



**Tobie Meyer-Fong.** *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th century China.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 336 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5425-5.

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## Experiencing the Taiping Rebellion

The study of war in Chinese history has been increasingly influenced by a “new military history,” which looks beyond campaigns, weapons, and tactics to examine the social, economic, political, and even cultural effects of war. The main manifestation of this turn in Chinese military history has been in the study of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), due to both sustained scholarly interest in this war and the availability of numerous materials that make this research possible. Tobie Meyer-Fong brings this approach, in this outstanding work, to the civil war that accompanied the Taiping Rebellion in nineteenth-century China. While there is no indication that trends in military history influenced Meyer-Fong, her approach nonetheless offers an important new perspective on this topic. The challenge for scholars seeking to describe the experience of war is to go beyond a simple cataloguing of hardships and atrocities. Meyer-Fong resolves this issue, as the title reveals, by focusing on the process by which the Chinese people sought to come to terms with the experience of war.

Meyer-Fong uses a series of thematic chapters to offer a range of distinct perspectives of how this “coming to terms” took place. The first chapter, “War,” sets the stage for the book’s approach with a reminder of the enormous loss of life (twenty to thirty million people) and utter devastation that accompanied the nineteenth-century civil war in China. Breaking free of conventional historiographical debates over the nature of the Taiping move-

ment, Meyer-Fong’s goal is “to bring the questions and concerns of those who lived through these events into our understanding of this period” (p. 14).

Her second chapter, “Words,” shows how heterodox Taiping religiosity was matched by people who drew on orthodox religious beliefs to explain the horrors that accompanied the arrival of Taiping armies. A key figure in Meyer-Fong’s account is a prolific essayist, Yu Zhi, whom she describes as an “evangelist” for these orthodox beliefs (a fusion of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism). Yu consistently explained the Taiping disaster in terms of reward and retribution for moral behavior. The seemingly indiscriminate spread of death and devastation ultimately forced him to shift from an original emphasis on personal wickedness resulting in individual suffering to a broader focus on the moral failing of society as a whole. He likewise stressed philanthropy both as a pragmatic way to aid the suffering and as a means of building merit that would be rewarded with the restoration of peace. Besides laying out the importance of religion on both sides of the Taiping war, Meyer-Fong also weaves insights throughout the chapter on the key role of written and spoken “words” in Yu’s vision of moral renewal. This included an appreciation for the talismanic power of the written word (encouraging the respectful disposal of texts); confidence in the power of the spoken word (calling for the revival of village readings of the imperial Sacred Edict); the moral value of producing

and reading of religious texts; and the use of illustrated texts about wartime suffering to raise relief donations. It is well known that the Taiping “long hairs” defied male hairstyles prescribed by the Qing as a symbol of submission (a shaved forehead and a queue).

In her third chapter, “Marked Bodies,” Meyer-Fong explores the ways in which hairstyles and tattoos, meant to reflect and enforce loyalties in impermeable ways, as well as distinctive clothing and accents, were perceived and experienced by people attempting to navigate a landscape of constantly shifting battle lines. In some cases, these markers offered a means for the symbolic expression of actual loyalties. Other situations were more ambiguous. Did a pale newly shaven head reveal an escapee from rebel forces reasserting loyalty to the Qing, or a possible Taiping spy? In the actual context of war, these markers often complicated rather than resolved issues of identity, as both soldiers and civilians tried to distinguish enemies from allies, or simply stay alive.

