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God's Chinese Son

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Jugend generation viewed their Nazi youth activities as unpolitical and that this depoliticization of the past served as a "bond of understanding" among this generation. This article needs fuller explanation than is possible in essay length. Dagmar Reese's study of the Nazi League of German Girls, the Bund Deutscher Madel, shows how Nazi policies brought all youth together in "a non-sexual comradeship of limited duration, restricted to youth." The Nazis gave women a more public social role, thereby rejecting traditional women's roles, but restricted it to youth. Reese explains this generation's lack of protest about their poor economic situation in the 1950s by their experience in the Third Reich: their self perception was more generational than gender-based in the postwar period. Michael Buddrus's study of youths' transition from the Third Reich to the Soviet Zone agrees that the Third Reich had brought about a unified youth generation and that this experience facilitated its integration in the new socialist regime through its "traditional willingness to submit to authoritarian rule." Mark Roseman's "The Generation Conflict that Never was. Young Labour in the Ruhr Mining Industry 1945-1957" asserts that the Hitler *Jugend* generation fit in "so quietly and so easily" because the rapid political changes left them distrustful of any ideology and, as a result, they were not susceptible to any radical group, the Allied presence; the union's promise of an organized non-conflictual representation of their interests, and the possibility of mobility in the mining industry.

The collection ends with Heinz Bude's very speculative study "The German Kriegskinder: Origins and Impact of the Generation of 1968." Bude views 1968 as a decisive break with Germany's past in that it became a Western, liberal country only at this time. While this generation's image is that of Germany's saviour from its National Socialist past, Bude argues that its temperament and mentality are strongly tied to the war years and are more German than its members would acknowledge. This generation's previous "failure to deidentify with their parental generation" led to the "delayed disobedience" of 1968.

This volume is a good introduction for anyone wishing to study youth and generational conflict since it contains both useful surveys of scholarship and some closely argued essays that are instructive in terms of methods and insights. Readers will appreciate the nuanced views of youth and generational conflict and Roseman's critical evaluation of the essays.

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Robert Wegs

God's Chinese Son: The Taping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan. By Jonathan D. Spence (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996. xix plus 400pp \$27.50).

In 1837 Hong Xiuquan, unsuccessful aspirant to the lowest examination rank and from a Hakka ethnic background, had a vision that lasted several days and nights. In it he obtained a mission from God to destroy all demons from the surface of the earth and to save mankind. Hong also learned that he was the Younger Brother of Jesus Christ. In 1843 he had once again failed the examinations, and from then onwards he devoted all his energies towards interpreting

his vision and carrying it into practice. This proved to be very difficult in his native county thirty miles north of Canton, so he and his earliest supporter Feng Yunshan moved to Guangxi province to proselytize further under the local Hakka population. Among his early followers were two who developed their own channels of communication with Heaven, namely through possession by God and by Jesus Christ, Hong's Elder Brother. The original vision of Hong Xiuquan and these shorter, but also more frequent and more concrete mediumistic communications formed the basis for all crucial decisions. The demons were identified as local deities at first, but sometime in 1850 they came to be identified as the Manchus of the ruling Qing dynasty. Hong Xiuquan went on to found the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (called the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom by Spence, to fit Western conventions) in order to destroy this demonic force. With his followers and their entire families, he started a long trek from their original base on Thistle Mountain to the old imperial city of Nanjing, located in the prosperous Lower Yangzi region. Here they established their Heavenly Capital in 1853. By the time of their final defeat in 1863, large parts of China had been thrown into chaos and tens of millions had died of war, hunger or disease.

