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A War of Words:

The Circulation and Interpretation of Taiping Depositions

***Chapter 2: The Recanting of the Faithful King***

Augustus F. Lindley could not believe his eyes. The date was October 22, 1864, and for the first time since their parting interview in Wuxi, Lindley was reading the words of an old friend. These, however, were not the words of the man Lindley thought he knew. The man’s name was Li Xiucheng, but he was more commonly referred to in China as the “Zhong Wang” of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, or the “Faithful King” for the English-speaking contemporaries paying attention to this fourteen-year conflict. A talented military commander and vital leader in the later days of the Taiping’s secessionist attempt, Li was in many ways viewed as the Kingdom’s last hope. His capture outside of the town of Fangshan a mere three days after the fall of Nanjing marks an end to any serious attempt at victory on behalf of the Taiping. He was one of the more well-known Taiping generals amongst Europeans and is consequentially one of the more controversial figures of the war. To those like Lindley he was “the most restless and determined of all the desperadoes Taeping-dom has sent forth.”[[1]](#footnote-1) As described by *The Newcastle Courant*, Li was “the only man whom the Taeping movement has produced on the rebel side who gave any proof of military talent, or any sign of having learnt the prudence of moderation in war.”[[2]](#footnote-2) To others, he was nothing more than a heathen working under the guise of Taiping sovereignty for his own gain. This is why, on October 22, when the *North China Herald* published a document known as “The Autographic Deposition of [Zhong] Wang, The Faithful King, at his Trial After the Capture of [Nanjing],” Lindley found himself angered and at a loss for words. What had happened to the man Lindley hoped to claim as a hero back home? This chapter will analyze the impact that Li’s confession had on the foreign community at the time. After the completion of an original run of edits, the document acts as a piece of pro-Qing propaganda, reminding Europe why they had broken their pledges of neutrality in the first place.

In his deposition, which spans around seventy-eight pages in its entirety, the Faithful King confessed many things.[[3]](#footnote-3) The most startling of these all was a sense of regret over the path his life had taken since first joining up with the Taiping back in Guangxi. It highlighted an overwhelming mentality of helplessness towards how this enterprise had turned out. In a sense, the now ironically titled “Faithful King” had recanted the ideology and state he had spent the past twelve years giving his life to and was about to lose his for. “Now I have been taken prisoner; but how could I have known that it would come to this? If I had foreseen the present disaster [sic] I could long ago have avoided it by remaining at home as an ordinary man.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In his book, *Ti-ping Tien-kwoh*, published two years after the *Herald*’s version of Li’s deposition surfaced, Lindley remained unconvinced that this supposed autographic statement contained any significant portion of truth. The two-volume work was even dedicated to the Zhong Wong “if he be living; and if not, to his memory.”

Lindley was without a doubt on the fringe when it came to views on the path Li Xiucheng traveled after the fall of Nanjing. *The Times* published news of his capture as early as September 30; his eventual execution via “‘cutting into a thousand pieces’” being reported by September 17 and published on November 10.[[5]](#footnote-5) Even so, Lindley’s opinions had not been born out of passion alone. There were others who seconded his doubts. On November 18, twenty-seven days after the *North China Herald* published the first section of Li’s confession, *The Age* declared that “the fate and whereabout of the [Zhong Wang]…is possibly the most salient point at present in Chinese politics.”[[6]](#footnote-6) *The Age* was no outsider periodical either, in fact it was one of Australia’s leading newspapers, and one of the most successful in the world at the time. The paper cited contradictory government bulletins and apparent sightings by legible sources in Huzhou. San Francisco-based paper *The Daily Alta California* would suffer from similar confusions. On October 15, the publication wrote of the Zhong Wang’s beheading, dating it to early September. A paragraph later they repeated that the Zhong Wang had been captured, but believed that he was still awaiting his sentence.[[7]](#footnote-7) On November 14, they wrote that their original report had been wrong, correctly affirming that the Zhong Wang had not been beheaded on August 2.[[8]](#footnote-8) The paper incorrectly believed that he had instead been sent to Beijing, a place his trials never took him.[[9]](#footnote-9) It would not be until mid-January that *The Age* would confirm the Zhong Wang’s death.[[10]](#footnote-10) At the same time, the paper would comment on the repulsive characteristics which had apparently always characterized the movement, losing the undeniable tone of respect they had afforded the Zhong Wang in November. What drove Lindley and the like-minded reporters at *The Age* to these doubts? What evidence was there that the Zhong Wang’s confession was a result of the Qing Dynasty’s supposed “addiction to forging documents of this sort?”[[11]](#footnote-11) As discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, Li’s deposition was not the first popular confession to be published during the Taiping Civil War. Time had not yet forgotten the Deposition of Tiende.

