

Tangpingist Manifesto

Tangpingists of the world, unite!

Anonymous Tangpingist

Contents

Translator's Introduction	3
1. Introduction: The great refusal/flat refusal	3
2. "Fellow Travellers" of Tangpingists	4
3. The Dilemma of Tangpingists	6
4. Allies of Tangpingists	7
5. Alternative Autonomous Communities	8

Translator's Introduction

This piece's exact origin is hard to discern. It seems to have been either originally posted to WeChat (A popular Chinese social media app), then shared to Chinese language platforms run outside of the control of the CCP, or else vice-versa, on June 1st 2021. Although its source is unclear and the author anonymous, it's important to understand the context from which it arose.

Crushed by the repressive 996 work culture (9am to 9pm, 6 days a week), which is an almost universal experience of people living in China today, Luo Huazhong made the radical decision to cease participation. In a series of quickly censored social media posts, Luo Huazhong ("Kind-Hearted Traveler") told of a different kind of life that he called Tangping.¹

The lifestyle he detailed was a kind of traveller/drop-out culture with an emphasis on spending as little time at work as possible. In the posts he shared stories of how, rather than grind himself to a pulp in order to live up to the expectations of the dominant culture, and become weighed down by its commodities, he had been happily unemployed for two years. In that time he found that an affordable diet, and modest living conditions were more than sufficient as they allowed him the time to pursue other more worthwhile activities, like cycling from Sichuan to Tibet, climbing mountains, and reading philosophy.

Since April of 2021 when this idea was introduced and then banned from every Chinese social media platform, the idea of Tangping spread quickly and became somewhat of a hot-button issue in Chinese culture. Of course the party was quick to reject it, with party websites calling it bourgeois, or nihilistic. But censorship wasn't sufficient to completely bury it, so state media began to invent a dialogue around what they claimed were the 'real' issues that Tangping had revealed.

Tangping has benefited from being memetic in its origins, as this has allowed it to dodge the censors, and images of chives can still be seen on Chinese social media. Tangping, like most ideas, is shaped by its (in this case mostly anonymous) proponents. Luo Huazhong is not a leader, nor a messiah. He was simply the OP (original poster) of the meme that Tangping became. The author of this piece is just another anonymous Tangpingist.²

1. Introduction: The great refusal/flat refusal

Some of the young people, disgusted at what they see before them, are moving on. Rather than being crushed by a sinister life, they simply live instinctually. Their poses resembling rest, sleep, sickness, and death, are not meant to renew or refresh, but are a refusal of the order of time itself.

The call of those great times that longed to convert life into fuel, once so violently urged them to move forward, is now just an irritating fly buzzing in their ears. This is the moment when one kind of magic fails, and another comes back to life.

As a matter of fact, if it weren't for the reminder of the Tangpingists, people would have forgotten that there is still such a thing as "justice." Just as exploited employees try to reclaim

¹ 躺平(Tangping) means to "lying flat." This spawned the slogan "a chive lying flat is difficult to reap" 躺着躺平很难. It has become somewhat known by its transliteration but this definition is important.

² Directly translated it would be 'practitioner of Tangping'.

their time from the bosses by touching fish,³ the Tangpingists, who walk the same path, demand compensation for the endless overdrafts of the past. It's believed that this remediation requires practitioners to reduce one's needs in order to survive by consuming the least and working the least. Yet another growing desire is the redistribution of time and space by society as a whole, so that lying flat may become the practice of most people. The first to wave of this is obviously a kind of Tangping.

Old and new aristocrats who feared losing their privileges swarmed. They have every reason to panic about this destructive idea that puts labor down like the plague, and against which there is no vaccine. But rather than acknowledging that this philosophy (which grew rapidly) is a mirror reflection of people's minds on a number of real issues, they prefer to decry it as the work of hostile forces. Of course, it makes sense for them to say that. For in the past, the people here have always been the most exemplary producers. Few other social factories in the world can make machines that run this smoothly, without making a single sound, as if the machine itself is a kind of void, without any friction. As if the people themselves were a void, and the nation was a form of reality miraculously snatched from the void.

The denunciation of Tangpingists began. However, these denunciations were so trite and lifeless that the head of the person lying down is not raised. But those who claim that Tangpingists are a mob of lazy scum and unaspiring beggars should hear at least one answer. Don't take it for granted how easy it is to lie flat. On the contrary, from the moment they lay down, the Tangpingist's body was already outside the country. Not only does their existence constitute another ethnic group, but the land on which they lie becomes completely detached from the old country. If this condition does not wish to be disturbed, shouldn't it have nothing to do with sovereignty and property rights? The body has no connection to possession and distribution, and the land is uninterested in management and governance. A radical Tangpingism marks a complete rejection of the current order. The Tangpingists make a merciless mockery of institutional inclusion, and are indifferent to any kind of praise or criticism.

