


Differences in perspectives on the Christian revolution of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in China

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In terms of civilian casualties directly and indirectly caused by the war, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement was the largest war in world history in the second half of the nineteenth century and had a strong East Asian Christian background. This article adopts the 'historical contextualism' approach of the Cambridge School in the history of political thought, and through a comparison of the relevant views of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Kang Youwei, it reveals that this intentional omission comes from a specific combination of modernisation routes and modernisation political construction choices. In contemporary China, the study of Christian theory and the practice of church organisation still need to answer the question of the general public as to whether Christianity can bring about a better life, both materially and spiritually.

Contribution: This article pointed out that three contemporaries, Marx, Weber and Kang, all evaluated the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement as a revolution of Christianity in China from the standpoint of 'China's need for modernisation', but differed in their evaluation of the position and role of the religious reform factor in the process of modernisation in China. However, they differed in their assessment of the position and role of the Reformation factor in the process of modernisation in China. The article reveals that for Protestant Christianity in contemporary China, it is still necessary to carefully handle its relationship with the government and to satisfy the people's real needs for a modernised material and spiritual life. Meanwhile, it sheds light on the issue of 'heterocultural adaptability' brought about by the expansion and spread of Protestant Christianity in East Asia, as well as on the question of whether Protestantism and Confucianism in the process of modern conversion can achieve peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Christian revolution; Taiping Heavenly Kingdom; Karl Marx; Max Weber; Kang Youwei.

Introduction

The division of beliefs brought about by the Reformation drove the social changes associated with 'modernity' in Europe; could the similar changes take place in China? This has also attracted the attention and discussion of Chinese scholars.¹ From a historical perspective, the situation of the spread of Christianity in China after the 18th century also saw new changes. On the one hand, the Jesuit forces under the Catholic tradition had achieved great success in China, but they suffered some setbacks after the Rites Controversy incident. The 'original strategy' refers to the 'Matteo Ricci strategy' of the Jesuits, in which the spread of Catholicism depended mainly on the permission of the Chinese emperor and the support of the middle and upper class Confucian scholars, and focused on finding common ground between Confucian moral and ethical doctrines and Catholic teachings. Conversely, Protestant Christian missionaries such as Robert Morrison (1782–1834) and William Milne (1785–1822) had already achieved the conversion of some Chinese laypeople to Protestant Christianity prior to the Opium War. Liang Fa was the inaugural Protestant minister to be ordained in China, and his theological writings exerted a profound influence on Hong Xiuquan's religious thought. Is it possible that this new Christian faith, imported into China from Europe, could form a torrent that would propel a social revolution in a short period of time, as it did in 16th- and 17th-century Europe?

1. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement influenced by Christian doctrine has attracted a great deal of attention in Chinese historiography, and one of the earliest researchers to study its relationship with Christianity from the perspective of the Christian 'religious revolution' was Mr Jian Youwen, whose English-language book *The Taiping Revolutionary Movement* was published in 1973 by Yale University Press in the United States. A more comprehensive collation and review of relevant historiographical studies is provided by Xia (2016:430–471). For a more recent discussion by contemporary Chinese scholars of religion around this theme, see Zhou (2016:424–433).

Note: Hangzhou City University Section: Cross-cultural Religious Studies, sub-edited by Chen Yuehua and Ishraq Ali (Hangzhou City University, China).

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851–1864), once described as ‘the culmination of China’s peasant wars’, established a regime independent of the Qing government. Its military campaigns affected more than a dozen provinces in China and caused some 20 million casualties, far more than the Thirty Years’ War in Europe, which was fuelled by religious differences. Whether the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom’s belief in the ‘Church of God’ [上帝教] belonged to the new Christian sect that emerged in the late 19th century is still a matter of academic debate. If one asks whether there was ever an opportunity in China for a mass revolution led by Christians from the lower classes, based on religious organisations, to succeed in establishing power? In terms of the realities of 19th-century Chinese history, the short-lived success of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom seems to confirm the existence of this possibility. As some scholars in China and abroad were still slow to recognise the movement as a Christian revolution, contemporary religious scholar Zhou (2016) has made a reasonable assumption about this possibility.² It has attracted the attention and discussion of scholars such as Tang Wenming, Sun Yi, You Bin and Zhang Xu, who are also concerned with the history and theory of the spread of Christianity in modern China. In scholarship outside of scholars specialising in religious studies, however, it is two modern European thinkers who are not philosophers of religion who have commented on the relationship between the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and Christianity and have had a great deal of influence: Karl Marx and Max Weber. Should Confucianism in China follow the history of Christianity’s development and the course of its modern reforms and carry out some kind of ‘religious reform’ adapted to the modern world? The earliest systematic discussion of this question was made by Kang Youwei (1858–1927), a Chinese thinker who lived contemporaneously with the two European thinkers mentioned here.