The Deposition of Tiende had shown the Qing to have a comprehensive understanding of the power of confession as a political tool. While their attempt at delegitimizing and undermining the momentum of the Taiping was ultimately unsuccessful, this early attempt at redefining the Taiping narrative had a great impact on the nature of later depositions. The case of Tiende gave Lindley reason to color his perception of the text. He postulates that the document might have been “made up by some prisoner of note…and the cunning writers attached to the Governor-General of the two [Jiang, Zeng Guofan].”[[12]](#footnote-12) Lindley’s convictions, or perhaps they would be better characterized as hopes, may not have panned out, but his initial instincts were not entirely misplaced. There was no reason to believe that Li Xiucheng’s deposition had not been edited before being published, the real question is to what extent, and why?

Li Xiucheng’s writing covered a lot of ground. A large portion of the text is dedicated to describing his pivotal role within the Taiping military and government. His confession also alludes to internal conflict within the movement, musings on why it failed, and a few ardent pleas for kind treatment of his troops and their families. The deposition was important not only for its content, but for the context it provided as well. Seeing as it was published only three months removed from the events at Nanjing, Li’s words gave the European world its first major look at the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom since its initial collapse, from its earnest beginnings onward.

Lindley’s book acted as a response to the acknowledgment that Li Xiucheng’s deposition supposedly provided its readers with an uninterrupted and authentic view of the Taiping’s history. Lindley was of the opinion that Li’s statements have largely been misrepresented and incorrectly interpreted by those involved in policy and the press. His efforts to rework the mainstream understanding of the movement were supposedly commissioned by the Zhong Wang himself.[[13]](#footnote-13) This added another layer to Lindley’s already dubious claims of authority on the subject. Did these appeals for a new vision of the Taiping conflict have any notable impact on Western thought? As Hallett Abend notes in *The God From The West*, his post-WWII book on Frederick Townsend Ward, “[Lindley’s] work was published after the fall of Nanking, after the death of the Heavenly King, and after the utter collapse of the Taiping movement, it could not have had a wide public appeal or a sizable sale.” It is important to remember that by the time *Ti-Ping Tien-Kwoh* was available for public consumption, both Europe and Asia had become preoccupied with new conflicts. One explanation provided by Abend for Lindley’s push to publish is “the suspicion that the publication was heavily subsidized by Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition in Parliament.”[[14]](#footnote-14) While these suspicions were never confirmed, Lindley’s book is nonetheless populated with a series of heated attacks on both American and British actors involved on the Qing side of things. These partisan leanings must be taken into consideration when evaluating the legitimacy of Lindley’s claims.

Another element of Lindley’s criticism to consider is the nature of his publisher. The firm who championed his work was known as Day & Son. The business had become a Limited Company in 1865 due to financial difficulties, and was on the eve of liquidating, soon to be purchased by the notoriously radical Vincent Brooks. Day & Son, who had once been awarded a Royal Warrant, had run into financial and legal trouble after attempting to assist exiled Hungarian patriot Lajos Kossuth print a new currency. Brooks similarly courted controversy by serving as one of Robert Owen’s primary publishers, a prominent utopian socialist philosopher. These publishers had any outright connections to the Taiping movement, and the ideals Kossuth and Owen held clearly differed from the utopian ideas formulating in China.[[15]](#footnote-15) Nonetheless, the predisposition they demonstrated towards independence-minded movements indicates a willingness to support alternative world visions and opposition movements. It is without question that Lindley stood opposed to “the evil foreign policy which Great Britain, during the last few years, has pursued.”[[16]](#footnote-16) These ideological leanings only further encourage suspicions that Lindley’s writing may have had more directly political undertones than meet the eye.