In *God's Chinese Son*, Jonathan Spence tells us the story of the Heavenly Kingdom primarily from the perspective of the religious beliefs and practices of Hong Xiuquan and the two other leaders that stood in immediate contact with God and Jesus Christ. He is able to do so in important new ways, because during the early 1980s a completely unknown source was discovered in the British Library. (p. xxv) It is the detailed record of some 180 mediumistic sessions during which God and Jesus Christ communicated directly with their followers. Recent scholarship by R. Wagner and R. Weller (see Spence's bibliography) had already pointed out the importance of indigenous messianic and demonological traditions in the development of a Heavenly Kingdom brand of Christianity. Their proposals are fully vindicated by this new source. In addition, Spence makes full use of missionary reports on Hong Xiuquan's beliefs, as well as of Hong's poetry and of his annotations and emendations to the Bible. This last type of source has been little used until now, maybe because we who have been born and raised in a Bible culture tend to do away with Hong's very personal interpretations as erratic rambling, rather than seeing them as a relevant source of information on Hong's mentality. By adducing rich contextual materials, Spence is able to give us a lively and well-informed inside account of Hong Xiuquan and his closest followers.

As shown by Spence, it is only by further investigating the cultural and religious context of Hong Xiuquan, that we can hope to expand our understanding of the Heavenly Kingdom movement. One example is the question of the provenance of the radical demonological views of Hong and his close followers. Spence (pp. 34-46) focuses on the figure of the underworld king Yanluo and describes the underworld in some detail, since Yanluo featured prominently in Hong's original vision as a major threat to mankind. However, the importance of the seal and the sword as demon-repelling objects, as well as the overall exorcist task that is assigned to Hong in his vision, (pp. 48-50) all point towards another interpretation. The seal and the sword are important exorcist objects of the Daoist priest. Exorcism normally plays no role in underworld iconography,

except when Daoist priests visit the underworld "to destroy the fortress of hell" and enable deceased souls to gain safe passage through the underworld towards a better incarnation. In Hakka culture in Guangdong province (Hong's culture of origin) it was the custom for adults to be initiated in a Daoist exorcist tradition. This custom lasted into the twentieth century.¹ Hong Xiuquan, not of elite background himself, could easily have taken part in this tradition directly or as a spectator. That he was well-acquainted with local religious lore as such is clear.

Spence only mentions indigenous messianic traditions very briefly in his Foreword, (pp. xxiii–xxiv) but otherwise devotes little attention to them. They may have been more important than he makes them out to be. In 1981 R. Wagner (see Spence bibliography) already demonstrated the messianic origins of Hong Xiuquan's interpretation of his vision. I think that in order to understand the specific brand of Heavenly Kingdom messianism in which demons are seen as the source of all evil, we need to look more closely at Qing demonological messianic traditions that could have provided a source for it. In fact, such traditions circulated widely in southern China. They specified a city (sometimes explicitly Nanjing) as a place of refuge (compare the trek to Nanjing by the Heavenly Kingdom), the principal eschatological threats were defined in terms of demons (including barbarians), one frequently mentioned saviour descended from the late Ming dynasty's imperial house (which had its first capital in Nanjing), and finally they believed in a mysterious general coming from the West (also an element in Heavenly Kingdom expectations, discussed for the first time by Spence, pp. 262–267).²

Furthermore, it is possible that the messianic fervor of the Heavenly Kingdom made them interpret origin myths of southern Chinese kinship, social and ethnic groups in the reverse. In these myths, the origin of various groups is frequently explained in terms of descent from a previous dynasty (either the imperial house or its loyal servants) or as a long trek from some place in the north of China. Thus, the Hakkas (to whom Hong himself belonged) claim to have migrated from the north sometime during the Tang dynasty. A very widespread minority in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces were the Yao, who believed that they had come from a sacred place in the neighbourhood of Nanjing.³

Jonathan Spence has given us a wonderful book to read, that shows us new ways of looking at the Heavenly Kingdom movement and its religious leaders. Thanks to the detail of his sources and his mastery of the narrator's craft, he has been able to reconstruct their voices in a most convincing way.

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ENDNOTES

1 Chan Wing hoi, "Ordination Names in Hakka Genealogies: A Religious Practice and its Decline," in David Faure and Helen F. Siu eds., *Down to Earth: The Territorial Bond in South China* (Stanford, 1995), 65–82.

2 See my "China's Inner Demons: The Political Impact of the Demonological Paradigm," *China Information* XI 2/3 (1996–7) 54–88.