Similarities between Marx’s and Weber’s commentaries on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement

When reviewing the history of the development of the modern industrial system in China, some current researchers have a well-known consensus that ‘China has, in just a few decades, gone through the process of industrialisation that took hundreds of years to complete in the developed countries of the West’ (Braghis & Feng 2021). Did Protestant Christianity follow a similarly ‘compressed in length but similar in direction’ path during its century-long journey of adaptation to China? The central question in this topic is whether the spread of Christianity contributed to the formation of modernity in China. Both Marx and Weber spoke favourably

2. In the ‘Foreword’ and ‘Afterword’ of the book, Zhou recapitulates his ‘historical hypothesis’, first published in 2011, that the leaders of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement adopted the correct political strategy to overthrow the Qing dynasty and topple the Qing dynasty, and Hong Rengan, a more purely Christian man, eventually led China to become a Weberian, Puritan-dominated Christian nation. This view has been challenged by some Chinese scholars and responded to by Zhou Weichi. See pp. 2–3 and pp. 400–403 of *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and the Revelation*.

of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement, initiated by native Chinese Christian factions, in terms of moving traditional imperial China towards a ‘modern China’.

Between 1850 and 1862, Marx wrote nine articles directly or indirectly related to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement in China (Li 2013). Due to different ideological backgrounds and specific contexts, Marx’s evaluation of the movement is characterised by both affirmation and denial, as well as enthusiastic praise in the early stage and outspoken criticism in the later stage. In the second part of Max Weber’s famous book ‘Confucianism and Taoism’, which was published before his death in 1920.³ In addition, a special chapter was devoted to the Taiping Rebellion, which gave hope and recognition to the Taiping Rebellion’s religious innovations, and attributed the failure of the Taiping Rebellion’s religious revolution more to the utilitarian foreign policy of the British government at the time.

How is it that these two German thinkers, who are generally regarded as having rather different positions on the theory of religion, agree on the main aspects of the revolution that took place in China with a strong religious background? According to the traditional way of thinking, why did Marx, who tended to be ‘pro-revolutionary’, have a more negative opinion of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in his 1862 China Chronicle than the later ‘conservative’ Weber (Li 2013)? I am trying to make analyses from the following three perspectives in the limited space available to it.

Firstly, both Marx and Weber recognised the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom religious revolution and believed that it would greatly influence Chinese society. In his early writings, Marx positively affirmed the historical significance of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement, viewing it as a ‘peasant revolt’ against feudal exploitation and oppression, or a revolutionary movement of national independence to overthrow a foreign ruling dynasty, and valuing its achievement of promoting the effect of the social revolution (Marx 2007:3–11). Although Marx had a reputation for commenting on the relationship between the Reformation and modern German politics (Marx 2009:3–4), he did not deal with the details of the Taiping Reign’s religious innovations alike, nor did he mention the Taiping Reign’s destruction of traditional Chinese religious idolatry. In Weber’s view, the

3. Max Weber’s work on Chinese religions was first partly published in 1916. According to the ‘Chronology of Weber’s Writings in German’ by Dirk Kessler, a German expert on Weber’s studies, the ‘Introduction’ and the Confucianism section of Weber’s research on Chinese religions had been published in 1916 in the Library of Social Science and Social Policy, vol. 41, no. 1 (pp. 1–87) and no. 2 (pp. 335–421), see p. 311 of the Chinese edition of *The Life, Writings and Influence of Max Weber* (Campus Verlag, German edition 1998, Law Press, Chinese edition 2000). However, the two parts published as essays did not include the seventh chapter, ‘Orthodoxy and Heresy’, which discusses the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, and which was only published in the spring of 1920 after Weber had revised, expanded and reviewed the proofs (p. 322 in the Chinese edition). Another expert on the editions of Weber’s works, Shi Hanwei (Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer) also accepts the view that the manuscript containing the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom section was first printed and published in 1920, but he believes that the two sections on Confucianism, which were published first, were published in two parts, in October and December 1915, not in 1916, as claimed by Kessler. ‘The Version Examination’ by Shi Hanwei for the German edition of ‘Weber’s Complete Works’, Part I, Volume 19, ‘Confucianism and Taoism’, this article was also compiled in Wang Rongfen’s translation of *Confucianism and Taoism*, Central Compilation and Translation Publishing House, 2018 edition, pp. 26–27.

