

# PERSONAL TESTIMONY FROM THE LAST KINGS OF HEAVEN

天國末王自述 RPG

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**1850-1864:** The misery- and Christianity-inspired **Taiping Rebellion** seethes through southern China and establishes the “Kingdom of Heaven.” Initially overwhelmed, the Qing **imperial government** and **foreign colonial forces** rally against the rebels. By the end of 1864, imperial soldiers capture most of the remaining Taiping leaders, force them to testify about their crimes, and then painfully execute them.

This game is about the **personal testimonies** of three of the last major Taiping leaders—specifically: how their testimony came to be written down, edited, and disseminated.

During the game, the players conduct **three interrogations of the captured Taiping “kings.”** For each interrogation, (A) 1 player will portray a **captive Taiping leader**, (B) 1 or more players will play **imperial interrogators**, and (C) 1 or more players will play the **imperial scribes** that record the testimony. **Rotate roles between interrogations.** Before each interrogation, give every player the **half-page describing their role** and allow them time to examine it.

If time is limited, the group may conduct **one or two interrogations** instead of all three. **Interrogations are conducting in the order in which the leaders were captured and executed:** (1) the Loyal King, (2) the Shield King, and (3) the Young Heavenly King.

Players may know very little about the Taiping Rebellion and 19th century Chinese politics. **That’s okay!** At any point in the game—particularly when players aren’t sure what to do next—any player may say **“I request additional facts & rumors!”** When this happens, a scribe draws a **Facts & Rumors Card** from the shuffled deck and reads aloud additional information about the rebellion.

After each interrogation, **the interrogators and scribes will make some choices** about what happens next & how the Taiping leaders will be remembered. (See the **Additional Play Advice** on page 5.)

LOYAL KING

LI XIU-CHENG

You are Li Xiu-cheng (pronounced LEE SHYO-CHUNG), a former **impoverished peasant farmer**. You joined up with the Taiping when they promised you **regular meals** and slowly **worked your way up the ranks** until you were one of the **main generals** of the Heavenly Kingdom. Known for your brilliant **strategy and success** in battles, you were captured just after the fall of Nanjing, the Taiping capitol, in July of 1864. **You urged the Heavenly King to retreat** from the city, but he refused, and now he is dead and the kingdom with him. Only **a few Taiping leaders are still free**, having so far avoided capture.

GOAL

PREVENT YOUR SOLDIERS AND FAMILY MEMBERS FROM BEING EXECUTED

PRIME EMOTION

SAD REGRET

*Amid this suffering, why was the Heavenly King born to disturb the whole country? Why did I, an incompetent person, support and assist him? Amid this suffering, why was the Heavenly King born to disturb the whole country? Why did I, an incompetent person, support and assist him? Now I have been captured and put in confinement. It must have been the will of Heaven for this to happen. – Li Xiu-cheng’s Personal Testimony*

## YOUR CORE MOVES

**APPEAR REASONABLE & SYMPATHETIC:** You were never a religious fanatic, more of an opportunist who saw a chance to improve your lot and the lives of others. All your decisions made sense at the time, in context. You may have been caught up by history, but you just did what anyone would have done, really.

**DOWNPLAY EVERYTHING:** Treason, what treason? The people were miserable and starving, eager to join up with any cause that would feed them and offer them hope for a better tomorrow. The Taiping provided that, but that doesn’t mean everyone who participated is actually a die-hard rebel.

**BLAME TAIPING CIVILIAN LEADERS:** The biggest obstacles to the rebellion’s success were often other Taiping leaders, especially the family members of the original Heavenly King. The nepotism among members of the Hong family ultimately doomed the kingdom.

STAKES

HOW MANY OF YOUR 6,000 REMAINING FOLLOWERS WILL BE KILLED?

## SHIELD KING

HONG REN-GAN

You are Hong Ren-gan (pronounced HŌNG REN-GAN), the **cousin** of the now-dead Heavenly King and the former **chief minister** of the Kingdom of Heaven. You got **separated from the rebels** during the march northward and **ended up in Hong Kong** for several years, studying and working with **foreign missionaries**. You finally managed to reach the Nanjing—the Taiping capitol—several years ago. The Heavenly King quickly recognized your **administrative savvy** and put you in charge of **running the kingdom**. You fled the fall of Nanjing in July 1864 but were captured in October.

## GOAL

INCRIMINATE THE IMPERIAL AND FOREIGN FORCES THAT OPPOSED YOU

## PRIME EMOTION

COLD FURY

*I have been captured. Every person, however, has their own mind, and each mind has its own bent. I have merely acted in accord with my duties as a minister, and it is vain for people to resist the will of Heaven. Whether I gain or lose, live or die, I can only resign all into the keeping of Heaven.*

– Hong Ren-gan’s Personal Testimony

## YOUR CORE MOVES

**KEEP THE FAITH, NEVER BACK DOWN:** You received the gospel both from your cousin, the original Heavenly King, and from foreign missionaries that you trained and worked with. You have no doubt that your cause was a righteous one, and you have no fear of the painful death that surely awaits you. Don’t flinch.