While studies of the experience of war often focus on the trials of survivors, the fourth chapter, “Bones and Flesh,” breaks new ground by its attention to the dead—though it is actually more about the issues raised for survivors by the massive number of dead bodies produced by the war. In Meyer-Fong’s hands, the exploration of these issues reveals an experience of death with “Chinese characteristics.” First there was the special angst created by the inability to provide proper burials; producing in turn angry ghosts bringing more misfortune to society. Second, there was an obsession with cannibalism, possibly true in many cases but also a trope for the breakdown of human society. Counterpoised to such stories are other narratives of bodies or coffins miraculously recovered, often with the aid of their ghosts, or bodies of the righteous dead discovered in uncorrupted states, suggesting the triumph of orthodox family relations and values over the disaster of the war. On another level the concrete project of burying and commemorating the dead likewise provided a new arena for elite activism and a framework for linking the deaths of individuals to grander schemes of meaning.

Chapter 5, “Wood and Ink,” addresses the issue of elite activism in the postwar commemorative project. Past studies have, of course, argued for the growth of elite activism in a managerial “public sphere” in the wake of the Taiping Rebellion. Meyer-Fong shows exactly how this expansion of elite activism took place, and suggests that symbolic commemorative endeavors were as important as more practical public projects in this development. She

demonstrates how a decision to expand the focus of “loyalty temples” on military valor to include virtuous civilians overwhelmed an original centrally managed process for recommending honors, opening the door not only for greater involvement by local elites but also for the addition of local loyalty shrines as sites for this recognition. Behind this effort to recognize the deserving dead was a desire to reintegrate Chinese society around orthodox values, with a particular emphasis on restoring loyalty to the dynasty, whose legitimacy had been sorely tested by extensive rebellions. By extension, however, death in the defense of other traditional values, most obviously manifested in cases of women who died protecting their chastity, also received new emphasis. Nonetheless, deciding who deserved honors in this context could raise troubling questions. Communities seeking imperial honors had little incentive to distinguish clearly between those killed by Taiping versus Qing armies (particularly since indiscriminate slaughter on both sides meant that ultimate loyalties of the dead were hardly clear). One special feature of this chapter is Meyer-Fong’s ability to uncover the ambiguities that could trouble the unifying purposes of the commemorative project, particularly in the face of differing local and central interests. Nonetheless, Meyer-Fong at times strains to give priority to conflict over the integrative functions of commemoration. She notes that commemorative efforts in Hangzhou “can thus be read as one of many arenas of competition (and cooperation) among national and provincial, official, and local interests all ostensibly speaking the symbolic language of loyalty to the regime” (p. 155). The addition of parenthesis here privileges competition over cooperation in a way that is not always obvious in her examples. Clearly commemorative projects were often contested on many levels, but Meyer-Fong actually shows how the symbolic power of imperial recognition still provided an important framework for these contests. The power and success of Qing commemoration were not dependent on the suppression of conflicting interests but on its ability to incorporate them. The process of commemoration was one of the main ways in which the dynasty, local communities, and even individuals sought to “come to terms” with the widespread loss of life resulting from the civil war. Commemoration was therefore a very important part of the experience of the war for those who survived it. Meyer-Fong also shows, however, how the bureaucratization of the commemoration process redefined varied experiences into set narratives of virtuous deaths.

Meyer-Fong’s last chapter, “Loss,” personalizes the

experience of war by focusing on one man whose life was largely absorbed by the desire to remember a mother who was murdered by Taiping soldiers before his eyes when he was only seven years old. On the one hand, this man spared no effort to gain official recognition of his mother as a virtuous woman who died defending her honor. On the other hand, this recognition never alleviated the grief that he experienced at her death, which he recalled and related in detail in a series of essays ultimately collected and published as a book. Meyer-Fong uses this case as a reminder of the subjective suffering of actual survivors of the war, and the very personal efforts to come to term

with loss, which were often blurred by commemorations.

Meyer-Fong taps a rich source of materials, which, precisely because they were written in the context of Qing restoration, have often been overlooked by historians more focused on tracing the sources of Chinese revolution. This book shows the insights that may be derived from such ignored sources when a scholar of Meyer-Fong's quality breaks free of conventional questions. Her work is a must-read not only for any student of the Taiping Rebellion but also for anyone seeking understanding of the effects of and response to war in late imperial China.

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