

# War

## *What Was Lost*

According to conventionally cited statistics, the Taiping Rebellion, which lasted from 1850 to 1864, cost twenty to thirty million people their lives.<sup>1</sup> On that basis, it has been termed the most devastating civil war in human history. A precise body count (or even an approximate one) is, in retrospect, impossible, as has been demonstrated recently by several inconclusive articles on population loss in this period.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary accounts suggest extraordinary carnage and destruction. Memoirs and local gazetteers compiled in the postwar period refer with appalling frequency to population loss approaching or surpassing 50 percent in cities and towns throughout the lower Yangzi region and describe unspeakable human suffering.<sup>3</sup> But whether or not these numbers are accurate, the death toll surely was much larger than that in the exactly contemporaneous American Civil War, a conflict in which some 620,000 soldiers and perhaps 50,000 civilians died.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, in spite of its devastating scope, the Taiping Rebellion remains relatively unknown outside of China, compared to events that were arguably of less far-reaching and transformative significance.<sup>5</sup> Even within the

China field, accounts of the Taiping Rebellion have been remarkably bloodless; we have been preoccupied with abstract ideological questions rather than with damage. Scholars seeking to explain the late-nineteenth-century rise of Shanghai routinely allude to the arrival of migrants from the prosperous and cultured Jiangnan region, without reference to the ruination that impelled them to move. In teaching about the Taiping Rebellion, historians of China typically gesture toward the fact of its having been the most devastating civil war in history or cite the appalling statistic of twenty to thirty million. But then we (myself included) lecture about Jesus Christ's Younger Brother and his odd vision to the delighted amazement of our students. It is time to reconsider these priorities.

A decade ago, as I finished writing *Building Culture in Early Qing Yangzhou*, a book about the construction of scenic sites in Yangzhou in the aftermath of the Manchu Conquest of that city in 1645, I realized that I had yet to examine the 1874 gazetteer for Yangzhou prefecture—held in the collection of the Library of Congress, only a few blocks from where I live.<sup>6</sup> I walked over to spend what I thought would be an hour or two ensuring that I had at least looked at all of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) gazetteers for Yangzhou prefecture. But what I found that day in that book changed the way I understood my project, by rewriting the ending. It also opened the way to an entirely new set of questions and pointed toward this present study. I was shocked to learn that nearly all of the sites discussed in *Building Culture* (and much else) had been destroyed during the Taiping War of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> I was, moreover, stunned to find that the 1874 gazetteer for Yangzhou prefecture documented in carefully stylized form the honorable deaths of a very large number of local residents who killed themselves or who were killed when the Taiping armies occupied Yangzhou. I had been studying Qing history for more than a decade. I had read books about the Taiping rebellion. I had given lectures on it in my classes. And I had never really thought about what it might have meant at the local level to the millions of people who had lost their lives, livelihood, and loved ones.

I spent the next several days reading the literally hundreds of accounts of the deaths of the loyal and righteous, even though these stories had no direct bearing on the project that I was trying to finish. A gazetteer is a topically organized compendium of materials on local topics edited by local elites under the formal oversight of officials and in accordance with fairly well-established principles of inclusion. Although earlier editions of Qing

gazetteers typically included biographies of moral exemplars including chaste women, loyal and righteous or filial men, and outstanding officials or literary figures, this edition spotlighted the loyal and righteous dead. As I later learned, emphasis on the loyal and righteous was typical of post-Taiping gazetteers produced in this region, as was the format in which they were presented. The stories of the exemplary dead were highly patterned, offering little more than name, social status, place, and means of death. For instance, in the Yangzhou gazetteer from 1874 we find, among many others: “Military Student, Zhu Wanchun. When the city fell and there was fighting in the lanes, the rebels used guns to surround him. He died in the gunfire.”<sup>8</sup> “Zhao Jialin was taken as a prisoner to the pagoda at Sanchahe in 1856. The rebels stored gunpowder there and he lit a match that he had brought with him. This blew up the pagoda and killed several thousand rebels. Zhao also lost his life.”<sup>9</sup>

The gazetteer describes martyrs sliced, stabbed, hacked, burned, or cut down for talking back; martyrs who died by drowning, hanging, self-immolation, self-starvation, or poison. Centered upon the moment of death, each story captures the essential act of resistance against the rebels. Each of the people so recorded was thereby translated from a living person into a moral exemplar embodying loyalty to the dynasty. In the process of translation, each was reduced to a single political and moral meaning. Nothing remains of their personalities or experiences beyond what could be construed as righteous or loyal. But all are named, situated, and caught in the act whereby their lives were extinguished—the moment that proved them worthy of commemoration. I wondered what had become of all the dead bodies; how had funerals been conducted in wartime? How seriously had survivors taken state-sponsored honors in the immediate aftermath of the war? What were the emotional implications of loss for those who lived? And what evidence of an emotional response might be found in a commemorative landscape seemingly and predictably dominated by state honors?

