



Princeton Model United Nations Conference 2017

The Taiping Rebellion
Chair: Nicholas Wu
Director: [Name]

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LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to PMUNC 2017! This will be my fourth and final PMUNC. My name is Nicholas Wu, and I'm a senior in the Woodrow Wilson School, pursuing certificates in American Studies and East Asian Studies. It's my honor to chair this year's crisis committee on the Taiping Rebellion. It's a conflict that fascinates me. The Taiping Rebellion was the largest civil war in human history, but it barely receives any attention in your standard world history class. Which is a shame — it's a multilayered conflict. There are ethnic, economic, and religious issues at play, as well as significant foreign involvement. I hope that you all find it as interesting as I do.

On campus, I'm currently figuring out how to write my thesis, and I'm pretty sure that I'm going to be researching the implementation of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). I'm also involved with the International Relations Council, the Daily Princetonian, the Asian American Students Association, and Princeton Advocates for Justice. I also enjoy cooking.

Best of luck at the conference! Please don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions. You can email me anytime at nmwu@princeton.edu.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Wu

The Taiping Rebellion

History of the Topic and Background¹

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, or the Taiping Rebellion, lasted from 1851 to 1864 and is the bloodiest civil war in human history.² By the time the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was established, the once-mighty Qing Dynasty had fallen from its heights of the mid-18th century. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was led by Hong Xiuquan, previously a failed civil servant of little significance. One day in 1837, Hong received the first of many visions, supposedly lasting for forty days and forty nights. In these visions, he claimed to have seen spirits who urged him to rise up against demons.³ Although Christianity was officially banned at the time by the Qing Dynasty, Hong Xiuquan began proselytizing to others, eventually coming to the realization that he was the third part of the Holy Trinity — Jesus' younger brother, claiming that he had been sent to Earth to rid China of the corrupt Qing regime.⁴ His movement grew until he declared the founding of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom on January 11, 1851, with Hong Xiuquan as its emperor.

At its height, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom controlled a significant part of southern China, with about 30 million people within its borders. At least 20 million people died over the course of the war.⁵ Multiple foreign powers, including the British and French were also involved in the war due to their significant holdings in China, siding with the Qing Dynasty against the Taiping when the Taiping threatened to cut off the lucrative China trade.

¹ Modern Pinyin romanizations will be used for consistency.

² Tobie Meyer-Fong. *What Remains : Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China*. (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2014). Accessed August 24, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central, 1.

³ Stephen R. Platt. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the epic story of the Taiping Civil War*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), e-book.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ This is a conservative estimate. At highest, seventy million people are estimated to have died.

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The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom lasted for 14 years, with the rebellion finally ending in 1864, after a significant foreign intervention and reorganization of the Qing military allowed it to retake most of southern China and recapture Nanjing. Hong Xiuquan died of food poisoning as Nanjing ran out of food under Qing siege. The remnants of the Taiping Army were hunted down by the Qing or disintegrated into bandit groups. But this ending is not preordained — the Taiping Rebellion could have ended differently, and it is up to you, the illustrious leaders of the Middle Kingdom, to change the course of history. Delegates, welcome to the Taiping Rebellion.

Background of the Qing Dynasty

Established in 1636, the Qing Dynasty is China's last imperial dynasty, having defeated the remnants of the Ming Dynasty. It is notable among Chinese dynasties for having been founded not by Han Chinese, the country's majority ethnic group, but by ethnic groups from Manchuria. Later on, during the Taiping Rebellion, the conflict takes on an ethnic aspect because of the resentment this arrangement stoked among the populace.⁶ The Qing Dynasty has officially banned Christianity in the empire, but the religion has nevertheless flourished among the people.

The Qing Dynasty reached its height during the 18th century, but then began a long and steady decline, with the first of many foreign humiliations coming in the form of its defeat in the First Opium War. In that war, the British went to war against the Qing after an escalation of tensions involving British traders' illicit exportation of opium to China from India. Unable to resist the superior British military, the Qing Dynasty was forced to sign the Treaty of Nanking, the first of many of what the Chinese people came to call the "unequal treaties." The Treaty of Nanjing was a huge blow to national pride, granting a large indemnity of 21 million silver taels and

⁶ Stephen R. Platt. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the epic story of the Taiping Civil War*.

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extraterritoriality to Britain, opening five treaty ports, and ceding Hong Kong Island to Britain.⁷ The Qing Dynasty was still recovering from that war when the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was formed. In addition to the existential threats from foreign powers and the Taiping, the Qing Dynasty remains internally weak, facing a monetary crisis and internal power struggles that threaten to split apart the empire regardless of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's advances.