Just rotate the world 90 degrees, and people will discover this unspoken truth: the one who lies flat is standing, and the one who stands is crawling. This secret worldview has become an insurmountable obstacle between the Tangpingists and the citizens. And until the world has been completely changed, the Tangpingists have no reason to change their posture.

2. "Fellow Travellers" of Tangpingists

Yet, don't think for a moment that there is a uniform Tangpingism. When the first person who called himself a Tangpingist appeared, he could never have imagined that it would make such big waves.

Tangpingism is so enthusiastically supported that those who feel threatened have to pretend they are supporters of this theory as well. How can there be any real comrades among these people? Those who are the first to come forward are just pantomiming the rhetoric to desper-

³ Like Tangping, touching fish is a new term coined by Chinese youth in response to an oppressive culture of overwork. The term itself is a play on the proverb "muddy waters make it easy to catch fish" [浑水摸鱼], and the idea is to take advantage of the Covid crisis drawing management's focus away from supervising their employees. It too seems to be growing from a hashtag to a philosophy, so perhaps we will see a Fish Touchers Manifesto soon.

ately keep themselves crawling. Is there any other way to deal with these Tangpingist “fellow travellers” than to throw excrement in their faces?

The first to show their faces were some honorable Tangyingists.⁴ Those aristocrats who move between their mansions and BMWs claim that Tangpingism shows the superiority of the order they follow. But in that order, who else lay flat (Tangping) before them? This alone gives their voice its power. Drawing this conclusion from their own lives, they think of Tangping as a form of hedonism based on material abundance. The richer the country, the more idle wanderers can be supported. Therefore, “Tangping in such a country is basically a kind of tangying.” It would be more correct to turn this sentence upside down: if there was never tangying (Lie to Win), why are people pursuing Tangping (Lie to Equality)?

There is another class of Tangyingists that are more deceptive. With the help of the rhetoric of “Tangping freedom,” they successfully repackaged the popular discourse into advertising slogans selling wealth management products. What’s more eye-catching than seeking something for nothing (“earning money while lying down”) in this age of overwork? However, the Tangpingists certainly made them feel that they had misplaced their expectations. In the past, when they were just completing the tasks given to them by the mainstream order, they felt that debts were always waiting somewhere ahead, as if they were just living for repayment, as if living itself produced debt – but who did they owe? It was when they took a radical Tangping stance against this systematic kidnapping that they felt they had found the right way out. This is the freedom that Tangpingists really found.

Following closely behind were some moderate Tangpingists. They came on the heels of the honorable people, as if afraid of missing out. They say, until now, who hasn’t noticed the changes in this world? But as faceless and mediocre figures, what influence are they expected to have? So for them, the essence of Tangpingism is not Tangping, but rather to not transgress or do things beyond the scope an individuals’ ability. – As long as the dominant culture still exists, how can you compete? – Therefore there is a call to retreat to a rural Tangpingism. We can also understand that when faced with the judgement of the official, the “radicalist” lying beside them made them tremble more than the judge did. At this time, their entire speech was simply, “My lord, I am only asking for a right to stand at the right time (like a servant). However, even these words were said on their knees. How can we distinguish this kind of kneeling vulgar Tangping (Lie to Peace) from the current philosophy of domination?

Then came the economists who argued for the “rationality” of Tangpingism. Unlike scholars who criticize Tangpingism as a disaster for the country and the people, these economists are inherently optimistic. They say, what rich country is there where young people don’t choose to Tangping? In the face of involution,⁵ there is no better solution than Tangping. This is also the most natural solution – but isn’t it the Tangpingists’ own theory? But the explanation behind this is actually that when more people voluntarily withdraw from the competition and choose Tangping, the total labor force will naturally decrease, so this will give the remaining laborers more bargaining power, which is expected to improve the average wage. The assumption here is that the root cause of involution is an oversupply in the labor market. Although Tangping will

⁴ The phrase Tangying [囹囹] is internet slang that means something like ‘winning without even trying’. In this context you can think of Tangyingists as people who are spoonfed a successful existence, like a roman emperor laying in his chair while being fed grapes and fanned with palm leaves.

⁵ Involution is a term coined by Clifford Geertz which broadly describes an economy where increased labor does not yield an equivalently increased output. It is often used to describe modern life in China.

also reduce consumer demand in the short term, they believe that in the medium and long term, a market equilibrium will surely emerge.

The problem here is that they only regard Tangping as a “natural” result of market competition, while involution is more a result of a runaway population than a competitive national character (attitude? Ideology?) – this just is another contemporary repackaging of Malthusian population theory. Fortunately, the market will still solve everything. Their Tangping (Lie to Equilibrium) doctrine is the dynamic element of spontaneous regulation of the dominant order. Therefore, who could have contributed more to this society than Tangpingists?