If one were to purely look at the number of articles Western periodicals ran on Li Xiucheng’s confession, one might get the impression that this document, quite frankly, was not significant at all. As previously implied in this thesis’ discussion of Lindley’s timing, most newspapers moved on quite quickly. Even the *North China Herald* neglected to mention it much after publishing the last section of their appendix to the document in March of 1865. So why was Lindley so obsessed with rerouting the narrative most observers derived from Li’s words? Just as Lindley maintained hope that the Zhong Wang still lived he had equal faith in the eventual success of the Taiping movement. Rumors of surviving Taiping forces still circulated. One purported that a Taiping army had recently begun to conquer territory in Fujian, an army Lindley incorrectly believed was led by the departed Hong Rengan.[[17]](#footnote-17) If this were to be true there was immediate cause for renegotiating the terms for which the Western world discussed and looked back upon Taiping’s secessionist attempt as originally cemented by Li’s confession. “[F]or the Heavenly Father is with us, and who can triumph against him?”[[18]](#footnote-18) By using this quote from the general Taiping leadership Lindley asserts the Christian faith that had been stripped from them since Li’s confession. He tells the European world that they may have been wrong in their initial judgement. Lindley was not the only person who felt that this confession held an important position. One man who felt similarly was Zeng Guofan, Commander-in-Chief of the Hunan Army.

Zeng Guofan had not built his Hunan Army from the columns of Banner troops already in the service of the Qing Dynasty, but from the myriad of local townspeople under his jurisdiction directly affected by the Taiping encroachment towards Central China. The organization’s unique beginning offers up some light on Zeng’s position and goals within the empire. Regardless of personal belief, Zeng expressed no royal ambitions or dreams. He portrayed himself as a model of the ideal statesman, one who loyally served his Emperor and dynasty. That is not to say he did not see problems with the way the bureaucracy had been managed in recent years; evident by his initiative in starting the Hunan Army. This clearly indicated a lack of confidence in Imperial ability to resist the Taiping advance and protect Qing civilians and their property. This uncertainty was directed right back at Zeng from the Imperial Court. The Qing might have needed Zeng’s organizational prowess, but they did so cautiously, suspicious of his motives. As Jonathan Porter points out, by the end of the war “[Zeng’s] autonomy had already progressed so far that his organization could be regarded as a viable foundation for a new Chinese dynasty, controlling the richest area of the empire and wielding authority in all of the crucial areas of personnel, finance, and military power.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This mutual distrust, put aside in the name of the same goal, underlies the unique vision Zeng hoped to portray in releasing Lis confession. The resulting document is a much more complex effort than a simple attempt at painting the Taiping as an overwhelming evil.

Upon the Zhong Wang’s capture, Zeng wrote in a memorial to the Imperial palace that there exists “a great number of people who read rebel depositions.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This statement proved true. The *North China Herald*, the primary news source for English-speaking foreigners based in China, ran the Zhong Wang’s deposition and related materials for over four months following the translated document’s initial publishing. Li Xiucheng’s words dominated the space within the weekly edition’s few pages, and the paper’s columns offered up relevant perspectives sanctioned by British Parliament on more than a few occasions. From their defeat in the first Opium War to the subsequent signing of a myriad of unequal treaties, the Taiping Civil War found the Qing government in the midst of their so-called “Century of Humiliation.” Li’s confession came at a time when China’s success as a unified entity relied more heavily on outside forces than it had at any time in the region’s history. Maintaining the state’s image was more crucial to stability than ever. Zeng might have had his problems with the Qing, but his fear of more Western intrusions greatly outweighed any thoughts of disloyalty. Zeng felt that increased involvement from the West would only place the Qing in a double bind. Any victories achieved with foreign assistance would only wrestle control away from the state. Any loses would damage the state’s reputation and risk bringing on more political and financial burdens.[[21]](#footnote-21) In addition to condemning the Taiping movement’s motivations and actions, Zeng’s edits transformed Li’s confession into an affirmation of Qing authority. It was no doubt that public opinion in the West on the Taiping had certainly soured during the last few years of their rule. Public opinion on the Qing however, had not necessarily improved in its place. As the conflict neared its end European nations began to feel the strain of the Taiping Civil War on their investments, and involvement, in the region. In many ways the confession served as a reminder that it made more sense for European powers to continue to support the Qing than it did for them to take any stronger action against them than they already had.

