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# Conditional Neutrality, Limited Intervention: The Ad Hoc Nature of Britain's Taiping Policy, 1853-1862

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*Conditional Neutrality, Limited Intervention:  
The Ad hoc Nature of Britain's Taiping Policy, 1853-1862*

by

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*The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
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*Conditional Neutrality, Limited Intervention: The Ad hoc Nature of Britain's Taiping Policy, 1853-1862*

*Thesis directed by Associate Professor Timothy B. Weston*

British imperial policy in the nineteenth century often found itself stretched and challenged as local policy makers struggled to adapt to their changing circumstances, the expectations and demands of local populations, while still adhering to the goal of British imperialism. Local British officials who responded to the Taiping Civil War, 1853-1864, highlight this struggle. Great Britain created their Taiping policy in an *ad hoc* manner in order to balance contending opinions about the potential of the Taiping compared with the Qing in furthering British economic, social and political goals. In this pursuit of a balanced policy, I argue that local British officials relied on an integrated policy of conditional neutrality and limited intervention. While local officials worked to maintain stability during the upheaval of the Taiping Civil War, they had to contend with the differing opinions and demands of missionaries, merchants and mercenaries all of whom complicated the situation.

Missionaries, merchants and mercenaries operating out of Shanghai, which was the main hub of Western commerce and society in the mid nineteenth century, were not shy about sharing their opinions regarding what policy British officials should take. Their actions and words pushed policy makers to rely on a flexible policy, which allowed them to accommodate some demands while suppressing others. This flexible policy of conditional neutrality and limited intervention protected British interests in China, while helping to maintain a degree of separation from the belligerents to not risk further destabilizing China. They maintained this policy

throughout the war, despite numerous altercations, and wars. The ad hoc nature of Great Britain's Taiping policy was successful despite the constant pressures of local groups, and the larger politics of the British Empire that conflicted with their local policy of conditional neutrality and limited intervention.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Empires define history, when they rise, when they clash and when they fall. Their political economic, social, and military realities define their eras. Empires do not exist in a vacuum; they do not exist in a world where only the largest players count, rather they exist in a world where a multitude of other states and non-state actors participate in the creation of history. Empires are not binary entities, but breaking down their binary appearances to look at the complications of their realities is an incredibly overwhelming task. Great Britain due to the size and strength of her nineteenth century empire is a modern allegory of empire, for good reason. Great Britain pioneered and shaped the western industrialized world's perception of what imperialism looked like, and how a western industrialized world power should behave both domestically and internationally. It also shaped the perceptions and expectations of colonized and non-industrial powers as to their role in the imperial world order. These perceptions then informed how western powers behaved. By questioning the Empire as part of a binary in conflicts, historians build a stronger understanding about the nature and lasting effects of imperialism and global expansion in the modern world.

Binary conflicts between China the "West" are a large part of China's nineteenth century history. The Opium War, the Arrow War, the Sino-French War, the Boxer Rebellion, and these conflicts are examples of China against the conglomerated "West". They are "us against them", and the West easily falls into the role of unified group when pitted against China despite their

many internecine conflicts. However, these apparent binary conflicts are operating within a background of domestic upheaval that affects them and complicates the idea that large-scale imperial conflict occurs within strict uninfluenced binary circumstances, or that the only binary conflict an empire might engage in is with other full-scale empires. The Taiping Civil War (1853-1864) is an example of how complicated international and imperial conflicts became in the nineteenth century and how those complications had lasting effects on the perceptions of power and the realities of power and influence in China and in the world. The Taiping Civil War at its most basic was the conflict between the Qing Imperial state and the often-labeled “rebellious” members of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. This perceived binary imperial conflict fails to explore fully the effect that it had on western groups and the realities of imperialism in China during the mid-nineteenth century, which in turn affected the progress of the civil war. This is not to say that the West controlled or was the primary force for change in the Taiping Civil War, far from it. The British Empire and other foreign powers in Chinese treaty ports at the time of the Taiping Civil War played an ancillary role in the conflict but their role was one that both forced the Taiping and the Qing to reevaluate their positions against each other but it also required Great Britain and the other Treaty Port powers to negotiate their own relationships with the Qing and the Taiping. While the Western states attempted to remain neutral in the conflict, not siding with or supporting either side, their own self-interest and the personal curiosities of the various groups meant that neutrality was often more a term than a practice. Because their neutrality was not 100 percent for a variety of reasons, and because it was in a constant state of definitional flux, the western powers, especially Great Britain, ended up as a sidelined third party not always participating but often engaging directly and indirectly with both belligerents.



The conflict between the Taiping and the Qing was a conflict between a weakening empire and an ambitious contender within the traditional context of the dynastic cycle, at first glance an example of a binary conflict. However, it is an oversimplification of a complex problem made messier by the existence of and engagement with the western industrializing powers namely Britain, France and the United States. While there were other western powers involved in China during the mid-nineteenth century these three were the most influential, with Great Britain leading the way both in terms of political power and in terms of economic influence. The Taiping Civil War could have become an example of dynastic change or of failed rebellion, rather because of Western involvement it occupies a unique place in Chinese history, marking the first time that Western powers became involved in a Chinese domestic conflict. .

The Taiping Civil War lasted almost 15 years, and upended the control and stability of the Qing state in the most prosperous and wealthy region of China. It killed at least 20 million people and displaced countless others. It required the abandonment of the centuries old “Law of Avoidance” in order to build the armies to suppress it. For almost 10 years China had a *de facto* two government reality, the Qing in Beijing and the Taiping in Nanjing from 1853-1864. The uprising itself had disrupted life in the rural regions of southern China for almost 5 years prior to the Taiping’s success in Nanjing. Contemporaries and scholars have referred to the Taiping war as both a rebellion and a revolution. Rebellion implies it had little legitimacy, and it lessens its impact on the state and society. Revolution implies that it was ultimately successful and held a large amount of popular support. Neither of these accurately conveys the importance of the Taiping to nineteenth century China and the nineteenth century international world. I choose to describe it as a civil war for two important reasons. First, civil war means two legitimate belligerents, the Taiping and the Qing. Rebellion delegitimizes the experiences and policies of

the Taiping whereas civil war acknowledges their successes like taking and holding a major city like Nanjing for almost 10 years. Second, the term rebellion does not do justice to the sheer size of the Taiping war. To call it anything other than a civil war diminishes the physical and psychological impact this conflict had on nineteenth century China.

The impact of the Taiping reached further than China; there were a number of western observers and participants in the war. Their interests and engagements were more than just idle imperial curiosity. The Western world was fascinated with information that missionaries, merchants and officials were sending back home about the Taiping. Here was an apparently Christian movement, built mostly by indigenous motivation with little to no external assistance. In the land of the “weakening godless China”, was a Christian movement with a clear goal to overthrow and replace the Qing with their new social and political order based on the visions of Hong Xiuquan. Negative reports subsequently balanced these glowing accolades claim that Taiping Christianity was a farce, their politics were weak and divided and their armies were guilty of heinous violence against civilians. This reported contradictions about the Taiping’s nature, and thus their likelihood work with the Western powers drove much of the continued uncertainty that surrounded Western ideas about the conflict. The Taiping were an enigma that could potentially threaten or strengthen their precarious hold on trade along the Yangtze River and potentially in China at large. The Taiping themselves became a source of intrigue, hope, while the conflict between the Taiping and the Qing became a concern for western governments and their citizens living in treaty port cities. A policy was necessary to balance these local hopes and fears with the state’s ambition.

Great Britain drove and controlled a good deal of the foreign policy in China and often set policy precedent between China and other states, for this reason I am focusing on Great

Britain's policy reactions to the Taiping Civil War. The British also were the majority Western population in treaty port China. While the Taiping Civil War was affecting Chinese lives across China, it was in the treaty port cities that westerners came together to voice their hopes and concerns about the movement and the conflict it created. Shanghai quickly became a center for these discussions, both because of its rapidly growing size and importance, but also because it was a point of trade and contact with the Yangtze River. The Yangtze was the fastest and easiest way to travel to Taiping held Nanjing. . This thesis focuses on Shanghai because it was an important center for policy discussions, and later a target for the Taiping generals because of its economic importance.

I argue that Great Britain created their Taiping policy in an *ad hoc* manner in order to balance contending opinions about the nature and potential of the Taiping compared with the Qing in furthering British economic, social and political goals. British policy on the Taiping War consisted of two main stages, conditional neutrality and limited intervention. I define conditional neutrality as the process of remaining uninvolved in the conflict except under certain conditions that the British set up in order to protect their interests and constituents. I define limited intervention as the process by which Great Britain involved itself in the civil war but with geographic and political limitations. The process that created these two related policies was not as straight forward as past scholars have presented it. Rather, local officials created these related policies in stages to compensate for contradictory information about the Taiping, the over extension of the British Empire, the continued struggles to assert and reaffirm their treaty rights with the Qing state as well as the demands and expectations of their own divided constituents.. This was an ad hoc approach to policy creation in order to accommodate these many shifting stances on the Taiping within China, and within their own western enclaves. An atmosphere of

loose state control, brought about by imperial over extension and weak communication routes, permitted the flexible nature of Great Britain's policy of conditional neutrality during the Taiping Civil War. This flexibility increased Great Britain's participation in the civil war in an effort to balance their policy of conditional neutrality with their economic interests. The 1862 decision to intervene was a result of an atmosphere of tightening state control that removed the ability of non-state actors to play a large role in policy interpretations. The British state had reached a point where their direct control had expanded enough that they could exert forceful policy decisions. They decided that the protection of economic interests superseded an almost 10-year claim of conditional neutrality and chose to throw nominal support in with the Qing, despite the lingering popular support of the Taiping from missionaries and some merchants both at home and abroad.

There were four main groups of Western non-state actors in China, officials, missionaries, merchants and mercenaries. These were not monolithic by any stretch of the imagination and individuals often would belong to multiple groups at any one time. Officials, while not strictly non-state actors because they worked for the state were in charge of creating and enforcing policy. While they reported directly to Whitehall and answered to the crown, the distance between them and their superiors, provided them with a little more freedom of personal action. They had to respond to all of the difficulties brought by the other groups while maintaining productive relations with Chinese officials. The historical record represents their own opinions and thoughts on the progress of the war and the potential success of either belligerent. However, their obligation to Whitehall and the crown hampered their ability to pursue a course of action supported by their own personal opinions. Often times they had to follow policy and orders that ran counter to their own personal feelings regarding the war.

Missionaries were in China for the purpose of conversion in order to bring Christianity and enlightened western civilization to the “godless heathens” of the East. However, their relations with the Taiping remained fraught with conflict as they tried to reconcile the Christian aspects of Taiping religion with the very clear dogmatic breaks between Taiping Christianity and Western Protestantism. The lack of consistent and accurate information about the Taiping complicated missionary attempts to reconcile dogmatic differences.. Missionaries were also individuals who believed that the Christianization of China could bring about better trade opportunities and this grants them a mercantilist classification as well.

The merchants were those individuals in China who were there to turn a profit, either as individuals or as members of firms. They were involved in shipping and sale of goods from India or the home islands as well as the acquisition of Chinese goods like silk and tea for sale back home. Their interest and concern was primarily stability and the continued access to uninterrupted and unmolested trade. While some believed that the Christian conversion of China would help promote trade, others believed that the civil war was too disruptive and was irreparably damaging trade and economic prosperity.

The last important group was the mercenaries, those who flouted the neutrality decree and involved themselves volunteering their services and expertise to the Qing for a price. They were a liability and a benefit to the westerners. They could protect and promote western interests, but they also stood as a stout reminder that neutrality was not always enforceable and it was not always consistent.

The British officials were responsible for balancing the needs, expectations, and demands of their constituents with their own beliefs and the often belated and retroactive orders from

Whitehall. Neutrality was the policy, but the implementation was not always consistent, the same problems existed with the policy of intervention. These inconsistencies were a result of the ad hoc nature of policy and the inability of officials to clearly define and enforce the policies of conditional neutrality and limited intervention.

## Chapter 2: Historiography

Scholars have spent much time and ink on the Taiping over the last 150 years, and yet in comparison to events like the Boxer Rebellion or the American Civil war, the western language academic offerings on the Taiping are paltry and lacking. There are many potential reasons for this, including a difficulty in finding new sources, as the Qing destroyed much of the Taiping's records when they retook Nanjing in 1864. For a long time it seemed many scholars believed that everything about the Taiping had been said. Jonathan Spence, most notably, mentioned his belief that "...it seemed to [him] that everything that could be known about the Taiping had been fully aired."<sup>1</sup> Whatever the reasons that English language Taiping scholarship has been lacking over the years, it would be incorrect to state that there are expansive gaps in the political and military narrative history of the war. Rather the missing pieces are the non-political and non-military histories, the effect on the people, the environment, and trade. That is the Taiping as the people rather than the politics experienced them. These areas are the least well addressed in Taiping scholarship, along with the Taiping impact on global history. The Taiping war was a Chinese conflict that affected and was affected by Western politics and interests. This western involvement and impact has generated a divergent analysis across the various historiographical traditions, which I will briefly discuss.

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<sup>1</sup> Spence, Jonathan D. *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*. New York: Norton, 1996. Pg xxiv

Taiping scholarship has not undergone a steady process of change rather it has experienced several large shifts, most of which have been in the past 60 years, with much of the major English language scholarship concentrated in the 1960s and 1970s. I have found very little published prior to this time that is scholarly; much has been reflections and memoirs by individuals who lived through the Taiping. I attribute publication boom the 1960s and 1970s to two specific factors. First, the boom marks the 100-year anniversary of the Taiping. Second, and more important, this was the beginning of Western, particularly American professional historical scholarship on China. There was a gap in scholarship until the 1990s and 2000s, which have seen the publication of four major works that either have questioned a common piece of the narrative or have broadened our understanding of the process and effects of the Taiping on Chinese society in the nineteenth century. Another important aspect of Taiping scholarship at large is how diverse the interpretations are between scholarly trends and communities. Nationalists, Marxists, and Western language schools are three of the most prominent groups; all of them have vastly different interpretations regarding the impact and interpretation of the Taiping Civil War.

The earliest works of Taiping scholarship are the memoir publications from individuals who experienced the Taiping war, and their reflections upon lengthy time spent in China. They are the first retrospective and interpretive works. Two of the most notable, and the earliest of these retrospectives are *The Ever-Victorious Army: A History of the Chinese Campaign under Lt.-Col. C. G. Gordon, C.B. R.E. and of the Suppression of the Tai-ping Rebellion* by Andrew Wilson published 1868 and A. Egmont Hake's *Events in the Taeping Rebellion: Being Reprints of Mss. Copied by General Gordon, C.B. In his Own Handwriting* published in 1891. The focus and interest in these memoirs is clearly on Charles "Chinese" Gordon's role as the General of the



Ever-Victorious Army (EVA) and only tangentially focused on the policy of Western intervention in the Taiping Civil War, even though the official intervention allowed Gordon to take command of the EVA. This focus on Gordon and the EVA overemphasizes what was a small-l portion of the civil war at large, and a comparatively small portion of the actions wrought by British policy. Overwhelmingly, neither book treats the Taiping as a complex group of individuals; rather all of the focus is on the military engagements between the westerners and the Taiping. These two publications glorified the benevolence and discipline of British military actions in China, often juxtaposing them against the violence and barbarism of their opponents, “We found near Mow Wang’s house about thirty heads of small boys, averaging from fifteen to eighteen years, and on inquiry found these were Mow Wang’s immediate attendants, and had been beheaded by the Wang’s after the death of Mow Wang.”<sup>2</sup> These works are publications in support of British military involvement overseas, while still being stories of adventure.