**BLAME YOUR OPPOSITION:** The Kingdom of Heaven failed because foreign and imperial forces teamed up against you. Despite many promises and shared Christian traditions, the white foreigners abandoned you and, even worse, supported the demonically wicked imperial government in crushing your rebellion. Injustice prevails.

**BLAME TAIPING MILITARY LEADERS:** The kingdom’s fall happened more swiftly due to the arrogant and improper actions of its military leaders, including Li Xiu-cheng. If the military had heeded the orders of their civilian counterparts, events would have gone much better for you.

## STAKES

HOW MUCH INFIGHTING WILL OCCUR AMONG IMPERIALS & FOREIGNERS?

## YOUNG HEAVENLY KING

HONG TIAN-GUI-FU

You are Hong Tian-gui-fu (pronounced HŌNG TYEN-GWAY-FOO), the **14yo heir** to the destroyed Kingdom of Heaven. You were **raised as a prince** in the **palaces of Nanjing**, the Taiping capitol. **Spoiled by your father**, the original Heavenly King, **everyone thinks you are incompetent** as a ruler. You were captured in October 1964.

## GOAL

ESTABLISH YOUR INNOCENCE AND BE ALLOWED TO STUDY THE CLASSICS

## PRIME EMOTION

NAÏVETÉ

*The conquest of the empire was the ambition of the old Heavenly King, and I had no part in it. Even after I had succeeded to the throne, everything was carried out by the Shield King and the Loyal King. My ambition is to accompany my teacher to Hunan and study for the imperial examination. This is all true.*

– Hong Tian-gui-fu’s Personal Testimony

## YOUR CORE MOVES

**INVOKE FAMILY TIES:** Your father—the Heavenly King—is the second son of God, so Jesus is your uncle and God himself is your grandfather. The Virgin Mary is your grandmother. Be sure to refer to major Christian divinities as your close family members.

**CLAIM IGNORANCE OF IMPORTANT MATTERS:** You’re happy to tell your captors everything you know, but you’re just a student of classical and Christian texts, really. You were still very much in training as a prince and have no real sense of the military strategies and economic policies of the Kingdom of Heaven.

**IGNORE REALITY:** People keep mentioning execution, which seems a bit far fetched! You’re just a kid! Now that you’re captured, you’re never going to be a problem for anyone ever again. You just want to be left alone so you can go study the classics somewhere in peace. How soon will you be allowed to leave? (Is this a ruse, or is it how you really feel? It’s up to you to decide.)

## STAKES

NONE. YOUR FATE IS ENTIRELY IN THE HANDS OF YOUR IMPERIAL CAPTORS.

# IMPERIAL INTERROGATOR

You are an **imperial official**, and your **subordinates** have captured one of the notorious Taiping rebel leaders responsible for the recent upheaval in the empire. Now you must lead the interrogation.

**Decide the following:**

- Are you a [civilian] or [military] official? [Higher] or [lower] level?
- What is your **primary emotion**: [rage], [boredom], [exhaustion], [incredulity], [pride], [relief], [malevolence], or [annoyance]?

## DUTY

PRESS THE REBELS TO CONFESS THEIR TREASON & THEN DECIDE ALL STAKES

## PRIME EMOTION

*I asked: "At the rebel court, did you realize that its stability could not be counted on, or did you believe that they would eventually succeed?"... I asked: "Why did you not surrender at an earlier date?"... I said: "Many innocent people have been killed by your troops. As a commander, you should have issued orders to prevent this from happening. How can you say that you are not at fault?"* – The Questioning of Li Xiu-cheng

## YOUR CORE MOVES

**GET THE INFORMATION YOU NEED:** When the interrogation is over, you—and your fellow interrogators, if any—will determine all stakes, both the stakes listed at the bottom of this sheet (how long will the rebel suffer during execution?) and the stakes listed on each rebel's sheet. Ask questions that prepare you to make those choices.

**HURRY THINGS ALONG:** Look, you have things to do. The country is still recovering from this disastrous farce of a rebellion, and you've already caught the main culprits. Let's get this tedious process over with, so you can get back to more important things.

**ENSURE THE SCRIBES DO THEIR JOB PROPERLY:** Imperial secretaries are useful but they're definitely not to be trusted to act on their own, especially in important matters. Stay on top of them and make sure their written accounts (1) make your side look good and (2) make the rebels look bad. Otherwise there might be trouble later.