Official remembrance rendered the dead meaningful within a very particular political context and discourse. Through the use of morally charged language, ordinary men and women were recast as martyrs and the violence of their deaths was imbued with political meaning and moral weight. Local elites produced morality tales of honorable death and submitted them for recognition up a hierarchy of provincial and metropolitan officials. They built shrines celebrating the war dead, framing them in accordance with values and institutions developed during the Qing dynasty. And yet, within

decades, the stories of those who had died ostensibly for the dynasty had been deliberately forgotten, overwritten by new national imperatives. By the end of the nineteenth century, the more distant violence of the Qing conquest of the Jiangnan region in 1645 had become the consummate icon of local suffering, replacing more recent events in popular memory. Interpretations shifted. In the gazetteers of the 1870s and 1880s, communal loyalty unto death for the Ming dynasty in the seventeenth century was understood to foreshadow loyalty unto death for the Qing in the early 1860s. The value celebrated by terrible analogy was loyalty above all else. By the turn of the twentieth century, the story of the Qing conquest had acquired new meanings: rather than encoding loyalty, it stood for national humiliation. More recent martyrdom in the name of the discredited dynasty lost all resonance; the mid-nineteenth-century struggle acquired a new set of heroes and meanings.

The public focus on the righteousness and heroism of the martyred dead facilitated erasure of wartime mayhem and brutality from historical memory; systematic elimination of Taiping texts ensured (in the short run) the relative absence of alternative accounts. After the 1911 Revolution, new revolutionary martyrs quite literally displaced those honored by the dynasty. Shrines honoring the dead from the Taiping War were repurposed and renamed to honor those who died founding the Republic. Texts and stories that did not re-inscribe the new conventional wisdom of Taiping heroism and its Qing antithesis were subject to either misinterpretation or neglect. Sources affirming Taiping heroism were recovered from collections abroad or invented wholesale. Neither revolutionary nor progressive, those who ostensibly died for the dynasty in the mid-nineteenth century became, in the twentieth century, extraneous to the dominant narratives of modern Chinese history, which reversed the verdicts on the war, the dynasty, the rebels, and the dead. New visions of the greater national good obscured meaningless violence, emotion, and loss. The terms in which their deaths had been commemorated were no longer meaningful. And, contrary to the gazetteer editors' purpose, memory of the war dead was extinguished.

### *Rebellion, Revolution, War*

The story of China's nineteenth-century civil war has most often been narrated as the biography of a visionary or of the proto-revolutionary movement he inspired. In 1837, Hong Xiuquan, a failed examination candidate

from Guangdong Province in China's Deep South, fell into a trance and was troubled by visions, which he later (in 1843) interpreted through a Christian tract that he had received from a Chinese evangelist several years earlier. He proclaimed himself the second son of the Heavenly Father, and thus, the younger brother of Jesus Christ. He gathered followers in his hometown, and, after 1844, in the mountains of Guangxi, developed a system of religious and quotidian practices that formed the basis of his radical challenge to the prevailing dynastic order.<sup>10</sup>

In January 1851, after winning a decisive battle against government forces, Hong Xiuquan pronounced himself the Heavenly King (Tianwang) of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Taiping tianguo), an act tantamount to secession. The Taiping army fought its way northward out of Guangxi, seizing strategically important cities along the way. Rumors proliferated, spreading anxiety and uncertainty downriver to the Yangzi delta region and beyond.<sup>11</sup> The Taiping forces occupied Nanjing in 1853 and made the early Ming capital their own, renaming it the Heavenly Capital (Tianjing). They established a currency and an independent calendar, promoted their religion, and imagined a radically new system of government and land tenure, which they were never fully able to implement. They also organized the populace into productive and fighting units, segregated by gender.

The Taiping played upon incipient Han nationalism: their propaganda quite literally demonized the dynasty, using the prefix *yao*, meaning demon, to delegitimize the Manchus as well as imperial personnel and institutions. They deliberately slaughtered the civilian inhabitants of Manchu garrisons.<sup>12</sup> For eleven more years, in spite of internal dissension that nearly destroyed them, the Taiping fought against Qing armies, local militias, regional armies, and foreign mercenaries for control over territory and tax revenue.<sup>13</sup> Communities changed hands, often repeatedly, inflicting terrible collateral damage on civilian populations and the infrastructure that supported them. Over the course of fourteen years, the war afflicted some sixteen or seventeen of the twenty-four provinces in the Qing Empire, wreaking particular havoc along the Yangzi River.