“The thing to be feared now is that the foreign devils will certainly take action.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Whether intentional or not, this is Li’s last message to his captors. It is a warning to his fellow countrymen of the dangers that lay ahead. These cautionary words, alongside a list of “ten propositions anent securing allegiance of the rebels…as a ransom of his life, and his words announcing ten fatal causes which lead to the defeat and death of the rebel [Hong],” are removed from the confession as it appeared in the *North China Herald*.[[23]](#footnote-23) The section is not even mentioned, whereas his ten errors and requests are explicitly stated as having been removed from the transcript. Two questions arise from this juxtaposition. Why mention the propositions at all if they were not going to published? More importantly, what purpose does the deliberate removal of anti-foreign sentiment have? To answer the first question one can look back at the previous paragraph’s analysis of state image. It is only in hindsight that one can view Li’s capture as an official end for the Taiping. Hong Tianguifu, heir apparent to the Taiping’s heavenly throne, was still at large; as was his Hong Rengan, the heir’s uncle, another well-liked figure amongst Western contemporaries and a player in the Taiping’s late-stage revival. By stating that a set of terms exists, without disclosing the content of said terms, Zeng relayed a sense of control over the matter. Zeng did this in his reports to the Imperial court as well, telling Beijing that “a hundred thousand rebel soldiers had been killed in the fighting, inflating the glory of his family and his army, masking their looting and atrocities against civilians.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The inclusion reminded the world that it was not the Ever-Victorious Army who had reclaimed Nanjing, but the Hunan Army. Zeng Guofan, and through him the Qing, had seen to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom’s initial collapse and would be capable of finishing it without extraneous hands.

The purpose behind deliberately removing any warnings about foreign powers is less ascertainable. Doing so could have been for a few reasons, one of which being that Zeng did not wish to provoke the West in any way. Whereas including mentions of Li Xiucheng’s terms of surrender built up the image of the Qing, theoretical guidance on how to deal with foreigners risked bringing it back down, should Westerners believe that Zeng aimed to follow it. On a more pragmatic level, the removal might indicate that Zeng did in fact desire to take note of Li’s words, hoping to obtain the upper hand by hiding this information from sight. This discussion further signifies the fact that Zeng had not intended to paint the Taiping as an evil enemy overall. It is without doubt that Zeng’s edits portray Li and the Taiping as an enemy worth fighting, but the demons he constructed were not entirely black and white.

Li had no way of knowing whether or not the war would end upon his capture. As he put his life to words he hoped to not only achieve some sort of amnesty for his own actions but also to spare the lives of his family and fellow Taiping followers. As will be seen in the next chapter, this difference in expectations produced a much more malleable document, one already pre-disposed in favor of Imperial forces. Zeng’s edits don’t re-arrange the entire document. They primarily focus on fixing grammatical errors, removing unnecessary information, and statements so flattering towards Zeng and his troops that they might inflame the court’s already heightened suspicions.[[25]](#footnote-25) Those few edits not related to document’s overall appearance do however aim to reinforce any malleability Li left open.

A weekly column from the *North China Herald*, titled “Impartial Not Neutral” espoused a view much more in line with Zeng’s edits than Lindley’s evaluations. Appearing in issue number 744, one week after the confession’s first appearance, the column states as follows: “He, the Faithful King, one of the pillars of the faith so called, repudiates or ignores the existence of that great moral inspiration which had been represented by the friends of the insurgents as the moving spring of all the acts performed under the rebel administration.” The column ends on a steadfast note, proclaiming that “we are justified in coming to the conclusion no high and noble aspirations filled the breasts of the men who initiated the rebellion – that, in a word, they were ambitious schemers plotting to overthrow a government for the sake of their own personal aggrandisement, and utterly unfit to organise a system, or in any degree secure the happiness of the people.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Here, Lindley’s shocking disbelief was replaced with a feeling of smug satisfaction, and an undoubting belief that what was written down was the truth. The editorial unabashedly declared that it was “unlikely that any exaggeration or misrepresentation had crept into [Li’s] report.” [[27]](#footnote-27) This moment serves as the most direct affirmation of Zeng’s conviction. Arguably China’s most influential foreign paper, circulating almost eight thousand copies in its prime, had found in Li Xiucheng’s deposition a defining piece of evidence in confirming the righteousness of Great Britain’s political stance over the past fourteen years.

