

Correspondence

Stephen Uhalley Jr. and Westerners in China: A Commentary

Stephen Uhalley Jr.'s review of Jen Yu-wen's *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement* (*Journal of Asian Studies*, August 1974) castigates Westerners based in China for not appreciating the Taipings. His account is stimulating but is it good history? Is it, perhaps, another example of the tendency to impose the philosophy of a concerned citizen of our time upon the events in China 100 years ago?

To say, for example, that T. T. Meadows, the British consul, was transferred from the great Western center of Shanghai solely because he favored the Taipings betrays a lack of information. His partiality for the Taipings may have had some bearing, but Meadows was the great maverick (some said madman) of the British civil service in China. He was eventually sent to the frontier open port of Newchwang, Manchuria, largely because his roaring life style was not compatible with Shanghai society or with British policy. His escapades in Manchuria where he killed a woman while hunting, asked for his own field piece (a cannon) to fight off a local armed anti-foreign group, and cavorted ostentatiously with women, earned him censure from British authorities in China and the distrust of the Chinese Department of the Foreign Office in London.¹

The answers to why Westerners in China did not warm to the Taipings and thus study them more closely are probably among the following:

1. Representatives from America and Europe came to China from industrialized, Christianized, onward-and-upward societies which were very pleased with themselves. When they read in the Peking Gazette that the Emperor was worried about a drought and was beseeching citizens to come forward who could convince the dragon to make rain, they found it difficult to take the whole culture seriously.

2. The Western merchants of Shanghai felt more threatened by the Nanking-based Taipings than by the imperialists. They had great influence in persuading the top British emissaries—who came to China with large discretionary powers for dealing with and perhaps recognizing the Taipings—to oppose the Taipings diplomatically and militarily.

3. The American Civil War which was contemporaneous with the final stages of the Taiping rebellion made “legitimatists” of people like Secretary of State Seward and Ministers and Acting Ministers like Anson Burlingame and S. Wells Williams. It proved impossible to fight rebellion at home and uphold it in China.²

4. The great violence of the Taipings destroyed the tentative interest of many Westerners.

- a. Uhalley seems unwilling to accept the British Consul Harvey's evidence

¹ See Hammond to Wade, December 11, 1865, General Correspondence: China, FO 17/444, Public Record Office, London, Chargé d'Affaires Thomas F. Wade favored issuing Meadows his cannon but was overruled by the Foreign Office; see also the perceptive vignette of Meadows by the longtime Chief Justice of the Mixed Tribunal at

Shanghai, Sir Edmund Hornby, after he had visited the British consulate at Newchwang. Sir Edmund Hornby to Earl Stanley, September 1, 1866, FO 17/453.

² Seward to Burlingame, March 6, 1862, Instructions: China, volume 1; Burlingame to Seward, June 17, 1862, Despatches: China, volume 20.

that the Taipings at Ningpo in 1862 had a "fume of blood and a look of carnage about them. . . ." But how about the American Minister Anson Burlingame who visited at the same time and was thoroughly shaken by the heads, assorted limbs and truncated bodies which lay in the streets? Since the Taipings were then threatening to attack Shanghai, is it really any wonder that Westerners worried or that Burlingame called the Taipings the "very incarnation of obstruction."³

b. S. Wells Williams was another American observer who was influenced adversely by the violence of the Taipings. Uhalley derides Williams for an "infamous quotation" in *The Middle Kingdom* which was demeaning to Hung Hsiu-ch'uan. But the quotation was part of a 49 page chapter dealing with the Taipings in which Williams musters evidence and comes to some conclusions about them. His account is influenced by the "impurity" of Taiping Christianity and he seems unaware of their economic and political theories. But what eventually turns him against them is their "carnage" and "ruthless license" plus the venality and excesses of Hung and his subordinates. Williams's bibliography of the movement includes works which are highly regarded by Uhalley and other serious students of the Taipings. The evolution of Williams's thinking is actually typical of the more thoughtful missionary observations: bouyant hope in the beginning that the Taipings would create a new China guided by Christian morality; then, disillusionment as the Heavenly Kingdom spills too much blood and violates its vows of austerity, morality and discipline; and finally an exaggerated adulation of Ever Victorious Army leaders like Ward and Chinese Gordon. My own conclusion regarding this marred account by our early China expert is that it probably encouraged more students to look further into the Taipings than it discouraged.⁴

All this is not to say that, in retrospect, the Westerners in China should not have shown more interest. But to attribute the opposition or indifference wholly to petty or ignoble motives is to miss the real flavor and atmosphere of the era.

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³ Burlingame to Seward, March 7, 1862, Despatches: China, volume 20.

⁴ S. Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom*, Vol. II, New York, 1883, pp. 575-624.