In fact, they are well aware of the situation of those who voluntarily quit. Those natural (“lack of theoretical guidance”) Tangpingists always been seen as the lowest-class in regular inspections of the labor market. The major economies of the capitalist world today are all cultivating a rapidly growing gig economy system. If the Tangpingists made the greatest contribution, the implication here is that they were the ones who made the necessary sacrifices for the continuation of the order. Here, the meek kneelers we mentioned will rejoice. Because, since radical Tangpingists are a bunch of unsuspecting saints, it is indeed most profitable to kneel and wait. But those economists will not tell them the disappointing truth: in the absence of democratic labor, Tangpingism, captured by the gig economy, not only fails to increase people’s pay, but may also lead to further extension of labor hours.

The last group to arrive, albeit late, were the technologists preaching the automation crisis. Unlike most who focus on the issue of involution, they insist that the spread of automation technology will quickly replace human labor. It will be too late to deal with a wave of unemployment by then. Therefore, Tangping is a rehearsal for the crisis of large-scale automation. Once the crisis comes, society will have to meet the basic living needs of Tangping unconditionally. If Tangpingism meant the abolition of labor, then accelerationism would bring that gift to them. But for the moment, Tangpingism is still too far ahead of its time. As Party members often say, a social ideology will only be compatible with its economic foundation (here it refers to technology as the primary productive force). What is there to worry about such an ideology that has been choked by reality? This means that for these Tangpingists, “the times will wake them up at dawn again and again.”

But such arguments precisely ignore the fact that Tangpingism was originally a reaction to accelerationism. Accelerationists will not provide an explanation for why decades of technological progress have not led to a reduction in labor time. Tangpingists do not believe in the messiah of technology, nor do they believe that we can start an alternative society within the existing dominant technological system. Rather, what they state in practical terms is that if labor is abolished, it must happen all at once, immediately, or we will never be able to abolish it.

3. The Dilemma of Tangpingists

While debating with various “fellow travelers,” the Tangpingists also present their real dilemma.

In fact, as long as the Tangpingist still adheres to an individualistic approach to practice, they are often forced into a cycle of asceticism and exploitation. Indeed, minimizing desire during the stage of asceticism helps us to minimize exploitation as well. But, here is the reality that the economists try to disguise, this then becomes a not-so-new technique of governance that shifts

the relative surplus of the population between being “unemployed” and having no income and taking “odd jobs” with no rights or guarantees – note that these terms are both produced with the logic of production as the core. Those who actively defected to Tangpingism either continued to produce that oppressive condition, or they continued to accept it, or both. Since the time of Marx, this has been an important means of hindering the rise of workers’ wages (he called it the “industrial reserve army”).

The embarrassing aspect of an atomized Tangpingism is that, lacking a path to be practiced on a large scale, it may perish in stagnation. The more one understands it, the less they need it—they are forced into it, excluded from the mainstream order, and have nothing to give up. And the more one needs it, the more they resist its true meaning – for them, there has always been too much order, too many things to give up. Think about those who are caught up in the logics of marriage and family, those who have children, those who seek meaning in job assessments and GPA, those paying off their mortgages...If the Tangpingists have made so many enemies, how can one expect the dominant order to leave them alone?

So, what should you make of a Tangpingism that is reclusive and withdrawn? When Tangpingists first attracted attention on social media, they were presented as such: they had exhausted their social energy with inhumane work, so they shut themselves in a cheap rental house and did not disturb the outside world. They didn’t seem to realize that what confined them to a hut of a few square meters was itself part of the order they were trying to refuse. But what could be done about it? Hadn’t they already taken that creed of radical Tangpingism as far as they could go?

Let us return to Diogenes for a moment. When Diogenes lay in his barrel and looked out at the world, he did not appear isolated. He did not shy away from advocating his ideas to passersby, and he placed the wooden barrels in the most prosperous road in the center of the ancient Greek world. He was poor, but full of life: lighting up every face in the street with a lantern during the day, supposedly searching for the real man; stepping on the fine carpet of Plato’s house, stating he was stepping on the idealist’s poor vanity; walking against the flow of the crowd as they left a theater and when asked why, claiming “It is what I have been doing all my life.” When his wooden barrel was crushed by iron hoofs, people quickly made another one for him.

Few people know that the order we live in today is more ubiquitous and indestructible than it was in the days of the city-state that imprisoned most slaves. And who do we expect to rescue our ruined barrels? If we reject the order that imprisons most of us, but leave behind the order that separates and divides us and prevents us from loving one another sincerely, what have we rejected?

4. Allies of Tangpingists

The world today is rough. In order to save Tangpingism from its bind, so as to realize the great rejection of the current order, it may need another aspect aside from individualism.