Taiping Heavenly Kingdom attempted to replace the previously confusing worship of multiple gods with the belief in the one true God, 'God', 'Heavenly Father' and 'Master Ye Huo Hua' (Jehovah), and explicitly prohibited witchcraft. The Taiping government also fiercely broke down a large number of idols that existed in Chinese folklore at that time, which is exactly what Weber hoped to see, namely, 'dispelling the charm of religion' and moving towards rationalisation.

Secondly, both thinkers have seen and cited historical documents related to the rise and fall of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Though the level of detail and analytical frameworks differ markedly, so does the discerning selection of sources. For example, both men used the 1853 Compendium of Information on the Chinese Nanking Uprisers, compiled by the British missionary Walter Henry Medhurst (1796–1857) and others, and were critical of the policy of armed intervention in China against Henry John Temple Palmerston (1784–1865), who was the British Prime Minister at the time (Marx 1993a:33; Weber 2018:291).

Thirdly, both thinkers saw the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom religious revolution as a force that could help drive some kind of change for progress. Although Marx, in his 1862 essay, drew on a letter written by the British consul in Ningbo, Frederick Harvey, to his colleague in Peking, to express his disappointment and pessimism about the future of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement (Marx 1993b:112). However, based on a different set of 'evolutionary lines', Marx emphasised more on the small peasant economic basis of the peasant revolts that preceded the Taiping Rebellion and argued that their proper future should be the establishment of a bourgeois republic in power. For example, in the long article 'International Review (I)', Marx mentioned that 'the country is said to be close to extinction, and is even threatened with a large-scale revolution'; he also noted, on the basis of reports brought back from China at the time by the German missionary Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff (1803–1851):

But what is worse, among the rebellious commoners there were those who pointed out the phenomenon of the poverty of one part of the population and the riches of another, and demanded a redistribution of property, and were and still are calling for the complete elimination of private ownership. (Marx & Engels 1959:264)

Weber, on the other hand, first recognised the great progress made by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in advancing the rationalisation of ascetic religion:

Never before had asceticism had such a powerful influence in China, and it is especially noteworthy that the shackles of sorcery and idolatry were broken, a move that would have been impossible in China except for the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. (Weber 2018:289)

He went on to point out that the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom 'also embraced a universal, benevolent, personified world

god that broke down national boundaries', and that without this powerful movement, 'this god would have had no connection with Chinese religious beliefs'. He then laments that the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom may have been the last opportunity for the desire to 'let a religion close in spirit to Christianity arise on Chinese soil' (Weber 2018:291–292). Why? While he enthusiastically celebrated the economic ethics of Protestant denominations in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which contributed to the prosperity of capitalism in the areas dominated by the Protestant faith in Europe and the United States of America (USA), the appeal of the Protestant ethic was in many ways superseded in Old World Europe by the burgeoning socialist movement. What Weber feared was, in a way, exactly what Marx was hoping for – a revolution that would truly upend the economic foundations of the old order.

The difference between Marx's and Weber's judgement on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement and its causes

Because Marx lived two full generations before Weber, there are some obvious differences between their assessments of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement. Although in Weber's time he saw this 'great uprising' frequently described in almost all writings on China, experts on Chinese religion did not bother to delve into the religious aspects of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, such as the famous Dutch sinologist Jan Jakob Maria de Groot (1854–1921), who was one of the most influential Chinese writers on the study of religions in China.⁴ In fact, on the question of whether or not the 'Church of God' [上帝教] practised by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom belonged to the Christian system, Zhou believes that there were different opinions among the European missionaries and foreign magistrates in China at that time nearly 160 years ago, and even today Chinese scholars still have a heated debate on this issue (Zhou 2016:46–53).

