

# **Ancient utopia and peasant revolts in China**

Ngô Văn

July 20, 2004

# Contents

<i>About the Author</i> . . . . .	3
<b>Ancient Utopia and Peasant Revolts in China</b> . . . . .	4
<b>The Peasant Plebeians in Archaic Feudal Society</b> . . . . .	5
<b>The School of Tao of Lao Tzu</b> . . . . .	5
<b>Peasant Revolts: 100 B.C. to 300 A.D.</b> . . . . .	7
<b>Libertarian Utopia and Peasant Movements during the Second Han Dynasty (25–220 A.D.)</b> . . . . .	7
<b>The First Theocratic State</b> . . . . .	9
<b>The Celestial Kingdom of the <i>Taiping</i> (<i>Taiping tien-quo</i>, 1851–1864)</b> . . . . .	12

## ***About the Author***

Ngo Van Xuyet (Born in Tan Lo, 1913; died in Paris, 2005)

*This essay, Ancient Utopia and Peasant Revolts in China, is Van's last book; shortly after finishing it he died in Paris in January 2005. His life has been extinguished, but his knowledge and his spirit of rebellion still touch us. Van was for us not just a Vietnamese militant who fought against the colonialist and Stalinist oppression of his country and the author of an indispensable work on the history of Vietnam from the 1920s to the present, but a friend with whom we shared ideas and emotions.*

*His relations with Barcelona were few but intense. In Barcelona, Van felt at home: he knew that here, in 1936 and 1937, a struggle was waged on two fronts, against fascism and against Stalinism, just like the one he waged in his home country against French colonialism and Stalinism; he knew that here, the revolutionaries did not allow their struggle to be swallowed by anti-fascism, any more than Van and his comrades allowed themselves to be swallowed by anti-colonialism in Vietnam.*

*Ngo Van was born in 1913 in Tan Lo, a village in the Mekong Delta, the youngest son in a large family of poor peasants. In 1926 he went to Saigon to work. He soon confronted the social and colonial oppression that affected Cochinchina during those years, and he joined the Trotskyist Left Communist Opposition. He was arrested several times and tortured by the French colonial police, and he was also persecuted by the party of Ho Chi Minh, because he opposed the Moscow line. In 1937 he published a pamphlet on the 1936 Moscow Trials. In 1948, he managed to escape from Vietnam and made his way to France. Most of his comrades in Vietnam were executed by Ho Chi Minh's party.*

*In France, he worked as an electrician at Jeumont-Schneider, where he encountered other workers who had arrived from various fronts, including Paco Gómez, a former member of the POUM during the Spanish civil war and revolution. He was active in various anti-Stalinist communist groups. He joined the "International Workers Union", a group that split from the Trotskyist "Internationalist Party", together with Edgard Petsche, Sania Gontanbert, Lambert Dornier, Sophie Moen, Benjamin Péret, Agustín Rodríguez, Jaime Fernández, Paco Gómez, Munis, Lu Sanh Hanh, and Phuc. He knew Sophie Moen, with whom he would live until the end of his life. He knew Rubel, and shared a long and intense friendship with him: upon Rubel's death, Van commemorated his life with a book, Maximilien Rubel: A Friendship, a Struggle. 1954–1996. In 1958 he helped found the "Council Communist Group", which collaborated with the ICO ("Information et correspondance ouvrière"), the group founded by Henri Simon after he left "Socialisme ou Barbarie".*

*Van, between work and militancy, found time for study and research on China, and in 1976 he published Divination, magie et politique en Chine ancienne, an unofficial history of the esoteric arts—those practiced under the rubric of feng-shui by non-conformists who rejected the public function—and their implications for power. Having retired from his job in 1978, Van began work on what would be an indispensable book for understanding the history of Vietnam between the 1920s and 1945, Viêtnam 1920–1945, révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale, which was published by L'Insomniaque in 1995. He re-wrote the book in Vietnamese so that it could be distributed in Vietnam. In 2000, the same publisher released his memoirs from that same period, until his arrival in France, Au Pays de la Cloche Fêlée, tribulations d'un cochinchinois à l'époque coloniale. In the following year, his book, Contes d'autrefois du Viêt-nam, which he co-wrote with Hélène Fleury, was published. Both books have been translated into Spanish: Memoria escueta. De Cochinchina a Vietnam, and Cuentos populares del Vietnam (Octaedro, 2004). Before his death he*

was able to finish the second part of his historic panorama of Vietnam, *Le Jouer de flute et l'oncle Ho*, and he also wrote *Ancient Utopia and Peasant Revolts in China*, which is presented below.

