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The Vision of Hong Xiuquan

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The Visions of Hong Xiuquan

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Abstract

In this paper, we will study the visions of Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全), the founder of Taiping Tian Guo (太平天國), or Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, as contained in two extant records: a record of an oral description by a relative and close associate of Hong, Hong Ran-kang (洪仁砵) as contained in Hamberg's book published in 1854 [4], and *Taiping Tian Ri* (太平天日) a publication of the Taiping Tian Guo, in 1861 [16]. These visions occurred in 1843, during a prolonged period of illness of Hong. By comparing these two extant versions of Hong's visions, we wish to reconstruct what probably were contained in these visions. In this paper, we wish to examine what Hong saw in these visions, why he was puzzled by them and not able to interpret them. This leads naturally to an investigation of the ways in which he found these visions being explained when he read the pamphlets written by Liang Fat (梁發), the first indigenous protestant Chinese Christian preacher, called *Quanshi liangyan* (勸世良言) [8] and when he read the Bible in a catechism class for baptism conducted by an American missionary, I. J. Roberts in 1847.

1. Introduction

In 1850, in a remote hilly area of south eastern part of China, namely, Jin Ti (金田)village¹, Guangxi (廣西) province, an incident took place: a small group consisting of poor people, mainly peasants, rose up against the officials of the Imperial Qing Kingdom, the ruling regime. This group of people, called themselves, the *Shangdi Huai* (上帝會)“Society of God”², smashed Confucius idols, destroyed Confucius temples in this area. This group was among a number of local and regional rebel groups in China in the late Qing dynasty [3], rebelling against the increasingly corrupt and inept government of Qing dynasty. Their action of destroying the Confucius idols attracted the attention of the local Qing officials, as a sign of rebellion against the Qing dynasty³. An armed resistance broke out in which the local Qing militia were defeated. This incident is commonly referred to as the Jin Tian uprising [14]. This marked the beginning of the Taipings, as the followers of its leader, Hong Xiuquan were commonly known. The group grew larger as they continued to expand their

¹In this paper, we will use the “pingyin” to represent Chinese characters, without the markings of the tones, except where we quote Hamberg's words, in which the Chinese characters were transcribed using a different system of transcription.

²Here we will follow the convincing argument contained in [14] that a proper translation of the term *Shangdi Huai* should not be “Society of God Worshippers”, but should be “Society of God”. According to [14], the “Society of God Worshippers” amounts to a tautology.

³The Qing dynasty though they were Manchu in origin, adopted Confucius' teaching as the basis of the philosophy governing the state affairs. Hence smashing Confucius idols amounted to a challenge of the rule of the Imperial Qing dynasty.

activities in proselytizing the people in surrounding counties of Guangxi (廣西), destroying Confucius idols and Confucius temples and other idols as practised by the folk religion of China. In 1851, the leader of the group, Hong Xiuquan proclaimed himself to be the *Heavenly King*, established the *Taiping Tian Guo*, or *Taiping Heavenly Kingdom* and started to use a new calendar (to denote that a new era has ushered into the world). They continued to exert pressure on the Qing officials, in southern China, spreading their activities south of the Yangtze River. In 1853, the *Taiping Tian Guo* conquered Nanjing (南京), and established it as its capital, called it *Tianjing* (天京), or *Heavenly Capital*. The *Taiping Tian Guo* continued to expand with conquest led by various kings⁴ to the north, east, west and south of Nanjing. Finally with the help of foreign mercenaries, the Qing army quelled the disturbance, conquered Nanjing, and Hong Xiuquan committed suicide in 1864. The situation was finally brought to end in 1868 when all remaining groups were eliminated [14]. In the process, it is estimated between 20 million and 30 million people lost their lives. This was the largest and certainly the most bloody of the rebellions in Qing dynasty [3] before the founding of the Republic of China by Dr Sun Yat-Sen (孫中山) in 1911.

The leader of the *Taiping Tian Guo*, Hong Xiuquan is said to be a scholar [4]. He was born in 1814 in Hua (花) county which is about 50 miles from Guangzhou (廣州), the capital of Guangdong (廣東) province in southern China. Hong was born into a moderately poor family, the youngest of three sons, and one sister [14], which allowed him to attend a school in the village. Hong participated in the state examination for the selection of officials in Guangzhou, but repeatedly he was not successful. In 1836, at the age of 22 [10], after a second unsuccessful attempt in the state examination, in a street corner in Guangzhou, Hong was given a pamphlet, *Quanshi liangyan* or *Admonition to Mankind*, or *Good Words exhorting Mankind* [8] written by Liang Ah Fat (梁亞發), or Liang Fat, the first indigenous Chinese protestant Christian preacher. Hong left the pamphlet apparently un-read, on his bookshelves at home⁵. In 1843, after the third unsuccessful attempt at the state examination, Hong fell ill, and during his prolonged period of illness, he claimed to have a number of visions, in which he

⁴The Taipings had a number of kings under Hong, its supreme leader. These were referred to as “blood” brothers of Hong, as was common in underground organizations of the time [3]. None of these were blood brothers of Hong, but were referred to as “blood” brothers in the *Taiping Tian Guo*'s own literature.

⁵This is curious. If Hong was not interested in the *Quanshi liangyan* why would he have kept the pamphlets. Why did he not just throw it away as one would have expected. It is surmised that he must have a cursory look at the pamphlets, found them strange at the time, but cannot comprehend them, and hence he did not throw them away.

saw many strange sceneries [4, 14, 12]⁶. He subsequently recovered, and took up a position as a teacher in the village. After one or two years, one of Hong's cousins, Mr. Li, visited him and was browsing through his bookshelves [4], discovered the pamphlets written by Liang [8]. After reading them himself, he recommended them to Hong to read [4]. Hong started reading these pamphlets and identified what the pamphlets described with those strange sceneries which occurred in his visions a few years previously. From then on, Hong became an “enthusiast”⁷. In 1847, he visited an American missionary, I. J. Roberts [14], and attended a catechism class intended to be baptised. However, Roberts’ two assistants were jealous of Hong [14], probably because he was better educated than them, and suggested to Hong to ask for a living from Roberts after the baptism. This led Roberts to be suspicious of the motives of Hong's intended baptism, and did not go ahead with it⁸. Hong returned to his village, and started applying what he learned from Roberts first by baptising himself, then he baptised his small group of followers [14]. Afterwards, they went to Guangxi, and started to smash Confucius idols and destroy Confucius temples.

