

Moral endeavours in Nanjing: Thomas Meadows and the OMEA

The word desultory suggests something not all that important, something in passing, half-hearted and casual. It seems strange then that a well-educated Englishman who became an interpreter and intelligence-gatherer in the Canton and Shanghai consulates for 10 years from 1843, should title his first book in 1847, on China and the Chinese, '*Desultory Notes*'. In fact they are anything but that, and still get quoted. His next work, published some ten years later, was also far from being a few notes. It was a 656 page effort covering his ideas, notably on the reasons for the longevity of the Chinese dynasties and their rebellions, on civilisation in general, observations on Chinese ethics, philosophy and government, plus an account of the Taiping rebellion and his own role in it.

Thomas Meadows (1815-1868) was born in the north of England and in 1841, a bit unusually, took himself off to the Royal University of Munich to study Chinese with Karl Frederick Neumann, Professor of Armenian and Chinese¹. Meadows arrived in China in 1843, after the Treaty of Nanking which ended the first Sino-British or opium war and included the ceding of Hong Kong to Britain. He was established at the British Consulate in Canton as an assistant and interpreter, and under the surface, an intelligence gatherer. After only 3 years he had published '*Desultory Notes*'.

Meadows, Thomas Taylor *Desultory notes on the government and people of China and on the Chinese language, illustrated with a sketch of the province of Kwang-Tung showing its division into departments and districts.* W H Allen, London. 1847. pp xvi, 250, (2) plus hand-coloured folding map, two folding charts, and four colour plates. Cordier 83, Lust 124, Lowendahl 1070.

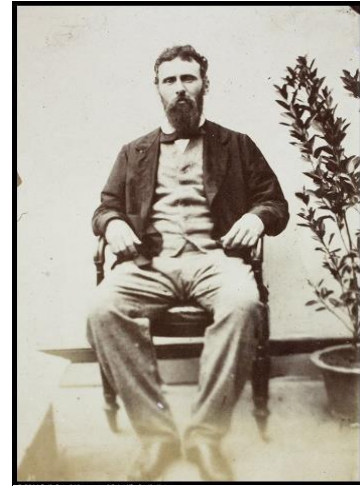


The four colour plates by J. R. Jobbins² are of mandarins in full- or half-dress costume.

¹ Neumann had visited China from 1829 until 1833. He collected a great deal of literature from and on China and published translations and his own work on the history of the English-Chinese wars, and on Chinese pirates. Neumann eventually was caught up in the revolutionary movements of the 1840s and 50s, and was dismissed for his views in 1852. He later settled in Berlin where he died in 1870. **Neumann, Charles Friedrich**, *Translations from the Chinese and Armenian: with notes and illustrations.* [1] Yuan, Yung-lun. *History of the pirates who infested the China Sea from 1807 to 1810.* 1831 -- [2] Chu-hung, 1535-1615. *The catechism of the shamans; or, The laws and regulations of the priesthood of Buddha in China.* 1831 -- [3] Vahram. *Chronicle of the Armenian kingdom in Cilicia during the time of the Crusades.* London, The Oriental Translation Fund, 1831. The 3 volumes can sometimes be found in separate issues. **Chisholm, Hugh**, ed. (1911) "Neumann, Karl Friedrich". *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

² John Richard Jobbins, London engraver, active 1836-1864.

Meadows already saw himself as an expert, stating in his preface *'I conceive myself entitled to write on China, firstly because I have some practical knowledge of the Chinese language; secondly, because I have bestowed my whole time and undivided attention on Chinese affairs for nearly five years; and thirdly, because during nearly three years of that period, I have been placed in an unusually favourable position for acquiring knowledge of those particular subjects on which I have ventured to write.'* He continues that almost all the business of the Consulate went through him because of his knowledge of the language, handling some 2500 documents in half a year, and writing *'upwards of 350 official letters that have passed between the mandarins and H. M.'s Consul on a variety of special subjects.'*



Thomas Meadows, Shanghai, 1859. Collection Vacher-Hilditch, Identifier VHO2-201 Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution

The book is indeed a set of notes. These are derived from short dissertations he wrote on Chinese institutions, government and character of the people. There are 19 notes, starting with one *'On the False Notions extant in England regarding China and the Chinese'*, and ending with one on *'Application of the Conclusion arrived at in Note XI to the Policy and Prospects of our own Country'*. Note XI was *'On the Cause of the long Duration of the Chinese Empire'*. There are other Notes on the language, the government and Mandarins, the law and prisoners, and on the people and their manners and customs. We see already in these, Meadows' insistence that a knowledge of Chinese history, language, government and people was essential in guiding British policy, something that, as his renown as a leading expert became widely acknowledged, would often put him at odds with British policy makers.