## Ancient Utopia and Peasant Revolts in China

Just like Joseph Déjacque in his *L'humanisphère: Utopie anarchique* (1857), we understand utopia as a dream that has not been realized, rather than one that is unrealizable. Utopia, which has all too often been conceived and analyzed as a phenomenon restricted to the West, is deeply rooted in the history of China. The same dreams and aspirations appear, the same uprisings full of the poetic fervor to reach heaven. The Chinese utopia, distinguished by both mysticism and the supersession of mysticism in the practice of life and earthly combat, is the same utopia that we encounter in the peasant revolts that shook the western world, whether that of Thomas Münzer in Germany or that of the diggers and the levelers in England, to mention only the most emblematic. It is as if all these revolts, without ever meeting, spread throughout space and time, feeding the flames of subversion and hope for the whole planet.

Here is a text from Lieh Tzu, one of the masters of the Taoist school, that is a typical evocation of the ancient utopia:

Neither King nor Subjects

“Yu (the legendary king of the Xia), was walking and arranging the lay of the land and the flow of the waters, when he lost his way. He came to a country called Chong Pei (“Extreme North”), to the north of the boreal sea, who knows how many miles from the districts of Ts’i. The extent of this country is unknown. There, it neither rains nor does the wind blow. There is neither ice nor snow. Nor are there birds, or quadrupeds, or insects, or fish, or vegetation. It is surrounded by a gently undulating plain. In the center of this territory there is a mountain shaped like a pitcher, called Huling. On its peak, from an orifice shaped like a ring, called Tsehiue (“Delicious Pit”), a liquid called Chenfen (“Divine Spring”) pours, with a scent more powerful than orchids or pepper, and of a flavor that surpasses that of the liquors *lao* and *li*. The spring divides into four streams that flow down the mountain and irrigate the entire country. The men of this country, of a friendly character, do not know rivalry or dispute. Their souls are good, their bodies are supple, and arrogance and envy are unknown to them. Young and old live together, there is no king and there are no subjects. Men and women cohabit freely without interference or petitions of matrimony. They live on the banks of the river, and neither do they sow nor do they reap. The air is warm and agreeable; they neither weave nor do they wear clothing. They live to be one hundred years old. There is neither premature death nor illness. The population multiplies ceaselessly. All live happily, they experience neither the degeneration of old age nor the affliction of sorrow. They are lovers of music and, while holding hands, they take turns singing until the day’s end. When they become tired they satiate their thirst in the Divine Spring and restore the balance of their physical and spiritual powers. When they drink too much, inebriated, they sleep for ten days. When they bathe in this Divine Spring their skin becomes oily and the scent of the spring does not dissipate for ten days.”

This text by Lieh Tzu describes an imaginary community that hearkens back to the archaic primitive peasant community, derived from the legendary origins of the organization of primitive China. It expresses the common dream of the oppressed peasant-serfs: the absolute absence of any power above their heads, the desire to be liberated from labor, the aspiration for a long and

happy life, the desire for free unions between men and women, and, finally, their desire to escape the perpetual threat of massacre under the authority of the feudal warlords of that era.

The author, Lieh Tzu, one of the masters of the school of Tao, or Dao (*Daokia*, Taoism), who was born around 450 B.C. (the era of the Warring States), led an inconspicuous life among the common people and subsisted thanks to the support of his disciples.

Taoist thought, rooted in the peasant soil, would be embodied, during the second century A.D., in the formidable peasant revolt that contributed to the fall of the empire of the Second Han (25–220 A.D.).

## **The Peasant Plebeians in Archaic Feudal Society**

During the first millennium B.C., archaic feudal society was divided, generally speaking, into two major classes: on top, the aristocracy; on the bottom, the peasant plebeians. Nobles and patricians, possessors of power and masters of the land, ruled and exploited the peasants. Religious rites regulated relations among the nobles; the life of the peasants was ruled by custom.

The peasants worked as serfs, sharecroppers or agricultural laborers, and the fruits of their labor filled the granaries of the nobles. Others, landless and enslaved because of indebtedness, worked in the mines, steel foundries, salt works and workshops that belonged to the feudal lords or to rich merchants.

During times of peace, in order to support the “superior men” (*junzi*, lord’s son), the “simple people” (*xiaoren*) worked and starved to death, and wove cloth but had nothing with which to clothe themselves. “The prince eats his taxes, the high officials eat their fees, the patricians eat their plantations, the plebeians eat their labor power, the artisans and the merchants eat the prices fixed by the State, the functionaries eat their functions, the administrators eat their patrimonies; the government is orderly, the people live in peace...”, according to the *Discourses of Kingdoms* (Kuo Yu, Chapter I).

During the bitter wars fought between feudal lords for the conquest of territories and for hegemony, the plebeians formed the infantry and died *en masse*.

In the midst of the disorder and social disturbances of the era of the Warring States (500–222 B.C.), the “One Hundred Schools of Thought” appeared among the learned, thinkers in search of the “road that leads to the reestablishment of peace under heaven”. But the dismemberment of the Royal Courts, the fall of the Houses of the Princes and of the Houses of the Feudal Lords led to the dispersal of these schools among the people. Among these learned men who had been plunged into poverty, some survived by teaching, others attempted to secure employment with the remaining feudal lords as political advisors, specialists in various skills and techniques or practitioners of the esoteric arts.