It is quite clear from the categories used in Taipings' own writings [16] that their world view was influenced by the experience of its leader Hong Xiuquan in his visions, their interpretations, and his few months' sojourn in Guangzhou with the missionary I. J. Roberts, where he was instructed in a form of evangelical Christian faith, and had access to both the Old Testament and New Testament⁹.

There are a number of puzzles which do not appear to have been considered by most other scholars so far.

1. Hong was well versed in Chinese literature, and presumably would be familiar with indigenous (folk) religion as practised in rural and urban areas in China in that era¹⁰. Why did he not use such a background to interpret his visions? What in his visions were so unusual that he would not have thought of using his background to interpret them?

⁶The occurrence of these visions is without doubt, as attested in [4], that during his illness, Hong would suddenly shout out, saying 'Tsan', 'tsan', or 'tsan ah', which means 'kill', 'kill'. These could happen as someone is in a deep trance, or in a dream. However, we would not go as far as Yap [15], in saying that Hong was probably mad, or mentally ill, at the time.

⁷In the sense that he is “enthusiastic” and earnest about what he did, like those caught up in the Great Awakening in US in 1740 [2]

⁸Hong however maintained a good relationship with Roberts, and Roberts was one of the few missionaries who visited Hong in Nanjing for an extended period after Taiping Tian Guo was established.

⁹According to some accounts, Roberts was not behaving in an acceptable fashion by his own missionary society. However, these probably would not have a bearing in the behaviour of Hong, who only spent a few months with him before the founding of the Taiping Tian Guo.

¹⁰A good summary of these practices was contained in Liang's *Quanshi liangyan*, which we will refer to in Section 5 in this paper. Another good summary is contained in the edited volume by Liu and Shek [9]

2. When he first read Liang's Quanshi liangyan [8], why did he so readily accept the categories as indicated in those pamphlets? After all, those concepts as indicated in Quanshi liangyan were as “foreign” to him as those sceneries contained in his visions. The concepts contained in Quanshi liangyan were not readily available to Chinese in those days, as protestant Christian missionary work were just at the beginning phase (as indicated in some of the reports provided by missionaries. like I. J. Roberts, K. Gutzlaff¹¹ at that time), and the influence of Catholic teaching was very limited in China¹². In other words, as far as the common man in the street was concerned, Christianity and many of its concepts were foreign or unknown at that time. Hence it is unusual that Hong, being someone who was learned in Chinese literature, and Chinese folk religious practices, to so readily accept the concepts as provided in Liang's pamphlets as the way to interpret his visions.

One way in which these two puzzles can be tackled would be by using the following methodologies:

1. Attempt to reconstruct what Hong saw in his visions as far as possible from extant sources. There are two extant sources which give a description of the visions of Hong, one is contained in a book written by Th. Hamberg [4], in 1853 but published in 1854, which was written from oral descriptions by one of Hong's relatives and close associates, Hong Ran-kang (洪仁玕); and the other one is contained in Taiping Tian Ri a publication of Taiping Tian Guo, published in 1861 [13].
2. From the reconstructed visions, understand what are the unusual features, based on an understanding of the Chinese folk religions as practised in China at that time¹³.
3. From an understanding of the unusual features in the visions from the point of view of a learned scholar like Hong, and from an understanding of the materials and concepts as provided in Liang's Quanshi liangyan [8], investigate why Hong so readily accepted those concepts presented in Liang's work, as the interpretation of his visions.

The approach to issue 1 cuts new grounds. So far, most scholars [14, 12] are interested to find out the elements in Hong's visions which are consistent with

¹¹He was one of the first missionaries that translated the Bible into Chinese based on the imperfect translations by Robert Morrison, the first protestant missionary to China.

¹²They were prohibited to spread their teachings by Imperial Edict.

¹³A good summary of this was contained in the edited book by Liu and Shek [9].

Chinese folk religions, e.g. Wagner [12]¹⁴. To the best of our knowledge, no one has yet attempted to reconstruct the visions of Hong by using extant sources. In addition, no one has asked the question, why would Hong so readily accept the concepts expressed in Liang's pamphlets as “authentic” interpretation of his visions.

One plausible reason why no one has ever thought of reconstructing the visions of Hong from extant sources is that it is full of risks: both extant sources are “unreliable”. Hamberg’s account depends on Hong's relative and close associate, Hong Ran-kang, conveyed using languages which might not be familiar to the writer¹⁵. The account contained in *Taiping Tian Ri* is also “unreliable” in that this was published in 1861, a full 18 years after the occurrence of the visions. Secondly, by 1861, Taiping Tian Guo was well established. Chances are that there would be considerable reflection on what occurred in Hong’s visions, and through acquisition of more information, resulted in considerable expansion in the account as provided in *Taiping Tian Ri*. So the question is: from two “unreliable” witnesses, can one obtain a sense of what lay underneath those sources. However, this is what historians need to do to reconstruct what would be the probable sceneries as witnessed by Hong as recorded in these two primary sources¹⁶.

As a side issue, and looking ahead, an interesting question ask is: knowing some of the contents in *Quanshi liangyan*, which in general informs people on a route to salvation, rather than a "textbook for rebellion", what are the new elements in Hong’s thought which contribute to his behaviours, e.g. the smashing of idols and temples. A speculative thought would be: had Hong not read the *Quanshi liangyan* of Liang Fat, would he have still behaved the way he did, in smashing idols, destroying temples, but

¹⁴For example, Wagner identified the cock like creature in Hong's visions as Lei Gong (雷公)[12], the god of thunder in Chinese mythology.

¹⁵Hamberg, while can understand Chinese, was not known as the expert in the Chinese language. Hong Ran-kang was not the person who had the visions. He knew of the visions through descriptions by Hong Xiuquan himself. It is most likely that Hong Ran-kang was not conversant in English, or German, as these were the languages most familiar to Mr. Hamberg. Thus, there might have been some misinterpretation on the part of Mr. Hamberg of what Mr. Hong had narrated.

