

The digital analysis of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom historical documents

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Introduction

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (太平天国) is considered to be one of the most important events in Modern Chinese history. The charismatic leader Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全, 1851-1864) led an uprising which became the biggest threat to the survival of the Qing dynasty in 19th century. Even though the Taipings eventually failed after 14 years of war, they are still widely studied by historians and scholars from other disciplines both in China and outside it .

Throughout decades historians in China and abroad made numerous contributions to collect various sources concerning the Kingdom. There were also many deep analysis of all kinds of sources: those concerning special types documents (e.g. printed sources (印书)) or concerning particular topic (military affairs (军事)). The author of this proposal believes that these analysis may be deepen by using tools of digital humanities. Programs such as MARKUS or the text mining method could expand both the linguistic analysis of certain sources as well as improve the comparative approach.

What I mean by linguistic analysis is to examine certain terms common throughout Taiping documents which for example may have been relevant to their ideology. This might be combined with the comparative approach, e.g. to use digital tools to compare Taiping sources with the Bible, Confucian Classics or Imperial Edicts. All of them have influenced the composition of Taiping sources. Digital tools may help to improve the depth of these comparisons.

Not only digital tools may help to improve general analysis on Taiping sources. The author of this proposal is currently working on the analysis of attitudes of Taiping leaders towards Manchu people and the Qing dynasty. The usage of digital tools such as MARKUS will surely improve the quality of more specific analyses.

Major questions

1. Do Taiping sources posses resemblance in language when compared to other contemporary movements documents ?
 1. Do these documents use simmilar terms and ideas?
 2. Can we determine which sources belonged to the Taiping movement and which were written by e.g. Heaven and Earth Society members?
2. To what extend Taiping rebellion sources where simmilar to the Bible (in Chinese translation), Confucian classics and other documents which helped to shape the Taiping ideology?
 1. What was altered,
 2. What was deleted,
 3. What was added
 4. What remained the same?
3. What are simmilarities and differences within documents written by different Taiping leaders? What could be analyzed is:
 1. Personal style of the particular leader (洪秀全)
 2. The usage of certain terms (天父、上帝、妖、鬼、韃靼、漢)
4. What were simmiliarities and differences between versions of the same documents?
5. Can we apply quantative methods to examine Taiping Rebellion sources?
 1. Frequency of certain terms?
 2. Frequency of certain phrases?

The usage of digital methods

1. May help to construct a database with Taiping sources
2. May help to OCR documents and thus enable more detailed linguistic analysis
3. Quantative analysis
 1. General tendencies – the frequency of certain terms
 2. Taiping leaders style of writing – may help to prove/disprove certain sources
4. Qualiative analysis
 1. Certain person/leader style of writing
 2. Same source, different versions analysis
 3. Two sources, common text
 4. One source, references to other texts

Sample Bibliography

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