With the collapse of the Great [Qing] Jiangnan Encampment (Jiangnan daying) near Nanjing in 1860, the Taiping succeeded in occupying many of the major cities of the fertile and commercialized Yangzi River delta. Endemic warfare in the region between 1860 and the fall of the Heavenly Capital to the Hunan Army in 1864 led to catastrophic material and human consequences. The Qing and their allies also deliberately dehumanized their

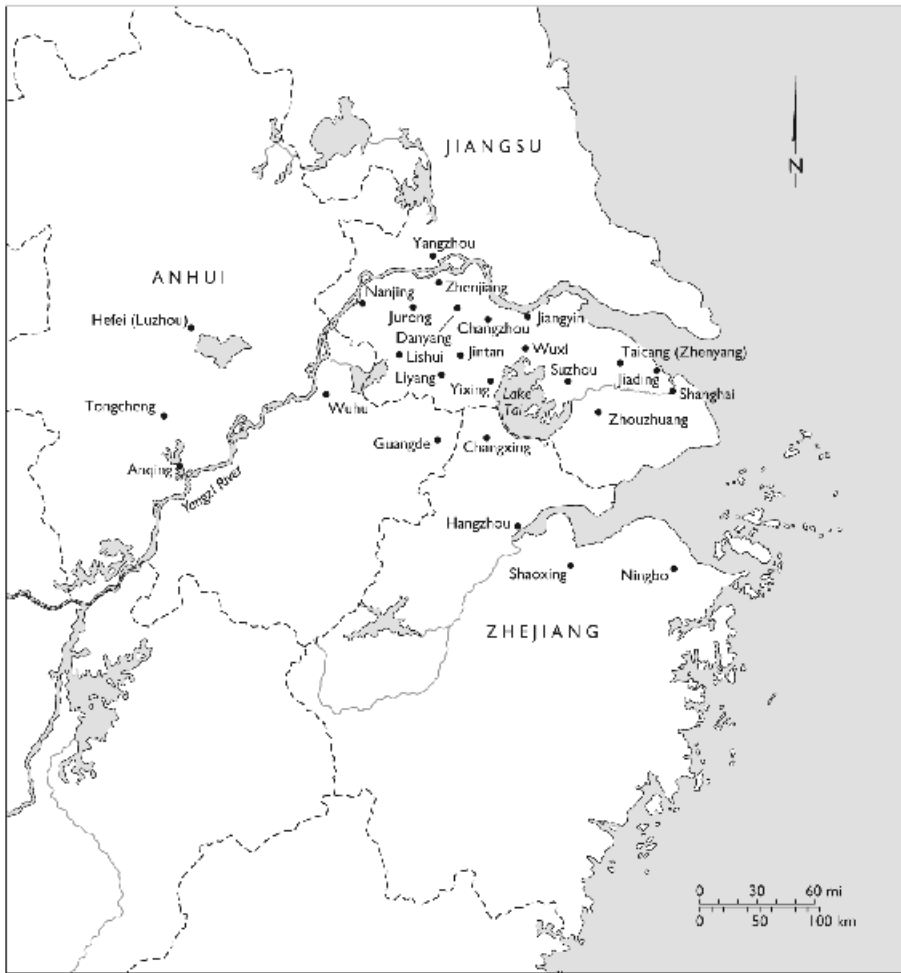


Figure 1.1. The Jiangnan region

enemies. Zeng Guofan, the founder of the Hunan Army, described the Taiping as the enemies of Confucian civilization even as he prosecuted an eradication campaign against them.

Refugees from delta cities fled to the countryside or sought safety in the treaty port of Shanghai, which benefited from foreign protection and which was in turn transformed by these new arrivals. Armies swollen by captives and new recruits contributed to escalating violence.<sup>14</sup> Looting became imperative in order to feed the expanded armies and militias on both sides; and because

civilians might also be soldiers or offer material support to the enemy, both sides brutalized ordinary people. As the war dragged on, the fighting became increasingly predatory, unpredictable, and chaotic.<sup>15</sup> It also turned vicious as both sides called for annihilation of their enemies in ever more absolute terms.<sup>16</sup> Alliances proved tenuous and property vulnerable. In some cases, brothers and neighbors fought on opposing sides, and many communities divided over whom to support and how best to protect themselves.<sup>17</sup>

In 1881, the editors of a local gazetteer for Wuxi County in southern Jiangsu Province observed that the war had shattered expectations of peace formed over the many centuries of Qing rule and marked the absolute end of an era: "While we urgently relied on the emperor's efficacy to expel the wicked and odoriferous forces, several hundred years of protection were overrun, trampled, and at an end. The cruelty of the killing and destruction was unprecedented."<sup>18</sup>

Why had things gone so badly wrong? The editors of the Wuxi gazetteer fault official incompetence and the venality of some of their counterparts among the local elite for the disastrous turn taken by events in their locale.<sup>19</sup> Preparations for the rebel assault, they note, had been inadequate and incomplete and those in charge bore some responsibility. Worse yet, they add, there were those who collected taxes and rents that spring who not only failed to protect the county seat but also willingly turned over what they had collected to the rebels.<sup>20</sup> Local militias that were mustered to fight against the Taiping had an appalling propensity to visit terror on farmers and merchants. Armies, short on rations, were difficult to control and maintain.<sup>21</sup>