This identification of the relationship between the end of the Taiping Civil War and Western military involvement is indicative of the early focus of Taiping writings in western languages. It was a limited focus and limiting to the full potential that early scholarship could take. However, I understand why the focus lay on the military engagement, it was the most concrete and clearly defined action that the British and western powers took in regards to the Taiping Civil War. Everything else remained in the grey area of what I have termed conditional neutrality making it very difficult to pin down the actions and decisions that an author could clearly write about and explain to their readers. There is also the undeniable reality that adventure in the Far East was a better story than a complicated policy regarding an unclear

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<sup>2</sup> Hake, A. Egmont. *Events in the Taiping Rebellion: Being Reprints of Mss. Copied by General Gordon, C.B. in His Own Handwriting, with Monograph, Introduction, and Notes*. London: W.H. Allen and Co. Ltd., 1891. Pg 386

religious uprising. These works focus on the military aspects of the war not on the policy difficulties that led to the final decision to intervene.

Early writings on the Taiping are rare, even missionary records and journals published in the decades following the conclusion of the Taiping Civil War spend almost no time discussing or even mentioning the Taiping. Within five years of the conclusion of the war, English language documents relegated the Taiping to a footnote in the larger discussion of Western involvement in China. By the 1870s, there were other rebellions, other uprisings, and other issues that were clearly more important to the Westerners in China. By the 1890s the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-1895 followed by the Boxer Rebellion and the 1911 Revolution overshadowed the importance and the experience of the Taiping Civil War. Most missionary records focused on the war years and were published during the progression of the war rather than afterwards as was the case with memoirs and recollections. The Taiping had fallen into the cracks of western language historical writings on China.

Just as Hake and Wilson focused on the military campaigns and used the Taiping as a stepping-stone between the first Opium and the second Opium war, most other early publications took this same route. Overall, they did not acknowledge much of the character of the Taiping or its effect on China, beyond the impact that it had on trade, and local populations, but only in ways that directly affected British citizens in China. Disparaging the Taiping for the damage done to the 'good' name of Christianity and to missionary work in China was another common theme among these works. The few missionary records of the Taiping published after the conclusion of the war tended to focus on the failure of Christian conversion using the Taiping as an example of this failure. Even these documents from the *China Recorder* and the *Journal of*

*the Royal Asiatic Society* only occasionally mentioned the Taiping and mainly focused on other aspects of Western experience in China<sup>3</sup>.

The recollective histories fade out and the next import movement in western language scholarship occurred during the course of the first two world wars as the colonial empires were breaking down. At this point, the Taiping was still very much a footnote in the literature that quickly moved on to events that were of greater importance to Great Britain, either because they more directly involved the British, or simply because they reflected more of their preeminence in the era of imperialism. These imperial histories are on the crux of the beginning of academic scholarship on China, but they were written by political agents not academics, and are not part of modern scholarship per se. Their political biases are evident in their writing and the lack of focus on the Taiping is indicative of their disinterest in the topic.

Costin's *Great Britain and China, 1833-1860* published in 1937 is exemplary of this type of publication. Focused on the era slightly before the first Opium War through the end of the Second Opium war, *Great Britain and China* discusses the beginning and the most important, to the British, portions of the Taiping Civil War, but it only spends a small amount of time discussing the Taiping at all before quickly moving on to other topics. The dismissive fashion that Costin uses to discuss the Taiping highlights the indifference and disinterest in the group as

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<sup>3</sup> The following is a short list of journals and articles that discuss experiences in China during the 1850s through the 1870s. Some include brief mentions of the Taiping, but others do not.

Thoughts on "Social Life of the Chinese" by Geo. Phillips Esq., Interpreter in H.M Consul Service, Amoy 1867 published in *Missionary Recorder: A Repository of Intelligence from Eastern Missions and a Medium of General Information* pg 6.

"Protestant Missions in China A Failure" by Ad Hominem 1867 published in *Missionary Recorder: A Repository of Intelligence from Eastern Missions and a Medium of General Information* pg 127.

The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Volume I "Retrospect of the events in the North of China During the Years 1861-1864" By R. A. Jamieson Esq. 1864.

important and influential to both Chinese and global history as well as British experience. The section about the Taiping begins, “The Chinese, we have seen, were a rebellious people.”<sup>4</sup> This one line dismisses the Taiping, and all uprisings and insurrections in the whole of Chinese history as simply being endemic to the society and culture without holding any real importance. In one line, Costin defined and explained away Chinese society and all of their behavior by their inherent rebellious nature. Moreover, the section entitled “The Rebellions and their Consequences” spends less than three pages on the Taiping before moving along to Great Britain’s engagement with other foreign powers in China ignoring the Taiping and the other uprisings that were going on concurrently. Though this work is about Great Britain and China, it truly only exists as a work about Great Britain’s foreign affairs with other Western Powers in China, with occasional forays into actual interactions with the Chinese when Britain was providing, as James Hevia puts it, an ‘English lesson.’<sup>5</sup> While this approach characterizes much of British and Western writing about modern China, the treatment of the Taiping is in some ways worse, mainly because the dearth of writing in the first place. Costin focused his discussion on the beginning impressions of Britain’s economic interests,

“...Bonham had to consider what attitude to adopt if the Chinese government asked for the help of British warships in the defence of Nanking. He realized that his first duty in that region would be the defence of his own countrymen at Shanghai, but if he could thereby gain advantages for British commerce such a proposal might be entertained.”<sup>6</sup>

The Taiping exist in British imperial histories as a footnote or a small blip of an event that affected and interrupted trade but could readily be used to back the Qing state further in to a

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<sup>4</sup> Costin, W.C. *Great Britain and China, 1833-1860*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937. Pg 159

<sup>5</sup> Hevia, James L. *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

<sup>6</sup>Costin, W.C. *Great Britain and China, 1833-1860*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937. Pg 160

corner regarding trade negotiations and the growing political demands of British and European imperialism. Scholarship was looking back on the glory days of Western imperialism, at the successes and failures in an attempt to explain their weakening grasp in the new century.

Costin was not the only author who ignored and diminished the importance of the Taiping to China or to Great Britain, or even the existence of the Taiping Civil war as a significant event. The 1943 work by G.E. Hubbard *entitled British Far Eastern Policy* does not discuss the Taiping at all, a surprise considering how much of British involvement in the Taiping was policy based and set the tone for policy creation and implementation for the rest of the century. Hubbard's purpose in this work is to examine how relations between The West and The Far East had gotten to the point of full-scale world war by the 1940s. However, his examination of early relations between China and Great Britain is woefully lacking. Focusing on the role of opium in the relationship Hubbard gives a brief political synopsis of the First Opium War and then jumps directly into the Second Opium War without any discussion of the interim changes in political and social power let alone the agonizingly slow but crucially important policy creation that happened between the two opium wars. The Taiping simply do not exist in this work even though the engagement of Great Britain in the conflict very much changed the balance of power, and put the Qing in a position where they were growing more and more reliant on Western military training, in part as a result of the creation of hybrid armies like the Ever Victorious Army that relied on Western tactics but Chinese manpower. The four main essentials of British policy were, Livelihood, Security, Peace, and Political Liberty<sup>7</sup> that Hubbard defines, would have allowed for even a brief mention of the Taiping. The nationalistic and Euro-centric approach to history still grounded these early works.

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<sup>7</sup> Hubbard, G.E. *British Far Eastern Policy*. New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1943. Pg 3

While Hubbard and Costin relegated the Taiping to a footnote in the larger quest to understand the British Imperial Project, American Holger Cahill took on the story of the Taiping in full through the eyes and experiences of Frederick Townsend Ward in *A Yankee Adventurer*, published in 1930. Ward was an American adventurer who found his way to China and through his skill and willingness to work he quickly made a space for himself as the leader of the unofficial defense force in Shanghai which, lacking support and more importantly funding from the Western powers in Shanghai, turned to the Qing and found generous patrons for their newly named Ever Victorious Army. Cahill's biography on Ward follows the story of the Taiping but once again focuses on a foreigner and the western, albeit unofficial, military involvement. Following the footsteps of Hake and Wilson, Cahill also over emphasizes the importance of western involvement in destruction of the Taiping.

These first writings on the Taiping tended to ignore or minimize the civil war, Cahill's work being the exception but it still focused on the importance of a Western adventurer rather than the Taiping. Works mentioning the Taiping at all, even in passing are few and works focused solely on the war are even fewer. Western language writers and officials had forgotten the Taiping less than 70 years after the conclusion of the war. Nevertheless, the Chinese language scholars had never forgotten and were continuously revising the Taiping narrative to promote and reflect their changing political agendas.

Chinese scholars have been writing about the Taiping since its inception. A number of important and noteworthy scholars have published on the Taiping over the past 150 years. In the earliest stages of scholarship two stood out, Jen Yuwen and Lo Erh-Kang. There are a number of other notable Taiping scholars but Lo and especially Jen are two of the most important in

creating the basis of western professionalized scholarship<sup>8</sup>. The first group of professional Chinese historians read and studied with Jen and Lo. It was this interaction between China and the West that created the first boom of western professional historical publications on the Taiping

The first formal professionalized scholarship on the Taiping was published between the 1950s-1970s and coincided with several major events, the aforementioned professionalization of Western historians, and the 100-year anniversary of the Taiping civil war. This selection of scholarship includes works published by Philip Kuhn, Jen Yu-wen (in translation), Mary Wright, S.Y. Teng, Vincent Shih, Eugene Boardman, and others. This era produced the largest amount of Taiping scholarship, and several of the published works have withstood 50 years of scholarly scrutiny. Kuhn's *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796-1864*, Teng's *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*, Michael's Three-volume work, *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents* and Jen Yu-wen's *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*, formed the base of early professionalized Western language Taiping scholarship. Franz Michael's and Jen Yu-wen's works are both narrative surveys of the Taiping Civil War, and both are important sources for beginning research on the Taiping.

Jen Yu-wen's *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement* published in 1973 is an abridged translation of his multivolume work on the Taiping. The first volume was published in Chinese in 1935 entitled T'ai-p'ing t'ien-kuo tsa-chi (Miscellaneous Articles on Taiping Tienkuo), Jen published five more volumes about the Taiping between 1935 and 1968. During this time, Jen

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<sup>8</sup> For a further listing of Chinese scholars to publish on the Taiping, refer to Ssu-yu Teng's work *Historiography of the Taiping Rebellion*.

traveled around China collecting and compiling documents related to the Taiping and incorporating his growing research and document acquisition into his publications. Mary Wright headed a project to translate and abridge Jen's work on the Taiping. She completed this project in 1973 with the publication of *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*.<sup>9</sup> While the Chinese language and Western language scholarship was reaching different conclusions, there was a strong discussion between the two historiographies even prior to Cold War détente in the 1970s. Jen Yu-wen's *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement* highlights the difficulty in gaining access to sources about the Taiping, and the types and degree of biases surrounding discussions of the Taiping. As Jonathan Spence points out in his foreword to *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*,

... [Jen] is not afraid to take sides. He is an anti-Manchu Chinese nationalist from Kwangtung; and he cannot hide the fact (nor does he want to) that he finds Hung Hsiu-ch'uan more sympathetic than Tseng Kuo-fan. Similarly, the author asserts from the title of his book onward that he is dealing with a revolutionary movement, and he is not disposed to enter the lists with those who insist the Taipings were mere rebels.<sup>10</sup>

Jen was unabashedly biased regarding his personal opinions about the Taiping and these biases informed his research and his writing. Because he so strongly supported the Taiping and saw them as revolutionaries rather than rebels, he tended to ignore or minimize the importance of the Qing opposition throughout his narrative of the Taiping. This one sided narrative is balanced out by Mary Wright's 1957 work, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T'ung-Chih Restoration, 1862-1874* which provides the Qing perspective of the Taiping. Spence believed that,

Jen Yu-wen's book and Mary Wright's may be read together, as both counterpoise, and continuation: together they help use to see the period from 1850-1867 in continuing

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<sup>9</sup> Jen, Yu-wen. *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973. Pg xix-xx

<sup>10</sup> Jen, Yu-wen. *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973. Pg xvi



process. The T'ung-chih administrators are now locked in context, and behind their thoughtful words we can hear, with a new clarity, the sharp, angry cries of the millions who sought a different solution.<sup>11</sup>

The divergence of scholarships shows the contentious nature of the Taiping civil war.

Franz Michael's three-volume *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents* published in 1966, includes a narrative history of the Taiping and one of the largest selections of Taiping documents in translation. Michael's goal was "...to collect and translate the existing Taiping documentary material and derive from it a periodization of Taiping history that would make possible a new understanding of this crucial period in the beginning of modern Chinese history."<sup>12</sup> Michael, saw the Taiping as the beginning of China's modern era. Volume I of this work is Michael's own narrative history of the Taiping, with heavily footnoted to the translated documents that make up volumes II and III. The project itself was part of the Modern Chinese History Project that Michael was chair of and included such scholars as Vincent Shih, a well-known Taiping scholar and others.<sup>13</sup> Franz Michael's work is the basis of beginning work on the Taiping because of its organization and ease of use through translated documents.

With few exceptions, many of these books published in the early stages of historical professionalization focused on narrative retelling of events rather than a historical interpretation of surrounding aspects of the war. Philip Kuhn's 1970 publication, *Rebellion and Its Enemies* was an exception. Kuhn's work is a structural examination of local organization that the Qing Dynasty and the Taiping used to build support for their respective causes. He breaks away from

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<sup>11</sup> Jen, Yu-wen. *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973. Pg xvii

<sup>12</sup> Michael, Franz. *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents*. Vol. I. III vols. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966. Pg vii

<sup>13</sup> Michael, Franz. *The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents*. Vol. I. III vols. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966. Pg viii-ix

the historical narration of the Taiping and examines what sort of social structures and local militia structures allowed for such high levels of ease in mobilizing populations for either offensive or defensive military organizations.

While Kuhn is looking locally and focusing on China and Chinese experience, S.Y. Teng is looking beyond internal Chinese affairs with his work *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Even though Teng is moving beyond China to a focus on the West, as the title suggests, it remains a survey of events and impressions rather than a wider analysis of historical impact of the Taiping Civil War. Along with Michael, Teng believes that the Taiping Civil War marks the beginning of China's modern era.<sup>14</sup> Because of the very evident early biases in Taiping scholarship, as evidenced in Jen Yu-wen's work, Teng felt the need to emphasize his own personal attempt at neutrality, "The author does not incline toward any specific type of interpretation, such as an economic one; balanced approach is intended. Historical truth is the chief concern."<sup>15</sup> Teng's claim makes a few points, he is clearly trying to distinguish himself from earlier historians, and from the very dogmatic histories that were, and in some cases still are, published in China. This is also an example of the early stages of historical professionalization, the process of approaching and writing history with an open mind and with minimal bias. Teng tried to be an unbiased authority on the Taiping interested in what he considered the historical truth. Teng's work is important to my study because it was one of two publications to examine explicitly the relationship between the Taiping Civil War and the

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<sup>14</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg vii

<sup>15</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg viii

Western Powers. The second work is J.S. Gregory's *Great Britain and the Taipings* published in 1969.

Gregory's *Great Britain and the Taipings* is a foundational text for my research project because it is the only work to focus specifically on British policy surrounding the Taiping Civil War. While Teng looks at British policy in a general sense, he focuses more on the wider implications of Western powers involved in the Taiping Civil War and includes the other major treaty powers in the scope of his work. Gregory makes the argument that British policy was limited in both its neutrality and its intervention. He counters the argument coming from Chinese scholars such as Jen Yu-wen that British policies in the nineteenth century were carefully designed plots of Victorian ingenuity to keep China weak in order to exploit its wealth and population. Gregory's focus is on official policy and the individuals directly involved in making policy rather than the other secondary groups which he dismisses as relevant but not crucial to the policy making process nor to its implementation and enforcement. According to Gregory, British officials created policy out of a strict political necessity. It was not policy dreamt up in Whitehall to punish and further damage the Qing state while leveraging potential support of the Taiping in treaty revision negotiations. *Great Britain and the Taipings* neglects to place as much emphasis on the groups outside of the formal policymaking process instead focusing all power on the local officials. In this thesis, I am responding to Gregory's argument that the non-state groups, which we both identify as missionaries merchants and mercenaries, did not play an important role in influencing the various aspects of Britain's Taiping policy. I agree with him that British officials created policy locally out of political and social necessity, but I disagree that the non-state groups played a negligible role in influencing the creation and implementation of both the policy of conditional neutrality and of limited intervention.