This view of the rebellion would hold sway over mainstream Western viewers for years to come. An article by G. T. Ferris, published by *The Cosmopolitan* in 1889, held to earlier convictions of the Zhong Wang’s bravery, but went no further in praising him. The article painted him in the same light as they did the rest of the movement’s leaders. The Zhong Wang was no longer a man of mercy, but a violent rebel leader who “burned and slaughtered to the very suburbs of Shanghai” who allowed for “rape, robbery, murder, and every form of savage brutality” to dominate the territories he took.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is here that the Zhong Wang’s attempt to find a middle ground, and placate his captors, might have done his cause more harm than good. By declaring himself a believer of circumstance, he alienated many of the European missionaries and commentators who might have maintained their loyalty to the Taiping otherwise. People like Archdeacon Arthur Moule would comment that the Taiping movement might have begun under a Christian ideal, but it was an ideal only, and one that had been lost along the way. In a lecture read before the Shanghai Literary and Debating Society, Moule makes note that the job of the Christian missionary is much harder in 1883 than it was prior to the Civil War. The Christian proclamations of the Taiping only linked the belief system with violence and unrest; bringing about a much warier population and government than had existed before.[[29]](#footnote-29) Moule and his contemporaries no longer saw supporting a group, whose commitment to God was now in question and situational at best, as having been worth the setback. *The Washington Post* makes a similar comment in 1900. The paper referred to Taiping religious belief as Christianity in quotation marks and therefore attributed a lack of sincerity or legitimacy to it. The author continued on to associate this period of violence with contemporary opinions on Christianity’s influx in China, claiming that Chinese spectators see Christianity’s continued infiltration as “a carnival of blood.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

“After I worshipped God I never dared to transgress in the slightest, but was a sincere believer, always fearing harm from serpents and tigers.”[[31]](#footnote-31) This sentence is notably missing from the first section of Li’s deposition published in the *North China Herald*. Edited out by Zeng, this missing sentiment reframes the rest of Li’s confession. In place of any notion of sincere belief, readers of the North China Herald heard of a population coerced into believing in God. “The people of the world are all afraid of death; being told that serpents and tigers would devour them, who would not be afraid. Therefore they obeyed.”[[32]](#footnote-32) These two statements are quite similar in content, but promote much different perspectives on the Taiping’s Christian motives. The first statement is a simple one. Li declares himself to be a true believer in the message of God. The fear of serpents and tigers may not be a conventional one for the average European Christian, but the fear of punishment for one’s sins, such as the act of non-belief, is standard fare. This is a concept that can be easily translated into a European context, and can be justified as not a new interpretation, but an adaption of biblical penances for a Chinese stage. The second statement is much less easily rationalized as a profession of true belief in a Western context. This became even more evident when Li attributes that majority of Taiping conversions to a desire for a secure source of food. The concept of “Rice Christians” was nothing new, having been tossed around since the Jesuits early expeditions into Chinese territories. What separates these two is that most “Rice Christians” were organized into small, localized communities, not large political intuitions who hoped to establish a new Heavenly regime. The Zhong Wang’s declaration of personal faith may not have been much, but it provided some basis for the movement’s Christian leanings. Instead the *North China Herald* finds “[n]o enthusiasm for the spread of truth and Christianity” in the contents of Li’s confession. [[33]](#footnote-33) The removal of any mention of sincere belief only more heavily emphasizes the notion that the Taiping was in reality made of very few “true” Christians. It was an important step in solidifying anti-Taiping attitudes amongst Europeans. It was much easier to justify siding with the Qing against a reportedly Christian movement when those people were Christian in name alone.

It is in this manner that Zeng Guofan managed to transform Li’s confession into a pro-Qing piece of propaganda. Through small cuts and edits, Zeng managed to make Li’s position much more ambiguous. By doing this, Zeng does not necessarily aim to improve the reader’s perception of the Qing as a moral entity; he merely makes that of the Taiping more questionable. Doing anything else would have been both incredibly difficult and out of character for someone in Zeng’s position. Zeng had his own conflicts with the Qing, who in turn had their problems with the West, and so on. From Gordon’s disagreements with Li Hongzhang to Zeng’s inability to control his army’s desire to loot and raze captured Taiping territory, including the occasional slaughter of said territories inhabitants, it was clear that the West had already established that their alliance with China’s elite would be an uneasy one.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Anti-Taiping sentiment had not always been the standard to which Western nations held. According to Holgor Cahill’s 1930 biography of Frederick Townsend Ward, commander of the Ever-Victorious Army, this sentiment would not gain widespread traction until the signing of the Treaty of Beijing. It was at this time that nations like Great Britain and France decided there was more political and economic gain to be had by siding with the Qing. He continues to describe the myriad of claims made against the Taiping from this time forward, from tales of Hong Xiuquan’s hundred wives, to their supposed razing of Suzhou, in which it was claimed that thousands of innocents had been killed. He even mentions the Zhong Wang, seconding the claims mentioned previously by *The Times* and *Newcastle Courant*, emphasizing that his merciful behavior towards his opponents was well-known at the time.[[35]](#footnote-35) What does this lasting impression of Li say about Zeng’s decision to go public with his deposition? This decision was ultimately a successful one. Should one accept that Zeng’s goal was to use Li as a tool, securing the prevailing narrative of the Taiping as a threat to the Western world, and tangentially demonize him, it undoubtedly worked. This vision may have existed amongst Western viewers prior to the confession’s publishing, but its existence secured and hardened these beliefs. It gave the West the authentic voice they needed to declare themselves as participants in a just war, fighting to protect China from the exploits of a false prophet.