There were also deeper and more insidious causes. The editors' description of the antebellum situation is idealized in order to sharpen the contrast between the responsible rule and social harmony of the more distant past and the abject suffering of recent experience. But trouble had been brewing for some time because of a multifaceted social and political crisis that affected even the Yangzi delta, a region often described as China's economic and cultural heartland. The empire was afflicted by shrinking government capacity, impoverishment, and natural disasters compounded during the Daoguang period (1821–1850) by the convergence of population pressure, failing infrastructure, corruption, inflation, and administrative malaise. These problems were much discussed at the time by statecraft-minded scholars.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, widespread death and destruction had accompanied floods, epidemics, famine, and earthquakes during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Tensions were further exacerbated by a severe monetary crisis, which intensified during the 1840s and 1850s. The empire depended on a bimetallic monetary system whereby taxes and other large transactions were paid in silver denominated by weight, while most of the business of daily life was transacted in copper coins. A shortage of silver triggered a sharp rise in prices and an even more dramatic rise in land taxes. Landlords pressured tenants to pay their rents, so that they in turn could pay their taxes, along with the host of irregular fees that the bureaucracy had initiated in order to make up for its own shrinking fiscal resources.<sup>23</sup> Tenants absconded, landholders sold their holdings and departed, those without means turned to banditry. The indemnity imposed by Great Britain in the aftermath of the Opium War placed a heavy burden on the dynasty's already overextended treasury, and the foreign victory challenged both the dynasty's sovereignty and its legitimacy.<sup>24</sup>

Many people at all levels of society had good reason to be dissatisfied; the civil war, when it came, magnified prior social problems, and these pre-existing problems also conditioned and shaped local responses to war. War provided further reason for anger and outrage at official malfeasance as well as inspiring proclamations of loyalty unto death. In its aftermath, war and reconstruction compelled the emergence of a revised political order, empowering provincial governors, in many cases themselves veteran officers in the regional armies that had suppressed the rebellion, and local elites at the expense of the court in Beijing.

The scope of wartime suffering and devastation almost certainly was as unprecedented as the Wuxi gazetteer editors aver, even if it had its roots in preexisting tensions. As a result of the war, they observe, there were almost no human survivors in Wuxi. Whole neighborhoods had been reduced to a mess of broken tiles and rubble. Only two in ten residences in the once-flourishing county seat survived. Of those homes that were destroyed, the editors write, the rebels had burned 20 percent and bandits had destroyed 10 percent; militia braves fighting over the spoils had ruined the remainder, and thus the most. Returnees straggling back to the county had found no homes; even migrants saw the rubble and determined it better to move elsewhere. Thus, even in the early 1880s, more than a decade and a half after the Taiping army had been eradicated, the population of the county seat remained sparse and government business continued to be conducted first out of a private residence and then a temple; there had been no money to restore the government offices.<sup>25</sup> It was difficult even to compile the gazetteer because



much of the county's textual heritage had been obliterated in the fighting.<sup>26</sup> Although some rebuilding had taken place, the glories of the days of the Qianlong and Jiaqing emperors, the editors conclude, "will never—and can never—be seen again."<sup>27</sup> There was, they suggest, good reason to believe that the times of peace and prosperity were over and that the war had changed everything. How then to recover?

This sense of cataclysmic loss is echoed in postwar gazetteers from across the Lower Yangzi region. Produced by local elites under the at least nominal oversight of the county magistrate acting at the behest of the provincial governor, these books were typically and often explicitly (and self-interestedly) dedicated to writing down the events of the war, documenting expressions of extraordinary loyalty to the dynasty by local residents, and recording postwar reductions in the tax burden.<sup>28</sup> Anqing Prefecture and its constituent Tongcheng County in Anhui both seem to have been too badly devastated to manage the effort; neither produced a postwar gazetteer.<sup>29</sup> The editors of a gazetteer from Guangde in southern Anhui summarized the local experience of war as follows:

In 1860, the rebels penetrated the borders of our department (*zhou*), coming and going countless times. Many of the inhabitants suffered and were killed or killed themselves or were captured or starved to death or died in epidemics. Those that died totaled more than half the population. Those that lived had no way to support themselves and all were driven out to the fort in the southern countryside. The fort protected them from danger . . . [as] it was easy to defend. The rebels attacked several times but failed to capture it . . . but when a rebel detachment led by Hong Ronghai broke through the walls and captured [the fort], his men carried out a cruel massacre. None of the residents survived. Between 1860 and 1865, the people could not farm and so they ran out of grain. In the mountains, all of the wild plants were consumed, and people ate each other, which led to the spread of epidemics. There were corpses and skeletons everywhere. The roads were covered with scrub, and for several dozen *li* there was no sign of human life. . . . This was a strange disaster, unprecedented since the beginning of human existence.<sup>30</sup>

The passage makes use of a repertoire of standard phrases to describe disaster, including the dietary descent from grain to wild plants to cannibalism; such stylized narratives and imagery are typical of accounts of warfare in many genres. That many postwar writers resorted to rhetorical patterns and literary allusions to describe their experiences means that we need to be careful not to consider their writings simply as vehicles for articulating

empirical truths. Nor, however, should we reflexively discount them as untruthful. Though these patterned phrases should not and cannot be held to juridical or scientific standards, they enabled authors to convey, in instantly recognizable language, a sense of the war's catastrophic scale. Passages such as this one do not reveal how many people died in a particular place or tell us precisely what the area looked like in the aftermath. And yet this particular account does suggest (in terms that the intended audience would have found meaningful) that in Guangde, as in many other places, the war was a destructive force that left both lives and landscape in ruins.

