The Origin of “A New Treatise on Aids to Administration” (资政新篇)

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Regarding Hong Ren'gan’s 洪仁玕 (1822–1864) life, his social connections, and the possible newspapers and periodicals sponsored by missionaries that he had read, there have already been academic discussions, among which Xia Chuntao 夏春涛 provides us with an accurate and detailed account. When it comes to the sources that contributed to Hong’s “A New Treatise on Aids to Administration,” many scholars have pointed out the influence of missionaries’ newspapers and periodicals in Chinese. Some also examine specific contents of the “New Treatise.” Nevertheless, a further, more comprehensive exploration on the sources that influenced Hong’s composition of the “New Treatise” is needed. I shall take this mission take on this task in this article. For the sake of convenience, I will cite passages from the “New Treatise” first in bold, and compare them to periodicals and books from missionaries in order to examine the sources of ideas in the “New Treatise.”

The “New Treatise” makes a clear opening:

夫事有常变，理有穷通，故事有今不可行而可豫定者，为后之福；有今可行而不可永定者，为后之祸。其理在于审时度势，与本末强弱耳。然本末之强弱适均，视乎时势之变通为律，则自今而至后，自小而至大，自省而至国，自国而至万邦，亦无不可行矣。其要在于因时制宜，审势而行而已。兹谨将所见闻者，条陈于后，以广圣闻，以备圣裁，以资国政，庶有小补云尔。

Now, in things there are the constant and the variable, and in principles the inapplicable and the practical. Hence, those matters which cannot be carried out at present but can be planned for are the good fortune of the future. Those matters which can be carried out at the present but cannot be eternally established are the misfortunes of the future. The principle of this lies in judging the

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time and in weighing the situation regarding the strength or weakness of the root and branch. However, the achievement of an equilibrium between the strength and weakness of the root and branch depends on the law of adaptability and applicability to the time and situation. Then from the present to the future, from the small to the great, from the province to the nation and the nation to the world, there is nowhere that [the principle] cannot be carried out. The important thing is to regulate what is appropriate according to the time and act according to the situation, and that is all. Now I respectfully present below in detail that which I have seen and heard, in order to broaden [the scope of] the sacred hearing, to await the sacred decision, and to assist in the state administration, in the hope that some small improvement may derive therefrom.

Observing the “Western society” (洋社会) in Hong Kong and Shanghai as well as the new developments of the world at that time, the author was in a better place than the traditional Chinese literati who dwelled on learning the Confucian classics. In the “New Treatise,” Hong divided his work into three sections, “Enlightenment by Customs” (风风), “Rule by Law” (法法), and “Censure by Penalties” (刑刑). In doing so, he systematically arranged his plan on reform, which was based on his understanding of the Western societies.

In the “Customs” section, Hong promoted a top-down elimination of bad customs and uncivilized ethos in order to make China a modern Christian nation which celebrated science. He coined the concept “three treasures” (三宝) to transform traditional Chinese value systems:

中地素以骄奢之习为宝，或诗画美艳，金玉精奇，非一无可取，第是宝之下者也。夫所谓上宝者，以天父上帝、天兄基督、圣神爷之风，三位一体为一体为宝。一敬信间，声色不形，肃然有律，诚以此能格其邪心，宝其灵魂，化其愚蒙，宝其才德也。中宝者，以有用之物为宝，如火船、火车、钟镖、电火表、风雨表、日晷表、量天尺、连环枪、天球、地球等物，皆有探造化之巧，足以广闻见之精，此正正堂堂之技，非妇儿掩饰之文，永古可行者也。

In China, people have always cherished extravagant habits; while beautiful poetry, elegant paintings, and exquisite articles of gold and jade are without value, they are nonetheless merely precious things of a lower order. What is most precious is the Trinity, composed of our Heavenly Father, our Heavenly Elder Brother, Christ, and the Wind of the Holy Spirit. Once all express their respect and faith, everything will be in perfect order, although these things cannot be actually perceived. This is so because [the Trinity] is capable of driving away evil hearts, preserving souls, enlightening ignorance, and cherishing talents and virtues. Things that are secondarily precious include useful objects, such as steamships, trains, clocks and watches, electric meters, thermometers,