If it was well-known that a majority of Europe had sided with the Qing, or at the very least come around against the Taiping, who was Zeng targeting when he decided to go public with this confession? One demographic he might have had in mind is the group of missionaries who still believed in the Taiping’s Christian vision. A group populated by people like Reverend J. V. Worthington. In April of 1864, Worthington published a series of commentaries by fellow Lutheran missionary Wilhelm Lobscheid. For Worthington, these commentaries illustrated “the noble and dignified costume” worn by the Taiping. “They look like the Lords of China.” He went on to shame the British government for their conduct; unable to understand their ignorance of what he viewed as an inherently progressive, Christian agenda. It is important to keep in mind that the Taiping Civil War was, in the minds of many, Christianity’s only real chance at securing a permanent foothold in China. Any particularities in theology or practice could be wrinkled out with a little bit of guidance from the Taiping’s Protestant big brother. Lobscheid is of the opinion that any proselytizer who had turned their back on the Taiping did so out of a lack of credit for what they saw as their own doing.

Isaachar Roberts was one of these people. Roberts, being the only foreigner to have had extensive interactions with Hong Xiuquan, aired a certain aura of authority over the issue of the Taiping’s Christianity in the movement’s early phases. An authority which was admittedly often mocked by his more conventional contemporaries. An 1861 article in *The Daily Alta California* provided readers with some choice words from Roberts. The quote, given halfway through his stay in Nanjing, declared the Zhong Wang to be a good Christian, although the paper noted on the group’s lack of orthodoxy.[[36]](#footnote-36) Roberts would leave Nanjing soon after this, decrying the Taiping leaders as unfit to rule, just as the *North China Herald* would two years later.[[37]](#footnote-37) Lobscheid is frustrated by actions like these, actions he sees taken again and again by missionaries throughout China. To him these denouncements were derived from explicitly selfish and political motives. They were the voices of missionaries who turned around when the job became too difficult, or when they were not immediately heralded as the saviors they believed themselves to be. “[I]f they are missionaries, it is their duty to try and remedy the faults they do nothing but rail at,” instead of actively advocating against their success and development.

It is clear at this point that a resistance, however small, to the demonization of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom had found a voice and was in a position to use it. This opposition may have been made up of a few missionaries, soldiers of fortune, and adventurers here and there, but its members possessed a quality most of mainstream commentators could not replace, they had lived with the Taiping. While plenty of Europeans had made visits to Heavenly Kingdom, or been treated to brief stays, few people had spent large spans of time with them, especially after the turn of the decade. It is questionable whether Zeng had hoped to change the minds of these people, and their opinions, although solid, never seemed to catch on. A more likely assumption is that by publishing Li Xiucheng’s deposition, Zeng hoped to pose these voices as even more partisan and biased than they had already appeared to be. What could be more authentic and accurate than the voice of the Taiping themselves? Zeng moved to establish these voices as mere visitors, who could have had access to thoughts and motives Li could see within himself.