Many contemporaries observed that the suffering had been unspeakable and, like the Guangde editors, alleged that the destruction had no precedent in human history. For many, suffering and damage were the defining features of their wartime experience. And yet, like the loyal dead, the damage, emotional toll, and destruction of this period subsequently have been overlooked or strategically forgotten. Pain, moral ambivalence, and confusion are not central to the defining paradigms through which we have come to know modern Chinese history. An examination of the human consequences of this war has the potential to transform our understanding of this period, forcing us to rethink the priority we attach to revolution, state, and nation and the absolute commitment we ascribe to allegiances such as "Taiping" or "Qing." For many at the time, these categories were contingent and profoundly unstable.

At home and abroad, then and now, China's mid-century war has never been referred to in neutral terms; its nomenclature has inevitably encoded political positions. In this it resembles the American Civil War, which also has had many names, most of which map onto political and regional affinities. The Qing and its allies referred to their enemies pejoratively as the Hair Rebels (Fa zei, Fa ni) and its armies as the Long Hairs (Changmao), never dignifying the movement by referring to it as the political and territorial regime that it in fact was. They also called them the Southern Rebels or Southern Insurgents (Yue fei, Yue kou), because the movement's leaders and early adherents originated in Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces. The war also has been called the Hong-Yang Rebellion because two of its most visible leaders were surnamed Hong and Yang—and the Red Sheep Rebellion, because the Chinese words for *red* and *sheep* sound like Hong and Yang respectively. Eyewitnesses termed what they experienced the Apocalypse (jie), evoking the disasters associated with the end of a Buddhist era—or

descriptively as the time of fires and soldiers. Proponents of the rebel cause named their movement first the Society of God Worshipers—and then, as they gained momentum, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, or the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace, reflecting the utopian terminology of both the Chinese and Christian classics.<sup>31</sup>

Before the Chinese Revolution of 1949, positive and negative nomenclatures coexisted and were invoked according to the political exigencies of the moment, or the affinities of the writer. In China, for more than five decades, the war has most often been termed the Taiping Revolutionary Movement. In English, we nearly always call it the Taiping Rebellion, inadvertently, or at least unthinkingly, assuming the dynastic perspective.<sup>32</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, there were competing usages. Those foreigners who favored the Taiping called them “insurgents” or “revolutionaries.” That we now almost inevitably use “Rebellion” reflects the British and American decision to side with the Qing.<sup>33</sup> We might, more aptly—given the civilian casualties and exterminatory rhetoric deployed on both sides—call it a total war. Because of the way it was fought, we might call it a war of insurgency and counterinsurgency or a civil war. The term *civil war* also allows that the nineteenth-century Chinese case might not be exotic or exceptional and is in fact comparable in key respects to events in other times and places. By renaming this as a civil war, we can refocus attention on damage and destruction rather than the peculiar vision or ideology of a man and his followers.<sup>34</sup> The term *civil war* eliminates implicit value judgments and transcends the totalizing political and moral narratives that emphasize national priorities over individual and collective suffering.

This was a hard-fought and confusing war prosecuted locally by militias, bandits, captives, mercenaries, and regional armies, many of whom were ambivalent and unreliable allies. It was only in relatively small measure a war fought by the dynasty to suppress a band of religiously inspired rebels from Guangxi. War pitted neighbor against neighbor, and it divided families; war betrayed promises of protection; imperial troops and local militias ran amok, leaving ruination in their wake. War occasioned moral, social, and political confusion and thus commanded renewed clarification of categories, even (or especially) when clarity proved elusive. War also further undermined dynastic legitimacy, and thus paradoxically it called forth intensified expressions of loyalty in its aftermath. Wartime loss, at least briefly, engendered longing for dynastic renewal.

*What Remains*

This book is centered on the seemingly straightforward questions that preoccupied those who experienced the war. How to explain events that seemed unspeakable, cataclysmic, or even millennial? What changes did war bring to daily life? What to do with all of the dead bodies? How to make sense of death on such a large scale? How to locate lost relatives? How properly to dispose of their remains and with what rituals to commemorate them? How to come to terms with calamitous loss, both material and personal? What to do about the demobilized soldiers of all kinds who continued to trouble civilian society in the war's aftermath?<sup>35</sup> What remained in a world shattered by civil war? And how were communities to be reconstituted, physically and imaginatively? All of these were urgent questions asked explicitly or implicitly by survivors, particularly in the devastated region constituted by southern Jiangsu, northern Zhejiang, and southeastern Anhui provinces. Such questions have not conventionally been asked or considered by scholars either in China or abroad, even though the Taiping movement has generated a voluminous historiography, particularly in Chinese. There is a profound disjuncture between the writings of survivors and how the war has been written about and remembered since its aftermath. Wartime suffering left searing memories in the Lower Yangzi region; and yet it is nearly completely absent from historical accounts that stress immanent nationalism, Christian influences, or failed modernity.