¹⁶The task here for an historian is no different from other reconstruction work that historians need to do. For example, there is a whole industry around the reconstruction of the life of Jesus from the extant sources, as contained in canonical biblical books in the New testament, and other ancient sources, like those in the New Testament Pseudepigrapha. See some of the most recent reconstructions in e.g. James Dunn, “Jesus Remembered”, William B Erdmans Publishing Company, 2003; John Meier, “A marginal Jew” Vol. 1,2 & 3, Doubleday, 2001; Richard Bauckham, “Jesus and the Eyewitnesses”. William B Erdmans Publishing Company, 2006. It is from these biblical studies work that the author of this current paper has taken hint and been influenced in an attempt to reconstruct the visions of Hong Xiuquan. As may be observed, some of the reconstruction techniques, e.g. the older version is assumed to be more authentic until proven otherwise, the less usual description is considered more authentic, the less conformity with the prevailing concepts are considered more authentic, are reminiscent of the techniques used in the reconstruction of Jesus' life from extant sources. In this paper, we will however not deploy the formal methods of textual criticism or redaction criticism to the extant texts.

probably in the name of another deity, or did his particular understanding of Christianity play a pivotal role in his subsequent “enthusiasm” and vocation of smashing Confucius idols and temples.

2. Two Extant Versions of Hong's visions

As indicated previously, there are two extant versions of Hong's visions, one contained in [4] and the other one in *Taiping Tian Ri*. The *Taiping Tian Ri* was written in classical Chinese, and apparently has not been translated in its entirety into English. In the table below, we will provide a somewhat free translation of portion of *Taiping Tian Ri* into English. This is not a good translation in that I am not an expert translator, nor am I an expert in Chinese language of that era. However, it suffices to say that the translation would give a sense of what the content of the original Chinese version is, and thus permit some comparison between the two versions.

<i>Hamberg</i>	<i>Taiping Tian Ri</i>
<p>When his eyes were closed he saw a dragon, a tiger, and a cock entering his room. and soon after he observed a great number of men, playing upon musical instruments , approaching with a beautiful sedan chair, in which they invited him to be seated, and then carried him away. Siu-tshuen (秀全) felt greatly astonished at the honour and distinction bestowed upon him, and knew not what to think thereof.</p>	<p>I saw numerous angels descending from Heaven, saying, we wished to receive you heavenwards. I also saw a child, wearing yellow that came in front of me. I saw something which looked like a cock, a few feet tall, standing in front of the child. The angels helped the true lord sit in a sedan chair, going heavenwards from the eastern main thoroughfare. The lord was ill at ease in the sedan chair.</p>
<p>They soon arrived at a beautiful and luminous place, where on both sides were assembled a multitude of fine men and women, Who saluted him with expressions of great joy.</p>	<p>Arriving at the Gate of Heaven, both sides were flanked with numerous beautiful maidens, welcoming him. The lord did not look sideways. Heaven shone with bright and colorful light, very different from those on earth. I saw numerous people wearing dragon robes, and corner hat, coming to see the lord.</p>
<p>As he left the sedan, an old woman took him down to a river and said,-"Thou dirty man, why hast thou kept company with yonder people, and defiled thyself? I must now wash thee clean." After the washing was performed, Siu-tshuen, in company with a great number of old virtuous and venerable men, among whom he remarked many of the ancient sages, entered a large building where they opened his body with a knife, took out his heart and other parts, and put in their</p>	<p>Then there was a command to cut open the lord's stomach, replacing the old [organs] with the new ones. Moreover, they arranged words, in front of the lord. He read them one by one. Afterwards, there was a heavenly mother, welcoming him saying: “My son, you went to earth and made yourself dirty (contaminated). Let mother clean you up beside the river, then you can go and meet with the old father”. I was cleansed, and the heavenly mother led me to see the heavenly</p>

<p>place others new and of a red colour. Instantly when this was done, the wound closed, and he could see no trace of the incision which had been made. Upon the walls surrounding this place, Siu-tshuen remarked a number of Tablets with inscriptions exhorting to virtue, which he one by one examined. Afterwards, they entered another large hall the beauty and splendour of which were beyond description.</p>	<p>father, lord of heavens, king of all kings.</p>
<p>A man, venerable in years, with golden beard and dressed in a black robe, was sitting in an imposing attitude upon the highest place.</p>	<p>His head wore a high brim hat, he wore a black dragon robe, his mouth, full of golden beard, reaching down to his stomach. His appearance was strong, body most high, his gesture most serious, clothing most tidy, his two hands covering his knees. My lord came to him and knelt before him. After prostrating, he stood by one side.</p>
<p>As soon as he observed Siu-tshuen, he began to shed tears, and said, -“ All human being’s in the whole world are produced and sustained by me; they eat my food and wear my clothing, out not a single one among them has a heart to remember and venerate me; what, is however still worse than that, they take of my gifts, and therewith worship demons; they purposely rebel against me, and arouse my anger. Do thou not imitate them.”</p>	<p>The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, entreated, saying, “You came here?” I said “You know”. “While on earth, human beings do not have conscience, is it not everyone created by me, fed by me, who is not fed by my food, cloth by my clothes, who is not blessed by me? Everything is created by me, every robe, every food, all are given by me. How much are human beings blessed by me. But they covered their conscience, and do not have any fear and respect for me? They are seduced by demons, wasting what I had given them. This is like respecting demons. It seems that demons created them, fed them and not realizing that demons let them down, surrounded them, ensnaring them. They, on the contrary, do not discern this. I am jealous, and yet I pity them. ”</p> <p>The lord heard this entreat, his heart felt, unease, wishing that he can immediately go and persuade them; let everyone discern demons’ designs, turn their hearts towards the heavenly father, lord of heaven, king of all kings.</p> <p>The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings said, “It is exceedingly difficult indeed” The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings usually taught the lord to sit properly, clothing needed to tidy, head needed to be upright, body needed to</p>

	<p>be straight, two hands needed to cover the knees, two feet needed to be separated. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, also brought the lord to high heavens, pointing out that on earth, demons seduced human beings, one by one pointing them out to the lord. Moreover, he blessed with his hand, earthly demons, immediately without rewards. He also, one by one, pointed them out to the lord. After this, the lord saw that the king of kings did not look back.</p> <p>Sometimes, the heavenly father, the lord of heavens, king of all kings, saw the demons, very cunning and he was very angry. He immediately sent the angels to go to the earth, to destroy the demons and report back. At that time, the heavenly father, the lord of heavens, king of all kings, all he pointed out of demons, none of them were worthy of the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings' rewards. [They] seduce human beings to do evil deeds, transgress heavenly commands, neglect to respect and fear the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, but to respect and fear him. If there was any who did not respect or feared him, he would bother them, and harmed them, inflicted them greatly. The lord was exceedingly angry. As a consequence, he requested the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, saying, "O Venerated One they are doing such things, why not destroy them". The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings said, "It is not only that there are demons on earth, they are also present even in the thirty three heavens."</p> <p>The lord said, "O Venerated One you have such great power, if you wish them to live, they will live, if you wish them to die, they will die. How would you tolerate them at all?" The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings said, "I will tolerate them to act like this for a while, then I will constrain them. Can they still run away from my hands?" The lord said, "If you tolerate them for a while, this will cause suffering among all my brothers and sisters."</p>
<p>Siu-tshuen also heard the venerable old man with the black robe reprove Confucius for having omitted in his books clearly to expound the true doctrine. Confucius seemed much ashamed, and confessed his guilt.</p>	<p>The heavenly father, the lord of heavens, king of all kings said, "You consider them. If you cannot tolerate them, then you should chase them all out." The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, also pointed out to the lord one demon, with a square head and red eyes. The lord always cared for him. But he</p>

