

**The Hidden Hand of Diplomacy:
Interpreters and the Negotiation of Foreign Involvement
in the Taiping War, 1860–1865**

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The role of interpreters in self-strengthening initiatives has been overshadowed by a focus on the role of the translators of the written word who facilitated the import of European scientific knowledge to the Qing Empire. This is in part because translators often leave a written record of their works while interpreters are to some extent hidden. Conversations between Qing and foreign officials during the Taiping war, when foreigners were fighting in support of the Qing, were often reported in diplomatic documents as if both sides were in direct conversation. The role of the interpreter was thus obscured. This paper will argue that the establishment of translation schools in Beijing and Shanghai from 1861 was driven as much by a need to improve the quality of interpreters available to the Qing state as it was by a need for translators of scientific works. Foreign and Qing sources both reported diplomatic problems arising from the poor quality of interpreters available during the Taiping conflict. Li Hongzhang also reported that he did not trust his own interpreters, many of whom were compradors with business interests in foreign firms. The translation schools were therefor in part an attempt to strengthen the late-Qing state by improving control over the quality and loyalty of its interpreters. An understanding of the significance of the role of interpreters in shaping the foreign involvement in Taiping war also suggests a wider case for the re-evaluation of interpreters as the hidden hand of diplomacy in earlier Sino-foreign encounters.