Confucius himself, in order to survive, became an advisor to various Courts. Lao Tzu, his opponent, and the inspiration of the Taoists, was the archivist for the Court of Zhou.

Among these schools, the Taoist school reflected the thought of the peasant plebeians.

## **The School of Tao of Lao Tzu**

The school of Tao was opposed to the traditionalist school of Confucius, which was the ideological foundation of the ruling feudal classes (or of the ideal feudal order, ruled by the religious

rites). The Confucian school taught the rules of proper living in the basic relations between king and subject, father and son, husband and wife, brother and sister, following the five cardinal virtues: filial loyalty and piety, equity, courtesy, common sense and reliability, to which was added the strict separation between the sexes, as well as conduct that was appropriate for the social level to which one belonged.

The Taoists, disdainful of a world in decline, lived as hermits or sought recruits among the peasant masses. Their ideal was the return to nature, primitive simplicity, the natural, spontaneous, free and happy life, stripped of all convention, without law or morality. This Taoist philosophy was descended from ancient magical-religious practices, inherited from the shamans of the most remote antiquity, which were deeply rooted in the peasant soil. The word *Tao*, or *Dao*, currently means the religion, or the Way; *Dao Lao*, the religion of Lao Tzu, and *Dao làm ngua*, the way to become a man. The *Tao* as the immanent principle of nature and cosmic movement suggests the idea of a dynamic power, of the incessant becoming of the universe. Its disciples preached non-action (*wu-wei*), the non-intervention of man in the natural and human universe, the return to spontaneity and primitive simplicity, to life in small autonomous communities, where:

“If ships or carriages exist, the people do not enter them; if shields and lances exist, they do not pick them up. The people eat what tastes good, they dress with elegance, they feel comfortable in their homes, and they enjoy their simple customs. The neighboring communities see one another from afar; they hear the rooster crow, they hear the dog bark, but they do not travel to the neighboring towns. And they live this way until they die.” (*Tao Te Ching*)

Unlike the Confucian philosophers, who abandoned themselves to the destiny dictated by Heaven (*Tien Ming*), the Taoists led their lives by following the motto, “My destiny depends on me and not on Heaven” (“*Wo ming tsai wop u tsai t’ien*”, Pao p’u-tzu). “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings,” as Shakespeare wrote in *Julius Caesar*.

From this anti-feudal and anti-traditionalist current we possess three selections of sayings: the *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to Lao Tzu (570–490 B.C.), the *Lieh Tzu* (450 B.C.), quoted at the beginning of this essay, and the *Chuang Tzu*, written by Chuang Tzu (370–300 B.C.). These thinkers lived without participating in any public functions, in obscurity and poverty. Living in seclusion and avoiding social and material conditioning, they attempted to escape illness, old age and death. They cultivated the art of long life, in order to “nourish the vital principle”, following breathing, nutritional and alchemical disciplines, practicing “the art of the bedroom” and engaging in physical exercises that imitated the playful capers and dances of the animals. They also accustomed themselves to separation from the world in order to freely indulge in ecstatic journeys.

Finally, the Taoists were also opposed to the School of the Laws (Legalism, *Fa Jia*), which was preeminent during the First Empire (221–207 B.C.). The Legalists condemned the feudal traditions and the old ways of government, and proclaimed the need for a draconian law that was equal for all, without distinguishing between natives or foreigners, nobles or tenant farmers, as well as the impartial application of punishments and rewards, under the authority of a Sage-King, the absolute ruler of the State. The feudal lord of Ch’in overran the six kingdoms and together with the remaining feudal lords, under the influence of the Legalists, founded the First Empire and proclaimed Qin Shi Huang the first emperor in 221 B.C. The centralized empire functioned on the basis of a complicated bureaucracy, and consisted of 36 provinces, each of which was ruled by a civil administrator and a military governor. Totalitarian institutions (collective responsibility for and obligatory informing on criminals within family groups) replaced the rites and moral codes

of the past. The learned Confucians who continued to teach their doctrine were condemned to death. The classical books, the works of the “One Hundred Schools” (except for books on medicine, agriculture and divination) were burned, and those who tried to conceal proscribed books were sentenced to forced labor.

Under the First Empire, the peasant plebeians, who were formerly attached to the fiefs of the defeated feudal lords, were granted the lands they cultivated conditional on the payment of a tax on part of their harvests, a share of the straw and hay produced, and a poll tax. Corvée labor on huge construction projects (the emperor’s palaces, roads and canals all across the Empire, the Great Wall and the emperor’s mausoleum...) and conscription for offensive military operations in distant lands led to an extreme aggravation of the condition of the peasantry.

## **Peasant Revolts: 100 B.C. to 300 A.D.**

After the death of the tyrant, the uprising of the former feudal lords together with generalized peasant insurrections between 209 and 207 B.C. put an end to the First Empire.