REPLY

Mr. Ring fails to grasp my main point, i.e., that much bona fide credible contemporary testimony has been neglected in Western historiography on the Taiping Movement. Thus it is not a question of a concerned citizen of this century imposing his philosophy on events in the 19th century. I simply suggested, as a professional historian, that for a change this available evidence be taken into account, however much this might call into question the assumptions and interpretations of the conventional wisdom to which we have become so comfortably and uncritically accustomed. Certainly this heretofore over-looked source material must be evaluated against the historical circumstances and in the context of the thought and practices which prevailed at the time. What is no longer allowable is that

such excellent evidence be ignored. Furthermore, all evidence pertaining to the Taipings must be scrutinized by the usual techniques of historical criticism. Too much of what has been accepted can easily be shown to be misleading or untrue.

As for the charges cited regarding Meadows's alleged behavior in Shanghai and in Newchwang, with the insinuation that he was possibly disreputable and irresponsible—it would be highly imprudent to accept these at face value. To begin with, they are not entirely consistent with the man's character as it can be discerned in his scholarship and as it is reflected in his demonstrated sense of responsibility and integrity as an official. He was a man who, despite "adverse currents," reported accurately, and who furthermore sought to change a policy that was clearly contrary to what he believed the situation, based on the facts he knew so well, called for. Thomas Meadows was not the first honest official to be railroaded by venal superiors and colleagues, who then had to justify an injustice with character assassination. His alleged "roaring life style," which was probably a fascinating one in any case, was a flimsy pretext. It could well have been imaginatively embroidered upon by the anti-Taiping propagandists, just as they invented far greater lies about the revolutionaries whom Meadows had befriended.

Mr. Ring also advances reasons as to why Westerners "did not warm" to the Taipings, again ignoring the fact that many of the most reasonable ones did, and that moreover many remained sympathetic to the Taipings to the end. Unfortunately, I am restrained editorially from devoting the space necessary to deal adequately with each of the "reasons" cited. I can only say that while there may be some truth in some of Ring's assertions, much of what he says is either misleading, erroneous or irrelevant. Let me take his points up one by one, not necessarily to refute them here, but to suggest that the story is far from the black and white, conventional interpretation that Ring intones.

1. The cultural and attitudinal disparity between Chinese and Westerners at the time is well-understood. But then should not this frustrating situation have made Westerners especially responsive to Chinese revolutionaries who shared their basic religious orientation, who sought their friendship and who increasingly attempted to evolve institutions and values that would be compatible with those of the Westerners? As a matter of fact, many Westerners were responsive, but were overruled by men of limited vision who had the power to influence events.
2. Contrary to popular belief, some of the leading Western merchants were opposed to the policy of intervening in China's civil war on behalf of the Ch'ing government. These merchants didn't necessarily sympathize with the Taipings, but they were opposed to any measures that would extend or intensify the war and thus disrupt trade. It is a matter of record that trade with the Taipings flourished except in war zones or where an anti-Taiping blockade had been imposed.
3. Whatever the rationalizations of American officials in China, there were respectable Americans who disagreed. The Reverend W. A. P. Martin, the most knowledgeable and distinguished of the Americans in China in the nineteenth century, remained sympathetic to the Taipings. His arguments for recognition of the Taiping government are the most eloquent and persuasive on record.
4. a. On the subject of violence, Ring uncritically accepts the unfair and distorted testimony of those who were out to do in the Taipings. To blame the Taipings

for the mutilated bodies found after a battle is monstrously unfair unless credible proof is provided that they were indeed responsible for the atrocity. This is all the more the case when in the instance cited, the Ch'ing forces had relied upon pirates(!) (and British and French naval units).¹

- b. I "derided" S. Wells Williams, not because he demeaned Hung Hsiu-ch'uan—he was entitled to his opinion on personalities—but because he used "evidence" to do so which he must have known or should have known to be untrue. How could historian Williams, who chose to write so much on the Taipings, not have known that Sir George Bonham never even met Hung Hsiu-ch'uan? Hence, how could Hung have asked Bonham for anything? Thus to repeat the fabrication, as Williams does, that Hung asked Bonham "if the Virgin Mary had a pretty sister for him, the King of Heaven, to marry!" is simply a further effort to inflame sentiment against the Taipings. Is this Ring's notion of "good" history?

Certainly we don't want to miss the "real flavor and atmosphere of the era," but it is incumbent upon us to separate fact from fancy, to recover the truth from the misinformation of propagandists. In doing so, it would be fatuous to underestimate ignoble motives. Remember, we're talking about Chinese revolutionaries who tried to be Christian, who tried to be friendly with Westerners, and who had eloquent Western champions, but who for all these efforts were crushed largely with Western connivance—because they threatened the lucrative opium trade, and because the Ch'ing government had already proven itself (in the Peking Convention of 1860) to be promisingly compliant.

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¹ See my "The Taipings at Ningpo: The Significance of a Forgotten Event," *The Journal of the*

Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Vol. XI (1971), 17–32.