There is still a lively interest in the book today: the *'book is probably best remembered for its candid description of the various officials, military officers, Yamen clerks and runners, gamblers, gangsters and pirates that one might encounter along the Pearl River Delta. After all, such individuals were his greatest sources of information. While other westerners dismissed the corrupt workings of the local Yamen, for Meadows these activities were a matter of "professional interest."*³

And what of the Conclusion in Note XIX?. It is a plea to take his arguments from his commentary on Chinese government and apply them to the British Empire. He says that the reason for the longevity of the Chinese Empire is due to *'the exclusive advancement of merit and talent, quite independent of every other principle or doctrine...'*. The imposition of this meritocratic political system is what is needed in the British Empire, giving colonists every *'advantage and privilege of British subject'*. In other words, it is a plea for more independence of the colonies and outposts of the Empire, with exams for administrative posts ensuring some level of quality in those taking up such posts, and equal opportunity and reward for those labouring in the sun for the motherland. It doesn't seem a particularly radical plea, though it would make many in the colonial services rather uncomfortable, and you cant help thinking there is something personal in the call.

In 1852, Meadows transferred to the Shanghai Consulate in a similar role. In the prior years, through his travels inland and knowledge of the language, he had developed an

³ <https://chinesemartialstudies.com/2013/06/14/the-chinese-and-their-rebellions-thomas-taylor-meadows-on-the-taiping-warfare-and-the-emergence-of-the-traditional-chinese-martial-arts/> Accessed 10 May 2024

unprecedented network of contacts and informants, to the extent that he has been likened to a more modern-day spymaster³. This gave him inside knowledge of the growth of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, foreseeing and reporting on the outbreak of the rebellion in 1850, though eventually being very critical of the British response. He was one of the first to make contact with the leaders in 1853, being among those aboard the *Hermes* when it sailed into Nanjing in February of that year. His role as a messenger from the Taiping leaders to the British Government was largely ignored by the British, to the detriment of the latter's policy. However, his sympathy for the rebellion was not too far out of line with that of his masters, Meadows the British administrators seeing in the early stages of the rebellion, a possible alternative to the disliked and distrusted Manchu Government.⁴

Later that year, Meadows returned to England due to ill health. Prior to his return he had considered writing three works. The first would have been on the Chinese people, from the general to the specific, on their beliefs, social customs, administration and legislation, philosophy, geography; not much would have been left out, and some of this was written into his subsequent large work. The second effort would have been on *'all that I thought amusing or interesting in my own movements and experiences'* over the 10 years that he had spent in China, together with an account of the Taiping rebellion. Again, much of this was incorporated into his new book, particularly the whole section on the rebellion. The third work was to be on the *'Union of the British Empire and the Improvement of the British Executive'*, particularly his promotion of an examination system, which seems to have been a bit of an obsession. This found its small way into the Preface of his book. Meadows blames his ill health for not achieving these three volumes, but *'though ill-health has greatly retarded my labours, by making them exceedingly uphill work at times, and partially prevented a systematic arrangement, the same leading ideas and principles pervade and give unity to the book.'*

Meadows does fuss at times, instructing the reader at length on how to read the work. When noting that it wasn't his plan to report on the *'inanimate'* nature of China, he tells us of his initial plan, based on his studies in the physical sciences and mathematics which he undertook prior to Munich and studying the language, to conduct chemical and physical investigations. He even had prepared a chest of chemical reagents to take with him, but before leaving, resolved that it was *'only to animate nature, and to one, though by far the most important section of that, viz. to man, that I should henceforth have to devote my whole attention.'* And so with man triumphing over chemistry, and probably the better for it, he published his new book, issued in 1856 by those pre-eminent publishers of 19th C travel, Smith, Elder & Co.

Meadows, Thomas Taylor *The Chinese And Their Rebellions, Viewed in Connection With Their National Philosophy, Ethics, Legislation, And Administration, To Which Is Added, An Essay On Civilization And Its Present State In The East And West.* London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1856. 8vo. pp. lx, 656, 16 (advert). Half-title, 3 hand-coloured folding maps. Cordier 1896, Lowendahl 1179.