These works by Jen, Michael, Teng and Gregory are the beginning of professional historical writing on China, and while they have their biases and historical legacies, they provided a solid foundation for future scholars. The 1950s through the 1970s were the most prolific times in Taiping scholarship and produced a number of works exploring the various aspects, , of the Taiping outside of a strictly narrative setting, though their focus does fall more heavily on questions of Taiping Christianity.

After the 1970s, publications on the Taiping slowed until the early 1990s when several works brought new life back into the discussion of the Taiping Civil War. Jonathan Spence's *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*, Thomas Reilly's *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire* and Robert Weller's *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen* are three important works that have revitalized the discussion of the Taiping. Beginning with Weller's *Resistance, Chaos and Control* published in 1994, these three books, mark the resurgence of scholarship on the Taiping which had otherwise fallen out of vogue in the 1970s. Weller, Riley, and Spence all tackle the Taiping, but it is Reilly who is one of the first scholars to address the difficulty that Westerners had reconciling Taiping Christianity with their own dogmatic beliefs and practices. Reilly argues that the Taiping were Christians, not pseudo Christians or individuals using a claim of Christianity in an attempt to legitimize their power in the eyes of the Western ports. He fully supports their identity as a Chinese religion with as many roots in traditional Chinese practices as in early Christian practices. The nature of Taiping Christianity has been at the heart of western discussions about the Taiping since the 1850s. The contention between those who believed the Taiping was a Christian movement and those who did not played an important role in influencing British policy. One of the ongoing questions

about the Taiping was whether their Christianity was more important than their politics or vice versa. According to Weller, the politics became a stronger driving force for the Taiping than their religion, while Reilly takes the opposite view that it was the religion driving the political motivation. These questions were the same faced by Western officials trying to create a policy on the Taiping that took into account the divergent interpretations and contradictory information that they were receiving.

Previous scholarship on this topic [how the Taiping were able to gain such a following among the common people] has failed to emphasize that when the Taiping religion left Hong Xiuquan's hands, it was no longer a Western religion, a foreign creed. The Taiping faith, albeit kindled by Anglo-American Protestantism, developed into a dynamic new Chinese religion, one whose conception of the title and position of the sovereign deity challenged the legitimacy of the imperial order. Hong Xiuquan presented this new religion, Taiping Christianity, as a revival and restoration of the ancient classical faith in Shangdi.<sup>16</sup>

According to Reilly, the Taiping was as much a foreign Christian religion as it was traditional Chinese religion. Religion tied together their identity. The Taiping Civil War was primarily a religious movement, "it was the worship of a new god that demanded the establishment of a new king, not vice versa."<sup>17</sup> This argument runs counter to Weller's argument that the Taiping were a religious movement that quickly was hijacked by political goals and as a result, a majority of the Civil War was driven by these political goals rather than the religious goals that Reilly is arguing for. These contradicting arguments are the same that faced the British and Western officials as they attempted to make policy in the 19th century.

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<sup>16</sup> Reilly, Thomas H. 2004. *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. pg 4

<sup>17</sup> Reilly, Thomas H. 2004. *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. pg 5

Reilly acknowledges the lack of acceptance for the Taiping an authentic expression of Christianity, and the 19th century origins of such beliefs.

This reluctance is due in part to a reaction against the exuberance of some nineteenth century missionary observers, who saw in the initial stages of the movement the promise of the conversion of the whole of China to Anglo-American Protestantism. But more than that, this reluctance also seems to indicate a resistance against affirming Taiping Christianity as a fully authentic Chinese religion, along with a hesitation in acknowledging Taiping claims concerning religious aspects of the Chinese imperial institution. As a result, little scholarship to this point as acknowledged Taiping Christianity as both a dynamic new Chinese religion seeking to identify with classical tradition and as an authentic expression of Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

This passage highlights the difficulties that western language scholarship has had coming to terms with Taiping religion, and it is directly related to the understandings of the Taiping during the Civil War. Nineteenth century Christian observers were very keen on the idea of the Taiping as an example of successful Chinese conversion to Christianity. Their enthusiasm about this perceived success often clouded their vision to many heterodox practices and ideas. The Taiping became more Christian than they actually were. When Great Britain decided to abandon their policy of conditional neutrality in favor of limited intervention, they had to contend with missionary support of the Taiping. The easiest way to do this was to highlight the non-Christian aspects of the Taiping and declare them not Christian at all. These competing visions and understandings of the Taiping have limited the questions scholars have asked about the Taiping. Reilly was the first to address these issues of the legitimacy of Taiping Christianity. Reilly is responding to scholars like Vincent Shih, Eugene Boardman, Rudolf Wagner, and Robert Weller, among others, who either have dismissed Taiping Christianity as a subpar knock off Protestantism, or ignored its Christian connections entirely. Taiping scholarship has dealt with

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<sup>18</sup> Reilly, Thomas H. 2004. *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. pg 6

issues surrounding Taiping ideology, but Reilly was the first to break down the religious aspects of the Taiping and look at them as legitimate examples of both indigenous Chinese religion and Protestant Christianity.

Eugene Boardman's *Christian Influence upon the Ideology of the Taiping Rebellions, 1851-1864* also treats the Taiping as operating under an ideology rather than a religion. To him Taiping Christianity is an inferior imitation of Western Protestant Christianity. He refers to it as having a "...quasi-Christian character..."<sup>19</sup> mostly owing to the fact the Taiping drew on so many other sources for their practices in order to continue to have popular support among the local populations. Boardman also saw the political aspect of the Civil War as being inimical to true Christianity because it operated to divide the ideology between potential for true Christianity and the political desire to overthrow the Manchus.

Wagner's 1978 *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision: The Role of Religion in the Taiping Rebellion* is one that Reilly in particular cites as being the most open to the idea that the Taiping could draw from both Christianity and local indigenous practices and the two sets could complement each other in the overall scheme of the Taiping beliefs. "Wagner also most fully acknowledges that the authority of the indigenous religious sources of the Taiping religion did not countermand the authority of the other, most specifically Christian sources of the Taiping religion."<sup>20</sup> According to Wagner "The Taipings did adopt Christianity. Differing emphases

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<sup>19</sup> Boardman, Eugene Powers. *Christian Influence Upon the Ideology of the Taiping Rebellion 1851-1864*. New York: Octagon Books, 1972. pg 3

<sup>20</sup> Reilly, Thomas H. *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004. pg 8

have been given to this point, but in substance there is agreement.”<sup>21</sup> Wagner acknowledges that there are arguments surrounding this point in the basic essence of what the Taiping adopted as Christian ideology and dogma, and Hong Xiuquan, Feng Yushan and the other Taiping Kings used Christianity to meld with indigenous religions and create a separate religion. Scholars have only begun to approach issues of the legitimacy of Taiping Christianity in the past 50 years.

Tobie Meyer-Fong and Stephen Platt have written the two most recent works on the Taiping both expand our understanding of the Taiping and its effect on global history and local experience. Meyer-Fong’s *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China*, published in 2013, is an in depth examination of how the population dealt with death and upheaval from the Taiping. Platt’s *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*, published in 2012, explores several aspects of the Taiping especially the experiences of Hong Rengan and Zeng Guofan. This particular book also argues how the Taiping, specifically British engagement in the conflict, affected global history. By choosing to support the Qing against the Taiping the British then were put in a position that prevented them from coming to the aid of the South during the American Civil War (1861-1865).<sup>22</sup> This argument places the Taiping into a global context in a way that had not been done prior. This integration into a global history is evidence of both the expansion of historian’s acceptance of global histories, but also the expansion of Taiping historiography.

*What Remains* addresses death, dying, and discusses how the population moved between Taiping and Qing control. Because of the constantly shifting battle lines and the near continuous

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<sup>21</sup> Wagner, Rudolf G. *Reenacting the Heavenly Vision: The Role of Religion in the Taiping Rebellion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. pg 11

<sup>22</sup> Platt, Stephen R. 2012. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. p xxiv



change in governance over cities and towns, the populations had to adjust and try to move between these shifting worlds. These shifting allegiances caused the British and other foreigners' problems as they tried to determine the intentions of the Taiping towards China and towards westerners. *What Remains* occupies an equally important space in the historiography because it is one of the first social histories of the Taiping.

One of the spaces within Taiping historiography that has been woefully neglected over the years is the issue of impact on China and the world, how events of the Taiping Civil war shaped the decisions of the Qing state and the treaty port powers. Inspired by Gregory and Platt I am situating myself into this global impact historiography. By expanding on Gregory's analysis of British policy and looking more carefully at the early stages of policy that Platt claims prevented the British from aiding the American South, I am trying to build a bridge between historiographies and histories. Platt's *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom* focuses on the latter stages of the Taiping Civil War mainly 1860-1864. This is the end of conditional neutrality and the movement towards a policy of limited intervention. If intervention in the Taiping Civil War was what ultimately prevented the British getting involved in the American Civil War I have to ask what were the policies and events that led to this decision. What was it about China, about the Taiping, that made them a more worthwhile investment of time and money? For myself, the purpose of global history is to question the creation of policy and how the nature of that policy then influenced the course of history far beyond the immediate borders that policy affected.

Recent scholarship has begun to address these issues and build a stronger historical context of both the event and its aftermath. Platt and Meyer-Fong are at the forefront of this push in scholarship, but are accompanied by others who have recently published on the Taiping,

including Tian Xiaofei's translation of Zhang Daye's memoir *The World of a Tiny Insect: A Memoir of the Taiping Rebellion and its Aftermath* published in 2013 which is one of the first to provide examples of Chinese experience in their own civil war. Even with the new scholarship that has opened the Taiping Civil War up to global history, there are still missing pieces. Taiping historiography has fallen into the trap of focusing too much on one aspect of the conflict, the Christian nature of the movement, or how they were nationalist revolutionaries ahead of their time. Recently scholarship has begun to question the war in more depth and try to understand the intricate relationships at play in the 1850s and 1860s. This requires questioning much of the lingering narrative, either that of Western scholars which either neglected the Taiping entirely or over emphasized the West's role in its suppression, or that by Communist China which minimized the religious aspect of the Taiping and emphasized them as revolutionaries and nationalists. Taiping identity and intent has been tied up with the involvement of Treaty Port powers in a subtle level in almost every work written on the war, but there are few publications that address how the treaty port powers engaged the Taiping and the Qing, this thesis works to address this gap.

## Chapter 3: Creating Policy in China

Great Britain, as the strongest and most influential of the Treaty port powers had to decide what role it would play in the Taiping Civil War. They also had to determine how they would balance the opinions and demands of the various members of their community, both their own citizens and those of other treaty port powers. As British power and control grew in the world, it was the weakest in the furthest reaches of their empire because the great distances made it difficult for consistent and fast communication. Because of this, the local officials had to rely on their own judgment in order to control the local situation. In balancing their opinions of how to manage their responsibilities to the British Empire with the expectations of missionaries, merchants, and mercenaries, the British officials fell in to an *ad hoc* policy making process in regards to the Taiping Civil War. The reasoning for this was twofold; first, there were too many contradicting opinions about what the British should do regarding the conflict and many powerful individuals and groups clamoring to be heard. While this cacophony of opinions was commonplace, there was very little direct state control to direct and manage such discussions. Second, because the civil war did not directly affect British citizens or British trade until much later, there was no pressing concern to warrant a more involved policy-making process the distance between British officials in China and their superiors in Great Britain, or even India, meant that they were not directly involved either. This distance from Whitehall and the other centers of European political and military powers created an atmosphere of independence that in light of the complex issue of Chinese civil war devolved into a state of permissiveness where the

various groups and individuals were very free to act on their personal beliefs regarding the nature and intentions of the Taiping. The independence of action from missionaries, merchants, and mercenaries constantly put pressure on the implementation of Great Britain's policy of conditional neutrality, and pushed the British to be more involved in the Taiping Civil War than was intended. As this unintentional interference increased and as the British Empire's control and influence in the eastern hemisphere expanded and strengthened the British government was better able to exert direct control over the policy implementation. This more direct control did not in fact make for a stronger neutrality policy rather the control of policy remained in the hands of the local British officials who, because of the Arrow War, had more direct access to support from the home government. Throughout the Taiping Civil War, British policy remained decidedly *ad hoc* in nature as the local officials tried to maintain control and some semblance of social and economic stability within the foreign concessions.

Much of this initial over-expansion of empire was a result of merchants seeking profits and larger markets for their goods. Missionaries soon followed seeking an audience for their proselytizing. The desire for trade and exotic goods drove many states to reach much further beyond their borders and more importantly to reach beyond their realm of direct political influence and control. Merchants seeking greater profits played political and geographic hopscotch with political officials trying to keep up and manage tax and security concerns. British trade in China was no different. Trade was wrapped up in exploration and both became wrapped up in the politics used to control the movements of money and people. China was an open playing field as far as the merchants and missionaries were concerned. Vast landmass, huge populations, the biggest issue was unfettered access controlled by the Qing who were disinterested and concerned about the effects of opening China to Western trade demands.

Through the pushing, shoving, and manipulation of events, Great Britain and the Qing were drawn into the first Opium War and that set the tone of their political relationship for the next 60 to 100 years. The posturing and positioning that continued were rooted in the Opium War because it was the first point in time that Great Britain stretched their political and military might in China to force their political and economic preferences. The Taiping Civil War became a part of this posturing and more importantly part of Great Britain's ongoing negotiation with the Qing for trade.

While conditional neutrality became the policy for the Taiping, its conditions were defined by the broader goals of British policy, which in 1943, G.E. Hubbard, as part of the International Secretariat Institute of Pacific Relations, defined. Imperial British foreign policy, especially as it related to China and Japan, existed in four main parts. These four fields of policy provided the broadest umbrella under which to define British policy in the Far East, they also formed the bounds and provided the exceptions that British officials used to inform their *ad hoc* policy of conditional neutrality during the course of the Taiping Civil War.

Livelihood—the safeguarding of British standards of life against excessive deterioration.

Security—safety from hostile action against British territorial possessions and essential lines of communication, and the power to defeat such action if it should eventuate.

Peace—preservation from the evils of war in the widest sense.

Political Liberty—the retention of the power to exercise freely British conceptions of liberty in the face of danger of submergence by antagonistic “ideologies.”<sup>23</sup>

These were very broadly defined parts of British policy, but overall they reflected the basic goals of the British Empire and allowed for a variety of methods to achieve those goals. At the most basic level the protection of British citizens and British financial interests in all locations was of

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<sup>23</sup> Hubbard, G.E. *British Far Eastern Policy*. New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1943. Pg 3

primacy. Should China threaten British interests of citizens, then the British Empire authorized itself and its officials to use any forms of coercion and force to protect them.

The 1842 Treaty of Nanjing began to open access to China in a new way. Treaty ports allowed more and more Europeans to come into close, albeit controlled contact with Chinese populations. The tensions of cultural and social exchange certainly put strain on both sides, and the disinterest and difficulty that the Qing embodied, in the eyes of the Westerners, did not help the situation. This population growth coupled with a growth in trade meant that Great Britain had more at stake in China and had more of a desire to protect the advances they had made. Nowhere does this become clearer during the course of the Taiping Civil War than in Shanghai.