	<p>continuously seduced man, surrounding them. The lord, as a consequence, asked the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, to chase him out. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings said, "If they are really behaving like this, you have my commands, and chase them out." The lord took command from the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, chased the leading demon, saying, "My heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, instructed me to tell you, you better disappear quickly from the scene".</p> <p>At that time, the saviour of the world, the heavenly brother Christ was gathering and leading the group of angels. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings said, "If there is anyone from high heavens following the demons, every single one of them will be captured back; if there is anyone with an evil heart is in assistance of the demons, and every single one of the stealthily entered little demons, every single one of them will be chased out." And investigating the reasons why demons behaved the way they were, there were plenty of wrong teachings of Confucius. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings instructed (the lord) to show three types of books, asking the lord to look, saying, "This type of books are the wonderful deeds of mine when I went down to earth , this book contains miracles, and entreats, this book is true, there is no wrong in them."</p>
	<p>"And this type of books are the ones that I sent your brother Christ to go down to earth, showing miracles, giving his life as a ransom for their sins, and his deeds, this book is also true, there is no wrong in them. That type of books are left behind by Confucius, they are the books that you study on earth. These books have plenty of wrongs and mistakes, even you study them, and are led astray by them." The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings because of these, scolded Confucius, saying, "Why do you teach people, confuse them, as a result, they do not know me, is your reputation is even more than me?" Confucius in the beginning tried to argue, but eventually silently deep in thought and could not say anything. Heavenly brother Christ also scolded Confucius, saying, "You created such types of books to teach people, even my own brother needed to study your books,</p>

	<p>and is being taught wrongly by your books.” All angels also scolded him.</p> <p>The lord also scolded Confucius, saying, “You created these books, teaching people, what can you do so creating these books?” Confucius saw that everyone in high heavens scolded him, he escaped down to earth, wishing to flee together with the leader of the demons. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings then sent the lord, and angels to chase after Confucius, tied him up and brought him back to the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings; the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings was exceedingly angry, instructed the angles to whip him with a whip. Confucius knelt in front of the heavenly brother, Christ, asking for mercy repeatedly. There was plenty of whipping and Confucius asked for mercy repeatedly. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings thought that his work could more than compensate for his mistakes, permitting him to stay in heaven to be blessed, and never allow him to go down to earth again.</p>
<p>Thereupon he gave Siu-tshuen a sword, commanding him to exterminate the demons, but to spare his brothers and sisters; a seal in which he would overcome the evil spirits, and also a yellow fruit to eat, which Siu tshuen found sweet to the taste. When he had received the ensigns of royalty from the hand of the old man, he instantly commenced to exhort those collected in the hall to return to their duties toward the venerable old man upon the high seat. Some replied to his exhortation saying “We have indeed forgotten our duties toward the venerable One. Others said, “Why should we venerate him let us only be merry, and drink together with our friends;” Siu-tshuen then, because of the hardness of their hearts, continued his "admonition" with tears”. The old man said to him, “Take courage and do the work; I will assist thee in every difficulty”. Shortly after this he turned to the assemblage of the old and virtuous saying, “ Siu tshuen is competent to this charge;” and thereupon he led Siu-tshuen out, told him to look down from above, and said, “Behold the people upon this earth! hundredfold is the perverseness of their hearts.” Siu-tshuen looked and saw such a degree of depravity and vice, that his eyes could not endure the sight, nor his mouth express their deeds.</p>	<p>At that time heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, commanded the lord to fight against the demons, gave him one golden seal, one sword (called Snow in the midst of Clouds), command all angels to chase demons, in thirty three heavens, in each level fighting with them. All those brothers and sisters who followed the leader of the demons, each one of them being captured back and returned to high heavens. All those who were evil in heart, assisting the leader of demons, and those that stealthily entered, the little demons, every single one of them were being chased out.</p> <p>In the process of chasing them out, the demon, and those of the little demons, returned to fight with the lord, but cannot resist the lord. At that time, the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, took the lead, although the demons were exceedingly cunning, one by one, they were destroyed by the lord. When the lord was fighting with the demons, the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings was behind him, the heavenly brother, Christ was also behind him, took up the seal, shining on the demons. The demons cannot harm the lord. Moreover, the demons cannot face the golden seal. When they saw the seal, they would run. The leader of the demons can change into many different shapes.</p>

Sometimes, when fallen to the ground because of being hit, he changed into a big snake; if the snake is being hit and falls to the ground, it changes into other shapes. He can change into seventeen or eighteen shapes; even as small as a nick of a dog, it can also change into other shapes. When the lord became angry with the fight, and wished to exterminate them, the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, shouted, saying, "No, no! It is enough to subdue them". The lord did not understand why. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings said, "This demon is an old serpent, it can seduce people, swallow people's souls, if you exterminate him, many souls who were eaten by him will not be saved.

Moreover, it will contaminate the holy sanctuary? Hence it is better to spare his life. "Even these little demons, the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, commanded the lord not to exterminate them. It was at of the level of the earth that they were exterminated. The lord sometimes became tired from the fight and fell asleep, the angels would surround him so that the demons will not be able to harm him. When he awoke, he fought again. Those little demons who stealthily [entered] in those thirty three heavens, and those who helped the leader of the demons, one by one were being chased down to earth.