A former policeman of the Ch’in, Liu Bang, who led the peasant armies, emerged victorious from that confused series of massacres, proclaimed himself emperor, and founded the First Han Dynasty (206 B.C. to 8 A.D.). The members of the imperial family received hereditary patrimonies, which later became kingdoms and principalities. The new Empire basically preserved the political and administrative structure of the Empire that it replaced. As always, peasant labor constituted the source of the livelihood of the feudal lords, the landowning aristocracy and the merchants. The labor of the peasants also supported the learned officials and the soldiers.

During the last years of the First Han Dynasty, when floods and droughts caused such great devastation, the peasants, crushed beneath the intolerable exploitation of the landlords and on the verge of starvation, took to marauding and survived by looting and pillaging. Cannibalism was not unknown. In 18 A.D., the revolt of the Red Eyebrows (*Chimei*) led to a generalized revolt of the peasants who fielded thousands of armed gangs. They confronted the Han imperial troops as well as the forces of adventurers eager for power.

Liu Xiu, a merchant and a major landlord, emerged victorious from the anarchy and proclaimed himself emperor of the Second Han Dynasty (25–220 A.D.). This dynasty would collapse under the pressure of the upsurge of peasant revolts provoked by a very serious agrarian crisis.

## **Libertarian Utopia and Peasant Movements during the Second Han Dynasty (25–220 A.D.)**

The peasant revolts, which were led during that period by two messianic organizations of Taoist inspiration, the *Tai ping Dao* (“The Religious Community of the Great Peace”) and the *Wu-dou Mi Dao* (“The Religious Community of the Five Pecks of Rice”), contributed to the disintegration of the Empire of the Second Han Dynasty during the Second Century A.D.

During the 170s, after the Yellow River floods, the peasants, submerged in the most extreme misery, formed itinerant bands and took to robbery and pillage. In the six provinces located in the area of Shandong and Henan, the movement of the *Tai ping Dao* emerged, whose leader, Zhang Jiao, was a devotee of the cult of Huang Lao, a synthesis of the mythical king Huangdi and a divinized Lao Tzu. His teaching was based on the sacred texts of the *Tao Te Ching*, the “Canon of

the Way and Virtue”, and the *Taiping Jing*, the “Canon of the Great Peace”, a text revealed to the Taoist master Yu Ji during the early Second Century.

The latter work, like the *Tao Te Ching*, is based on the cosmogony of Yin and Yang and the Five Elements, accompanied by harsh critiques of social inequality, the parasitism of the powerful and discrimination against women.

“It is natural that all the wealth and all the products of nature belong to Heaven, to the Earth and to the world, and should feed man.... Man has the duty of clothing and feeding himself by his own efforts.... The rich man, who separates himself from the poor by letting them die of hunger and cold, acts contrary to the principle of the Tao and is a great enemy of mankind. His crime cannot be absolved.” (*Taiping Jing*)

These new ideas stoked the fires of the millenarian dream of the peasants to establish a humanity without rich or poor, without nobles or serfs, under heaven. The community, organized militarily, consisted, after a decade of growth, of around 300,000 adepts.

Some groups would have frequent meetings that lasted several days where they would hold ceremonies, celebrate festivals or undergo purificatory fasts. During the course of these assemblies, the adepts entered into collective trances to the rhythm of the music, and experienced scenes of joy where men and women “breathed together”, thus realizing the unity of Yin and Yang and reinforcing their vital spirits. Because illnesses were considered to be the result of sins, the sick had to confess and were isolated in meditation rooms, and were cured by being smeared with the ashes of burned hornbeam.

War amulets were distributed to the followers at the time of the Spring and Fall equinoxes. Everywhere, at the doors of the administrative buildings of the great walled cities, the provincial capitals and the compounds of the imperial dukes, there appeared, written in letters of chalk, an appeal to subversion, the *jiazi* characters, marking the beginning of a new era, in the year 184, and announcing the death of the old Blue Heaven and the arrival of the Yellow Heaven and the triumph of great happiness.

The members of the Taoist cults, which the powerful considered to be “Demon Religions” (*guidao*) that were opposed to the official orthodox cults, were condemned to death. The torture of a religious teacher and the execution of more than one thousand adepts of the *Taiping Dao* in Luoyang, the capital, led to an insurrection during the second month of 184. The insurgents wore, as a symbol of their membership in the cult, a yellow turban, the color of the Yellow Heaven, for which reason they were called Yellow Turbans, or Ant-Rebels because of their vast numbers.

They seized several cities, important urban centers in Shandong and Henan provinces, despite the resistance of the imperial troops of Luoyang. The government officials fled or were killed. Government buildings were burned. After they seized the cities of Shandong and Henan, they occupied the mountainous region of Taishan (between Shanxi and Shandong) in 185 A.D.; in 186, they took Shanxi, Hubei and Leaotong; and in 188, Shaanxi. The patriarch Zhang Jiao and his two brothers Zhang Bao and Zhang Liang died early in the fighting and imperial repression caused terrible devastation and thousands of insurgents were killed. This did not prevent the Yellow Turbans from raising an army of several hundred thousand men in various provinces. Despite their defeat, their influence persisted.