Zeng Guofan had no way of knowing that his decision to edit and publish Li Xiucheng’s confession would maintain its noteworthy status for the next century to come. Many of the original leaders of China’s communist movement saw themselves as successors to the advances the Taiping had made. For much of the party’s origins Taiping actions were used to shape their own images and notions of Chinese nationalism and history. Zeng’s removal of lines like “I did this because of my unquestioning loyalty, in order to save the Sovereign who was in danger” allow for such discussion to happen in the first place.[[38]](#footnote-38) They make Li’s actions seem just as dubious to commentators of the twentieth century as they did to Augustus Lindley. It is because of this that much debate surrounded the status of Li as either a hero or a traitor. As discussed by Steven Uhalley Jr. in 1966, around the time of the Taiping’s centenary, much of the evidence used to prove Li’s status came directly from his confession. Uhalley provides an example of these debates by comparing two varying opinions. One of these opinions was provided by Luo Ergang, a man who had at the time served as Director of the Taiping Historical Museum. Uhalley considered Luo to be “the leading authority on the Taipings in Mainland China today” as did many other Western scholars of the period, evident by frequent citing of his work.[[39]](#footnote-39) The contrasting opinion was provided by a prominent Party endorsed historian by the name of Qi Benyu. Qi was both a powerful politician, close to Mao until the Cultural Revolution, and a dominant figure in Chinese scholarship at the time. He headed the history department of the *Red Flag*, a political journal.

According to Luo Ergang Li Xiucheng maintained his genuine status as “Loyal King” until his execution. “[W]hat many historians have accepted as treachery by Li had actually been an extremely clever strategem [sic]…intended to deceive Li's captor, [Zeng Guofan], with the aim of buying time for the Taipings.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Uhally admits that Luo’s description of a “self-sacrifice plan” is in reality unlikely.[[41]](#footnote-41) Qi Benyu’s argument disregards this possibility entirely. Qi’s main argument maintains that the job of the historian is to analyze actions not speculative motives. With this in mind, Qi states that purposefully or not, Li’s confession sets him up as having betrayed the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. The fact that this argument involves distinguished political and academic actors is proof of the perceived importance of Li’s actions to defining Chinese communist identity. If the Party claimed Li as a hero when in reality he had been a traitor, or vis a versa, Chinese communist thought would lose a vital part of their cultural lineage.

Another proof of the lasting impact of Li Xiucheng’s confession is to be found in the way books published for public consumption refer to him. Take for example *The Taiping Revolution*, first translated by the Foreign Language Press in 1976, a book written by members of the Fudan University and Shanghai Normal University staff. The authors, known collectively as the Compilation Group for the “History of Modern China” Series, portray Li’s later actions as demoralizing, abasing, recalcitrant. They continue to describe elements of his confession as exaggerated, inaccurate, and boastful. Furthermore, when mentioning his escape from Nanjing with Hong’s recently crowned heir no mention is made of his attempt to save the young sovereign by giving away his horse. Instead the book informs the reader of Li’s flight to Fangshan as being dominated by his attempt to secure the kingdom’s “gold, silver, pearls and precious stones” and resulting in “meekly expressed repentance” so that his life might be spared.[[42]](#footnote-42) It is interesting to see the book quote from Augustus Lindley as well. Quoting from his history four times over the course of the book’s one hundred and seventy-four pages the authors find a powerful ally in Lindley’s unswaying belief in the movement’s positive nature. They even start the book off with a painting of his exploits and efforts to assist the Taiping in combat towards the conflict’s end.

*The Taiping Revolution* may not have been written by any prominent political leaders, but the company responsible for its circulation has been closely associated with the Chinese government ever since their founding in 1952. The Foreign Language Press primarily targets the international community, just as Zeng Guofan aimed to do when he published Li Xiucheng’s deposition in the *North China Herald*. What this coverage, and the previous discussion analyzed by Stephen Uhally Jr., fail to do is consider the historicity of the issue. Uhally faults Qi Benyu and his associates for viewing Li’s words through a strictly Marxist lens. There is some legitimacy to this. A significant portion of discussions around Li’s confession tend to begin with judgement already in place. Rather than view Li’s words and their effect in their own historical context many instances of scholarship jump straight to mapping modern conceptions of “hero” or “villain” onto Li based on their own biases. Uhally himself is no better than those he is accusing. By deferring to Jian Youwen’s interpretation and belittling the work of Mainland Chinese scholars he shows himself to be another tool in the political game that is justifying Nationalist or Communist rule.