⁴ Fairbank, J. K., Meadows on China: A centennial review. *Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No.3, May 1955. pp 365-371. Platt, S. R., *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom. China, the West, and the epic story of the Taiping Civil War.* Vintage, New York, 2012. pp. 90-91.

The maps are of China Proper, the Chinese Empire, and Kwang tung (Guangdong) province. The first five chapters provide a description of China, the people, history and its current state. They conclude with a commentary of Huc's views on China. *'Ireland was once called the best abused country in the world. I deliberately and seriously declare China to be the best misunderstood country in the world. Month after month we continue to have notices, articles and books about it, all furnishing proof of the correctness of this assertion. The last book that has appeared, L' Empire Chinois by M. Huc seems to me to demand special notice both on account of its comprehensive title and of the name of its author – still more because of its errors.'*⁵ Huc's faults, despite his extensive travels and more than a dozen year's residence in China, lies with his use of faulty Jesuit accounts from up to 50 years ago, and then even when he departs from this, his own observations seem inaccurate. There is the slight feeling of annoyance from Meadows that Huc, who is still cited favourably today and regarded as more accurate than Meadows suggests, was trying to do something that Meadows was also trying to achieve, an extensive view of China from his travels and observations. Huc's book appeared two years before Meadows', and was a successor to Huc's popular account of his travels in Tartary, Tibet and China. However, Meadows proceeds to put him right, in some detail, and while he was likely correct, there is a whiff of distaste at the Abbe's catholic profession.⁶

But all this clears the ground for Meadows to get into the chapters of real value in the work, those on the *'nature and progress of the recent resurrectionary movement in China'*. He starts with a biography of *'Huang sew tseuen', 'the originator and acknowledged chief of the present religious-political insurrection in China'*⁷. Through to Chapter XX, Meadows provides what is easily the best contemporary account of the rebellion, covering the religious and philosophical background to the sect, the conflicts and upheaval over 6 or 7 years, and his own adventures and contacts with the rebels.

In Chapter XX, he gets at the heart of his thinking: rebellions are necessary for the health and progress of the Chinese empire, *...periodical dynastic rebellions are absolutely necessary to the continued well being of the nation: that only they are the storms that can clear the political atmosphere when it has become sultry and oppressive.....the nation itself is perfectly well aware of the political function of its rebellions; and it respects successful rebellions, as executions of the Will of Heaven, operating for its preservation in peace, order, security, and prosperity.'* He says that the system is there, and we need to understand that. We should then be questioning whether *'we should, by forcible interference, do the Chinese any good..... Such disinterested interference of one nation with another has never yet taken place, I believe, in the world. But there has often been a pretence of disinterestedness in such proceedings: and we are, at this moment, being loudly summoned to interference with the Chinese in the name of humanity and of civilisation: hence the necessity of arguing against it too.'*⁸ How modern does this sound?

Meadows uses this thinking at the end of the Chapter when he addresses the issues of the opium trade. *'I hold that though we may use all these perfectly sound arguments which prove*

⁵ Meadows, Thomas Taylor, *The Chinese And Their Rebellions, Viewed in Connection With Their National Philosophy, Ethics, Legislation, And Administration, To Which Is Added, An Essay On Civilization And Its Present State In The East And West.* London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1856. p. 51.

⁶ Huc, E. R., *Souvenirs d'un voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet, et la Chine pendant les années 1844, 1845 et 1846, 2 vols.,* Paris, A. LeClère & Co. (1850); *L'Empire Chinois 2 vols.,* Paris (1854). Both works were published into English soon after appearing.

⁷ Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864) was the founder of the sect the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. After early success against the Qing government forces in 1851, Hong established his capital in Nanjing in 1853, and led the movement from there until his death in June 1864, a month before Nanjing fell to Qing forces. A good popular account of the Taiping rebellion is Stephen Platt's *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom*, Vintage, 2012.

⁸ Meadows, Thomas Taylor, *op. cit.* pp 264-265.