In fact, the general conception of mass Tangpingism is radical in nature. Tangpingism does not mean the decoupling of a certain social link, but every link. Tangpingism does not occur in the breakdown of a certain social class and identity community, but in the entire working class. It seeks to link refusal to go to school, to work, to have children, and to have a family, and so it naturally has the potential to link a whole generation of people who are mostly oppressed under

the current order. It tries to contact all those who refuse coercion and obedience, men and women, workers and the unemployed, citizens, farmers and nomads, hooligans, students and intellectuals, heterosexuals, homosexuals and other queer people, vagrants and pensioners... what other idea could quietly build the secret affinities to set the stage for a general strike?

Allies we contact include:

- a. Women and queer people. We reject marriage, family, and sexual relationships that bring them oppressive, discriminatory, and unequal relationships. We refuse to breed for the continuation of patriarchy.
- b. Workers (whether full-time workers, gig workers, or unemployed). We reject labor orders that create exploitation and alienation. We refuse to create labor value that provides a source of capital for bureaucratic managers and capitalists.
- c. Peasants and nomads. We refuse to be assimilated into an imposed modern order. We reject economic plunder and cultural extermination. We reject environmental catastrophe. We reject forced migrations.
- d. Students and intellectuals. We reject the intellectual and cultural production of mainstream ideologies. We reject them monopoly on knowledge.
- e. Young people, citizens, the homeless, and the unemployed. We reject high rents and housing prices. We refuse to pay housing loans and interest.
- f. The elderly. We refuse to delay retirement. We refuse expensive medical and nursing care. We refuse to be apathetic and neglected.
- g. Other theorists and activists who advocate radical change rather than conservative order. For example some Marxists, anarchists, feminists, ecologists, cooperativists...

5. Alternative Autonomous Communities

Radical Tangpingism is manifested not only in reaching out to a wide range of allies, but also in mutual aid communal relationships and in connecting with those alternative autonomous regions that have or do exist. Without the attempts of these pioneers, the Tangpingists would have no basis for realizing their vision.

A Tangpingist is the smallest autonomous region, and their body is an out-of-control place that drifts around. On any occasion, in any situation, whether it's work, entertainment, classes, meals, mourning, weddings, Tangpingists practice their own ritual, Tangping. Faced with any person or entity, whether it is a leader, a boss, a division commander, or banknotes, medals, and national flags, Tangpingists are loyal to their own label, which is Tangping.

Tangpingists invent their own festivals. In the midst of such festivals, they celebrate neither harvest nor victory. They lie down on the highways where the traffic flows, in the factories where the machines run and the bodies are numb. They neither spend nor indulge. They lie down in shopping malls that serve as contemporary churches, in stately or majestic palaces or modern complexes. In the midst of such celebrations, they do not provide more leisure for themselves, but for others. They did not erect these shelters for themselves, but for all the oppressed.

For those who practice the principle of alternative autonomy in other ways, whether they are struggling under the siege of high-pressure order, hiding on the top of mountains or jungles that no one cares about, whether they retreat to the borders and corners of this world, or are stationed in the center of noisy and bustling squares, Tangpingists try to find inspiration and enlightenment from their attempts. We are grateful to the following pioneers: the anarchists and Marxists who founded the Paris Commune, the workers who took over the factories in the Spanish Civil War, the escaped slaves who formed marron communities in the Great Dismal Swamp in the United States, the homeless, artists, students and queer people who occupied houses in Berlin, Germany, the autonomous Zapata aborigines of Chiapas, Mexico, and the women who fought patriarchy and organized cooperatives in the Kurdistan region of Syria.....

Through mutual aid and self-determination, Tangpingists will also build their own communities. We seek an alternative to the order of excess that is centered on production and expansion. We seek Tangping anytime, anywhere. We seek to build shelter on deserted and vacant land without being evicted. We seek infrastructure, spatial design and urban layout for leisure and play purposes. We seek an economy of gifts, reciprocity and freedom from exploitation. We seek collective governance with direct democracy and gender equality. We seek to defend common ownership. We seek to tax our existing rent-seekers and renters to pay back what we have been deprived of in the past. We seek a barrel repair fund. We seek to allow residents to pursue their own pleasures with minimal labor. We seek technologies that accelerate Tangping rather than enslavement, so that labor reductions pay off immediately. We seek community care and nurturing. We seek to remove borders and move freely between autonomous regions. In particular we seek attention to those in need – to provide care for those who have suffered from mental and physical pain, money for those who are indebted, care for those with reduced mobility and incapacity, space for those who have suffered discrimination, stigmatization and injustice... ..

And for those who can't join us for the time being, Tangpingists must think of them too

It's time to stop fighting each over the rations during artificial shortages. A philosophy of resistance will be given new life from our actions. When the time comes, the Tangpingists will formulate more detailed tasks. But before that, we must make the first barrel.

Tangpingists of the world, unite!

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