Beyond this major issue, then, it is quite natural that there are differences in the comments made by Marx and Weber more than half a century apart. For example, Marx saw it primarily as a social class revolution of the peasants against the oppression of their rulers, while Weber saw this religiously heretical revolution as promising new institutional elements for China. Marx believed that the main task of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was the change of dynasty and the replacement of the national ruling group and that its religious overtones were common to all Eastern peasant movements (Marx 1993b:112). Weber considered the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's system to be 'a curious mixture of Christian and Confucian forms', but still, by comparing it to ancient Islamic intercourse and the secular rule advocated by the Baptists of Münster, Germany, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, England, William Laud (1573–1645), Weber thought that the

4. Max Weber, translated by Wang Rongfen, *Confucianism and Taoism*, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2018 edition, p. 287. In the second footnote written by Weber himself, he pointed out that.

Taiping Heavenly Kingdom mixed the 'Beutekommunismus typischer Form militaerischer' (typical military plundering of the world's cosmopolitanism) with the ancient Christian style of benevolence without cosmopolitanism (Weber 2018:289), making the institutional features of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom easily understood by European scholars. Obviously, this kind of careful analysis would have been difficult to do in Marx's time, and below I will try to list three reasons for the differences.

Firstly, at the time when Marx was writing his series of essays on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement, the Qing government and the European powers had not yet officially sent diplomatic envoys to each other (the first official diplomatic representative of the Qing government to Europe, the ambassador to Britain, Guo Songtao, only took up his post in London in 1877). Although some missionaries from Britain, Germany, France and the USA managed to enter the area controlled by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and actively wrote reports of their observations,⁵ the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's own interactions with European countries were still at a passive and limited level. The scope of first-hand literature on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom that Marx had access to was extremely limited, and it was not the centre of Marx's own research and attention. When Weber wrote his treatise on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement, China had already entered the era of the Republic of China, and almost all of the Chinese politicians were willing to actively engage in diplomatic contacts and communication with European capitalist powers in the hope of obtaining support from the latter, which made Weber's access to Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement-related literature more extensive.

Secondly, from the point of view of the resources of the academic research and exchange environment that both sides could borrow and rely on, there was an academic generational difference in the resources available to both sides for the study of Chinese religions and social movements. In the era when Marx wrote his essay on China, Germany was not yet united, and the study of Sinology in Prussia and some of the states themselves was still in a relatively weak initial stage. When Marx wrote the *International Review of China* at the end of January 1850 on the revolt of the Chinese peasants, he made use of the main sources of the records of personal investigation and public speeches of the Cologne-born missionary Karl Guetzlaff, who had just returned from China at that time. In his discussion of the Taiping Rebellion in 'Revolution in China and in Europe' published in the *New York Daily Tribune* in June 1853, Marx reportedly added Karl Guetzlaff's biography of the Emperor Daoguang to his references. Interestingly, in the influential book *Life of Taou-Kwang, Late Emperor of China*, the author, missionary Karl Guetzlaff, has a general conclusion that as far as the whole nation is concerned, the land of China does not seem to be a fertile ground for the cultivation of the

5. An important text on the subject is *Western Reports on the Taiping*, compiled by Prescott Clarke in co-operation with J.S. Gregory, Canberra, The Australian National University Press, 1982.

Christian faith (Guetzlaff 1852:70–71). Weber, in his discussion of the Taiping Rebellion at the end of chapter 7 of *Confucianism and Taoism, 'Orthodoxy and Heresy'*, begins by citing the success of the series of actions led by Hong Xiuquan against sorcery and the destruction of idols, and goes on to deduce that:

As far as we know, this was the strongest, clerical, political and ethical revolt against Confucian administration and ethics in all of Chinese history. This fact proves precisely that there was nothing to prevent the Chinese from producing the 'innate qualities' of the Reformation that characterised the West. (Weber 2018: 287)

Although Weber did not specify who he was criticising, it is clear from the wide influence of Karl Guetzlaff's work in European Sinology at the time that Weber was aware of the conclusions of missionary Sinology represented by Karl Guetzlaff that China's 'ethnicity' was not suited to Christianity's propagation and development and that he believed, based on his own premise of universal rationalised religious assumptions and theoretical deduction, that this 'ethnicity' was not suitable for Christianity to spread and develop; he considered this 'lack of innate qualities' to be unreliable.