## The First Theocratic State

During this same period, the religious community of the Five Pecks of Rice (*Wudou Mi Dao*) was founded by Zhang Daoling in the Han River valley, who studied the Tao at Mount Beimang. His followers, in order to receive his teaching, had to pay five pecks of rice. They were given the name of the Rice-Rebels (*mitsei*). Zhang Lu, the grandson of Zhang Daoling, carried on the work of his grandfather.

The Empire, which was being ravaged by the Yellow Turbans, sought to win the support of Zhang Lu, but the latter killed the officer of the imperial forces sent to negotiate with him and kept his troops. He conquered the region and organized a theocratic state in Sichuan and the southern part of Gansu, without government officials, without jails and without individual property.

Concerning this community, the *Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms* provides the following account:

“The novices were called Demon-Soldiers (*guizu*). Those who were initiated to the Tao and had become followers of the faith were called the Bearers of the Libations (*jijiu*). Each individual led an organized group. All taught that one had to be of good faith, reliable and honest. The Bearers of the Libations were responsible for the ‘Inns of Equity,’ where the rice was stored and the meat of equity was cured. Wayfarers could eat until they had their fill. If they abused this privilege, the Spirits of the Tao caused them to become ill. There were no prisons; those who had committed minor crimes were made to reflect upon their misdeeds while walking the one hundred steps and their crime was thus absolved. Those who had committed serious crimes, after their third such offense, were executed. There were no more government officials, and the entire ‘administration’ was in the hands of the Bearers of the Libations. The people (the Chinese) and the aborigines were very satisfied with the regime.”

Another book, the *Tien Lo*, points out that the Bearers of the Libations were responsible not just for the administration of the Inns of Equity and the material well being of the people, but also assisted the adepts in their study of the canonical book of the five thousand words, the *Lao Tzu* (*Tao Te Ching*).

The theocratic state founded in 190 by the religious community of the Five Pecks of Rice (*Wudou Mi Dao*) would last thirty years. It was to disappear in the turmoil of the years of guerrilla anarchy that marked the end of the Second Han Dynasty in 220 and the formation of the Three Kingdoms (220–280).

The spirit of revolt of the Five Pecks of Rice lived on. In the year 399, Sun En, a member of the religious community who had inherited his position as a patriarch from his paternal uncle, recruited his followers from among the sailors, fishermen and pirates of the coasts of Zhejiang, and formed “demon armies”. His insurrection, which began in 400, spread along the coasts and threatened Nanking. Defeated in 402, numerous insurgents committed collective suicide rather than surrender.

In the Third Century A.D., Ko Hung (253–333), the Taoist master alchemist, discussed in his work, *Pao P'u Tzu*, the views of a certain Pao Ching Yen, who thought that in the distant past, when there was no king, the world was better than it is now. This first libertarian anarchist, a devoted reader of the *Lao Tzu* and the *Chuang Tzu*, evoked the golden age of the primitive communities, and immediately afterwards discussed the terrain of politics and the concrete method of struggle against despotic absolutism.

According to the learned Confucians, Heaven, when it gave birth to the people, also established the Kings. And just how did Heaven express its will with regard to this matter? The powerful oppress the weak and the weak submit. The cunning deceive the naïve and the latter place themselves at the service of the former. The King-Subject relation arose because there was submission and because there was servitude, the impotent people were ruled.... The Blue Heaven had nothing to do with this....

“To compel the people to work and to feed the government officials is to exploit the people so that the officials can enjoy large salaries....

“In the distant past there was neither king nor subject. If someone wanted to drink, they dug a well; if they wanted to eat, they cultivated the fields. Men became active when the sun rose and, when the sun set, they rested.... Without worries, they were free; generous, they were happy. There was neither war, nor disputes, nor honor nor vengeance. In the mountains there were no paths, on the rivers there were no boats or bridges, there was no communication between rivers or between valleys. No one took what was another’s. There were neither guards nor soldiers, since no one threatened to attack. Neither power nor profit germinated, and disorder and calamities did not occur. No one used either shields or lances, and fortresses and walls were not built. The ten thousand beings lived together in transcendent equality and were one with the Tao (the Way). Illnesses were not contagious and the people ended their long lives with natural deaths. Men had pure and innocent hearts, and cunning attitudes did not arise. Having what they needed to eat, they were content, they patted their stomachs and went for a walk. Their words were plain and unadorned, their acts direct and without ornament. How could taxes have been invented? How could walls and man-traps, and severe punishments, have been invented?