Background of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom

A man named Hong Xiuquan had his first visions in 1837, shortly after failing the imperial examinations that would have allowed him to rise through the Qing civil service and secure a future for himself and his family.⁸ He then joined the ranks of the many people unhappy with the state of the Qing Dynasty and the overall direction of the empire. He saw visions of a China that would rise up against the corrupt Qing Dynasty and restore China to its former greatness. Additionally, Hong Xiuquan interpreted these visions to mean that he was the third part of the Holy Trinity, directly inserting himself into Christian theology. In 1844, he turned these sets of visions into sets of teaching and theology, marking the founding of a new religious sect, the "God Worshipping Society."⁹ Local Qing Dynasty officials attempted to suppress this society, but this tactic backfired, and Hong's religious following evolved into a full-blown rebellion. Hong and his followers were able to draw their support and legitimacy from a myriad of sources, chiefly among them the weakness of the Qing Dynasty.

Initially, they conducted guerilla warfare against the Qing Dynasty, but once the rebels captured Nanjing, they transformed their rebellion into a full-fledged state, an alternative to the Qing Dynasty. The Taiping were able to fill the power vacuum left by the Qing Dynasty's decay,

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars>

⁸ Stephen R. Platt. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the epic story of the Taiping Civil War.*

⁹ Tobie Meyer-Fong. *What Remains : Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China.*

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establishing a base of power and proclaiming themselves as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. For the 14 years that the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was in existence, it developed its own bureaucracy and controlled some of the wealthiest and most prosperous parts of China. On the contrary to the description of it as a mere “rebellion,” it developed as an alternative to the sclerotic Qing Dynasty, something that made it attractive to foreign powers as a future trading partner or an outright alternative.

The Taipings’ propaganda aimed to demonize the decaying Qing Dynasty, allowing the Taiping to build a broader-based appeal beyond their theocratic base. For a while, it seemed like they might even become modernizers, with plans of radical social reforms like land reform, redistribution, and gender equality in its occupied territories.¹⁰ This endeared them to the peasantry and others who felt disaffected by the Qing Dynasty’s lopsided inequality and ineffective governance. Yet, many of these reforms were never implemented due to the constant state of war.¹¹ Evincing the ethnic component of the civil war, the Taiping would often kill all of the civilian inhabitants of Manchu garrisons, capitalizing on the Han majority’s resentment towards their Manchu overlords.¹² Some historians refer to the Taiping as genocidal in their campaigns against the Qing.¹³ For their part, the Qing also demonized the Taiping as enemies of Confucianism and led extermination campaigns against the Taiping armies and civilian encampments.¹⁴

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Taiping-Rebellion>

¹¹ Stephen R. Platt. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the epic story of the Taiping Civil War.*

¹² Tobie Meyer-Fong. *What Remains : Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China.*

¹³ Stephen R. Platt. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the epic story of the Taiping Civil War.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

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The Current Situation

We start in 1853, just after the Taiping have captured Nanjing, one of the wealthiest and most prosperous cities in southern China. They have declared it to be their capital and have renamed it “Tianjing” (heavenly capital). At this point, foreign forces have not yet entered the war, but they are intrigued by the creation of a Christian kingdom in what they see as the heathen country of China. The Taiping still enjoy considerable support from the populace, having prosecuted a successful war against a decaying, corrupt, and ineffective Qing regime. Furthermore, the Taiping have been able to capitalize on Chinese ethnic tensions to propagate their war. The Qing come from the minority Manchu ethnic group, something resented by the country’s Han ethnic majority. Furthermore, the Qing suffer from internal divisions that weaken their ability to resist the Taiping advances.

Economic Issues

Still reeling from its defeat in the First Opium War, the Qing Dynasty is chronically short on cash, contributing to low morale among its soldiers. Additionally, the Qing Dynasty suffers from a monetary crisis exacerbated by the 21 million silver tael indemnity. China used a bimetallic monetary system in which large transactions were paid in silver, while everyday transactions were paid in copper.¹⁵ Yet, because of the indemnity being paid to the British, the Qing Dynasty was short on silver, which caused an increase in prices and in taxes. This monetary crisis exacerbated existing social inequalities and helped to drive people to banditry in order to survive. As the war goes on, famine also strikes in parts of the country when fields are destroyed by marauding armies and bandits. In contrast, the Taiping are flush with cash and coin, having just plundered the coffers of

¹⁵ Tobie Meyer-Fong. *What Remains : Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China*, 8