Thirdly, in terms of analytical focus, Marx paid more attention to linking the revolutionary nature of the violent revolt of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement with factors such as the economic base of the small peasantry and the imperialist invasion of China, while Weber, through his analyses of the specific institutions (he cited a large number of official documents of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom that had already been translated into English and other European languages by the missionaries) and the characteristics of the religious activities, explored the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's rebelliousness against China's own religious traditions and the breakthrough (Weber 2018:289). Weber pointed out that a similar sectarian division had occurred in Europe, some European missionaries supported the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and conducted religious services for it (e.g. the 'Nonconformists' of British Protestantism and Protestant missionaries of the Low Church denomination), while others were as hostile to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom as the British government was at the time, advocating forceful suppression of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, mainly British 'High Church' missionaries and French Catholics (Weber 2018:289). The characteristics of the sociology of religion are more fully reflected in Weber's analyses, and his analysis of the process of the 'rationalisation' of religion in China, as well as the heretical sects and the repeated twists and turns that may have appeared in it, is much more nuanced.

Did 19th-century China need a Christianised Confucianism?

Although there are similarities and differences between the interpretations of the two European masters, they can be seen

as 'external observations' of the Christian revolution of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, so how did Chinese scholars with a global vision at that time view the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom revolution? Would this movement have triggered the long-simmering general crisis in Chinese society and the political revolutions on the European continent, as Marx said? Marx believed that the main impetus for the series of changes in China in the late 19th century was the forceful intervention of Britain. Whether the main impetus for the Taiping Revolution came from religious antagonism, dynastic rebellion or national resistance, the change in the socio-economic base of Chinese society caused by Britain's artillery and warships and the dumping of commodities was the most important factor influencing the course of the revolution.

Similarly, some scholars have argued that it was the massive industrialisation movement led by the Communist Party of China (CPC), which lasted for more than half a century and brought about changes in everyday technology and life forms, that changed the beliefs and ethical foundations of Chinese society (Yan 2017:120–123). Industrialisation is, of course, an important part of modernity, and closely linked to the many social problems it brings with it are precisely the socialist revolutionary ideas represented by Marx and the capitalist interpretative approach represented by Weber. In the scholarship on the relationship between Confucianism and religious governance in China, a comparative study of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement from a sociology of religion perspective helps us to think about another possibility for Chinese society to move towards a 'modern society' before rapid industrialisation.

Kang Youwei (1858–1927) was a thinker of the second half of the 19th century, along with the two European scholars mentioned earlier. Unlike Marx and Weber, Kang seldom affirmed the revolutionary significance of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in pushing China's society towards modernisation, nor does Kang believe that the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's belief in the religion of God is formally linked to European Christianity. There were only a few references to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement in Kang's writings, which he denounced as the 'Long Hair Rebellions', as well as the 'Eight Diagrams Religion Rebellions' (Tenrikyo bandits) who had attacked the Forbidden City during the Emperor Jiaqing period. Kang Youwei thought Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement was one of the 'Three Rebellions' since the establishment of the Qing Dynasty (Kang 2017:40). Even when it comes to the details of the struggle, he called the Taiping army 'renegade' from the position of the traditional scholars who were 'loyal to the king and protect the country'. What is impressive, however, is that Kang Youwei had already had the idea of reforming Confucianism before he participated in the Reform and led the Hundred Days' Reform ideological movement, and some of his ideas can be found in his book *A Historical Examination of Confucius' Reform System*, published in 1897. After travelling to more than 20 countries in Europe and America from 1899 to 1909, he even more strongly advocated the need for China to establish a modern

belief system similar to that of Christianity in Europe and the USA and actively promoted 'Confucianism' with its new religious connotations to become the state religion of China. Weber himself also noted Kang's reform proposals and made commentaries on Confucianism and Taoism (Weber 2018:281).