## Chapter 4: First Introductions to the Taiping

The growth and existence of the God Worshippers movement did not come to the attention of the West until much later, after they had achieved notoriety as the Taiping. Access to China's interior was still heavily restricted in the 1840s and since the God Worshippers stayed away from Canton, they did not attract the attention of Westerners. The Taiping did not begin to gain official attention until 1853 when they successfully took Nanjing. Prior to this, diplomatic officials knew very little about them, if they had heard of them at all. "Not until the summer of 1851 did the English vice-consul, Thomas F. Wade, report on the Kwangsi insurgents who took Yungnan on 25 September and who were spreading 'vicious' or 'strong doctrine.' Only then was he unmistakably referring to the Taiping rebels."<sup>24</sup> It was at this point that rumors from the interior about the Chinese Christians who were on a march against the Qing were brought the attention of Westerners.

Early reports on the Taiping were a mixed bag of information and brought a great deal of confusion to the Western powers. The information was not clear or well understood; rather it was cobbled together from various secondary reports not first hand-witnesses to the Taiping success at Nanjing. Sir George Bonham, first baronet (1803-1863) was the leading British official in China. He began his foreign service with the British East India Company and later became the governor of Prince Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca. He held this post for six

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<sup>24</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg 206

years and during his time, he gained a level of ability with Chinese language and customs, though he continued to prefer to work with individuals who had no experience with Chinese language or learning.<sup>25</sup> In 1848 he was appointed as the plenipotentiary and superintendent of trade and the governor of Hong Kong, this put him in the position to have the more control over trade relationships and to influence local opinions. It also put him in contention to the local Qing officials many of whom were still objecting and trying to stymie the British attempts to enforce the trade provisions of the Treaty of Nanjing. As a result, Bonham was more than willing to examine other options in dealing with the Qing including the remote possibility of supporting the Taiping against the Qing. In a Letter from Sir George Bonham to Lord John Russell, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, sent March 28<sup>th</sup> 1853 and received May 30<sup>th</sup> 1853, Bonham reports that "The progress and advance of the insurgents as far as Nanking is confidently reported to have been unchecked, and if that city be not actually in their hands at this moment, its surrender must speedily take place."<sup>26</sup> The first reported news back to Whitehall involved the uncertain assurance that the insurgents had either already taken the major city of Nanjing or were on the brink of doing so. In the same report, Bonham discusses the uncertainties of the movement and their effect on the local western populations. "The worst feature connected with the advance of the insurgents to Nanking has been a kind of panic amongst the Chinese merchants and traders at Shanghae, which has reacted in an injurious manner upon our trade. There is at present little or no business carried on, and money is very

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<sup>25</sup> Reynolds, K. D. "Bonham, Sir (Samuel) George, first baronet (1803–1863)." K. D. Reynolds In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: OUP, 2004. Online ed., edited by Lawrence Goldman, October 2005. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/2840> (accessed March 27, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> British Parliamentary papers "Papers Respecting the Civil War in China: 1852-1853" pg 1



scarce."<sup>27</sup> This was not an issue with western traders becoming nervous but rather the concern among their Chinese counterparts, but the effect on trade was clear. It was negatively affecting trade and putting strain on the financial system in Shanghai. The first clear threat to British trade interests in China.

There was no mention of the Taiping's Christian nature in this first report, but rather it includes Bonham's opinion that nonintervention should be the policy. "...my intention is not to interfere in any way, unless compelled to do so for the protection of British subjects at Shanghai, not by any means a likely contingency."<sup>28</sup> Conditional neutrality from the very beginning was the preferred policy. Bonham believed that the British should not get involved except if there was a threat to Shanghai, but more specifically a threat to British subjects in Shanghai not necessarily to trade. The first official introduction that Great Britain had to the Taiping was an uncertain knowledge about their progress at Nanjing, and the negative effect it had on trade in Shanghai, information about their religious aspirations was lacking.

Prior to any solid or verified information regarding the Taiping's Christian nature the first instinct of British officialdom in China was nonintervention. This was, in Bonham's opinion supported by the foreign community. "This determination I have reason to believe has met with general approval of the foreign community at this port [Shanghai]"<sup>29</sup> From the very beginning of the Taiping Civil War the intention and support was in favor of neutrality. It is important to note that supporting neutrality did not mean that primary support was in favor of either side. Individuals with sympathies laying with the Taiping and the Qing could both benefit from a

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<sup>27</sup> British Parliamentary papers "Papers Respecting the Civil War in China: 1852-1853" pg 2

<sup>28</sup> British Parliamentary papers "Papers Respecting the Civil War in China: 1852-1853" pg 2

<sup>29</sup> British Parliamentary papers "Papers Respecting the Civil War in China: 1852-1853" pg 2

policy of neutrality. This consensus did not last as more reports and refugees came to Shanghai from Nanjing and as Bonham made his first trip up the Yangtze to ascertain the Taiping intentions towards foreigners, the treaty ports and trade. As more and more information about the Taiping was reported to the residents of Shanghai the more divided the various groups became as to the best course of action. Missionaries were often thrilled at the potential of a Christian China, though many were hesitant about declaring the Taiping true Christians. Merchants' greatest interest tended to lie in potential for successful trade, which was dependent on stability, something that the Taiping were upending, but could potentially be better at maintaining should they eliminate the Qing. In the earliest years of British policy creation, these were groups they had to contend with, and who they had to rely on for their support. The mercenaries were not yet players in the earliest stages of policy creation.

The unknown quantity of Taiping Christianity and the movement in general made it difficult for officials to balance the opinions and demands of the local groups. The divergence of opinions combined with contradictory information regarding the Taiping created a situation where it was difficult to appease each group's expectations. To compensate for this lack of information, and to ensure that he was making an informed decision about neutrality rather than intervention, Sir George Bonham chose to travel to Nanjing to ascertain Taiping intentions towards foreigners and trade.

As one of the first officials to investigate the Taiping, Bonham led the first foreign mission to Nanjing to meet with the Taiping leadership and determine the best course of action for the British government. Prior to this trip, his own opinions were very much against supporting the Qing, though not necessarily for supporting the Taiping. In a letter to the Earl of

Clarendon sent April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1853, and received August 5<sup>th</sup> 1853, on the eve of his voyage to Nanjing, Bonham writes,

But as I am by no means satisfied in regard to the intentions of the insurgents towards foreigners, and as the former appear to be a more formidable body than has hitherto been supposed, I am unwilling to rest until I shall have obtained a declaration of those intentions, more especially as I have the best evidence that the Shanghai Taoutae has spared no pains in spreading false rumors, and, short, endeavoring, by every means in his power to induce the insurgents to believe that we are to take the part of the Imperialists against them. He has, in his official dispatches to other Mandarins, announced that we are arming and dispatching steamers to assist the Emperor's troops at Nanking and Chinkeang.<sup>30</sup>

In light of these concerns, Bonham decided to lead the first mission to Nanjing aboard the H.M.S. Hermes to determine the Taiping's attitude toward foreigners. This was the most crucial component as far as Bonham was concerned since his goal was primarily to protect the personnel and trade located in Shanghai, which was only about 200 miles downriver from Nanjing. Bonham's trip was one of three undertaken by the Western powers in 1853; France and the United States took the other two trips<sup>31</sup>. While Bonham was intrigued and willing to consider the Taiping as potential successors to the Qing, not all of his fellow diplomats were as optimistic.

Rutherford Alcock (1809-1897) the British consul at Fuzhou then Shanghai,<sup>32</sup> and W.H. Medhurst (1796-1857) a Shanghai missionary important as a religious and local political

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<sup>30</sup> British Parliamentary papers "Papers Respecting the Civil War in China: 1852-1853" pg 16

<sup>31</sup> These three trips marked each of the major treaty port powers attempts to ascertain the nature of the Taiping. Even though all the trips left from Shanghai and there was a high degree of communication between the foreign officials, each government wanted their own evaluation of the Taiping. Discussion of the French and American trips can be found in Teng's *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers*. However, just as very little has been done to look at British policy explicitly, even less has been done to examine the effects and implications of the French and American policies. Even though for the most part they follow Britain's lead, there were several points of divergence.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas, R. K. "Alcock, Sir (John) Rutherford (1809–1897)." Rev. J. A. G. Roberts. In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, edited by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. Oxford: OUP, 2004. Online ed., edited by Lawrence Goldman, January 2008. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/293> (accessed March 27, 2014).

leader,<sup>33</sup> were both less than optimistic about the potential of Taiping. "...Rutherford Alcock doubted their ability to replace the Manchu dynasty...W.H. Medhurst, reported that all accounts seemed to agree that plunder was the principal, if not the sole, object of these marauders at this stage of the insurrection..."<sup>34</sup> *The North China Herald* was another source of political and popular opinion that did not support with the idea of the Taiping successfully replacing the Qing. "...the British-owned English-language weekly, *the North China Herald*, which was published in Shanghai and contained more information about the Taiping Rebellion than any other periodical, frankly showed its preference for the imperial regime as against the Taiping rebels and advocated the policy of intervention."<sup>35</sup> While Bonham believed in neutrality, *The North China Herald's* prominent editorial section continued to publish opinions supporting intervention. An editorial published on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1853 declared that "ultimate success of the rebel movement will be the signal for hostile measure against foreigners in China; we have thus much to lose and nothing to gain by the subversion of the Ta-tsing [Qing] dynasty unless foreign interference be hereafter solicited."<sup>36</sup> There was clear support on behalf the foreign population in China for intervention on behalf of the Qing, Alcock himself presided over a meeting wherein British merchants created a volunteer protection corps.

He [Alcock] understood, indeed, that the expediency of organizing a volunteer corps had already been under consideration...he was instructed to state that Her Majesty's

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<sup>33</sup> Bickers, Robert. "Medhurst, Walter Henry (1796–1857)." Robert Bickers In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., edited by Lawrence Goldman. Oxford: OUP., <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18494> (accessed March 27, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg 206

<sup>35</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg 207

<sup>36</sup> North China Herald January 15 1853

Plenipotentiary saw no objection whatever to the step, but on the contrary, he would be very glad to promote the formation and efficiency of such a corps by every means in his power. He also had the pleasure of stating that he had received an offer of assistance from Captain Tronsou, of the 2nd Fusileer Bengal Army, who had requested him to say his services were entirely at their disposal, either for the organization and drilling of a volunteer corps, or for the purposes of general defense.<sup>37</sup>

This meeting occurred prior to Bonham's trip up the Yangtze to meet with the Taiping and is evidence once again that there was concern among the local British residents in regard to the perceived Taiping threat. While the merchants worried about the stability of trade and the likelihood of attack on Shanghai, the missionaries and religious leaders in and around Shanghai concerned themselves with the Christian nature of the Taiping and their role in supporting or preserving that nature.

While Alcock was advocating intervention and supporting the merchants in creating a self-defense force against threats of Taiping incursion the missionaries were advocating caution and neutrality. Issachar Roberts, an American Baptist missionary who was the only Westerner to train Hong Xiuquan in theology and one of the biggest advocates for the Taiping, in a letter published in *The Chinese and General Missionary Gleaner* February 1853 declared, "This is China's crisis. How earnestly ought Christians to pray and strive for the furtherance of the gospel among this people under present circumstance; and to make the most of every opportunity of usefulness that may soon offer!"<sup>38</sup> Roberts lauds the Taiping and argues that westerners

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<sup>37</sup> British Parliamentary Papers "Papers Respecting the Civil War in China: Minute of Proceedings at a Public Meeting of British Subjects held at Her Britannic Majesty's Consulate, Shanghai April 8 1853" pg 9-10

<sup>38</sup> Clarke, Prescott, and J S Gregory. *Western Reports on the Taiping: A Selection of Documents*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982. Pg 21

should work to support them. French Lazarist Missionary Dr. LG. Delaplace<sup>39</sup>, was more reserved, while still lauding the Taiping behavior and condemning that of the Qing.

...the pretend defends of the country are almost so many brigands, who pillage the honest citizen even in his own house...These rebels, on the contrary, adopt the most prudent measures. No pillage among them; no disorder; this has been announced in their proclamation from the very outset...If, as it now appears very probably, the insurgents are victorious, we may perhaps expect some emancipation from our hold religion.”<sup>40</sup>

Bonham had to balance his policy against all of these opinions and claims about the Taiping. Supporting one group would come at the cost of alienating another. Support of the Taiping did not always mean an attack of the Qing and vice versa, support of the Qing did not always come at the expense of the Taiping. Bonham found himself in a situation with very little actual knowledge, and even less support or oversight from Whitehall. Communication was taking 3-6 months to reach Great Britain from China and sometimes the same length of time for them to send a response back. Any questions or issues that Bonham faced and required an immediate response fell to him, he could not do much more than make a decision and hope that when he sent his reports back home they would support him.. While his initial belief was for conditional neutrality, Bonham decided that the best way to determine what policy the British should take was to go to Nanjing and discover firsthand the nature of the Taiping and their feelings towards foreigners.

The trip to Nanjing began with the interpreter T.T. Meadows traveling to Suzhou via the Grand Canal, his first reports were quite sanguine, declaring “...the whole army prays regularly

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<sup>39</sup> While my focus is on British policy, citizens of different treaty port powers inhabited Shanghai. They interacted with each other in the internationalized space of the Shanghai concessions. Individuals of one country would inevitably read comments made by individuals from another country. There was no clear divide between citizens of western powers in China, despite the artificial barriers that might appear in scholarship.

<sup>40</sup> Clarke, Prescott, and J S Gregory. *Western Reports on the Taiping: A Selection of Documents*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982. Pg 24-25

before meals. They punish rape, adultery, and opium smoking with death”<sup>41</sup> This report interestingly enough works both for and against the Taiping. While the British would see the process of prayer before meals as civilized, the extremely harsh punishments for crimes like adultery and opium smoking was an indication of Chinese barbarism and was one of the reasons the British pushed for concessions of extraterritoriality in China. Given this preliminary and very brief report from Meadows, Bonham decided it was enough information that he should go to Nanjing himself. Bonham left Shanghai aboard the HMS *Hermes* on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1853 and traveled up the river towards Nanjing. The *Hermes* was followed by a number of imperial boats, and was fired upon as they passed by the Taiping base at Zhenjiang. They arrived in Nanjing on April 27<sup>th</sup> 1853 and were taken to see the Wei Changhui and Shi Dakai, two of the lower level Taiping kings, rather than Hong Xiuquan or Yang Xiuqing, a mistake for which their guides were whipped at the order of Yang. Meadows delivered a document to the Taiping leaders on April 30<sup>th</sup> and the *Hermes* left on May 1<sup>st</sup> sailing back to Shanghai. They were once again fired upon at Zhenjiang, which caused more tensions. They arrived in Shanghai on May 5<sup>th</sup> and quickly information spread among the local population about the Taiping. The *North China Herald* was at the front of the information dissemination.

In one article about the trip, the *North China Herald* makes several key points that show the concerns that any policy regarding the Taiping had to address. “The Insurgents are Christians of the Protestant form of worship and anti-idolaters of the strictest order. They acknowledge but One God, the Heavenly Father, the Allwise, Allpowerful, and Omnipresent Creator of the world; with him Jesus Christ, as the Savior of Mankind; and also the Holy Spirit

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<sup>41</sup> *Papers Respecting the Civil War in China* 1853 pg 16

as the last of the Three Persons of the Trinity.”<sup>42</sup> This passage affirms that they are indeed members of the Christian brotherhood, but a later passage seems to temper this optimism about the level of sincere conversion among Taiping members.