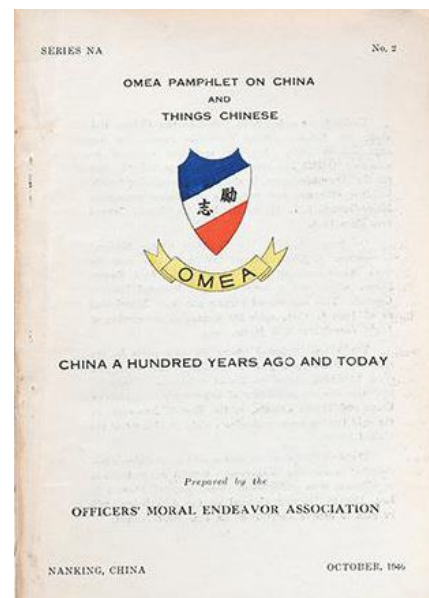
that coercive measures directed against opium smokers, must continue as ineffectual as they have hitherto proved, still that we have no right whatsoever to prevent, by intimidation, any Chinese ruler from trying such measures against the smokers, their own subjects, if they so please.' There goes, and rightly, one argument for the opium wars. 'On the other hand, I hold it quite possible to strike into a line of reasoning.....in which a determination not to put down the opium trade by any physical coercion on our own part, would be completely justified to all educated Chinese.' And he ends with 'it is not by any means an inevitable necessity that it should prove a cause of quarrel, whether with a new native dynasty, or with the Manchu rulers, re-established in full power.'⁹

Meadows' final three chapters are 'On Civilisation' and provide him with space to put forward his thoughts on what civilisation is, on religions, science and art, Christian and Confucian. He returned to China after about three years and served as vice consul or consul in Shanghai 1859-63, and then Ningbo and later was transferred to the more obscure Manchurian treaty port of NewChwang¹⁰, where he died in 1868.

Now lets move forward a hundred years. In mid-1946, the writer V.S. Phén 'was given the privilege of the stalls in the library of the Social and Political Science Association of Peiping.' There, he 'came across a book in a very bad condition. I picked it out, and found that it was an old acquaintance, something that I had scanned over a quarter of a century ago.' The book was Meadows' *The Chinese and their Rebellions*. To Phén, 'it showed a more comprehensive knowledge of China and things Chinese than many a one that is popular. It revealed a more penetrating insight into world affairs than its title would lead readers to expect.' And so Phén, who was at the time involved in writing pamphlets for the Officers' Moral Endeavour Association (OMEA), drew up his text into two columns, and filled them with extracts from Meadow's book on one side and on the other his commentary on the relevant aspects of China in 1946.

Phén, VS *China a hundred years ago and today*. Nanjing: Officers' Moral Endeavour Association. 1946. 8vo, pp 64. Original buff wrappers, gatherings wire-stitched and glued into wrappers as issued, front cover lettered in black with OMEA shield.

Firstly what was the OMEA? It had been set up by Chiang Kai-shek in 1929 with the objective, as Phén notes in his Introduction, 'of promoting health, building character and providing wholesome recreation.' It was modelled on the YMCA and played a role in supporting and promoting Chiang Kai-shek and his wife.¹¹ From 1929 it was headed by Major General Huang Jenlin¹². In 1946, at the successful end of the war with Japan, OMEA (Li Zhi She) was directed to take over another military organisation, the War Area Service Corps (WASC). The WASC had been involved in welcoming and looking after foreign military personnel, mostly Americans,



⁹ Ibid., pp 490-491.

¹⁰ Now Yingkou, a port city in Liaoning Province. It became a treaty port following the 1858 treaties of Tianjin

¹¹ <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/chiangkaishek/background/> Accessed 18 May 2024.

¹² <https://michaelturton.blogspot.com/2010/06/paper-on-parade-chiang-personality-cult.html> Accessed 18 May 2024.

¹² <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/15f9971c35634e6cadf8d21b95e6f7c5> Accessed 20 May 2024

during the war, and to this end, it published a series of pamphlets on *'China and all things Chinese'*. These were short tracts designed to introduce foreigners to China and its customs, and included titles such as *'Lord Macartney's Embassy to China'*, by Gladys Yang and V.S. Phen, pamphlet PA No.1, Peiping, February 1946, *'The three Chinese festivals. Why the current year is called a year of the dog. Some canine breeds of China'*, pamphlet No. 2, February 1946, *'Trends in Chinese literature today'* Peiping, April 1946, and others on Chinese philosophy, drama and the income tax system. These were all published from Beijing, and headed 'Series PA', with successive numbers.¹³

Later in 1946, when OMEA took over the functions of the WASC, the pamphlets continued, but as the 'Series NA', and published from Nanjing, The first of these was *'The "Lukouchiao Incident" of July 7, 1937 ; OMEA takes over WASC'*, and the second Phen's pamphlet, headed Series NA, No.2, published in October 1946. There is little known about Phen. It is not a Chinese name, more likely derived from South East Asia or India, though Phen is given a Chinese name on the pamphlet's title page. Phen may have been involved in the general pamphlet production, co-authoring the earlier one published out of Beijing on the Macartney Embassy.