## STAKES

REBEL LEADERS MUST BE EXECUTED; HOW LONG WILL EACH ONE SUFFER?

# IMPERIAL SCRIBE

You are a personal secretary or scribe **in service** to one of the **imperial officials** present. **Highly trained** in administrative matters, you are tasked with **recording the interrogation** of a rebel leader.

**Decide the following:**

- **Which interrogator** do you work for? For **how long**?
- What is your **primary emotion**: [professionalism], [concern], [petulance], [haughtiness], [patience], or [meticulousness]?

## DUTY

TAKE NOTES ON THE REBELS' TESTIMONY & THEN DECIDE HOW TO WRITE IT UP

## PRIME EMOTION

*I heard of the capture of the false Loyal King and that the governor was personally interrogating him with a knife, intending to cut him to pieces. I immediately hurried to the governor's place and, whispering to him, tried to stop him. I felt that this man was important in the eyes of the imperial court. A short while later, the governor suddenly had a change of heart and ordered him to be imprisoned.* – Secretary Zhao Hui-fu's Diary

## YOUR CORE MOVES

**INSIST ON PROPER PROCEDURES:** The mixture of military and civilian officials here are sure to botch this interrogation without your support and insistence that the correct process be followed. Make sure that everything is correct. Otherwise there might be trouble.

**ASK CLARIFYING QUESTIONS:** Ask the rebel (or even the interrogators) if something is unclear or potentially misheard. The rebels are from the South and speak with a strange accent, so it may sometimes be difficult to understand them or know what they mean.

**TELL THE REBEL'S STORY:** Take notes on the interrogation however you like—text notes, shorthand, draw pictures, or any mixture of different media. Then, when each interrogation is over, you have 10-15 minutes to finalize some representation of the rebel's story (in text, poetry, images, etc.) to present to the highest ranking official(s) present for dissemination as imperial propaganda.

## STORY

REBEL LEADERS MUST BE EXECUTED; HOW WILL YOU TELL THEIR STORY?

## FACTS & RUMORS

**LONG-HAIRED BANDITS:** The Qing imperial government ordered its citizens to wear their hair in a single long braid. Instead, the Taiping wore their hair loose and flowing as a sign of rebellion, sometimes held back by a simple head-scarf. The imperial epithet for them was “long-hairs” or “long-haired bandits.”

**ASK:** What have the interrogators done to their captives’ long hair?

## FACTS & RUMORS

**SHANGHAI:** Just up the river from Nanjing is the international trading port of Shanghai, home to large numbers of Westerners who live in its “foreign concessions.” Between 1860 and 1862, the Taiping struggle to capture Shanghai but are driven back by foreign soldiers charged with protecting the city’s foreign wealth from looting. This arguably dooms the rebellion’s chances.

**ASK:** How much does each person present blame foreigners for the country’s current state?

## FACTS & RUMORS

**SO MUCH DEATH:** The Taiping Rebellion was one of the bloodiest wars in human history. Taiping, imperial, and foreign forces made use of rifles and cannons against unarmed opponents, in addition to swords and spears. Plus, there was widespread looting and murder of civilians in captured territories. Altogether, an estimated 30+ million people died.

**ASK:** How has each person here changed as a result of witnessing so much death?

## FACTS & RUMORS

**WERE THE TAIPING REALLY CHRISTIANS?:** From the 1850s to the present, religious scholars have debated whether the Taiping were “true Christians.” Were they a native Chinese version of Christianity, a new Christian sect, a new “Abrahamic” religion, a new hybrid Chinese-Western belief system, a Christianity-inspired cult, or something else entirely?

**ASK:** How do each of the interrogators and scribes feel about the captives’ religious beliefs?

## FACTS & RUMORS

**ETHNIC DIFFERENCES:** All of the captives (and many other Taiping leaders) come from the Hakka people, a distinct linguistic and cultural group in South China. A long time ago, the Hakka’s ancestors moved to southern China from the north, giving them distinct traditions and ways of speaking. Many Hakka joined the Taiping, alongside members of other groups.

**ASK:** How do the interrogators and scribes feel about Hakka people?

## FACTS & RUMORS

**THE SECOND SON OF GOD:** The original Heavenly King was a failed imperial examination candidate from South China. He had a vision telling him that he was the second son of the Christian God, the younger brother of Jesus. And that he must destroy the Qing empire and establish a new Kingdom of Heaven.

**ASK:** How does the captive feel about this vision and the Taiping’s religious cause?

## FACTS & RUMORS

**THE FALL OF NANJING:** In early 1864, the original Heavenly King died of illness and the Young Heavenly King ascended the throne. Soon after, imperial forces seized the city and the remaining Taiping leaders fled. The Loyal King was quickly captured but the Shield King and Young Heavenly King remain on the run for a few more months, later captured in October.