Once they arrived on earth, the lord was exceedingly angry, shouting loudly, to all the angles, saying, "Cut them down, cut them down". All angel obeyed the command of the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, the command of the saviour of the world, Christ, and the command of the lord, using the sword which the heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, gave to the lord, cut down numerous demons, but the leader of demons, already fled. As a consequence, the demons were subdued, obeyed the command to go down to eighteen hell, two third of them not capable of doing evil things anymore. The lord sometimes fell hungry during the battle, the heavenly mother, and all the little sisters, brought from high heavens, sweet fruit for the lord to eat, its colour is exceedingly yellow, its fragrance exceedingly good. When the lord fought with the demons, the heavenly mother, and all the little sisters, also assisted the lord, hence, they prevailed over all battles. After the victory, they all returned to high heavens. The heavenly

	<p>father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, was exceedingly pleased, and bestowed on the lord as “The Taiping heavenly king, heavenly path king Chuen (perfect)”. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, said, “Your name is Chuen, your previous name the first word of which is the same as my name, and this is offensive to me. You ought to replace this name. When you go down to earth, sometimes you were called Hong Xiu, sometimes known as Hong Chuen, sometimes known as Hong Xiu Chuen. Your name, and the name of your brother, all are meaningful.”</p> <p>At the time, the lord was in high heavens, and there was a palace is the eastern side. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, usually taught him to sing hymns, with no words changed. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings, word by word taught him how to sing in a long tune, and changes. The heavenly father, lord of heavens, king of all kings sometimes commanded the heavenly brother Christ to teach the lord, none of the words would change.</p>
	<p>The heavenly brother Christ was exceedingly angry. His heavenly wife, persuaded the heavenly brother. The heavenly wife, was tolerant of him. It could be said that the eldest sister-in-law can act as a mother. If the heavenly brother Christ has reasons to prevail, the heavenly sister-in-law would persuade his heavenly brother.</p>

While the main points are similar between these two versions, there are however some significant differences. These differences might have arisen because of the language differences between Mr. Hong Ran-kang and Mr. Hamberg in the narration of the visions. These might have been due to the later expansion in *Taiping Tian Ri* to make it more legitimate. The visions are in a sense a “call for mission” of Hong Xiuquan. Hence, it is likely that in its published version: *Taiping Tian Ri*, a certain dose of expansion is inevitable.

3. Re-construction of the Vision of Hong

In this section, we will re-construct the visions as best as we can base on the two accounts which we have. The principle in which we will follow would be: in the

visions it would not be possible for Hong to identify the characters, as otherwise he would not be in a perplexed state as to the interpretation of these visions. Secondly we will consider the one given by Hamberg [4] as more authentic as it is closer to the time of occurrence, and less coloured by the happenings in Taiping Tian Guo, compared with the *Taiping Tian Ri* which was printed much later (so that categories have time to adopt their identities as provided in *Taiping Tian Ri*)

Below we will give a reconstruction of the visions of Hong, followed by extensive notes on the way this is reconstructed.

In the vision, Hong saw a dragon, a tiger, and a cock¹⁷ entering his room. It is probable that he saw a child wearing a yellow robe well¹⁸. Soon after, he saw a great number of men, playing musical instrument, approaching with a sedan chair¹⁹. They invited him to be seated on the sedan chair, and carried him away. Xiuquan felt astonished that they would bestow such an honour on him.²⁰

They soon arrived at a beautiful and luminous place, where on both sides there were a great number of men and women assembled²¹. They saluted him with expressions of great joy²².

He left the chair. Two things happened to him: he was being washed by an old woman, and his stomach was cut open, and his internals were replaced with new ones. In the washing by the old woman, she told him, “You dirty or contaminated man, why did you keep company with yonder people - with the implications that it is these yonder people who contaminated him²³ His internal organs were being replaced with new ones, through cutting him open²⁴.

In the place or in a different place, Xiuquan saw a number of tablets, with inscriptions on them, exhorting to virtue. Xiuquan read them one by one²⁵.

¹⁷In *Taiping Tian Ri* we encounter that there is only one cock like creature. The omission of the two creatures, tiger and dragon might be due to their difficulties in interpreting the presence of these two additional creatures to the Taipings. The omission in *Taiping Tian Ri* is even more puzzling as it mentioned later that there are men wearing cornered hats, wearing dragon robes. Hence it is most certain that there were these two other creatures present.

¹⁸The existence of the child is mentioned in *Taiping Tian Ri* but not in Hamberg [4]. This may be due to the fact that Hamberg did not take note of this detail in Hong's recollection of the vision as narrated to Hong R.

¹⁹ Here in *Taiping Tian Ri*, the numerous angels would be considered embellishment, as there is no reason why these should be angels. They could be men playing musical instruments.

²⁰ The entering of heaven using the eastern path, or road is almost certainly an embellishment. It would sound grander if Hong is carried away heavenwards on a sedan chair accompanied by angels, rather than just being invited to sit on a sedan chair, carried by men, playing musical instruments.

²¹ Here *Taiping Tian Ri* is almost certainly an embellishment. The place does not need to be identified as heaven. *Taiping Tian Ri* mentioned great number of beautiful maidens, and made the point that Hong did not look sideways at them. This is to give an impression that Hong is pious, and that he is not given easily to the temptation of the flesh.

²² Here in *Taiping Tian Ri*, it only mentioned that these people coming to greet him, but omitted that there were expressions of great joy

²³ It is a common endearing way to address an old woman as one's mother. Hence there is no particular meaning attached to the way the words from the old woman as contained in *Taiping Tian Ri*. Both versions give a sense that it is the yonder people who contaminated Hong. There an implication here that Hong was originally considered clean, but only got contaminated through coming into contact with these yonder people.

²⁴ Here Hamberg [4] drew a logical conclusion that there was miraculous healing of Hong, that his wounds were healed. However, this might not have happened in the vision, as *Taiping Tian Ri* correctly presented the facts. There is an apparent juxtaposition of the order in which these two events took place in the two versions. However, this is immaterial to what had happened.

²⁵ Here both versions agree that there were a number of tablets, with inscriptions. Both version agree that he read them one by one.

After this, they entered into another large hall with great splendor²⁶. Here they saw an old man, with golden beard and dressed in a black robe sitting in an imposing posture on a raised place.²⁷

As soon as the old man saw Xiuquan, he burst into tears, saying, “All human beings in the whole world are produced and sustained by me; they eat my food, and wear my clothing but not a single one among them has a heart to remember and venerate me; what is however worse, they take of my gifts, and therewith worship demons, they purposely rebel against me, and arouse my anger. Do not imitate them²⁸.”

(Probably in another version) Xiuquan also heard the venerable old man reprove Confucius for having omitted in his books clearly to expound the true doctrine. Confucius seemed much ashamed and confessed his guilt²⁹.