That there are ambitious self-deceivers, shrewd imposters, and calculating hypocrites among them in plenty, we doubt not; we also doubt not that numbers join and will continue in, their ranks influenced exclusively by motives as worldly and ignoble as those which guide the conduct of so many professing Christians of the West. But among the leaders and originators of the movement there are unmistakable signs of a good leaven, which we trust, and earnestly wish, may ultimately spread throughout the whole mass. One convincing proof of the sincerity of the ruling minds is that, while fighting to free their country from a foreign yoke and anxious to obtain adherents, they nevertheless throw great difficulties in the way of a rapid increase of numbers by insisting on the general adoption of a new and reviled religion learnt from “barbarians.”<sup>43</sup>

This section does two important things, first of which is it shows that while the Taiping leadership was believed to be legitimate converts, the majority of the movement was in fact made up of individuals who were not true believers and joined for protection, food, or opportunities for subversive activities. The second argument of this passage is that of course the leadership was sincere in their motivations and ambitious, otherwise why would they have accepted and based their movement on a hated foreign religion that would discourage people from joining in their clearly righteous cause. Only true sincerity of religious conversion would force someone to follow something that would be so unwelcome. So where does this leave us in terms of conclusions that can be drawn about the state of Western opinion and the process of British policy regarding the Taiping in 1853 shortly after they had secured their capital at Nanjing.

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<sup>42</sup> *North China Herald*. "Trip of Her Britannic Majesty's Plenipotentiary Sir Geo. Bonham, Bart., Sc., Sc., in the "Hermes" to Nanking, April 22d, 1853." May 7, 1853.

<sup>43</sup> *North China Herald*. "Trip of Her Britannic Majesty's Plenipotentiary Sir Geo. Bonham, Bart., Sc., Sc., in the "Hermes" to Nanking, April 22d, 1853." May 7, 1853.



While Bonham's trip had tentatively affirmed the status of the Taiping as Christian, the matter of trade and the Taiping's opinion of foreigners was still not resolved. By this time British "...trading interests and investments in Shanghai's buildings, docks, and trade [were] estimated already at around twenty-five million pounds sterling..."<sup>44</sup> This was a significant amount and the volume of people and trade was growing. The primary concern of Bonham and the other British officials was convincing the expatriate population of Shanghai that the Taiping were not a threat and that the officials would do all in their power to protect trade and personnel if they became a threat, while convincing the Taiping that it was in their best interests to support trade and to work with the British on their diplomatic terms. What Bonham and Meadows discovered at Nanjing however, was a group of individuals, some of whom knew little to nothing of Shanghai, The British Empire or the origin of their Christian religion. "...they appear to be extremely ignorant of foreign nations. Canton was known to them as the seat of a great foreign commerce; but Shanghae...was found to be quite unknown to several of their leading men"<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Taiping's ignorance was compounded by their inability or unwillingness to approach the foreign visitors as equals, rather they treated Bonham and his entourage as subservient to Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping movement at large. While the British were accepted as brothers in Christ, the Taiping expected the British to take Hong Xiuquan as their lord as well, demonstrating in no uncertain terms that they believed in the absoluteness, and universality of their religious ideology with no indication of perception that it would not be accepted beyond the

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<sup>44</sup> Spence, Jonathan D. *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*. New York: Norton, 1996. Pg 193

<sup>45</sup> *North China Herald*. "Trip of Her Britannic Majesty's Plenipotentiary Sir Geo. Bonham, Bart., Sc., Sc., in the "Hermes" to Nanking, April 22d, 1853." May 7, 1853.

borders of their control. A conversation between the North King Wei Changhui and T.T. Meadows on April 27<sup>th</sup> 1853 set this perception and Meadow's concern regarding it.

In reply to my inquiries respecting the Tae-ping Wang...the Northern Prince explained in writing that he was the 'True Lord' or Sovereign; that 'the lord of China is the Lord of the whole world; he is the second Son of God, and all people in the whole world must obey and follow him'. As I [Meadows] read this without remark, he said, looking at me interrogatively, 'The True Lord is not merely the Lord of China; he is not only our Lord, he is your Lord also'. As I still made no remark, but merely kept looking at him, he did not think fit to insist on an answer, and, after a while, turned his head and began to talk of other matters. His conversation gave great reason to conclude that though his religious beliefs were derived from the writings, or it might even be by the teachings, of foreigners, still he was quite ignorant of the relative positions of foreign countries...<sup>46</sup>

This sort of exchange was common during Bonham's trip, a suggestion of brotherhood followed by the pressure of subservience to Hong Xiuquan and the Taiping religion. Bonham handled it well, certainly rather than escalating the situation by forcibly claiming that any political slight to the British would be responded to with violence, Bonham kept his head and continued to respond diplomatically, though not without the threat of potential force should the Taiping fail to respect British interests.

But I must add that to every person or respectability, and otherwise, who daily crowded the decks of the "Hermes," I caused to be conveyed a full explanation of the motives which had prompted the visit of the steamer to Nanking, and an assurance that our part was altogether a neutral one. I, at the same time, informed the Princes in writing, that we had very great and important interests at stake at Shanghae; and that, in the event of their coming down towards us, it was expected British persons and property would not be interfered with; for if molested, the injury would most certainly be resented in the same manner as similar injuries were resented during the war which ended by the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Clarke, Prescott, and J S Gregory. *Western Reports on the Taiping: A Selection of Documents*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982. Pg 50

<sup>47</sup> Papers Respecting the Chinese Civil War 1853. Pg 16

Bonham was maintaining the stance of neutrality while warning off the Taiping that any threat or attack would be responded to with violence in order to protect British trade. This form of conditional neutrality becomes the *de facto* policy of the British for the first ten years of the Taiping Civil War. A neutrality allowed for a majority of the divergent groups in Shanghai to be appeased if only because the British were not taking action to officially support or attack either side. It was an *ad hoc* decision based on limited knowledge and an even more limited understanding of the Taiping and the Taiping in relation to the Qing. By not taking a clear stance in the conflict but by remaining neutral with the stated caveat of self-preservation, Bonham was giving the British breathing space to see how the situation played out. This was not, as Gregory describes it, and vehemently argues against, "...the cynical astuteness of mid-Victorian imperialism at work in China."<sup>48</sup> This was one official's concerted attempt to prevent Great Britain from being drawn into a lengthy conflict on a landmass they could not hope to control, either physically or without strong objections from their fellow European powers.

Bonham returned to Shanghai with more knowledge about the Taiping but without a clear concession on their part to uphold British trading rights should they expand their control to treaty port cities. Bonham's initial hopes for the Taiping were not sustained after meeting with them, and rather than supporting the Taiping or the Qing in the uprising Bonham instead drew conclusions based on the reports from the Hermes mission and

...predicted... that the Taipings 'will not succeed in their attempts to overthrow the present government.' Though Fishbourne and Meadows were impressed by the Taipings, Bonham did not think highly of them... [and] on 7 May 1853, recommended a policy, which may be called military neutrality... His policy was to sit tight until the Manchu government needed aid so desperately that greater demands could be made of it with greater assurance of fulfilment...At the same time, Bonham held the view that 'more

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<sup>48</sup> Gregory, John S. *Great Britain and the Taipings*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969. Pg 168

political and commercial advantages were likely to be obtained from the insurrectionists than from the Imperialists'.<sup>49</sup>

In just a few short months, Bonham went from believing that the Taiping had a chance at defeating the Qing to being very convinced that they would not be successful in such an endeavor, but despite this, he was still willing to believe that there were potentially greater commercial opportunities to be had with the Taiping than with the Qing. This contradiction and ideological discrepancy prevented Bonham and other officials from becoming more than observers. There was no clear-cut way forward, Bonham believes that the Taiping will lose, but that would be better for trade, intervention at this point could have bolstered the Taiping to a successful conclusion, and there was support for this. Nevertheless, conditional neutrality prevailed. This was the conundrum of contradictory opinions about the Taiping Civil War that continued throughout its length. The uncertainty and wavering impressions carried throughout the next nine years and culminated in the 1862 policy of limited intervention. Individual's contradictory opinions and impressions about the legitimacy of the Taiping and of their potential for success characterized this early stage of British and western curiosity about the Taiping. The desire to continue trade and protect the population of foreign citizens was paramount to policy makers and Bonham's recommendation was to pursue a policy of conditional neutrality, despite his own uncertainty regarding the potential that the Taiping might represent for religion and more importantly for trade. Even though policy was defined as non-intervention conditional neutrality there were such hopes and fears pinned on the Taiping that the British, and other Western powers, were not willing to leave them alone until they had fully ascertained their beliefs, goals, and attitudes toward trade and the existence of foreign powers in China.

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<sup>49</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg 216

British neutrality had been approved in a dispatch by the Earl of Clarendon, Lord John Russell's successor to the post of Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, dated May 31st 1853, stating

Sir, I have received and laid before the Queen your despatch of the 28th of March, reporting such intelligence as you could obtain respecting the progress of the insurrection in China, and stating that you had determined, pending instructions from home, not to interfere in any shape in favor of the Chinese Government. Her Majesty's Government approve your determination in that respect, which is in entire conformity with their wishes and intentions.<sup>50</sup>

This approval is only for Bonham's decision to not interfere in a way that would favor the Qing, there was a secondary dispatch sent August 5th that approved Bonham's decision regarding no interference favoring the Taiping.

I [Clarendon] received on the 30th ultimo your despatches of the 6th and 11th of May, giving an account of your visit to the head-quarters of the insurgents at Nanking, and containing many interesting details illustrative of the present state of the parties opposed to the reigning dynasty in China. Her Majesty's Government have read these accounts with the greatest interests, and they entirely approve of your proceedings as reported in your despatches.<sup>51</sup>

After six months, the British Government had approved Bonham's original policy intention towards limited neutrality in the Taiping Civil War. Limited neutrality conditioned by the threat of force should British interests or citizens be attacked became the de facto policy in the civil war. Its application and enforcement became an ongoing issue of policy interpretation because 'British Interests' were themselves a vaguely defined category subject to individual interpretation.

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<sup>50</sup> Papers Respecting the Civil War in China pf 6-7

<sup>51</sup> Papers Respecting the Civil War in China pg 44

## Chapter 5: Neutrality Ratified

As the creator of the policy, Bonham was only in a position to control its implementation and enforcement for a year before his retirement in the spring of 1854. Sir John Bowring (1792-1872) replaced Bonham, and immediately planned his own trip to Nanjing. In June of 1854, Bowring led a second mission to Nanjing accompanied by missionary and translator W.H. Medhurst Jr. (1822-1885). Bowring was inspired to go on his own fact-finding mission after a meeting with the local governor, he “discovered, among other things that with their greater valor, and physical superiority, the Taipings might succeed in overturning the Manchu dynasty.”<sup>52</sup> He wanted to confirm Bonham’s impressions with his own first hand experiences. There were continued questions as to the nature and legitimacy of the Taiping and what that meant for the British Empire and their desire for trade. Overall Bowring’s mission received a less positive welcome from the Taiping. They were unable to secure a meeting with Yang Xiuqing, and all communication tended towards mandates rather than congenial exchanges. To deal with this and still have their mission be a success Bowring put forth a list of thirty questions for the Taiping to answer, Yang Xiuqing responded with an additional fifty questions that Yang wanted the British to answer.

These questions and answers fully exposed the Taipings’ misguided and absurd pretensions in both political and religious matters...In answering the questions the Eastern King noted that, after peace had been achieved the Taipings would be glad to

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<sup>52</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg 227

trade not only with England but with the myriad nations of the globe, only such harmful articles as opium, would be prohibited.<sup>53</sup>

Only when the Taiping had achieved peace would they welcome all trade except for opium. The British were not likely to support this vague timeline, and the loss of opium revenue would be a blow. Bowring's mission returned with an overall poor opinion of the Taiping. However, there remained in the minds of Bowring's son Lewin Bowring and the trip translator W.H. Medhurst some optimism as to the Taiping prospects. In the report submitted to the Earl of Clarendon on July 14th 1854 they make the following remarks regarding the Taiping.

At first when they gave out that their object was to relieve the people from the oppression of the Mandarins, to remit taxes and to re-establish in its purity the ancient Chinese Rule, it is not improbable that popular sympathy may have been on their side. But blessings and advantages held out by them have not been realized. Their progress has been marked by devastation and desolation. Trade properly so to speak is utterly non-existent, and although we have reason to believe that coal...is to be found in considerable quantities in the Province of Keangse in the vicinity of the country which has been overrun by the insurgents, they show no disposition to dispose of it to foreigners...<sup>54</sup>

The Taiping failed to make a good impression on the Bowring mission, but although Bowring and Medhurst returned from their trip unwilling to support the Taiping in the war, there was no major shift in policy. Sir John Bowring maintained Bonham's policy of conditional neutrality despite receiving reports that could justify a policy of limited intervention supporting the Qing, including one from a prominent missionary. Neutrality for Bowring provided a potential leverage against the Qing and to a certain extent the Taiping in his attempts to revise treaty agreements and open by the Yangtze river to trade. However, there were no reports of Bowring

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<sup>53</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg 228

<sup>54</sup> Clarke, Prescott, and J S Gregory. *Western Reports on the Taiping: A Selection of Documents*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982. Pgs 159-161

using the threat of Taiping support against the Taiping to push treaty revisions. It was merely a thought he had and reported but never used during his tenure.

In Bowring's report to the Earl of Clarendon on July 14th 1854 he notes

Without reference to the Court, or Emperor, no Mandarin could therefore undertake, on his own responsibility, to make the concessions we desire to obtain. The United States Commissioner and myself expect to arrange an early meeting with the High Officers, the result of which may determine our future proceedings in reference to the extension of our commercial relations in China, which are certainly not likely to be served by the progress of the rebellion, but rather to be endangered thereby. Your Lordship will no doubt come to the conclusion that neither to the religious element, nor to the political organization of the Insurgent power, can we look with hope or confidence.<sup>55</sup>

Bowring maintained neutrality despite a lack of confidence in either the political or the religious aspirations of the Taiping. Intervention on either side posed too many problems and unforeseeable consequences. So long as trade remained unmolested, the British seemed quite willing to maintain their policy of conditional neutrality. In the early years of the civil war, the Taiping focused on their northern campaigns rather than spreading their control east towards Shanghai and the other treaty ports. Moreover, while Lewin Bowring and Medhurst came away with very negative views of the Taiping, others who visited saw them as a glimmer of hope for China.

RM McLane, the United States Minister to China invited Reverend M S Culbertson was invited by to accompany his mission to Nanjing in June of 1854. While Culbertson experienced much of the same realities that Bowring and Medhurst, including the Taiping troops stationed at

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<sup>55</sup> FO 17/214



Zhenjiang firing on their vessel<sup>56</sup>, his conclusions about their potential were quite different from those of Bowring and Medhurst.

That this [Nanjing] is indeed destined to be the capital of China, there can scarcely be a doubt. Having established their headquarters here, the insurgents are now sending out their armies in various directions to subdue the country, and everywhere these armies are successful. Peking, it is true, has not been taken, and may long hold out, but it is cut off from all communication with the southern provinces, except by sea, and the insurgents have command of the whole Yang-tsz river from Chinkiang-fu to the province of Hupeh, if not further...As to the religious features of this movement, we are still left in a great measure ignorant of the facts necessary for forming a reliable judgment<sup>57</sup>

Bowring saw no redemption or potential for success while Culbertson had no doubts as to the successful outcome of the war in favor of the Taiping. A policy maker in the position to reconcile such disparate conclusions would be better off to avoid picking a side in the conflict in the first place, and that is what Bowring chose to do. By remaining neutral, he avoided disrupting the delicate status quo between his various constituent groups.

After two missions to Nanjing to meet with the Taiping and minimal success in getting them to cooperate or at least provide some level of concessions that the British could work with the ultimate decision was to remain politically, and militarily neutral.

