequestered behind protective walls in Canton, playing games while millions starved or were killed outside those walls.

For interpretive purposes, Spence’s bookends invoking the Western role in the story cannot be ignored. The book presents a reasonably clear connection between the greed and moral

\(^{14}\) Spence, 155.
\(^{15}\) Lu, 142.
\(^{16}\) Lu, 141.
\(^{17}\) Lu, 135.
\(^{18}\) Lu, 136.
ambiguity apparent in Western interactions with China, which create the conditions under which a rebellion of this scale could occur. Likewise, the use of tracts, religious poetry, heavenly visions, spirit possessions, and reinterpretations of Christian theology, portray Taiping thought as oppositional to both the failing Qing government and the exploitative West, while still assimilating a fundamentally Western theology.

Although God’s Chinese Son is not strictly a religious history, it makes for an intriguing comparison with works of American history, which often relegate religion to a non-central role. Where continuity in the discussion of religion and its effects is missing in American studies, it seems that a much more integrated approach is taken by historians of China, and particularly in a book like God’s Chinese Son. Jonathan Spence’s integration of the problems of faith—both Christian faith and the local religious beliefs of the Chinese in the Canton prefecture—represent one of the choices that Spence makes to give his narrative purpose. Because a narrative “inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others,” the extensive use of religion intentionally leads the reader to draw some conclusions about the power of, or potential misuses of religion. At the same time, the bookends about the West provide the Taiping movement with the opportunity to use or misuse religion in the way that they do. Spence’s inclusion of these elements in a narrative structure give a voice to Hong Xiuquan and his Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, and also prompt the reader to ponder the multiple implications of the Taiping Rebellion without being led to a foregone conclusion.

21 Cronon, 1350.