The old man gave two things to Xiuquan: a (golden) seal and a sword, commanding him to exterminate the demons, but to spare the brothers and sisters³⁰, Xiuquan was given a sweet fruit to eat³¹

Then, there was an aftermath of the giving of the seal and the sword. Xiuquan immediately commenced to work and exhort those who gathered to return to their post to work. There were those that responded and there were those that did not respond to the call. The old man indicated that he will assist Xiuquan in every difficulty. Then Xiuquan looked down on the earth and found that he could not bear the sight as he found them deprived³².

²⁶ *Tai ping Tian Ri* made an implicit assumption here that because the old man was not seen in this place, and hence they must have entered a different room, while Hamberg [4] is more explicit in making reference to this.

²⁷ *Tai ping Tian Ri* told us what this old man wore - black dragon robe. Also it told us that this old man's beard come down to his stomach. It furthermore made a ready identification that this old man is none other than the heavenly father, the lord of heavens, king of all kings. This identification is certainly post hoc, rather than an identification by the old man himself. The title it uses reflects that this is the one who is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. In Hamberg [4], there is not yet such identification. Hence this would be the more authentic version, as the identification of the old man as the heavenly father, the lord of heavens, king of all kings is only after Hong understood the meaning of the visions, and was convinced of his encounter with the heavenly father, the lord of heavens, king of all kings, the supreme being who is the almighty god. The old man is sitting with a straight posture as provided in some details by *Tai ping Tian Ri* which is an expansion of the words used in Hamberg [4].

²⁸ Here we follow the version provided by Hamberg [4] as it is shorter, and more precise. The version provided by *Tai ping Tian Ri* is essentially the same, though with some expansions.

²⁹ Hamberg [4] has this in a separate place than the same vision, while *Tai ping Tian Ri* has this in the same vision and in a more elaborated form. The context is dear, Confucius was being reproved by the man in the black robe and he was much ashamed of himself: his crime according to [4] is that he has omitted to clearly expound about the old man in his books. The *Tai ping Tian Ri* contained a commissioning of Hong Xiuquan to exterminate the demons. This appears to be later embellishments to legitimize what Hong was doing – in exterminating idols and demons. Then there is the involvement of Christ the heavenly elder brother of Hong. This is also almost certain to be later embellishment, in that it tends to legitimize what Hong was doing. The story concerning the three types of books, with the first type being Old Testament, the second type being the New Testament, and the third type being the books written by Confucius is again almost certain an embellishment, as an expansion of the fact that Confucius was being reproved, for omitting to expound on the old man.

³⁰ This is similar to the great commission of disciples contained in the gospels. Xiuquan was asked to exterminate the demons, but to spare the brothers and sisters. The *Tai ping Tian Ri* version appears to be considerable expansion of the version in Hamberg [4]. Hence the Hamberg version (4) is considered more authentic.

³¹ The *Tai ping Tian Ri* version explains what the functions of this fruit is: to sustain him to fight the demons. This further expands into the involvement of the heavenly brother, Christ, and his heavenly wife in assisting Hong Xiuquan in exterminating the demons. These are almost certainly embellishment.

³² Here we will follow the scene as provided in [4] as these are more compact, and less details. The ones contained in *Tai ping Tian Ri* are more elaborated, and almost certainly are embellishment intended to explain the briefer descriptions contained in [4].

A somewhat startling aspect of this reconstruction is the lack of mention of a heavenly brother in [4]³³, the earlier account of the visions of Hong, while in the account given in *Tai ping Tian Ri*, his role was much more elaborate³⁴. This is startling in view of the common belief that Hong called Christ as his elder heavenly brother. But in Hamberg's version, there was no mention of a heavenly brother in the visions [4]. This leads to the speculation that may be the role of Christ was only added much later when Hong was in contact with the Christian faith, *i.e.*, when he came into contact by reading *Quanshi liangyan*, when he attended the catechism class with I. J. Roberts, and was introduced to the Bible. If this understanding is correct this would lend considerable weight to the reliability of the report given in Hamberg [4].

4. What Are the Unusual Features of the Visions

In this section, we wish to examine the re-constructed visions and asked the question: what are the unusual features contained in this reconstruction which a learned person like Hong Xiuquan cannot interpret using the knowledge he has had on Chinese literature and the knowledge on Chinese folk religion practices.

The more unusual features of his visions from a cultural point of view are as follows:

- His encounter with the old woman. While in dreams or visions, a woman might appear. However, it is unusual that Xiuquan was being washed by this old woman. The reason of being washed is because of the contamination that he acquired after having been with people “on the yonder”. This assumes the possibility of imputed contamination. It assumes that the people on the yonder are contaminated. By being associated with them Hong was contaminated, and needed to be cleansed. By being cleansed externally, he was being made clean on the outside.
- The replacement of his internal organs with new ones. This makes an assumption that his internal organs were required to be replaced. They were either faulty, or unclean. In the context, it is assumed that they were unclean.

³³This lack of mention of Christ in the visions is also confirmed in the self report of Hong Ran-kang, the person who provided the information to Hamberg [4]. In the self report of the kings, Hong Ran.kang [5], he did not mention the existence of a heavenly brother, Christ.

³⁴This omission of any mention of Christ in the account given by Hamberg (as contained in Chapter 3 of the book) was not noted by other scholars, to the best of our knowledge. This omission is also curious given the fact that Mr. Hamberg was a missionary, hence would have known the centrality of the concepts of Jesus in God's salvation plan, and that in a later chapter (Chapter 4) [4] he did mention Christ assisting Hong Xiuquan in his efforts to exterminate idols.

Hence by replacing his internal organs, he was being made clean from the inside.

- The witness of Confucius being shamed. The reason is that Confucius failed to expound the true doctrines about the old man. This may be due to the fact that Hong failed the state examination repeatedly. Sub-consciously he might have built up a dislike towards Confucius. However, it is clear here that the reason why Confucius was being shamed was because he failed to expound the true doctrine. This assumes that there was a set of true doctrines, and Confucius, being a representative of the intelligentsia, and the sages, did not expound them fully to people in the yonder. This might be the reason why they were contaminated, we are not sure. Confucius said that if you do not know, you are not guilty of what you do. However, Confucius himself should have known better, being a representative of the wise. Hence he would have no excuse of not being aware of the true doctrines. But he chose not to expound them, and hence he was being found guilty of neglect. To an educated person in Hong's era, to express this type of thought against Confucius is amounting to sacrilege.