The British policy of neutrality as formulated by Bonham was approved by Clarendon, followed by Bowring and others, and served as an official line in China for almost a decade. The British home government preferred neutrality; the aggressive Palmerston had left the Foreign Office in December 1851, and his successor Clarendon, stood for mediation...British diplomats in China liked such a policy because it gave them ample

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<sup>56</sup> Clarke, Prescott, and J S Gregory. *Western Reports on the Taiping: A Selection of Documents*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982. Pg 137

<sup>57</sup> Clarke, Prescott, and J S Gregory. *Western Reports on the Taiping: A Selection of Documents*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982. Pgs 139

room for action. Bonham's strategy was to sit tight until higher Chinese officials asked for aid, so that greater demands could be made with greater assurances of acceptance.<sup>58</sup>

While Bonham and Bowring both indicated their willingness to use the Taiping conflict to their advantage in trade negotiations with the Taiping there was little indication that they were ever able to follow through on these. Showing that while there was an inclination towards abject manipulation of the circumstances, in practice there were too many other issues to confront instead. The British Foreign Office, by luck of gaining a more conciliatory, but by no means weak man, at the helm had saved them from ending up in yet another armed conflict within their empire, at least just yet. There were more pressing matters for British officials at large to deal with than the Taiping Civil War, issues that required much of their focus and resources to protect their expanding empire and to maintain the status quo within the European powers.

The Crimean War, 1853-1856, took precedence as the European powers fought amongst themselves. 2 million combatants fought in the Crimean war with almost half a million casualties, between all of the belligerents. Great Britain had a force of 250,000, costing upwards of tens of millions of pounds. The Indian Mutiny took up much of British attention between 1857 and 1858, and afterwards as the state took for the British East India Company in governing India, devoting large financial and personnel resources to returning stability to India and transferring control to the state. Both of these conflicts were overwhelming more important to the British than a group of rebels or revolutionaries who may or may not have been Christian in a way that their missionaries could understand, and whose goal was to overthrow the Manchu state with whom the British already had very generous treaties granting them an abundance of riches through political and economic concessions. Beyond ensuring that the Taiping did not cause any

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<sup>58</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg 237

damage material or personal to citizens of the British Empire and so long as they could continue to operate with a high degree of autonomy from the Manchu state, the British foreign office and the local British officials were quite content to allow the Taiping to exist. The occasional missionary or individual would attempt to learn more about the Taiping and their curious form of Christianity. Overall, after those first few eventful and wholly unsatisfying trips up the Yangtze the Taiping were not yet important enough of a threat to the British Empire or in many cases to the Manchu state warranting a more aggressive policy. Diverse personal opinions about the Taiping persisted, but the state choice was a conditional neutrality that allowed individuals enough leeway to get involved if they so choose while the state would continue to claim no knowledge or responsibility for them.

The upcoming treaty revision was another reason to support neutrality, allying with the Taiping would weaken their bargaining position with the Qing and make it harder for them to get the concessions they wanted. With all this affecting local and international politics, the Taiping issue remained mostly tabled for almost ten years. Beyond that the Taiping, there were several other incidents that took center stage in Sino-Western relations. The Arrow incident began the Second Opium War in October of 1856, and was not resolved until the storming and looting of the Summer Palace in 1860, which resulted in the Convention of Peking and the ratification of the 1858 Treaty of Tianjin. These two treaties established freedom of religion in China and allowed missionaries the ability to proselytize without fear of state reprisals. The treaties also gave foreigners much greater leeway to travel within China, thereby expanding the reach of missionaries, who were more interested in the interior than the merchants who managed their trade from the treaty ports along the coast due to political protections offered therein.

After Bowring's mission in 1854 conditional neutrality became a fact for the Western powers. So long as the Taiping did not interfere with trade, the British government would not interfere in the war on either side. The circumstances in the late 1850s complicated this considerably. At its most basic level the main point of neutrality was to avoid disrupting the status quo balance of power between the Taiping and the Qing, while simultaneously appeasing the various non-state groups who did not agree about which side to support in the conflict. Moreover, while there was a call on all sides to use the threat of intervention against both the Taiping and the Qing, there was little indication that the officials took the chance to act on these calls. Officials instead focused on assuaging the fears of merchants concerned about profits and those of missionaries concerned that the West might be damaging its chances for a Christian China. A reality that could ultimately solve the issues related to trade. The Issues of what to do about the Taiping in a more specific sense faded to the background as their military campaigns slowed thereby removing a perceived potential threat and as they became embroiled in internal conflict between the various kings. As internal issues distracted the Taiping, the British and other western power also became preoccupied with other more pressing issues, albeit that threatened and complicated their claims to neutrality.

## Chapter 6: War with the Qing

By the late 1850s with the second Opium War, and the growing numbers of British citizens flocking to China for missionary and trade opportunities as well as the adventure offered by the military, the British Foreign Office decided to take yet another look at the strangers in Nanjing. Social pressures were growing and the Taiping were in recovery from their internecine fights. New populations bombarded China and they wanted to know about the dangers and hopes of their new home. James Bruce, the eighth Earl of Elgin's trip to Nanjing in fall of 1858 had similar experiences as both Bonham and Bowrings' missions including being attacked by the Taiping at Nanjing. "We were fired at when we reached it [Nanjing] on our way up [the Yangtze]...It was, moreover, important to insure a safe passage, not only for ourselves, but for such other vessels as might be sent up from time to time..."<sup>59</sup>. Once again, the secondary Taiping commanders had failed to promote their own self-interest by forgetting how to respond to a western ship sailing by a Taiping held city. While the local commanders had ordered attacks on western ships, the communication from the top Taiping officials was conciliatory in nature and "...seemed to Lord Elgin to open the door to further intercourse with the rebels at Nankin."<sup>60</sup> When Lord Elgin and his entourage attempted meet with the Taiping leadership and discuss their

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<sup>59</sup> Oliphant, Laurence. *Narrative of The Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the Years 1857, '58, '59*. Vol. II. II vols. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859. Pg 449

<sup>60</sup> Oliphant, Laurence. *Narrative of The Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the Years 1857, '58, '59*. Vol. II. II vols. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859. Pg 455

intentions towards trade protections they found themselves stymied by a divisional official and decided to take matters into their own hands.

A boy, whom we pressed into service as a guide, led us ...to an official residence of inferior description, where the officer in command of the troops in this division had his headquarters. As our last communication with this gentleman had been in the shape of a cannonball, and no formal interchange of amicable sentiments had passed since, we felt a little uncertain as to the view he would take of this unceremonious visit on the part of four of his late enemies. We soon discovered that his intention was to detain us by polite speeches, and send for instructions. As this did not suit our views, and we found four very nice ponies tethered in his courtyard, belonging to some of his staff, we decided on appropriating them, and pursuing our way into the city.<sup>61</sup>

To Lord Elgin, the Taiping had not changed from the original reports of Bonham and Bowring, their grasp of international affairs, as Great Britain expected them to be practiced, was weak if not utterly nonexistent. Their local support was minimal at best, “Whether any large number of them [the Taiping] believe in the divine mission of Hung is, Mr. Wylie thinks, questionable; and it is to be feared that skepticism is equally prevalent regarding the better parts of their professed creed.”<sup>62</sup> Their prospects in taking the Qing throne were slim at best despite some of the local optimism that the Taiping could become a viable alternative to the Qing.

G.J. Wolseley, a member of Lord Elgin’s trip, wrote,

Being neither a missionary nor a merchant, I was most anxious to visit the rebel headquarters, and, if possible, by a stay there to judge for myself of their merits or demerits. Having had some little experience of the imbecility and rottenness of the Imperialist

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<sup>61</sup> Oliphant, Laurence. *Narrative of The Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the Years 1857, '58, '59*. Vol. II. II vols. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859. Pg 455-456

<sup>62</sup> Oliphant, Laurence. *Narrative of The Earl of Elgin's Mission to China and Japan in the Years 1857, '58, '59*. Vol. II. II vols. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859. Pg 463

Government, I want to Nankin strongly prejudiced against it, and only too anxious to recognize any good which we might discover in its rival for supreme power.<sup>63</sup>

Wolseley's overwhelming hope for the Taiping was born of a distaste for the Qing officials, not out of any true belief in the Taiping, and he was not alone in this sentiment. The Arrow War had left a bad taste in the mouths of many westerners both in the Qing's duplicity regarding the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin, but also in the treatment of the diplomats who were charged with finalizing the treaty. Costin notes that, "Both in the question of the exchange of ports and the regulation of the opium trade in 1858, two matters which deeply concerned the British interests, the Government and its representative were care not to arrive at their ends by forceful means. When they used force it was to meet the duplicity, evasion, cunning, and cruelty of the Chinese officials."<sup>64</sup> While this is a stunningly biased justification for the violence and excess of the Arrow War, it does highlight the disgust and mistrust that British officials held for their Qing counterparts. This feeling of mistrust also prompted a reexamination of the Taiping as a potential replacement for the Qing.

Elgin's trip to Nanjing proved useful, as he was able to gain a greater knowledge about the Taiping and the Jiangnan region of China, as well as to acquire first-hand information about the Taiping. Elgin had used the threat of the Taiping to push against the Qing by threatening to create a treaty with the Taiping rather than continue to pursue treaties with the Qing whose conduct he found reprehensible. "Lord Elgin is also reported to have written warning Prince Kung that if the Manchus rejected the demands of Britain and France, the powers would withdraw their forces from Shanghai, which would then fall to the Taipings. Prince Kung had to

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<sup>63</sup> Wolseley, G.J. *Narrative of the War with China in 1860, To Which is Added the Account of a Short Residence with the Tai-Ping Rebels at Nankin and a Voyage from Thence to Hankow*. London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1862. Pg 335

<sup>64</sup> Costin, W.C. *Great Britain and China, 1833-1860*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937. Pg 344

sign the Convention of Peking.”<sup>65</sup> This level of brinkmanship between Elgin and Prince Gong was impressive especially considering that the British had arguably violated their professed neutrality by initiating the Arrow War in the first place in 1856. While their conflict was with the Qing, they knew they were in a better position to push the advantage because the Taiping Civil War preoccupied the Qing

Conditional neutrality worked in the favor of the British because it provided them the loophole to involve themselves officially in military conflict with either the Taiping or the Qing so long as they could point to an instance of attack on trade or personnel. While officialdom was restricted to their conditional neutrality, individuals and groups had more leeway because of the difficulty that local officials had enforcing a neutrality with such a widely interpretive set of conditions.

While Great Britain and its fellow foreign powers had chosen to remain neutral for the first decade of the civil war, the same was not true for individual citizens who found that their own personal opinions drew them to one side or the other. They reported on such things accordingly, further muddying the informational waters that British officials and others had to slog through in order to stay updated on the current situation, thus the semi-regular official trips to Nanjing.

The real state of the case is, that we learn all particulars concerning Chinese events from the English and American community settled at the several ports open to foreigners. This community is exclusively composed of two classes, the commercial and the missionary, whose interests, as a general rule, clash upon all points; the fact that the former do not

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<sup>65</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg 249



practice the morality inculcated by the preaching of the latter being often cast in the missionaries' teeth by unbelieving Chinamen.<sup>66</sup>

Missionaries and merchants still formed the two largest groups that British and western officials had to contend with but they were not the only two important groups. The mercenaries often made the tasks associated with neutrality more difficult because these individuals were actively flouting the spirit and intention of neutrality in their quest for adventure and cash.

In 1855, in an attempt to counteract individuals turning to mercenary pursuits for fame, fortune and adventure, British subjects were ordered to "...maintain 'strict neutrality...between the different parties are present contending for dominion in that empire [China]' and promising prison time or a hefty fine for any Crown subjects who violated neutrality."<sup>67</sup> This 1855 ordinance defined violating neutrality as, "...British subjects who assisted either of the 'contending parties' in China by taking military service, recruiting men, or furnishing arms or other supplies."<sup>68</sup> As a result, many individuals simply renounced their British citizenship and became Americans in order to engage in mercenary activities<sup>69</sup> even though the Americans took an equally dim view of their own citizens engaging in mercenary activities.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Wolseley, G.J. *Narrative of the War with China in 1860, To Which is Added the Account of a Short Residence with the Tai-Ping Rebels at Nankin and a Voyage from Thence to Hankow*. London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1862. Pg 331

<sup>67</sup> Lewis Hertslet (comp.), *A Complete Collection of the Treaties and Conventions...Subsisting between Great Britain and Foreign Powers...* (London: Butterworth, 1859), vol. 10, pg 61-62

<sup>68</sup> Smith, Richard J. *Mercenaries and Mandarins: The Ever-Victorious Army in Nineteenth Century China*. New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd., 1978. Pg 24

<sup>69</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 27

<sup>70</sup> Smith, Richard J. *Mercenaries and Mandarins: The Ever-Victorious Army in Nineteenth Century China*. New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd., 1978 pg 24-25

Foreign aid has been sought by all parties least of all however by those intrepid men who aim at the establishment of a Christian dynasty. The patriot chiefs have not been in a position to negotiate with runaway seamen and the inducements they held out to recruits were not of a character to tempt the mercenary. A bare supply of the necessaries of life during the war and a post under the reformed government are all they offer. On the other hand deserters from ships and unlucky gold diggers from California were offered skippers wages by imperialists while pirates and brigands such as held Shanghai were able to outbid the mandarins. It is no marvel therefore that Europeans and Americans of a certain class should be found in the employ of the two parties last named. At first Portuguese and Manila men were employed but these did not stand fire and were superseded by Englishmen and Americans. The wholesome inquisitorial proceedings of English naval and consular officers served to convert into American citizens a body whom the Republic will never delight to honor subjects became citizens as rapidly as on the eve of a contested election indeed Englishmen as such disappeared from the stage altogether<sup>71</sup>

The British could not control their populations because there was no large force that had the time or funding to chase around the variety of citizens who were swayed by the promise of high wages and who could simply renounce their citizenship in order to avoid penalties. The British Empire in China was running on a skeleton crew of officials who had to balance their time and energies on managing multiple treaty ports and colonial holdings in the region. They were responding to local pressures from their own citizens, local pressures from the Qing officials and international complications among fellow foreign officials, all while having very little support from the home government to back themselves up if they ran into a larger issue than they could handle. Even when the British were engaged in the north of China fighting in the Arrow War, there was little extra support for the local officials in Shanghai.

Neutrality outside of the local armed forces was not such a simple matter as it might appear. Missionaries who believed strongly in the Taiping's Christianity were keen on getting involved, either through pressuring their own governments or attempting to reach Nanjing and

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<sup>71</sup> MacGowan, "Contributions to the History of the Insurrection," pg 3

support the Taiping, either by learning from them or more often, attempting to correct their dogma to be friendlier and more accommodating to the Western observer. American, Issachar Roberts was well known for his support of the Taiping movement and Hong Xiuquan, especially in its early stages. Hong Xiuquan had invited Roberts to Nanjing in 1853, but war and circumstances stymied Roberts in his attempts to travel to Nanjing. Finally, he was able to bring his family to Shanghai from Canton and once there he appealed to the American Commissioner Humphrey Marshall for support to make the trip to Nanjing. Marshall denied his first several requests but Roberts persisted until,

Marshall threatened to send the missionary home if he should go [to Nanjing], and even said, "I'll hang you if you attempt it." But immediately after the interview, Agustin F. Heard Jr., an American merchant was told by Marshall; "Why could not the infernal ass go without saying anything to me about it? Of course I had to tell him 'no.' My position compelled me to take that stand under the treaties, but I should have been delighted to have him go and bring me back some report of the rebels, which I could rely upon."<sup>72</sup>

While this exchange was happening between American officials and American citizens, I have no reason to doubt that similar discussions were occurring in the British camp. Policy and treaties required officials to refuse such travel permissions to their citizens, but they had little recourse if private citizens chose to take matters into their own hands. Clearly, information was so poor that anything from a known source was better than what officials had to work with.