Photograph of the entrance and part of the grounds of the Moral Endeavor Association Building (Li zhi she) in Nanking, 1945. Martin Hiller 1945. Hiller Collection, University of Missouri.



Li zhi she as photographed in 2008.

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Li_ZhiShe_Historical_Sites3.JPG

We can't be too sure whether American military officers were much interested in the China of the 1850s. However, Phen's pamphlet was one way of presenting present day features of China. The extracts from Meadows with Phen's commentaries are grouped under the headings: On Administrative and other Problems; Theory and Practical Working of the Chinese Autocracy; The Chinese People; Misrepresentations and Misinterpretations; Some Passive Resistance to Open Rebellion; Superstition, Politics and International relations; Prophecies from Mr Meadows' Book; On Civilisation. This final section comprises

¹³ <https://search.worldcat.org/search?q=se%3APamphlets%20on%20China%20and%20things%20Chinese>
Accessed 18 May 2024

some selected paragraphs from Meadows' chapters on civilisation, which Phen remarks are 'purely academic'.

Some of Phen's commentaries are interesting and useful comparisons, while a few don't seem to match the Meadows' extracts very well. He starts with a piece from Meadows on the practice of censuring mandarins who performed badly by sending them to outposts of the Empire, something Meadows' approved of and wished for the British '*If our Institutions permitted it, and her Majesty were to send unsuccessful Minister to Capetown...*' though doesn't say why Capetown or Celyon should have suffered from incompetent British Ministers, particularly in the light of his own proposals that colonial administrators should sit exams to qualify. Phen outlines the legal structure of the current Government, with the traditional five 'Yuans', executive, legislative and judicial, similar to administrative structures in the West, plus examination and control.

In responding to Meadows' description of China Proper, with its huge land mass, population and provinces, Phen complains about one of the centuries-old arguments about China, that its people and Government have little interest in other countries and people. '*To this day, there is still not sufficient interest even among the educated Chinese to learn all that there is to know about foreign countries.*'. Phen then displays his colours: '*Well-wishers of the country....must realise the danger of the whimsical nature of the psychological frame of mind of the average thinking man. If this is not taken care of, there is even a chance of the "half-baked" to be easily led to believe that the presence of United States troops in China at the present moment is something detrimental to the well-being of their country.*'¹⁴ This is the OMEA promoting the current US military support for Chiang Kai-shek in the Nationalists' conflict with Mao's Red Army.

Sometimes Phen's commentaries are a little out of kilter. In the section on the workings of the Chinese autocracy, he provides an extract from Meadows on the Emperor '*The reigning Emperor of China is absolute because he is, in the eyes of his people, the Teen-Sze, the Son of Heaven.*' He juxtaposes with this with a discussion of the oldest Chinese song, *Chi Yang Ko*, or the 'Chinese Earth Song', a song which he says is still the political philosophy of the Chinese farmer. The thinking is unclear, except near the end where he translates part of the song from an earlier English translation, ': *As long as we are allowed to work, and to enjoy the fruits of our labour, the power of the great and mighty Emperor does not weigh upon us.*'¹⁵ So the Emperor is absolute, but please don't bother us.

THE HUSBANDMAN'S SONG

Work, work, - from the rising sun
Till sunset comes and the day is done
I plough the sod
And harrow the clod,
And meat and drink both come to me,
So what care I for the powers that be?