“But when cunning was employed and artifice was born, because the Way and Virtue were in decline, hierarchy was established. The rites of ascent and descent, of diminution and increase, multiplied; people dressed in fine costumes for the sacrifices, and brought fine clothing as offerings to the Blue Heaven and the Yellow Earth. Buildings of stone and wood rose to the clouds, and their beams and cross-beams were painted red and green. Cliffs were excavated in search of precious stones, and mines were dug in search of gems. Even though jade was as common as trees in a forest, there was not enough to satisfy the whims of men; and although mountains of gold had been accumulated, there was not enough for their taste. They abandoned themselves to perversion and departed from the primal origin, from the essence of the Great Beginning.... They turned their backs more and more often on the original simplicity. They manufactured sharp, pointed weapons, and the calamities of usurpations and invasions became constant. Their only concern was to make sure that their bows were strong enough, their shields hard enough, their lances sharp enough, and their defenses solid enough.

“During the times when there was neither oppression nor violence, however, these concerns were unknown....

“Why is it that tyrants like Qin and Chu were able to burn men, massacre their advisors and censors, cut out their hearts and grind their bones, and exhaust all the possibilities of evil....? Why is it that they were able to flaunt their cruelty, give free rein to their perversity and slice up the Empire like butchers? This was due to their royal status that authorized them to do as they pleased. Once the king-subject relation was established, the stubbornness of the multitudes increased daily. That is when the people rebelled against their servitude, they complained about having to live in the mud and the dust, and the Sovereign trembled on his royal throne in his ancestral temple and crushed the people in their misery. He sought to imprison them within the

rites and the rules, and correct them with punishments and penalties. As if it were possible to summon forth tempestuous seas and terrible floods, and then to pacify them with a clump of soil and to contain them with a mere wave of the hand.”

The Taoist thinkers questioned the inequality among men under the heaven of China, while among the peasants the spirit of revolt grew during the era of the agrarian crisis. In the countryside, the separation between rich and poor exacerbated the social tensions, and peasant insurrections were endemic during this entire period. During certain eras (during the Tang Dynasty, of the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the Song Dynasty, during the 12<sup>th</sup> century) the imperial power was compelled to implement agrarian reforms in order to establish a certain degree of social peace.

The great Sichuan peasant insurrection of 993, led by the mystics Wang Xiaobo and Li Shun, was launched under the slogan, “level the rich and poor” (*Kiun p'in fou*).

In 1120, in Zhejiang, the special taxes levied to pay for the construction of the Imperial Palace at Kaifeng provoked a brief uprising led by a Buddhist secret society influenced by the spirit of subversive Taoism. The rebels, poorly armed, strict vegetarians who worshipped demons, massacred the rich, government officials and dignitaries. When its leader Fang La was captured after a year of fighting, the rebels escaped the repression that was in store for them by means of collective suicide.

Ten years later, in 1130, another peasant insurrection broke out—this one in the Taoist tradition of the Five Pecks of Rice—in the region of Lake Dongting, in southern Hunan. The special levies exacted by government officials and the looting carried out by an army that was half private and half official had exasperated the peasants, most of whom belonged to the Taoist sect inspired by Zhong Xiang. This patriarch, who was also a magician and a guerrilla leader, declared that, “the laws of the Song [the reigning dynasty] are perverse” and proclaimed the famous slogan, “level the nobles and the serfs; make the rich and the poor equal”. The rebels rejected all symbols of the old order, and “burned administrative buildings, fortified towns and marketplaces, pagodas and temples, the homes of powerful bandits, and massacred government officials, without forgetting the learned *ju* (Confucians), monks, quack doctors, diviners....”, that is, all those who lived without working and without doing anything to earn their rice. Zhong Xiang fell thirty-five days after the insurrection began. His disciples carried on the struggle with more than 400,000 followers and swept across nineteen districts until 1134, when they were all massacred.

In approximately 1300, the harsh exploitation imposed by the Mongol power provoked an increasing degree of hostility on the part of the Chinese masses, who were prepared to rise and fight against the occupying forces.

Opposition to the Mongols crystallized in the banned and persecuted secret societies. The adepts of the Buddhist sect of the White Lotus (*Pai-lien chiao*), most of whom were poor peasants, refused to pay their taxes or to perform their quota of forced labor. The same thing happened with the members of the sect of the White Cloud (*Pai-yiin chiao-hui*) on the southern reaches of the Yangtze River. Other millenarian movements, expecting the arrival of Buddha-Messiahs, arose in Henan in 1335, in Hunan in 1337 and in Guangdong and Sichuan during the following years.

In 1351, after the great floods, the uprising of the Red Army (*Hongjun*), so called because of the characteristic red turbans worn by its soldiers, inaugurated the great insurrections of the lower Yellow River, and these movements spread during the following years to the province of Anhui.

The peasant revolts led to the fall of dynasties or to the creation of new ones. In 1352, a 24-year old monk, Zhu Yuanzhang, led a band of rebels and seized a small city in the northwest part of

Anhui. After concluding an alliance with the Red Army he successfully eliminated his rivals and finally took Peking. In 1368 he put an end to the Mongol Yuan dynasty and founded the Ming Dynasty.