For most of the twentieth century, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was among the most studied subjects in the field of modern Chinese history as practiced in China.<sup>36</sup> Termed the "Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Revolutionary Movement" (Taiping tianguo geming yundong), the period inspired the creation of museums, compilation projects, oral histories, academic journals, and dedicated institutes. Researchers assiduously looked for, verified, organized, and published such Taiping materials that survived the dynasty's postwar efforts to extirpate all traces of the Taiping heterodoxy and gathered materials deemed representative of Qing and foreign perspectives. Their scholarly enthusiasm had a political dimension. Beginning in the early twentieth century, patriotic Chinese politicians and scholars identified the Taiping as a proto-nationalist antecedent to their own revolutionary ambitions.<sup>37</sup> Most famously, as a revolutionary and a Cantonese, Sun Yat-sen styled himself a latter-day Hong Xiuquan. Chiang Kai-shek first identified with the Taiping; later, as he began to promote his own program

of Confucian revivalism, he emphasized an affinity for Zeng Guofan. A Hunan native, Mao Zedong admired Zeng Guofan in his youth and only later developed an appreciation for Hong Xiuquan.<sup>38</sup>

Identification with the Taiping cause became politically orthodox after the 1949 Revolution; the Communist Party embraced the Taiping as their revolutionary predecessors and deliberately identified elements of their own revolution with a particular vision of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Prolific and influential scholars such as Luo Ergang built their careers on making a case for the progressive, patriotic, antifeudal, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary character of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. The Taiping took on tremendous explanatory power as the origin point for the revolutionary trajectory leading to Communist victory in 1949 and onward to the future. The Taiping were thus almost by necessity described as an authentic peasant movement that liberated women and redistributed land. In politically intense periods, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (particularly in the Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius), scholarship on the Taiping flourished as a way to comment on contemporary events or to criticize specific (contemporary) political figures.

Beginning in the 1890s, it also became conventional to excoriate individuals such as Zeng Guofan, the triumphant Hunan Army general who defeated the Taiping, as a traitor to the Han race for his loyalty to the Qing.<sup>39</sup> A century later, beginning in the 1990s, he has been, ambivalently rehabilitated along with Confucius as an exemplar of “national values,” as part of an officially promoted search for new sources of legitimacy in a world where loyalty to the current system partially trumps Han ethnic nationalism.<sup>40</sup> Even today, however, it is at least moderately transgressive to speak of the Taiping Revolutionary Movement as a civil war. To focus on damage and destruction challenges academic and political vested interests; over the past decade or so some scholars in China have begun to do so, but generally this represents a reversal of prevailing notions of right and wrong, “good” and “bad,” and a rejection of scholarly and political orthodoxy in the present.<sup>41</sup> Much political and academic capital has been invested in a positive evaluation of the Taiping movement. To focus on wartime destruction is understood as a negation of the Taiping movement as revolutionary and progressive, and as a critical statement about the post-1949 order.

Some of these scholarly predilections have been absorbed into English-language scholarship on the Taiping period, particularly of an earlier gen-

eration. The Taiping vision and its principal visionary loom large in this literature. Wartime damage and local experience figure more prominently in studies of particular places than in studies of the Taiping rebellion *per se*.<sup>42</sup> Cold War-era anti-Communist agendas dictated mirroring and appropriating the Chinese narrative of a Taiping Revolutionary Movement but reversed the conclusions from pro to con.<sup>43</sup> Instead of revolutionary and progressive, the Taiping followed a “fanatical religious faith,” their ideology was un-Chinese, their system was “primitive,” the leaders were “ruthless” and “self-indulgent,” and Hong Xiuquan was “clearly mentally ill,” while others in the leadership “used crude religious hoaxes to assert authority.”<sup>44</sup>

Feminist scholars by contrast embraced the Taiping as their own antecedents; they drew upon Chinese scholarship to locate a feminist utopia among the big-footed woman warriors who marched north out of Guangxi.<sup>45</sup> Also, because of their Christian inspiration, the Taiping attracted disproportionate attention among an earlier generation of Western scholars interested first in China’s potential conversion to Christianity or later in “Western impact” and “Chinese response.” The question of whether the Taiping religion should be understood as authentically Christian preoccupied missionaries, diplomats, and other observers who visited the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, and it has subsequently loomed large in scholarship on the period. It continues to dominate pedagogy about this period and occasionally resurfaces in the historiography.<sup>46</sup> By deliberate contrast, and probably influenced by Paul Cohen’s call (1984) for a “China-centered approach” to Chinese history, other scholars have located the origins of Taiping religious practice in the popular religions of South China. This research combines (to varying degrees) textual reading with ethnographic analysis.<sup>47</sup> Although these works may draw different conclusions regarding the Chinese or Christian basis of Taiping religious thought, many of them share a focus on the movement’s principal visionary and the nature and content of his religious vision or ideology.<sup>48</sup>