Between the independent actions of private citizens and Britain and France's involvement in the Second Opium War, it is no surprise that there were unintentional direct interferences with the progress of the Taiping Civil War. "For when they [The British] invaded and took possession of Canton they also quite unintentionally put an end to the gruesome program of anti-

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<sup>72</sup> Teng, Yuan Chung. "Reverend Issachar Jacox Roberts and the Taiping Rebellion." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 23, no. 1 (November 1963): 55-67. Pg 60

Taiping executions under its governor-general—who happened to be the same official who had ordered the capture of the Arrow.”<sup>73</sup> An attempt to manage the Second Opium War unintentionally interfered with the process of the civil war. This diminished the Qing’s persecution of the Taiping near their original base and lessened the danger that being a Taiping supporter would have. It effectively was an unintentional attack on the Qing’s prosecution of their civil war with the Taiping. This sort of unintentional intervention aside, the biggest issue facing British officials was the continued questions about neutrality versus intervention. More and more people were demanding that officials make a lasting decision about the Taiping. Many of these calls hinged on the perceptions of the Taiping’s Christian identity. This was a constant reminder during Lord Elgin’s trip to Nanjing.

That shared Christianity was the most difficult quandary of the British presence in China. For Britain believed itself to be a Christian country, and the appeals of the Taiping scarcely fell on deaf ears. Furthermore, coming as they did at a time when Britain and France had just concluded...a new war against the Qing dynasty...it seemed clear that in many ways what the British wanted in China was something they were far more likely to get from the rebels than from the imperial authorities.<sup>74</sup>

This question was the constant companion for everyone who had to answer whether or not the British were going to formally break their neutrality and take a side. As more individuals made their own choices to support the Qing or the Taiping depending on their own personal convictions, the problem itself grew larger and larger. . It was easier for the French to ignore the Christian nature of the Taiping given the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, and

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<sup>73</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 29

<sup>74</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 40

the report that the Taiping had killed a French Catholic missionary did not help matters.<sup>75</sup> While the question of the Taiping Christianity remained in the eyes of some, the realities of their existence and their military expansion effectively made the issue moot when Li Xiucheng began his successful eastward march to the sea, and more importantly the British and western trade stronghold of Shanghai. The conditional neutrality of Great Britain and the Western treaty powers was about to be tested in a direct confrontation with the Taiping.

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<sup>75</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 73

## Chapter 7: The Shift towards Intervention

The beginning of 1860 marked a resurgence of the Taiping military campaigns led by General Li Xiucheng. Beginning in the spring, Li and his army quickly captured Changzhou, Wuxi, and Suzhou. This push east sent droves of refugees pouring into Shanghai in hopes of a safe haven from the Taiping, and the violence and chaos that followed. As refugees poured into Shanghai swelling the city's population, including imperial soldiers fleeing from the Taiping front, the question of safety and security became paramount. Lord Elgin's younger brother Frederick Bruce, as the ranking official in Shanghai, had to decide what the British response would be, to both the potential, yet unconfirmed, threat from the Taiping, and the already realized threat of chaos that the growing numbers of refugees and soldiers in Shanghai represented. The growing population brought with it rumors and fear of the Taiping advance. If not handled carefully these could easily cause citywide panic which would be detrimental to trade and security.

Weighing the fearful possibility of chaos breaking out in the foreign settlements under his watch, Bruce decided that it was Britain's moral duty to protect Shanghai—not just the foreign settlements but also the Chinese city they abutted. That part of Shanghai was officially the jurisdiction of the Qing civil government and not under foreign control, but he feared a humanitarian disaster if chaos in the imperial city should spread into the neighboring foreign settlement—and he thought a limited intervention by British forces in place might stop this from happening...he also made it quite clear that if the British did set up a defense of Shanghai, it would be strictly limited to the city itself.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 73

Like his brother Lord Elgin and all British officials in China, specifically Shanghai, Frederick Bruce had to face the issue of the Taiping as they began to appear as a direct threat to the lives and livelihoods of British citizens in China. Bruce had to assuage the fears and concerns of merchants in regards to trade security and he had to address of the concerns of missionaries who did not want to be attacking fellow Christians. Defending Shanghai against the Taiping incursions could show tacit if not explicit support for the Qing state. This was a problem since the signing of the Convention of Peking in October of 1860 was still several months away and technically Great Britain was at war, or at least very tense odds, with the Qing. A decision to defend Shanghai from the Taiping in defiance of their professed neutrality, while still at war with the Qing placed the British in a potential disastrous position. There was no clean answer, no foolproof decision that Frederick Bruce could make in regards to potential threats from the Taiping that would not jeopardize British neutrality, or weaken their bargaining position with the Qing. While Bruce reluctantly began requesting volunteers to defend the city, mercenaries were flocking to American Frederick Townsend Ward the leader of the Ever Victorious Army, backed by Chinese merchants in Shanghai willing to pay very generously.

Ward's militia was technically illegal and made up of deserters from all the major foreign powers in China. It was funded by Chinese merchants and fighting mostly on behalf of the Qing state. Since the members did not claim a western national identity, they were able to sidestep the fact that they were breaking the policy of neutrality. They were supporting the Qing, and the local foreign officials were more than willing to look the other way so long as Ward and his company could protect Shanghai, and even better if they could repel the Taiping in any sort of successful manner. Incidentally, their first attempts to retake Taiping controlled cities were abject failures. This buildup of armed western personnel who were actively fighting the Taiping,

or at least existed as a definitive defense force marked the beginning of the end of western neutrality. Local support for these groups increased in the 1860s since the Taiping had revitalized their military might, and posed a much greater threat to trade than they had before.

During the 1860s yet another group of missionaries went up the Yangtze River to meet with the Taiping. This time led by Joseph Edkins, a key member of the London Missionary Society, they had the opportunity to meet with Li Xiucheng in Suzhou. Edkins was overall impressed by their hosts, despite the brutality and chaos they witnessed during their trek. He and made it clear that he believed the British should be actively supporting the Taiping because they would be friendlier and willing to trade if only the British would cease any support or interaction with the Qing. While Edkins returned with a favorable report, not all among his party were equally impressed despite their hopes and personal beliefs.

A letter published in the *North China Herald* from Reverend J.L. Holmes presented the following impressions of his experiences with the Taiping.

I went to Nanking predisposed to receive a favorable impression. I came away with my views very materially changed. I had hoped that their doctrines, though crude and erroneous, might notwithstanding embrace some of the elements of Christianity. I found, to my sorrow, nothing of Christianity but its names, falsely applied—applied to a system of revolting idolatry—whatever there may be in their books, and whatever they may have believed in times past, I could not escape the conclusion that such is the system which they now promulgate, and by which the character of their people is being moulded.<sup>77</sup>

The stark divisions of opinions about the Taiping have begun to waver as access to the Taiping increased and as more missionaries set aside their own aspirations for China and examined the actualities of the movement and its legitimacy compared to their religious dogma.

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<sup>77</sup> Clarke, Prescott, and J S Gregory. *Western Reports on the Taiping: A Selection of Documents*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982. Pg 250



Frederick Bruce was not swayed by the few glowing reports and arguments he had received and instead,

...warned Edkins against encouraging British support for the Taiping, writing...that 'Similarity of belief and sympathy are not grounds sufficient to justify a foreign nation in taking part in a civil contest.' Specifically, he judged that what he termed the Taiping's 'novel anxiety for foreign intercourse' must either be a ruse to gain foreign support...something that, if it were true, would alienate their countrymen and make it impossible for them to rule China.<sup>78</sup>

Bruce personally was not keen on supporting the Taiping, even though his distaste for the Qing was no secret either. While he did not advocate for full intervention on either side, and was still intent on pursuing the policy of neutrality, he firmly believed that the Taiping were not going to be an advantageous movement to support. In a letter to Edkins Bruce writes, "I do not wish, for obvious reasons, to be called upon to take part for or against the insurgents. I am not bound by treaty to assist the Imperialists; and, on the other hand, similarity of belief and sympathy are not grounds sufficient to justify a foreign nation in taking part in a civil contest."<sup>79</sup> Any attempts, most notably by Thomas Meadows to persuade Bruce to change the policy of neutrality to be supportive of the Taiping came to naught. Bruce's objection to Meadow's personal beliefs resulted in him ignoring the letter delivered by Meadows from Li Xiucheng stating the Taiping intention to march on Shanghai with the sole purpose of taking control of the Chinese section of the city only, and their hopes of building friendship with the foreign powers, "Li Xiucheng closed his letter to the foreign ministers on a friendly note, saying that he looked forward to

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<sup>78</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 89

<sup>79</sup> Hake, A. Egmont. *Events in the Taiping Rebellion: Being Reprints of Mss. Copied by General Gordan, C.B. in His Own Handwriting, with Monograph, Introduction, and Notes*. London: W.H. Allen and Co. Ltd., 1891. Pg 144

holding discussions with them once he arrived at Shanghai, and he wished them good health.”<sup>80</sup>. Bruce’s choice to ignore Taiping communication brought the Taiping and the British to blows.

August of 1860 marked the first official Taiping attack on Shanghai, and while their stated goal was to take the Chinese city, and leave all the foreign settlements untouched and governed by their own local foreign governors, Frederick Bruce did not receive or refused to read that information. And since he was committed to protecting both the foreign settlements of Shanghai and the Chinese city, the western defenses took the Taiping approach as an attack on the whole of Shanghai and repelled it handily. Much to the consternation of the Taiping who believed that their intentions had already been made clear. Here was a case of conditional neutrality in action; the British were defending against a perceived attack on their trade and claims in Shanghai.

One concession that the British made to their position, despite the fact that they had clearly engaged in protecting the Chinese city, which was beyond the scope of their conditional neutrality, was that Bruce and the other British commanders refused to turn any Taiping prisoners over to the Qing for execution. The French were less circumspect in their behavior, turning over Taiping prisoners for execution, or executing themselves.<sup>81</sup> Great Britain seemed to have chosen August 1860 as the month to attack both sides of the civil war, because as Frederick Bruce was defending Shanghai, his elder brother Lord Elgin was in the process of sailing back north to end the Second Opium War. Bruce’s decision to attack the Taiping was ridiculed for breaking Britain’s pledge of neutrality, disrupting trade and for attacking fellow Christians.

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<sup>80</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 92

<sup>81</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 92-94

Publications in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* affirm that as many issues as the Taiping might have, they pale in comparison to the issues of the Qing, and at least the Taiping true representatives of the Chinese.

The testimony is almost uniform that bad as the Insurgent rule is, that of the emperor's officers is much worse; and it is this mal-administration that drove his majesty's subjects to insurrection in the first instance, and that now leaves, over-ruin and trodden down by intestine war, what were ten years ago the fairest part of his empire...This empire is the empire of the Chinese and not the empire of the Tartars; its throne is the throne of the Chinese and not the throne of the Tartars; and its sons and daughters with its rich products are all Chinese, and do not belong to the Tartars."<sup>82</sup>

Even in the 1860s with continued reports and negative experiences with the Taiping, many foreigners still held to the opinion that the Taiping represented a better chance for China than did the recalcitrant and belligerent Qing. Many of these individuals were missionaries, Thomas Meadows, Issachar Roberts, while there were some moving away from Taiping support, enough held out hope to have a significant voice. Moreover, the support for the Taiping migrated back to Great Britain, to the missionaries and churches there, who did not experience firsthand the chaos of the civil war. Stephen Platt has examined some of the issues of public response to the Taiping in his work *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom*.

At this point in the fall of 1860, Great Britain's claim to neutrality in the Chinese Civil War was hanging in tatters above the ramparts of Shanghai. Repelling the Taiping and protecting the Chinese city under the civil control of the Manchu state was not an easy situation to explain, but at the same time, British national interests in China remained firmly entrenched in trade, despite the number local opinions that still supported the Taiping. If trade was threatened that took precedence over any potential religious relationship that could be leveraged, at least in

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<sup>82</sup> "Record of Occurrences" by the Editorial Committee, August 13<sup>th</sup> 1860. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Volume OSII #1. Pg 112-113

the eyes of Frederick Bruce. Lord Elgin still held out hope for the Taiping and continued to argue for true neutrality so as not to prolong the war as Meadows and Bonham had predicted early on, and to give the Taiping a true chance to be successful.

But whatever that move may be, and whatever direction it may take, I have determined, pending the instructions of Her Majesty's Government, not to interfere in any shape in favour of the Chinese Government, as I feel confident that any such interference on my part could only prolong the struggle, though in the first place it might appear to have a totally different result.<sup>83</sup>

These arguments about what neutrality and intervention meant to the British, to the Chinese, the merchants, the missionaries, the Taiping and the Qing Imperialists continued in this fashion until 1862. Local officials had maintained almost ten years of conditional neutrality driven by personal opinions, hopes, and prejudices, while facing constant debate about the potential benefits and dangers of supporting the Taiping or the Qing. Each time the British officials affirmed their dedication to neutrality in the Taiping Civil War subject to the continued protections of British trade interests and citizens. This became an issue for British officials when in 1861 they declared the American Confederacy an independent government and a recognized belligerent in the American Civil War. This internationally recognized status was something they had refused or neglected to provide to the Taiping, despite plenty of evidence that the Taiping had more legitimacy than the American Confederates.<sup>84</sup> Ultimately, despite this

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<sup>83</sup> Papers Respecting the Civil War in China pgs 1-2

<sup>84</sup> Stephen Platt breaks this decision down very clearly in his 2012 publication *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*.

discrepancy of status and treatment, the British maintained their conditional neutrality, protecting only Shanghai, up through 1862.

## Chapter 8: Intervention

The policy of conditional neutrality effectively ended in April 1862 and replaced by the *ad hoc* policy of limited intervention. When Taiping celebrations in Ningbo for a recently promoted commander went awry, a poorly aimed gun was fired through the rigging of a French ship, this combined with the British HMS *Ringdove*'s close calls of a similar nature prompted the Commander of the *Ringdove* to complain to Taiping officials in Ningbo. While the Taiping quickly offered apologies, Admiral Hope had already jumped on the report and decided that the British had to act to protect their interests.<sup>85</sup> This response should not come as a shock considering the consistency of the accidental attacks or misfires from Taiping weapons onto Western ships and personnel. Almost every trip made up the Yangtze to Nanjing experienced some form of attack, regardless of the intent of the travelers. The Taiping would fire on the western ships in what was most likely a genuine misunderstanding; the western powers would object and apologies quickly followed allowing the westerners to continue on their way. After nearly ten years of these consistent misunderstandings, it was not surprising that the British were fed up with the Taiping's inability or unwillingness to manage their firearms, or pay attention to international standards of diplomatic and military behavior.<sup>86</sup> The constant misunderstandings and mistakes were clearly trying British patience. After 10 years, and continued hopes for better

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<sup>85</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 276

<sup>86</sup> Not to say that the British were without fault in this case. Lord Elgin faced a number of staunch objections to his troops storming the Summer Palace at the end of the Second Opium War.

relations the Taiping should have learned how to approach and manage their armies and generals to forbid such attacks accidental or otherwise.

Taiping apologies were at first accepted, but were subsequently rejected because of word from Parliament. For the whole of the civil war, reports were sent back home for review and advice. These usually took two months to reach Great Britain from China and then another two months to receive the responses. It had been nearly four months since the fall of Ningbo officials in China had finally received Parliament's response; it was not a report in favor of the Taiping. While protecting Shanghai remained a priority, Lord Russell argued for extending such protections.