The social turmoil of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries had the same causes as that of the previous centuries. Beginning in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, a class of tenant farmers and agricultural workers emerged, and the number of landless peasants, homeless and without any resources, increased. A labor force whose working conditions verged on slavery worked in the mines, foundries, ceramic and paper factories, and the printing and salt industries. During the great rebellion led by Deng Maoqi in 1448–1449 in the region of Zhejiang and Fujian, the rebel peasants concluded an alliance with the workers in the silver mines led by Ye Zongliu. These forces conquered towns and cities, where they looted the armories, and the uprising became a revolutionary movement. The subsequent repression led to the deaths or exile of a million people. In 1476 the same phenomenon was repeated, and in 1565 the insurrections of the wildcat miners broke out in the mountainous regions between Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during the last years of the Ming Dynasty, an old soldier, Zhang Xianzhong, assumed leadership of the plebeians, and then proceeded to massacre the rich landowners, the dignitaries and the Empire's government officials, free all the slaves and proclaim himself King in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan. He fell in combat in 1646, after having occupied the Min River Valley and Sichuan for two years.

Under the later reign of the Manchus, great insurrections of the poor, organized by the secret society of the White Lotus, broke out in the 1780s and did not end until 1803.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China still had a medieval economic, political and social structure. The invasion of the western imperialist powers reduced the Empire to a semi-colonial condition. The Manchu Dynasty, already in decline because of a series of treaties imposed at gunpoint (the Opium Wars of 1842 and 1857), opened its doors, first to the French-British powers and then to the others, exempting them from customs duties and granting them concessions in various cities, enclaves on Chinese soil that were removed from the authority of the government in Peking. The opium trade was legalized. The victors imposed enormous war indemnities on China. Foreign ships were allowed to circulate freely on the country's rivers. The Peking government was completely subjugated after 1860, when the celebrated Summer Palace was sacked and burned by an expeditionary force of French and British soldiers after they entered the capital city.

With the arrival of the imperialist powers, a new class was born, the germ of the Chinese bourgeoisie, that of the purchasing agents (compradors) who helped foreign capital exploit the masses. The desperation of the peasants exploded in peasant insurrections, uprisings and revolts, the most important of which was that of the *Taiping*.

## **The Celestial Kingdom of the *Taiping* (*Taiping tien-quo*, 1851–1864)**

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a peasant revolt broke out in northern China, led by the Buddhist sects of the White Lotus and the Celestial Order. Pirates plundered the coasts of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang. The south of China was the scene of sporadic uprisings of peasants

influenced by clandestine organizations affiliated with the Society of the Triad (*Sanhohui*), another name for the Society of Heaven and Earth (*Tiandihui*).

In central China, during the same period, in the provinces of Jiangxi and Guangdong, in the middle and lower Yangtze River Valley, the Society of the Worshipers of God (*Bai Shangdi Hui*) arose among thousands of peasants crushed under the yoke of the landlords, the rapacity of the usurers and the exactions of the Mandarins. In their profound desperation the peasants looked towards heaven. The “Worshippers of God”, inspired by Christianity, assumed the name of *Taiping* (“Great Peace”), following in the footsteps of the Taoist community of the Yellow Turbans of the Second Century A.D. These two movements, although born in different historical contexts, pursued the same goal, to realize the utopia of the Great Peace, a society “without rich or poor”, the return of the era of happiness, the mythical golden age of yore.

At the head of the *Taiping* we find Hong Xiuquan (1813–1864), a visionary member of the minority Chinese ethnic group of the Hakka, who converted to Christianity under the influence of Protestant missionaries. He believed he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ and that he was the messiah whose mission was to save the world. The economic depression and famine of 1849 caused the Society of the Worshipers of God to grow rapidly. Within two or three years it had 30,000 members. Among its adepts, most were poor peasants, but it also included 3,000 coal miners, and a large number of the unemployed transport workers of the road that led from Canton to the Xiang Valley in Hunan, thousands of deserters from the imperial army, aborigines and fugitives from the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. Chinese intellectuals, members of the petty landless nobility, also joined the ranks of the Society. The Worshipers of God joined forces with the other secret societies opposed to the Manchu Dynasty.

The insurrection broke out in 1850 in eastern Guangxi, in the town of Kint’ients’uen, in the region of Kik’ingtchan, near the Thistle Mountain, where the headquarters of the Society of the Worshipers of God was located. The predominantly peasant movement sought to eliminate the landlords and the mandarins who represented the imperial power of the Manchus, generally hated by the Chinese people.

In 1851, Hong Xiuquan proclaimed himself Heavenly King (*Tianwang*) and founder of the Heavenly Kingdom of the Great Peace. He conferred upon his ministers and military commanders the titles of Second King, King of the East, King of the West, King of the North and King of the South, among whom we find Yang Xiuqing, an organizer and strategist of great genius, and Shi Dakai, a very talented general.