Rather than looking at the Taiping War against the backdrop of Modern Chinese History, and thus looking for what it has meant in terms of the history of the Chinese revolution(s), I seek to bring the questions and concerns of those who lived through these events into our understanding of this period. This book recalibrates our perspective on these events by de-centering the visionaries and generals and focusing on everyday experience. Survivors wrote of terrifying rumors, some of which proved horrifyingly true. They describe senses overwhelmed: a familiar world torn asunder, the

sound of ghosts and neighbors wailing, the stench of death, and the torment of mosquitoes. In a world dominated by moral confusion and loss, people sought to instantiate certainty, to inscribe allegiance, to reweave fraying confidence that the world as it had been could ever be restored. By making a place for individual suffering, loss, religiosity, and emotions, this book transforms our understanding of China's nineteenth century, recontextualizes our understanding of suffering and loss in China during the twentieth century, and invites comparison with war and political violence in other times and places.

Drawing upon published and manuscript sources in many genres, including local gazetteers, diaries, martyrologies, administrative documents, morality books, poetry collections, biographies, religious tracts, legal texts, diplomatic dispatches, travelers' tales, missionary reports, official and unofficial histories, and memoirs, this book captures a broad range of voices, although of course most of those who left written traces were people of at least modest education and social status. In so doing, this study calls attention to the contradictions between individual and local experience and the moralizing imperatives of state-sponsored accounts, whether during the late Qing or subsequently.

Some of the source materials that inform this study have been republished in modern, punctuated editions, while others remain available only in their original manuscript or block-printed form. Some have been disparaged in the Chinese historiography as incorrigibly pro-Qing and thus unreliable or unworthy of consideration except insofar as they provide support for the current conventional wisdom. However, many of the memoirs and diaries so classified in fact are surprisingly critical of the dynasty. In general, elitism and localism play a more important role than a pro-Qing stance; social contempt and native-place bias inform negative description of the Taiping as *déclassé* outsiders.<sup>49</sup> But there is much more in these sources than disdain for the rebels. Even in semiofficial sources and official documents, we find voices deploring destruction and atrocities committed by the state and its military agents. People made life-changing decisions for reasons of opportunism or survival, or because they had been captured and had no choice, rather than out of moral or political commitment. Their anger, whether at the dynasty, at their situation, at the rebels, or at all of the above, endures in searingly emotional and vivid accounts. There is compelling and consistent evidence of people switching allegiances and making complicated decisions in order to survive. The insistent postwar rhetoric of loyalty to

emperor and state papered over the deep tensions and fissures within the polity that had been exposed and expressed in wartime.

A smaller portion of the sources used in this book were produced by British and American travelers, diplomats, mercenaries, and missionaries who traveled through Taiping territory and commented in writing on what they saw there. Their presence in China helped make the Taiping War an event in world history; through them descriptions of the war were transmitted to a global audience. British parliamentarians debated the merits of neutrality with regard to the Chinese revolutionaries in relation to their stance on the American Confederacy.<sup>50</sup> Travel writers and missionaries donned “native dress” (including false queues) and reported on their experiences tromping through the Chinese countryside in what had become a requisite gesture of cross-cultural masquerade.<sup>51</sup> Other visitors described the war-torn landscape as a sportsman’s paradise, where they took advantage of opportunities afforded by the devastation to hunt pheasant, quail, hogs, musk deer, and ducks.<sup>52</sup> Foreign travelers had vested interests ranging from promoting trade to proselytizing Christianity to self-aggrandizement to trying to parse out their own national interest in the Chinese conflict.<sup>53</sup> Racial stereotypes and class consciousness inform their writing in many cases, sometimes in unexpected ways. Like their Chinese counterparts, they saw what they were conditioned to see and used established imagery, literary conventions, and analogies to articulate their experience. What they saw and what they wrote generally reflected what they already thought they knew and biases they inevitably held, not all of which, however, can be predicted on the basis of their status as “imperialists.” These foreign writers are not privileged here as “objective eyewitnesses” but rather incorporated into a mix of various perspectives on the war. They provide a counterpoint and thus resonance. They do not, however, provide us with a clear and neutral view.