Notes:

Find block quote to indicate editing style and illustrate how these edits actually work

Uhally mentions that Zeng inserts the use of the word surrender, look into this, could be useful for the section on Zeng’s embellishing after the fall of Nanjing on page 10

1. “The Capture of Nankin.” *The Times* (London), October 1, 1864. p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The Capture of Nankin.” *The Newcastle Courant* (Newcastle), September 30, 1864. p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to Franz Michael, Zeng Guofan’s edited and abridged version, used by the *North China Herald*, only contained 28,000 words, containing 5,000 less words than the version published by Luo Ergang in 1951, and 22,000 less words than Zeng claimed the document contained in a set of instructions sent to his son (p. 1381). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Curwen, Charles A. *Taiping Rebel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Japan and China.” *The Times* (London), November 10, 1864. p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “China.” *The Age* (Melbourne), November 18, 1864. p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Later From China.” *The Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), October 15, 1864. p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Li’s actual execution did not take place until August 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Later From China.” *The Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), November 16, 1864. p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “China.” *The Age* (Melbourne), January 16, 1865. p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lindley, Augustus F. *Ti-Ping Tien-kwoh; the History of the Ti-ping Revolution, Including a Narrative of the Author’s Personal Adventures*.London: Day & Son, 1866. p. 771. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Lindley, *Ti-Ping Tien-kwoh*, p. 771. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Stapleton, Augustus G. “The Rebellion in China: Important Testimony of its Character.” New York Observer and Chronicle (New York), October 11, 1866. p. 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Abend, Hallett E. *The God From The West; a Biography of Frederick Townsend Ward*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1947. p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Wooldridge, Chuck. *City of Virtues: Nanjing in an Age of Utopian Visions*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lindley. *Ti-Ping Tien-kwoh*. pp. vii-viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lindley. *Ti-Ping Tien-kwoh*. p. 820. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Lindley. *Ti-Ping Tien-kwoh*. p. 821. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Porter, Jonathan. *Tseng Kuo-fan’s Private Bureaucracy*. Berkeley: Regents of the University of California. 1972, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Curwen. *Taiping Rebel*. p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Carr, Caleb. *The Devil Soldier: The American Soldier of Fortune Who Became a God in China*. New York: Random House, 1992. p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Curwen. *Taiping Rebel*. p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. “The Autographic Deposition of Chung Wang, The Faithful King, at his Trial After the Capture of Nanking” *North China Herald* (Shanghai), February 11, 1865. p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 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. p. 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “The Autographic Deposition of Chung Wang, The Faithful King, at his Trial After the Capture of Nanking. Appendix.” *North China Herald* (Shanghai), March 25, 1865. p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “Impartial Not Neutral” *North China Herald* (Shanghai), October 29, 1864. p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “The Autographic Deposition of Chung Wang, The Faithful King, at his Trial After the Capture of Nanking. Appendix.” *North China Herald* (Shanghai), March 25, 1865. p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ferris, G.T. “An American Soldier in China.” *The Cosmopolitan* (New York), August 1889. pp. 392-393. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Moule, Arthur E. *Personal Recollections of the T’ai-p’ing Rebellion*. Shanghai: Shanghai Mercury, 1898. pp. 24-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. "The Taiping Rebellion." *The Washington Post* (Washington, D. C.), July 21, 1900. p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Curwen. *Taiping Rebel*. p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Curwen. *Taiping Rebel*. p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. “The Autographic Deposition of Chung Wang, The Faithful King, at his Trial After the Capture of Nanking. Appendix.” *North China Herald* (Shanghai), March 25, 1865. p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Wooldridge, *City of Virtues*, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cahill, Holger. *A Yankee Adventurer: The Story of Ward and the Taiping Rebellion*. New York: The Macaulay Company, 1930. pp. 275-277. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. “The Asiatic News.” *The Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), January 19, 1861. p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Spence, Jonathan D. *God’s Chinese Son: The Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1996. p. 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Curwen. *Taiping Rebel*. p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Uhalley, Stephen. "The Controversy Over Li Hsiu-ch'eng: An Ill-Timed Centenary." The Journal of Asian Studies 25, no. 2 (1966): 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Uhalley, Stephen. "The Controversy Over Li Hsiu-ch'eng: An Ill-Timed Centenary." p. 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. It is important to note that here Uhally mentions Jian Youwen’s similar claim that Luo’s assertion is unlikely. Jian, another prominent scholar, plays a unique role in Taiping historiography due to his position as a member of the Nationalist Party and as a devout Christian. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Compilation Group for the “History of Modern China” Series. The Taiping Revolution. Beijing: Foreign Language Press. 1976. p. 151, 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)