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Nanjing. The money shortage and looming inflation crisis provide a major crisis for the Qing Dynasty. Further straining the empire's rapidly diminishing resources, certain parts of the empire have overpopulated as food production failed to keep pace with population growth. This overpopulation will compound the empire's existing issues as time goes on.¹⁶

Foreign Relations

At this time, little is known about the Taiping and their ideology outside of China. The Taiping advance is within two hundred miles of Shanghai, but so far they have not advanced on the major treaty port. The few Europeans that have managed to make contact with the Taiping have sent back conflicting reports, though the British plenipotentiary, for his part, has called the Taiping ideology "superstition and nonsense."¹⁷ On the European continent, Karl Marx, among other intellectuals, has taken an interest in the Taiping Rebellion, seeing it as the inevitable part of the end times of capitalism, and his writings pique the interest of European intelligentsia.¹⁸ Something even more appealing to the European powers is the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's embrace of Christianity. Although they know little about the actual disposition of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's ideology, they are intrigued by the Kingdom's embrace of Christianity, a welcome change from what they see as the heathenism and debauchery of the Qing Dynasty.

A decade after the First Opium War, the opium trade and the imbalance of payments between Britain and France and China remains a sore point in international relations. The European powers seek to create treaty ports beyond those established by the Treaty of Nanjing, and are anxious to renegotiate the Treaty's terms more favorably for European traders. Britain and France

¹⁶ Harry F. Lee and David D. Zhang. "A Tale of two population crises in recent Chinese history." *Climactic Change* 116, Issue 2. January 2013.

¹⁷ Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son* (New York: Norton, 1996), p. 198.

¹⁸ Stephen R. Platt. *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the epic story of the Taiping Civil War*.

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seek the opening of all of China to foreign merchants and the legalization of the opium trade, among other concessions.¹⁹ Although these disagreements have not flared into open hostilities, as recently as 1847 the British led a punitive expedition to Guangzhou in response to perceived transgressions against British citizens. Tensions remain on edge

Lastly, something to keep in mind for the later stages of this crisis is the forthcoming American Civil War. The United States is still neutral in the crisis, but it maintains significant commercial interests in China. Further complicating the situation are the American citizens operating in China as soldiers of fortune for the Qing. When this crisis starts, the American South has not yet seceded, but it is clear that war is brewing between the South and the North. This brewing conflict and potential loss of a large trade partner is clearly on the agendas of the European powers. There are rumors that the British Empire will intervene in either the American or the Taiping civil wars, but not both.

Regional Blocs and Internal Leadership Conflict

The current emperor, the Xianfeng Emperor, is perceived to be a good emperor, but he is young and inexperienced. He lives an overindulgent life, and it is rumored that he is not in good health. Consequently, there is much maneuvering behind the scenes in the event the emperor is no longer able to serve. The fecklessness of the emperor has also opened up further rifts between modernizers and traditionalists within his circles of advisors. The Dowager Empress Cixi and other Qing advisors have jockeyed for power, seeking to increase their prestige and enrich themselves as the empire crumbles around them. Additionally, many of the generals have seen their prestige and power increase as the central government has atrophied, helping to cement their positions as

¹⁹ Shandra Goldfinger. "The Second Opium War." Mt. Holyoke College.
<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~goldf20s/politics116/secondwar.html>.

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potential successors to the Qing. The resolution of these internal leadership battles will help to determine the overall course of the war, as well as influencing the foreign powers' perceptions of the Qing government. The European powers are more likely to side with a government that will be stable and preserve the Chinese trade routes.

Complicating the Qing Dynasty's internal problems, other rebellions have flared up throughout the empire. As the central government's power has waned, local factions long under the control of the Qing have decided to take their chances at independence, adding further strains to the already overtaxed Qing. Bandit rebellions in northern China have come together in a group loosely described as the "Nian," ravaging the countryside with their fierce horseback armies. In the west, long-restless Muslim populations are stirring, with rumors of open revolt against a central government that they have long seen as hostile to their interests as a religious minority. The Qing Dynasty will have to work hard to regain the trust of its war-weary citizens who are just as wary of the seemingly ineffective central government as they are of the Taiping.

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Keywords:

Confucianism: System of traditional Chinese beliefs with a heavy emphasis on intra-family bonds and filial piety.

Extraterritoriality: Legal procedure implemented in the Treaty of Nanjing that granted immunity from Chinese legal jurisdiction to Europeans in China. Instead, they would be tried in the courts of their respective home countries.

Hakka: Literally means “guest family” in Chinese. Subset of the Han Chinese majority that speaks the Hakka dialect. Hong Xiuquan belonged to this group, which faced great persecution and discrimination at the hands of the Han Chinese majority.