Conventional categories from the historiography could not contain the unruly information found in the sources. An illustrated pamphlet narrating the war in pictures doubled as a fund-raising text informed by a passionately pro-Qing religious sensibility. The protestations of undying loyalty to dynasty and emperor expressed in gazetteers and shrines masked deep tensions among local, provincial, and metropolitan interests. Commemorative shrines and cemeteries honoring the dynasty’s dead turned out also to be tax shelters for local elites who sought to reduce their tax burden in the absence of rent-paying tenants. Practical functions and entertainment intruded into



ostensibly sacred spaces: aquaculture and birthday parties had to be banned, repeatedly, at shrines honoring the loyal and righteous. A late-nineteenth-century county gazetteer from Hunan celebrates the virtue of a righteous woman from Taiping-occupied Nanjing who killed the two Hunan Army men who abducted her, upending the conventional association between the dynasty and moral right. Philanthropists and activist elites formed spirit-talking circles to receive morality books from the gods. They listened for the divine, and sometimes for the dead, even as they used restoration and rebuilding to create an order that better served their collective interests. Their involvement in reconstruction not only was deeply self-interested, it was also inflected by a vibrant religious sensibility.

The things named in the chapter titles are meant to suggest the physicality and evanescence of lived experience and the power of emotions unleashed by loss. The chapters themselves highlight the tension between the centralizing imperatives of state-sponsored accounts and the intimate human details that could not be contained therein. Chapter Two, “Words,” introduces Yu Zhi, a charismatic pro-Qing preacher and writer who claimed to represent the dynasty to the populace; he found inspiration and explanation in the divine logic of reward and retribution. Previous scholarship has highlighted the role of activist local elites such as Yu Zhi in wartime mobilization and postwar reconstruction. This chapter focuses on another dimension of elite philanthropy and activism, illuminating how the religious heterodoxy of the Taiping movement was matched by a new religiously inflected vision of imperial orthodoxy.

The next three chapters focus on bodies: living, dead, and commemorated. Chapter Three, “Marked Bodies,” examines how wartime identities were articulated and apprehended through tattoos, hairstyle, and clothing. These signified absolute allegiance in a time of highly contingent affinities. And yet, they proved unreliable; even tattoos marked on a captive’s face could potentially be erased. A uniform or passport could be cast aside or swapped; a barber might be found to change a hairstyle to facilitate passing. For many, the war left indelible emotional scars, even after what had marked the body was cast aside or overwritten.

Chapter Four, “Bones and Flesh,” asks what happened to the dead in Jiangnan. Corpses carried a heavy burden of political symbolism; a landscape littered with dead bodies and bones signaled the profound failure of the ruling regime. Cannibalism, both rumored and real, further indicated that the communal bonds that undergirded society had come undone. In

a world seemingly stripped of its moral underpinnings, stories of corpses that had been lost and found or miraculously preserved bespoke the virtue of individual dead—or the families with whom their bodies were reunited. The act of burying the dead conferred legitimacy on provincial and local officials, or on the philanthropic organizations that joined the effort to properly dispose of bones and flesh.

Chapter Five, “Wood and Ink,” centers on efforts to commemorate the war dead in shrines and books. Through commemoration, the dynasty sought to rehabilitate and recapture the allegiance of communities exhausted by civil war. The dead were remembered as martyrs; wartime uncertainty and betrayal officially were overwritten with an insistent narrative of loyalty unto death and dynastic victory. And yet, strong feelings could not be contained. Commemoration at the same time became a vehicle for expressing very different affinities: local people asserted their duty to commemorate family members and neighbors, in wood in the form of shrines, or with ink on the pages of books—even as the victorious Hunan and Anhui armies sought to privilege the memory of their own dead. At all levels, in the war’s immediate aftermath, people sought imperial sanction to validate their efforts, even as they deployed the dynasty’s institutions to their own purposes.

Chapter Six, “Loss,” highlights one man’s efforts to honor his murdered mother in a peculiar memory text. Zhang Guanglie, an otherwise obscure man, deliberately invokes the structures of official commemoration only to declare them inadequate to represent or contain his memories and feelings. Zhang documents his own deeply personal quest for meaning and consolation in face of devastating loss. Wartime pain, moreover, eventually found expression through new media. Newspapers such as *Shenbao* transmitted stories and facilitated formation and mobilization of new types of community, in some cases grounded in bitter experience.

Violence and commemoration reshaped postwar communities and reconfigured how people understood the political and social worlds that they inhabited. Bodies, dead and alive, bore the physical marks of wartime experience. The Taiping inscribed the words “Taiping Heavenly Kingdom” on the faces of their captives; men pondered the political implications of hair. Corpses and coffins predictably were restored to grieving families under mysterious circumstances. Cannibalism provided a metaphor for social collapse; it also provided sustenance in devastated communities. The bodies of the righteous dead did not decompose; the spirit of a beloved sister returned after death to offer reassurance that she had died well. These stories suggest

the manifold and potentially lingering ways in which raw emotions and deep injury shaped people's relationships to their families, to the state, and to each other. Here, the sources are read close to the ground, below the lofty retrospective frameworks of dynastic loyalty and revolution in service to which they were later appropriated. By looking at how people in mid-nineteenth-century China came to terms with civil war, we gain a new perspective on their world, and perhaps on ours as well.