- The encounter with the old man, who gave him two gifts: a seal and a sword. With the seal and the sword he was being asked to fight the demons and to exterminate them. It is not unusual to encounter an old man ³⁵ in dreams or visions, and would be given gifts. The unusual aspect is that Hong was asked to use these two gifts to fight demons and exterminate them.

- The zeal which he would have in exterminating the demons.

Thus, it is observed that most of the categories encountered by Hong in his visions are already known in China in that era. The unknowns are: how would he make sense of these sceneries. Some of the consequences are alien to Hong, for example, the need to be cleaned both internally and externally. The awareness that Confucius has neglected in his duties, and hence was being shamed. The awareness of needing to exterminate the demons using the seal and the sword. But why would he need to be cleansed in the first instance? What was his contamination? Why would he be unclean? Who were “the people on the yonder”? Why is it that Confucius was not expounding the true doctrines, given the fact that Confucius has expounded much truth about the ways a country should be governed, how people in the same family relate to one another, and

³⁵There is speculation [11] that this old man could be identified with Bao Gong (包公), a prominent figure in a popular mythology of folk religion of China. This man is associated with righteousness, as he is depicted as a dark faced righteous judge in popular mythology.

how one should relate to others in the society, etc. What were the true doctrines which Confucius was accused of not being true to in his duties in expounding them? What could these be? Who were the demons? Why would they need to be exterminated?

These would be the questions which would have run through Hong's mind, after he had recovered sufficiently and reflected on his visions. Being a man in that era and a member of the literati, he would assume that there were some significant meanings associated with the visions. What are the gods trying to tell him in giving him the visions? It would be up to him to find out how to interpret these visions.

5. *Quanshi liangyan* (勸世良言)

This is the name given to a number of pamphlets written by Liang Fat [8], the first indigenous Chinese Protestant Christian preacher. The contents of these pamphlets are given in Chapter 4 of Hamberg [4]. Quoting Hamberg, these pamphlets contained "...a good number of whole chapters of the Bible according to the translation of Dr. Morrison³⁶, many essays upon important subjects from single texts, and sundry miscellaneous statements founded on Scripture" (see page 17 and 18 of [4]). In some parts, it contained sermons, and an autobiography of Liang Fat, the author of these pamphlets. It is interesting to note that in *Taiping Tian Ri*, the existence of these pamphlets was not mentioned at all, despite the pivotal role it has in providing an understanding of Hong's visions. This may be due to the fact that the most "pertinent and relevant aspects" of *Quanshi liangyan* were already incorporated into *Taiping Tian Ri* and hence the compiler or writer of *Taiping Tian Ri* did not find it necessary to mention the existence of these pamphlets.

From the point of view of a Chinese not being exposed to Christianity previously, reading these pamphlets would be quite difficult, because these pamphlets were written without any introduction or commentaries to help the reader to understand them. In other words, the pamphlets were written in such a way as to assume that the reader can figure out what the message is³⁷. For example, in Vol 1 (according to Hamberg it is entitled "A true account of the salvation of mankind"), Section 1, the section is entitled "A paraphrastic version of the 1st (*sic*) chapter of Genesis". This

³⁶Dr. Robert Morrison was the first Protestant missionary to China in the early 1800s. He translated the Bible into Chinese language.

³⁷This is very similar to the way that the Bible is written. There is no introduction nor commentary. The reader is expected to work out for themselves the strange names, and strange events contained in these narratives.

starts with the Lord Jehovah created all creatures in the field³⁸, out of which the serpent was the most cunning, and then it continued to paraphrase the third chapter of Genesis until the point that Adam and Eve were being chased out of the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:19). Then without warning, it broke into an exposition of this passage, saying that because of Adam's sin against the Lord, calamity and suffering were brought into the world. To someone who has no understanding of the messages in the Old Testament, this passage is almost impossible to understand. For a start, who was this Jehovah³⁹? Why was he given such a name? Why was he referred as God? In Chinese mythology, it is someone else who created heaven and earth, and all the creatures thereof. In Chinese mythology, serpent is not necessarily considered to be evil or cunning. In some context, serpent can be considered as good. Someone reading through these accounts would soon be confused, and not know what to think of the events told in these narratives.

However, it is believed that it is the second section of Volume 1 which would be the one to have caught Hong's eyes. According to Hamberg [4], this section is entitled "An exposure of the idolatry of China".

This section could be considered as a good summary of the folk religious practice in China as were practised in the 1800's. The section starts with a description of man's need for producing idols, out of almost anything; a long list of the artifacts made by man was given. Then, it went on to attack the way that the three routes: Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist, to the meaning of life in producing idols for worship. No doubt it would be the one on Confucius' way which would have hit home for Hong. In this, it mentioned that the Confucian scholars worshiped two idols, which they had created. But the pamphlet points out the logical fallacy of these idol worships. If everyone worships these same two idols, how come that some would not have been successful in their state examinations even into their seventies or eighties of age? In other words, the idols are unable to help (bless) the scholars in their state examinations. This would have hit home for Hong, as he failed a number of times in the state examinations. While we are not informed anywhere that he might have worshiped these Confucian idols, it is highly likely that he would have done so in the

³⁸This is actually a paraphrase of verses 1 to 19 of Chapter 3 of Genesis rather than Chapter 1 of Genesis.

³⁹In *Quanshi liangyan*, it is the direct transcription of "Jehovah" into Chinese characters (which means "venerated old one, fire, god"). This in itself is the tetragram of God in the Old Testament, "Yahweh", the name of God. The Old Testament Hebrew is written without any vowel indications. However, the Jews normally use the vowel points of Adonai, the Lord in Hebrew for this tetragram, and this then transcribed into English as Jehovah.

part. Secondly, the pamphlet also indicates that the idols were smashed and destroyed, using a proof text from the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament. This appears to tally with Hong's vision, in which he saw idols being destroyed. He was being urged by the old man to exterminate demons (idols).

It might have been the reading of this section which ignited the interest of Hong in these pamphlets, we are not sure. This might be what Mr. Hamberg had indicated in [4] that Hong found that what was described in the pamphlets matched what he saw in his visions.