Han: Majority Chinese ethnic group, named after the Han Dynasty.

Indemnity: Large sum of money paid by the Chinese to the British as compensation for losses in the First Opium War.

Manchu: Chinese minority group from the Jurchen people that established the Qing Dynasty.

Opium War: Fought from 1839-1842 between the Chinese and British over the opium trade. Resulted in a massive defeat for the Qing Dynasty, the ceding of Hong Kong to the British, the opening of treaty ports, and the levying of an indemnity to be paid to the British.

Plenipotentiary: Diplomat invested with the full power of independent action on behalf of their government in a foreign country.

Treaty Port: A port bound by treaty to be open to foreign trade under what the Chinese called the “unequal treaties.” Shanghai, a major treaty port, had foreign concessions granted to the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as the French. Foreigners in these ports had the right of extraterritoriality.

Tael: Unit of silver currency in Qing Dynasty China. Roughly equivalent to 40 grams of silver.

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Questions to Consider:

1. How will the Qing resolve their conflict with the Taiping without yielding too much to the European powers?
2. How will the Qing prevent internal leadership conflicts from spilling over into the public sphere?
3. How much of a role do the Qing wish for foreign mercenaries to play in the conflict?
4. How will the Qing rebuild legitimacy among the Chinese people?
5. What will become of the opium trade?
6. Provincial governors have been more adept at fighting the Taiping than the central government. Should the central government devolve more power at the risk of further fracturing the Qing Dynasty?

Positions

You will be assigned a character for the duration of the conflict. The Xianfeng Emperor himself will not be present in the room. And instead, the chair will coordinate the committee on behalf of him. Below are brief introductions to the characters. This is in no way exhaustive. And in fact, you will be responsible for carrying out your own independent research into your characters. Remember, please ignore details of these individuals' lives after August 1853.

Empress Dowager Cixi: Empress dowager and regent of the Qing Dynasty. At the time of this crisis, she is still jockeying for power behind the scenes, especially within the imperial bureaucracy.

Prince Gong: Xianfeng's half brother. He wields power behind the scenes as a potential successor to the emperor. Currently serves on the Grand Council, which sets military policy. Although his title is lofty, it is rumored that he has tensions with the Xianfeng Emperor.

Zeng Guofan: Governor of Hunan and leader of the Xiang Army, one of the two major Hunan armies in the war. His troops are fiercely loyal to him, and he is able to raise more veteran armies from Hunan.

Sengge Rinchen: Mongol nobleman and Qing general able to field armies of battle-hardened Mongol horsemen that can rapidly deploy.

Li Hongzhang: Qing general and diplomat and a major proponent of modernizing the nation. Thought to have some pro-Western sympathies. He is Zeng Guofan's student and serves as a general in Hunan Province.

Zuo Zongtang: Qing statesman and leader. Commander of the Chu Army, one of the two veteran Hunan armies. Many years later, the dish Americans call "General Tso's Chicken" was named after him.

Zhang Guoliang: Former bandit and Qing field marshal. Raised the Green Standard Army in Jiangsu Province to fight the Taiping.

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Auguste Protet: French admiral and commander in chief of French forces in China, mostly based in Shanghai. He is able to call upon French reinforcements. Currently assessing the ability of the Taiping to supersede the Qing.

Charles George Gordon: A commander of the “Ever-Victorious Army,” a force of Chinese soldiers led by European officers known for their fighting prowess. But at this time, they are just a motley group of foreign mercenaries and Chinese irregulars operating out of Shanghai.

James Bruce, Eighth Earl of Elgin: British plenipotentiary. Thinks that the Taiping ideology is “superstition and nonsense” and is equally skeptical of the Qing, but is ready to call for a British intervention in the war on either side if circumstances change.

Frederick Townsend Ward: Formidable American sailor and mercenary who becomes a commander of the Ever-Victorious Army. Does not currently lead any forces in East Asia, but this could change if he manages to recruit mercenaries to his cause.

Josaiah Tattnell: American naval commander, commodore of the East India Squadron. At the time, the United States is officially neutral, though American forces took part at times in separate conflicts

Rear Admiral James Hope: British Commander-in-Chief of the East Indies and China Station

Robert Garrett: Commander of British troops in China and Hong Kong

Yang Fang: Shanghainese banker, patron of the Ever-Victorious Army

Thomas Bowlby: Reporter for the Times of London, interested in the slow decline of the Qing and the rise of a new Christian kingdom

Isaachar Jacox Roberts: Missionary from Tennessee who is curious about the ability of the Taiping to proselytize China

Anson Burlingame: U.S. minister to China, currently represents American position of neutrality in the war