**ASK:** How did the captive feel when they were forced to flee Nanjing with a handful of others?

## FACTS & RUMORS

**THE VERY LAST KING:** While most of the Taiping leaders have now been captured, the Obedient King Lai Wen-guang will remain at large for four more years. He will join up with allied bandits of the Nian Rebellion and continue fighting until his capture and execution in 1868.

**ASK:** How does everyone present feel about at least one Taiping leader continuing to wreck havoc on the empire?

## FACTS & RUMORS

**ONE HUNDRED YEARS LATER:** In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party declared that the Taiping Rebellion was a peasant revolt that predated its own revolution. The Taiping carried out some land redistribution and advocated for some additional rights for women, so their religious influences were downplayed and they were held up as revolutionary heroes.

**ASK:** How does the captive feel about being remembered this way in the future?

# ADDITIONAL PLAY ADVICE

## ROLEPLAYING ADVICE

- **Use your own voice** – not fake, racist accents.
- **Use normal, formal language** – not stilted, orientalist language.
- Treat the characters as **people**, not archetypes or larger-than-life figures. These were real people who lived and died less than 200 years ago, however they have been immortalized.
- This game deals with **sensitive themes** of war, religion, violence, death, ethnic differences, torture, and execution. None of those themes necessarily feature in a graphic way during play, but it's important to let the players know that they may come up.
- Please use and familiarize the players with a set of **safety tools** that will help facilitate a positive play experience.
- If it helps, this game takes place in roughly the same time period as the **U.S. Civil War** (1861-1865).
- In terms of **media references**, the only easily-accessible film set in this period is Peter Chan's *The Warlords* (2007), starring Jet Li, Andy Lau, and Takeshi Kaneshiro. This film is worth checking out for its depiction of the gritty, desperate vibe of the era.

## ADVICE ON PANDEMIC PLAY

- If playing in-person, the characters can be **seated relatively far apart, and wearing masks** should be totally fine. For example, you might have the Taiping captive sit isolated in a chair, while across the room the interrogator(s) sit behind a large table, facing the prisoner. The scribe(s) could be seated off to the side. The interrogators have likely commandeered some local building to serve as their temporary headquarters.
- **Playing outside** is also okay, perhaps imagining that the interrogation is taking place in the military camp of the imperial interrogators and scribes. This provides even more safety than playing inside.
- **Playing online** over some form of video-chat or video-conferencing should also be relatively easy, if that method is preferred. I suggest trying to position the players cameras such that more than just their face is visible, as gestures and body-language can be important elements of expression in larp (and tabletop!), even when playing seated.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & SOURCES

This game was original designed for Golden Cobra 2011, a game jam for freeform larp that specifically asked for “committee”-style games about minority religious experiences, particularly ones that could be played under pandemic conditions. After considered a few different possibilities, I decided to design a game about the personal testimony of the last remaining leaders of the Taiping Rebellion.

## LUDOGRAPHY

- Indie games fans may recognize my debts to Frederik J. Jensen's *Montsegur 1244*, a game about Cathars facing execution in 13th century France. The general situation and information cards owe a lot to *Montsegur*.
- Laura Simpson's award-winning game *Companions' Tale* directly inspired the unreliable nature of the captives, interrogators, and scribes.
- I'm sure that Jason Morningstar's game *'Terps*, about military interpreters, was also bouncing around my head.

## HISTORICAL SOURCES

- In Chinese, the testimonies of these three leaders are called 忠王李秀成自述, 干王洪仁玕自述, and 洪天贵福亲书自述. They can be difficult to find in English but try Franz Michael's *The Taiping Rebellion: History & Documents*, Vol. 3 (1971).
- While conducting research for this game, I was lucky enough to run across Jordan Weinstock's 2019 undergraduate honors thesis for Washington University of St. Louis, titled “**A War of Words: The Circulation and Interpretation of Taiping Depositions.**” This thesis provides an excellent account of the testimonies and how the imperial government sought to use them for propaganda purposes. Thanks, Jordan!
- If you are interested in the Taiping, the easiest books to find are Stephen R. Platt's *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom* (2012), Tobie Meyer-Fong's *What Remains* (2013), Zhang Daye's *The World of a Tiny Insect* (2013), Thomas H. Reilly's *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom* (2014), Jonathan Spence's *God's Chinese Son* (1996), and Caleb Carr's *The Devil Soldier* (2012).
- In terms of a more personal acknowledgement, I first conducted research on the Taiping Rebellion as a 2004-2005 Fulbright Fellow at Nanning University, and this game probably wouldn't exist without all the people who made that experience possible.