Similar protection he [Russell] decides "should, as far as possible, be accorded to the other Treaty ports"—meaning that Ningbo would not fall under the umbrella of British military defense as well. Russell concluded by telling the Admiralty to inform James Hope that "the British flag is to be protected on the Yangtze by a naval force, and generally that British commerce is to have the aid of Her Majesty's ships of war." Admiral Hope was given free rein to engage the Taiping forces in Shanghai, in the treaty ports, and practically anywhere else in China where he deemed them a direct threat to British trade interests.<sup>87</sup>

Lord Russell gave military and political leaders in China a blank check to pursue any avenues to ensure the security of British interests. Not just to protect the security of trade, although that was the most important, not just permission to defend if intentionally attacked, Admiral Hope, Frederick Bruce and other officials in China had full permission to do what they deemed needed to protect British trade and British citizens, regardless of the cost.

By this point in spring of 1862, there was a growing dissatisfaction with the Taiping. The takeover of Ningbo had effectively stopped trade in the city. Shanghai was under constant threat

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<sup>87</sup> Platt, Stephen R. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Pg 277

of attack, both physical and economic, and the merchants were becoming increasingly nervous as to their own security. A dispatch from British Consul FW Harvey regarding the state of Ningbo showed the state of crisis in the city.

...they have issued Proclamations in all directions, calling on the people to return, to re-open their shops, and to live in peace and security under their rule...But all these placards, appeals, and measure have hitherto met with just the amount of success that they deserved, a natural mixture of dread and suspicious being the only response given by the half-dozen respectable Chinese who are still here, living on our side...Respecting Shanghae...I understand that the insurgents here are reported to have declared...that if they are not allowed to seize that city, they will stop all supplies of tea and silk reaching it...<sup>88</sup>

Either the Taiping take Shanghai, or they divert all the goods that Shanghai relied upon through Ningbo, a city where trade had stopped because of the fear that Taiping control brought. This report in 1862 was clear indication that unless the British took action, the Taiping were intent on attacking the basis for British trade in the region, either by rerouting goods or controlling the city they came through.

Between the tensions over the accidental attacks at Ningbo and continued opposition to the Taiping among the upper ranks of British officers and officials in China, little was needed to push the British into revisiting their policy of conditional neutrality. One of the indications that this policy was created through *ad hoc* means was the ease at which the British were able to change policy. There was no need to wait on lengthy debates in Parliament, or for orders to be sent, rather the officials looked at their current circumstances and adjusted their policies accordingly. Captain Dew of the *Encounter*, the ship Admiral Hope dispatched to look into the

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<sup>88</sup> Clarke, Prescott, and J S Gregory. *Western Reports on the Taiping: A Selection of Documents*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982. Pg 375-377



“attacks” at Ningbo, was in charge of the negotiations with the Taiping over the events in Ningbo. After getting nowhere quickly, in part due to Dew’s untenable demands of the Taiping,

This is to inform you, on the part of the English and French Senior Naval Officers, that had you agreed to their demands and removed your guns from the walls, they should have felt bound in honour to have acted up to their promise, and have prevented an attack on you on the Settlement side by the Imperial forces, which in countless numbers and heavy-armed ships advance to attack you. We now inform you that we maintain a perfect neutrality, but if you fire the guns or muskets from the battery or walls opposite the Settlement, on the advancing Imperialists, thereby endangering the lives of our men and people in the foreign Settlement, we shall then feel it our duty to return the fire, and bombard the city. We would implore you, as your cause is hopeless, to leave Ningbo, thereby preventing much effusion of blood on both sides, more especially of the harmless tillers of the soil, who on the one hand will lose their heads if they are not shaved, and on the other lose them if they are shaved.<sup>89</sup>

The Taiping could not agree to this ultimatum because it would put them at risk. Through diplomatic manhandling of the situation the Taiping were forced to choose between defending their position at Ningbo and starting a war with Great Britain and France, both whom were still claiming full adherence to their neutrality, or allowing their position to lapse and flee from Ningbo in hopes of appeasing both sides. There was not a way for the Taiping to win this standoff, and Great Britain entered the fray against the Taiping, which put them effectively, albeit not entirely intentionally on the side of the Qing in early May of 1862.

Neutrality as an *ad hoc* policy created to address the uncertainties and disagreements regarding the Taiping Civil War had finally reached the tipping point where neutrality would not do enough to protect British interests and so Frederick Bruce and his fellow officials made the decision to revise the policy in favor of limited intervention. The threat to trade and the continued difficulty that the British had in trying to extract any level of concession or trade

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<sup>89</sup> Further Papers Relating to the Rebellion in China pg 51

agreement with the Taiping made it increasingly difficult for many of the British to hold out hope.

This finally policy shift from neutrality to intervention has been a source of contention among Taiping scholars. Platt's analysis puts British intervention very firmly in the realm of trade protection, but Teng gives the British a less financially self-interested reasoning.

According to Teng there were five main reasons for British intervention, protection of commercial interests, to effectively reward the Qing for being so conciliatory in the Second Opium War, end Taiping destruction and killing, reaction against the Taiping attitudes toward westerners, and finally intervention was motivated by political ambition.<sup>90</sup> These motivations are not inaccurate but are quite biased and demonstrate the hypocrisies of the nineteenth century behavioral expectations. Reasons two and four are the most important. Teng's claim that the British were effectively rewarding the Qing for their conciliatory nature in the signing and ratification of the Convention of Peking, is showing how Britain's own arrogance and feelings of smug superiority had convinced them that they should "reward" the Qing for being utterly destroyed, their national treasures and sacred palaces being looted and burned, and then being such good sports about it, while chastising the Taiping for their own arrogance and belief in the legitimacy and universality of their own beliefs.

To accept Teng's argument that the Taiping's arrogance in some way justified the British decision to intervene is to accept the claim that the Taiping had no legitimacy and had earned their punishment for failing to properly court or respond to any British overtures for peace, or trade. Teng writes off British arrogance and their insistence of their own correctness as

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<sup>90</sup> Teng, S. Y. *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers: A Comprehensive Survey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Pg 312-313

acceptable while the Taiping's similar attitude is condemned and blamed for their failures. It also assumes that the Taiping made no genuine efforts to accommodate the British or any other foreign power, which is disingenuous and inaccurate, as the Taiping particularly under the premiership of Hong Rengan had made several attempts to cater and attract western support<sup>91</sup>, their limited success tended to be with religious individuals who were excited to see a Chinese Christian movement in China and were willing to overlook instances of theological divergence.

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<sup>91</sup> Platt's *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom* examines Hong Rengan's impact on the Taiping at length. Hong Rengan was Hong Xiuquan's cousin and an early convert to the movement. He was separated from his cousin and became stuck in Canton. It was there that he spent almost ten years studying with western missionaries, learning more about western beliefs and political practices. Because of his superb skills as an administrator and because of Hong Xiuquan's growing paranoia, trusting only family members, he recalled Hong Rengan to Nanjing and made him Premier. Hong Rengan attempted to institute a number of major reforms to the Taiping including several that were aimed at wooing western support by making the Taiping movement more understandable and palatable to western observers. This included changing their diplomatic practices and modifying Taiping dogma to be more accepting of western Protestant Christianity. Hong Rengan did not have a great deal of success in implementing his policies but their existence and his attempts are noteworthy actions taken to attract western supporters.

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

The Taiping Civil War was a disaster in terms of loss of human life, destruction of environment, political and social upheaval. To deal with this conflict the policy of Great Britain during the first 10 years of the Taiping Civil war was an *ad hoc* conditional neutrality between the two belligerents and avowed non-intervention with the intent not to prolong the conflict by getting involved. Officials formally modified this policy in 1862 and Great Britain intervened in the civil war against the Taiping, their limited intervention meant that they were focused on protecting treaty ports, not necessarily fighting on behalf of the Qing. Ad hoc neutrality was a prudent and successful strategy because there were so many opinions vying for influence concerning a movement that was poorly understood at the best of times and utterly misunderstood at the worst. The variety of groups and individuals that made up the foreign population of the treaty ports contended with each other, the local officials to promote, and their own ideas of how the west should engage in the civil war. While the merchants held the most obvious sway over policy, given that the condition of neutrality was designed to protect their interests, missionaries and mercenaries played a less visible but still important role. The influence of missionaries shows through the strongest in the persistent choice of neutrality. There was a good deal of support throughout the Civil War for intervention on both sides, but the religious nature of the Taiping and the influence of missionaries meant that officials were not keen on attacking the Taiping. Mercenaries played an even more subtle role in influencing

policy, namely that their existence was a constant reminder of the policy's weakness; officials could not enforce neutrality consistently.

Officials had to work with very limited resources and state support in dealing the circumstances of the Taiping Civil war. Which included, calls to intervene on both sides of the conflict, personal sympathies lying with both sides, a home government that was concerned with trade and security, but did not have the ability to project the full political and military power across great distances at the beginning of the conflict. Local officials were aware that the state was concerned about repeating mistakes made in India that would both upset the balance of power in Europe as well as vastly over extend and strain Britain's ability to control its empire.

The British government in the late 1850s and early 1860s had already faced a major colonial crisis in India, the writing was on the wall at just how quickly a local revolt could spread and threaten the lives of British citizens. The Sepoy Mutiny, also known as the Indian Uprising of 1857<sup>92</sup>, irrevocably altered British colonial policy, as the state had to take over governing India after the failures of the British East India Company. Almost immediately the state was governing a country of close to 200 million people, the size of their formal empire exploded almost overnight, bringing with it a myriad of problems. China was even larger and it did not have a governing structure that they could easily adopt to imperial management. As vast and diverse as India was, China posed an even larger problem should a similar sequence of events occur there. In India, the British East India Company had already built a functional governing structure that the state could make use of; China did not have an equivalent. If the Taiping failed, but took the Qing with them because of poorly thought out British actions the effect on trade and

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<sup>92</sup> See William Dalrymple's *The Last Mughal* for a thorough discussion of this event.

social order would be devastating to both China and Great Britain directly, but also to the rest of the Western powers who would lose their trade agreements and opportunities. Great Britain wanted to avoid a circumstance like this in China, but it also did not want to lose its treaty port security.

The risk of a total state collapse in China would have been catastrophic to British imperialism. Officials were responsible for maintaining positive relations with the Qing government while still trying to be forward looking enough not to damage their chances with the Taiping should they succeed. They had to maintain open trade in the treaty port cities while negotiating with the Qing, the Taiping, local rebels and bandits not to mention the other foreign powers occupying the same space, and the comments and critiques from their own merchants and missionaries. British officials in China during the 1850s and 1860s were handed an infinitely complicated state of affairs and expected to do right for the state, with little direct state support. Whitehall was 2-3 months away at the fastest, and 4-6 months away at the slowest. Officials made the decision for conditional neutrality out of an immediate need to control the situation to protect British interests and not jeopardize local security. It remained malleable but controlled and allowed for the British to react according to the immediate needs of each situation they were presented with while still adhering to the wider economic goals of British imperialism.

Neutrality was an *ad hoc* response to all of this because it upset the fewest number of people on all sides of the issue and allowed for the local officials to exert a level of control that they would otherwise not have, while still allowing for the opportunity to pursue a political and economic relationship with both belligerents. Neutrality allowed the state to balance hope and cynicism while they waited to see the best outcome. It was the confluence of events in the early 1860s that gave Frederick Bruce and his fellow officials a reason to adjust policy from

conditional neutrality to limited intervention, once again as an immediate response to a potential threat. However, this time one that they could backed up by enough military support, to control the situation.

The importance and influence of the individual was yet another reason why *ad hoc* neutrality was a successful policy. This was policy run by the local officials with very little intervention from Parliament, it was not coming from a central location, and was subject to the whims and personalities of the often-changing local officials, each of whom had different experiences and hopes for their time in China. Its success lies in that overall, even with the number of difficulties, the policy did achieve its overall aim, to avoid direct conflict for as long as possible, to remain flexible in its potential responses and maintain a level of stability within the foreign community.

Neutrality and non-intervention were also examples of Great Britain realizing that whether they wanted to or not their existence and interaction in China had upset and influenced many of the power relations. They might have wanted to stay out of the conflict completely, but there was no way to do so. Conditional neutrality and later limited intervention allowed them the flexibility to lessen their impact on the situation as much as possible.

In 1862, officials modified the policy of conditional neutrality because it did not deal effectively with the threat to trade. While this adherence to economic rather than social concerns might have upset missionaries and others who were more inclined to believe the sincerity of

Taiping Christianity, there were fewer and fewer individuals by 18260s who still held out unconditional hope for Taiping success.<sup>93</sup>

The original intent of British policy was to stay out of the conflict as much as possible and allow the Qing and the Taiping resolve the issue. Great Britain would continue maintain open communication with both sides until the conflict ended at which point they would work with the victor to continue to build or rebuild any trade and political agreements that Britain deemed necessary for its financial success. Overall, this policy was successful; it made the best out of a bad situation for British officials and prevented themselves from being drawn in to the Taiping Civil War. Even the intervention of 1862 was severely limited in both policy and practice. In a joint decision foreign official's transferred leadership of the former mercenary force the Ever Victorious Army into limited British control under Charles "Chinese" Gordon and gave them strict instructions to protect the area around Shanghai. It did not defeat the Taiping at large and was used primarily as a defense force for Western citizens, Smith's work *Mercenaries and Mandarins* provides an excellent account of the EVA and its function in suppressing the Taiping, as well as the difficulties it faced as a politically hybrid military unit.

Scholarship on the Taiping has expanded considerably; however, there are still more pieces to for scholars to explore The most glaring omissions currently are evaluations of policy from the other treaty port powers, an environmental approach to the Taiping specifically in terms of environmental recovery, and the effect that the Taiping had on the other major rebellions of the mid to late nineteenth century, linkages in policy and practice between the Indian Uprising and the Taiping Civil War Great Britain and the Taiping were closely involved, despite Britain's

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<sup>93</sup> Platt's *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom* discusses the public backlash, both domestic and abroad regarding Bruce's policy change in 1862.



neutrality. Their very presence in China and their curiosity about the Taiping brought them together in ways that scholars are exploring.

Great Britain was trying to find its footing in China without resorting to colonialism, it did not want China as a colony, for administrative reasons and because it would upset the balance of power in Europe. Much of that, they decided, required being uninvolved except in matters directly relating to trade. In light of the absence of direct oversight from the British government, individual actors made their own choices and built a flexible policy that met their needs and the needs of the state while balancing a number of diverse opinions and demands. Britain and the Taiping Civil War was an example of the struggles of imperialism and its limits. In theory, an imperial power should be able to take direct and decisive action to control a situation to their advantage. Britain in India is a good example, the British East India Company was unable to eliminate the threat of the Indian Uprising, the state came in, ended the rebellion and consolidated control over the country to secure their economic interests. This was not the case in China; the distance between the seat of Imperial power and the potential colonial holdings was too great to manage in the mid nineteenth century. Imperialism was limited by distance and by a lack of technology. It was not until much later, when technology for travel and communication had advanced that the British and other Western powers were able to exert such direct control in China. A good example of this was the Boxer Rebellion and the 8 State Alliance that was able to coordinate a multi-state attack in China in response to local unrest that threatened their security. In the 1850s and 1860s, this was not an option, circumstances of distance and location limited the actions of empire.

Britain the Taiping and the Qing were all caught in a struggle with imperialism. Stability for trade at the cost of risky intervention, political and social overthrow through military success

at the cost of allying with an encroaching power, or maintaining power and control at the cost of acknowledging your own weakness. Britain was an imperial power struggling, to avoid more colonial possessions and responsibility while still increasing their trade opportunities. The Taiping were caught between two imperial powers and intent on maintaining and expanding their own autonomy and control. The Qing was a failing imperial power fighting internal challengers and the imposition of an external economic and diplomatic structure. How we understand these political and social interplays builds our knowledge of the nineteenth century and the effects of imperialism.

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