A curious point to note: *Quanshi liangyan* contains far more about the Lord Jehovah, and about the way of Jesus. Indeed, its major focus is to convince readers that all have sinned against God, but there is a salvation through Jesus, upon his self-sacrifice on the cross. None of these appear to be emphasized in the writings of Taiping Tian Guo⁴⁰. This emphasis on idol extermination is confirmed in two extant early writings of Hong Xiuquan, called *Admonition to the World* [6], and *Ode to World Salvation*[7]. These two writings are claimed to be early in that they were composed in 1845 and 1846. Reading these two writings, one gets the impression that Hong was more interested to legitimize his mission and his vocation of being the God sent to exterminate idols, and to cleanse the earth of spiritual contaminations. While the role of the heavenly brother Christ is mentioned in these two writings, however the mention of the vicarious death of Christ to save the world was given only a cursory mention, rather than emphasized. Instead, the writings of Taiping Tian Guo appear to emphasize the role of idols and the need to exterminate them from the earth.

This puzzle might be resolved through an understanding of the ways in which literature can be read by various people with a pre-conceived idea. For those who read the *Quanshi liangyan*, and the Old and New Testaments, if they are already convicted of their sins or their own deprived state, they might find a way of salvation from their deprived state through the vicarious death of Jesus. This might be one of the reasons why *Quanshi liangyan* started with Genesis 3, in which it was described how sin came into the world, through the disobedience of Adam and Eve the first couple. Then it went on to show the manifestation of sin through idol worship. Moreover, through an exposition of the New Testament, it showed that there is a way forward in which man can be reconciled with God, through Jesus, his only begotten son, who died on the

⁴⁰There were mention of the role of Christ in the salvation of man. However, these are mentioned in passing, rather than emphasized as in Christianity

cross, who have no sins, to take away the sins of the world.

However, for someone like Hong, who was preoccupied with his visions, and was perplexed by them, when he read the account of the idols as practised in the folk religions of China at that time, and saw in his visions that these idols were exterminated, he would have read these pamphlets in that perspective. In other words, his views would be coloured by his visions. While initially when he read the pamphlets might not have perceived that the pamphlets would provide a key for understanding or interpreting his visions. However, probably from reading the account of the section on against idols, his views were changed, and perceived that the pamphlets may contain keys to interpret his visions. As his visions were concerned mainly with idols, and hence he might have missed the understanding of the contents of the *Quanshi liangyan*. This may be one way in which he saw as keys to understand his perplexity with the visions. He did not have much opportunities to be further acquainted with the Old and New testaments, even though he spent a few months with I. J. Roberts, the American missionary in Guangzhou. In that period of a few months, it would not be possible for him to assimilate the teachings as contained in the Bible. Thus, he was forced to contemplate the writings contained in *Quanshi liangyan* (which he might have ready formed the views before he met Mr Roberts), and the Bible (we were told by Roberts that he sent Hong away with reading materials including a Bible) in a vacuum. It is thus simple for him to take what he saw as the key to understand his visions, and adapt the others as he saw fit using categories which were familiar to him.

Thus, in order to find a place for himself, he created a “myth” that he was the second son of God, the father⁴¹, and hence the younger brother of Jesus⁴². This makes sense in a filial relationship which was strong in China. Then it is possible to identify God as god the father, and associate him with the old venerated man in his visions. As indicated in Section 2, it appears that in the original vision, there was no mention of a middle aged person identified as Jesus. It might be that only after Hong had been in contact with *Quanshi liangyan* that convinced him that there should be such a figure: Christ. One way in which this relationship can be established was

⁴¹If we can believe the authenticity of the early status of the two writings, *Admonition to the World* [6], and *Ode for the Salvation of the World* [7], then it seems that the idea of Christ as the elder heavenly brother and himself as the younger brother is quite early, before Hong went to consult with Roberts.

⁴²It is interesting to note that the Taiping Tian Guo normally referred to Jesus as Christ, the messiah, the saviour of the world, the venerated title of him. It does not normally refer to him as Jesus, by his known earthly name. This lack of differentiation may be due to the lack of instruction of Hong and his followers.

through the creation of the myth that he is the second son of god, and Jesus as the elder heavenly brother. But this understanding must have occurred early, as the mention of Christ as the elder heavenly brother already occurred in *Admonition to the World* [6], and *Ode to World Salvation* [7].

This syncretistic way of merging concepts in the one religion with another was quite commonly practiced in China at the time [9].

6. Conclusions

In this paper, we re-examine the visions of Hong and his understanding of these visions. We commenced our work by an attempt in re-constructing the visions through two extant descriptions of the vision, one by Hamberg [4] and the other one as contained in *Taiping Tian Ri*, a publication late in the existence of Taiping Tian Guo. Through this reconstruction, it is shown that there is a high probability that the figure of Jesus was not present or highlighted in the original visions. It is highly probable that only the “old venerated man” was present in the visions. This “old venerated man” commanded Hong to exterminate the demons. After Hong came into contact with Christianity, first through the reading of the pamphlets written by Liang [8], the first indigenous protestant preacher and by being instructed in the catechism by I. J. Roberts, a missionary from USA, Hong was able to interpret his visions, through an understanding of the extermination of idols, as given by the “old venerated man”, using the seal and the sword. Then, he synergistically combined categories familiar to him, e.g., filial relationships, and created the concept of Jesus being the elder heavenly brother, the first born of God, and himself being the younger brother. This legitimized his actions. He has received his mission and vocation, from the heavenly father, and this gave him the mandate to exterminate idols in the world. It is through the extermination of these idols that he and his group were in direct conflict with the Imperial Qing militia, which led subsequently to the formation of the Taiping Tian Guo. Hence this paper can be considered as an attempt to understand the early thoughts of Hong Xiuquan as far as possible and in understanding the role of his visions, and their subsequent interpretation using Christian categories. Would Hong Xiuquan have used another deity to explain his visions, the answer is probably in the negative, except may be those associated with Islam, or Judaism⁴³. The main reason is

⁴³Judaism, Islam, and Christianity are the three major religions of the world that preached against the worship of idols.

that most of the other deities seldom command the adherents to exterminate idols. However, Hong Xiuquan was not in contact with either Islam, or Judaism, even though they were practised in China⁴⁴. “Alternatively through historical accidents, Hong was rejected for baptism by I. J. Roberts. Had he have the opportunity to be baptized, stayed and worked with I. J. Roberts, he might have a better understanding of Christianity, and would not have been engaged in armed uprising, or chose alternative form of religious reform, e.g. through the preaching and exposition of the Bible, history might have to be re-written, as there might not have been a Taiping Tian Guo, or *Taiping uprising*.”

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⁴⁴In the case of Islam, it was practised in the western part of China, even today, while for Judaism, it was practised earlier in China but died out with the demise of the Yuan and Ming dynasties. As late as 1945, and, to some extent, even today, it is claimed that there were families in the Kaifeng region in China who claimed to be observants of Judaism.

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