Kang Youwei also argued from some specific perspectives that China really needed a reformed religion for all, which was very close to European Christianity in form, but whose kernel should be the Confucian teachings of Confucius, not the transplanted and transformed European Protestant Christianity of Hong Xiuquan and others. The Confucian movement initiated by Kang Youwei was not very successful at that time. Although Kang Youwei's initiation of the Confucian Church movement was not very successful at the time, the cultural impact it created has stretched into contemporary China.

It seems to be well established that Confucianism still has value in current China, but should it play a similar role to Protestant Christianity in Chinese society? Some contemporary Chinese scholars seem to be enthusiastic about the establishment of a 'Christianised Confucianism', but they have real memories of the failure of Kang Youwei's establishment of 'Confucianism' more than a hundred years ago, and many scholars lament the devastating social revolution waged by the followers of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and the 'Church of God'. Zhou Weichi believes that if contemporary Chinese society is to peacefully accommodate tens of millions of Christ-followers, the first issue should be to follow the example of the Puritan-style 'separation of church and state' in Europe and the USA and to build a 'firewall' between the impulse of faith and secular political participation (Zhou 2016:450). From the point of view of these contemporary scholars, it is clear that the 19th-century Chinese political system was not yet ready to embrace an institutionalised Christianity or a Christianised Confucianism that had achieved a 'separation of church and state'.

Summary and further inference

As China's interactions with the world have become more frequent in the 21st century, Chinese scholars and Christian believers have gradually gained a deeper understanding of the latest developments and changes in the Christian world outside of China over the past 200 years. In his monograph, Zhou Weichi points out that, from the perspective of the overall picture of changes in world Christianity in the mid-19th century, there are many similarities between the heretical elements of the 'Church of God' [上帝教] espoused by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and the Mormonism of the USA and the part of the 'Southern Christianity' sects in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. In the future, it is possible that the 'Church of God', as a modern Chinese sect that believes in God and Jesus, will be accepted and recognised by 'Christianity', which has expanded its definitional boundaries.

Nevertheless, we cannot take for granted that the acceptance of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's religion as an emerging branch of Christianity would mean that their regime would be supported by European and American capitalist countries. As mentioned earlier, because the major capitalist developed countries had already realised the 'separation of church and state' at that time, the sympathy and solidarity of the religious people with the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom could not be directly translated into the economic and military support of the secular Western governments. Correspondingly, the Europeans who supported the Taiping army in fighting with practical actions were not necessarily based on the fervour of believing in the same religion as the Taiping army. Take the examples of Walter Henry Medhurst (1796–1857), the missionary from London, England, and Joseph Edkins (1823–1905), a younger missionary also from London. The former considered the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's religious propaganda works, such as the Book of Heavenly Rules [天條書] and the Poems of the Young Learners [幼學詩], to be quite in line with Christian teachings, but only suggested that the British government of the time should maintain neutrality between the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom regime and the Qing government (eds. Luo & Wang 2004:38–41). The latter personally visited Li Xiu-cheng, Hong Rengan and Hong Xiuquan, the main leaders of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, and had in his works lengthy theological discussions with the latter two which were faithfully recorded. Joseph Edkins has written extensively on Chinese language, history and religion, and both Weber and Kang Youwei have read his work. He saw the religious changes in the late Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and said that it had become difficult to transform this heresy into true Christianity – which may have actually influenced the foreign policy of the British government at the time. The overarching spiritual influence that Christianity used to have on its believers has also been challenged by the encroachment of other belief systems in pre-industrial China in the mid-to-late 19th century. Joseph Edkins understood these changes in Chinese society, but he remained hopeful about spreading the Protestant Christian gospel in China. Until his death in Shanghai in 1905, the year in which the imperial examination system was officially abolished, marking the disappearance of the monopoly of power enjoyed by Confucianism over the minds of the Chinese elite.

Through the efforts of scholars such as Weber, mainstream Christianity has also gradually gained a positive and active impression among non-believers in mainland China after 1978 (Zhou 2016:114). Reversing the stigmatising labels of 'medieval superstition', 'spiritual opium', 'instrument of colonial aggression', et cetera, which had been attached to it for about 30 years since 1949. This historical reversal of status, like Marx's and Weber's commentaries on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement analysed earlier, is also closely related to the changing needs of the people's material life and spirituality at various stages of Chinese society's history.

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S.E.W. declares that he is the sole author of this research article.

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