*Translated by H A Giles, Chinese Poetry
in English Verse. London, Quaritch,
1898.*

Phen also often heads off into his own, or more Western, views then prevalent. He includes a piece from Meadows on the examination system for Mandarins in the Government's service, which he often extols as useful for the British Empire. Phen says: '*The system of examinations might have served China well for over two millenniums. But the poisonous dregs are being felt now. "Bookishness" is not, and never has been, a criterion of moral standards, or even of administrative ability. Quite often, the more learned a person becomes, the more he finds himself able to serve his own selfish end rather than the good of the community.*' You have to side

¹⁴ Phen, V. S., China a hundred years ago and today. Nanjing: Officers' Moral Endeavour Association. 1946. pp 3-5.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp 8-9.

with Meadows here: ‘...but while there is on one hand an intimate connection between “ignorance and vice”, so on the other hand, high intellectual faculties, are, as a general rule, (which the exceptions but prove) associated with moral elevations.’¹⁶

They go on, talking back and forwards about the mode of conquering and being conquered, absorption of indigenous people by the Chinese, the archaeological Peking man and the ancient roots of the people, the value of missionaries (Meadows doubtful, Phen positive) and some rebuttal of Meadows’ attacks on the Abbé Huc. They move onto bandits, and how small groups had in the past ended up founding dynasties, and the Taiping rebellion, where Phen becomes a little prophetic: ‘*Fanaticism and environment goaded them [the Taiping rebels] on. For a time the combination worked wonders. It succeeded because the majority of the population was illiterate and superstitious....but even among the most advanced of nations, speculations into the unknown can be capitalised to supplement the political machinery. If this is done wisely, it accelerates progress; if done blindly, it turns domesticated man feral.*’¹⁷ Well, look around you today.

The last section, before the final on Civilisation, is about a number of ‘prophecies’ that Meadows makes. Phen says that modern day students of China ‘cannot but marvel at some of the things that Meadows said in 1856....He had the audacity to say a great many things which were against the policy of his country and which were against the practices of the comity of nations of his time’. These things made his book great, but now forgotten. ‘Today most people realise that “China is a world necessity”. Mr Meadows originated that phrase in 1856.’¹⁸

Meadows has not been totally ignored or unappreciated. Even if colonial administrators and the government of the time might not have agreed with him, and he wasn’t alone in finding himself at odds with politicians safely ensconced in London, scholars and historians of China, and particularly of the Taiping rebellion, continue to cite and appreciate him. It is particularly his insight into and support for the rebellion, which brings him to attention. It was a view largely in sympathy with that of the British Government in the rebellion’s early days, and in line with the British Government’s abhorrence of the Manchu Government.

About 40 years after Phen published his comparative pamphlet, the historian J S Gregory gave a lecture on ‘*The Chinese and their revolutions*’¹⁹, channelling Meadows, in particular the latter’s expertise on the Taiping Rebellion and his theories on revolution in the dynastic history of China. The latter has intrigued readers from the time of the 1856 publication. Early in his book, Meadows wrote, as Gregory also quotes: ‘*Rebellion is in China the old, often exercised, legitimate and constitutional means of stopping arbitrary and vicious legislation and administration. To say that an industrious and cultivated people should have no right whatever, in any way, of checking misgovernment and tyranny which must destroy its cultivation and its industry, and ultimately its very existence as a people, is to maintain a proposition so monstrous that I merely state it.*’²⁰ This is what was behind his sympathy for the Taiping rebels. It was their right. ‘*The long tradition of popular rebellion in the form Meadows knew it, may be now dormant but is not necessarily totally dead or defunct.*’ says Gregory. ‘*Yet I do not doubt that, consistent with their own tradition of autocratic yet morally responsible and ultimately accountable*

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp 43-44.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁹ **Gregory, J. S.**, *The Chinese and their Revolutions*. The 45th George Ernest Morrison Lecture in Ethnology. Canberra, Australian National University, 1984. See at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/160609255.pdf>

²⁰ **Meadows, Thomas Taylor**, op. cit. p.24.

*government, the Chinese people will ensure that revolution in China never remains simply what the ruling elite, Communist, Confucian or whatever, decrees.'*²¹

Meadows believed that the Chinese were the most rebellious, but the least revolutionary of civilisations. Rebellions challenged governments and brought change; revolutions overturned governments. This was a critical feature of the 2000 year survival of dynastic China. However, we now know that it was a rebellion, with foreign intervention, that ended the Ching dynasty; it was revolution however that eventually changed the 20th century Chinese world.

Acknowledgement and thanks: Matt Wills of Peter Harrington Rare Books, expert on China, for bringing the OMEA pamphlet to light, and so stimulating another look at Meadows and his legacy.

²¹ **Gregory, J S**, op cit. p.23