In 1852, the *Taiping* occupied the northeast part of Guangxi, the southwest part of Hunan, and then advanced towards Changsha, and reached the regions to the southeast of Nanking. They took Nanking in 1853 after sixteen months of bloody battles against the imperial forces of the Manchus. Nanking, renamed Heavenly Capital (*Tianjing*) would be the political center of the Heavenly Kingdom until its fall in 1864. The *Taiping* army, seeking to enlarge the kingdom, undertook the conquest of the Lower Yangtze, sent an expedition northbound towards the region of T’ientsin, and threatened Peking. Forced to withdraw due to the cold weather and lack of supplies, they were defeated in the region of Shandong in 1855.

The first rebellious act of the *Taiping* was to abolish the braided hairstyle known as the queue, which they considered to be a symbol of servitude imposed by the reigning Manchus. The *Taiping* wore their hair long, which is why their enemies called them “long-haired bandits” (*changmao*). After establishing their theocratic state, the *Taiping* proceeded to confiscate land and redistribute it to those who were old enough to cultivate it, granting them a right of usufruct to the land

that was inspired by the ancient system of rectangular fields divided into nine equal portions, arranged like the brush strokes of the character # which is the symbol for a water well (*tsingt'ien*), carrying out an “equal distribution of the land”, a collective distribution.

Women received shares of land equal to those received by men. The agrarian law of the *Taiping* reflected the primitive agrarian collectivism of times past: “If there is land we shall work it together. The inhabitants of the Celestial Empire do not possess anything of their own, everything is at the disposal of the supreme sovereign who distributes the objects and the products equally among all the inhabitants of the Celestial Empire, in such a way that each one eats until he is full and does not suffer from the cold...”

Once private ownership of the land and private trade had been suppressed, the collectivity assured to each person the satisfaction of his indispensable basic needs. The *Taiping* sought to establish the absolute equality of the sexes, condemned adultery and prostitution, and prohibited the binding of the feet of girls (a practice that spread after the Song Dynasty). Women enjoyed civil rights equal to those enjoyed by men and were enrolled in exclusively female armies.

The Heavenly King, under the influence of his prime minister, Hong Rengan (1822–1864), launched a modernization program (construction of railroads, development of science and technology...).

The *Taiping* tried to reach an agreement with the foreigners with regard to free trade in commodities and the suppression of the opium trade. The Heavenly King modeled his monarchy on those of the past and established a Court in Nanking. In order to recruit officials, the classic knowledge of Confucius was replaced in the examinations with Biblical knowledge. An aristocracy rapidly developed that sought to make its privileges permanent. The modernization program remained a dead letter. Power corrupts.

In 1860, the Court of the Manchus initiated a campaign to reconquer the territories seized by the *Taiping* by enlisting the support of two Chinese statesmen, Zeng Guofan, who represented the interests of the Chinese landlords, and Li Hongzhang, leader the bourgeois Chinese purchasing agents (compradors). These two assassins organized and led the war against the *Taiping* with considerable help from mercenaries and materiel provided by the western powers. The imperial armies encountered bloody resistance on the part of the *Taiping*. In 1864, Nanking fell. Hong Xiuquan, the Heavenly King, committed suicide. A million people died during the subsequent repression. The *Taiping* armies continued to fight for two more years in Fujian, and some escaped to Formosa, while others made it to Tonkin (northern Vietnam), where, under the name of the Black Flag Army, they fought a valiant struggle against the invading French colonial troops.

The *Taiping*, whose movement had encompassed the most populous provinces of southern and central China, defeated the imperial armies for thirteen years, from 1851 to 1864.

Their project to establish a mystical and egalitarian community is consonant with the utopia that nourished the peasant insurrections and revolts from the Chinese Middle Ages right up until modern times. The movement of *Taiping* appeared as the prologue to the Chinese Revolution of 1925–1927.

But after the tragic defeat of the 1925 Revolution, the last peasant revolt, under the leadership and authority of the Maoist party, put the emperor Mao Tse Tung in power.

In China, as in the West, utopia, so deeply rooted among the dispossessed, proceeds from a popular understanding of emancipation whose memory must be preserved, before it disappears in the tortuous and brutal adaptations to economic modernity that perpetuate the burden of the coercions of the past.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Ngô Văn  
Ancient utopia and peasant revolts in China  
July 20, 2004

Retrieved on 2020-05-01 from

<https://libcom.org/library/ancient-utopia-peasant-revolts-china-ngo-van-xuyet>

The last essay completed by the veteran Vietnamese council communist, written in 2004 when he was 91 years old, is a brief introduction to the history of peasant revolts in China, with special emphasis on their Taoist origins and utopian and libertarian inspirations, and features many interesting quotations from historical and religious texts.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://theanarchistlibrary.org)**