



2013-034

Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*. New York: Knopf, 2012. Pp. xxviii, 471. ISBN 978-0-307-27173-0.

Review by Cord Eberspächer, Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf (eberspaecher@yahoo.com).

The Taiping Rebellion was one of the bloodiest civil wars in history. It started with a revolt in southern China in the early 1850s. Initiated by the Hakka Hong Xiuquan, who believed he was the younger brother of Christ, the movement spread quickly and the Taiping armies conquered large parts of the Yangtze basin, making Nanjing their capital. Around 1860, the Taiping conquered Hangzhou and Suzhou in the east, threatened Wuchang in the west and even attacked Shanghai. The Qing Dynasty seemed lost and many Westerners believed the Taiping to be the founders of a new dynasty. Finally, the Taiping Tianguo, the “Heavenly Kingdom of the Great Peace,” was brought down by newly established militia armies, assisted by mercenaries under foreign command. Nanjing fell in 1864. The war left vast regions devastated and cost more than twenty million lives.

With his *Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom*, Stephen Platt (Univ. of Massachusetts, Amherst) has made the latest addition to the few books on the Taiping Civil War in western languages.¹ It is the best work on the subject since Jonathan Spence’s *God’s Chinese Son*.² Platt was inspired and encouraged by Spence. Their books are complementary, since they chose to highlight different persons and topics. Thus, for example, Spence writes at length on the Taiping Heavenly King, Hong Xiuquan, while Platt mentions him only briefly, concentrating instead on his cousin, Hong Reng’an, who played an important role in Taiping foreign relations.

Although Platt did not intend to write a comprehensive history of the Taiping civil war, he manages to show it from all sides—the Taiping, the imperialists, and the foreigners—mainly through a close look at Hong Reng’an, the Qing general Zeng Guofan, and the American mercenary Frederick Townsend Ward, among others. By showing the international dimensions of the war, he hopes “to illuminate the wider effects of the U.S. Civil War far beyond America’s borders”—a topic few educated Americans are familiar with.

The narrative revolves around two protagonists, Hong Reng’an and Zeng Guofan. Platt starts with Hong’s time in Hong Kong, where he worked with missionaries like the famous James Legge, a pioneer in the translation of the Chinese classics. He sets this account within the context of the rise of the Taiping movement and the Second Opium War (1856–60). We follow Hong from his time as a “preacher’s assistant” to his decision to join his cousin’s cause and travel to Nanjing. We learn about his appointment as a kind of Prime Minister, his ideas for China’s future development, and his hopes to secure western aid through his missionary friends. He was quite successful at first, as foreign visitors and residents relayed the Taiping’s version of the state of China to the outside world and many westerners started to think of them as a serious competitor to the seemingly moribund Qing. But this phase was short: in January 1862, the last missionary, the American Issachar Robert, left Hong after a quarrel:

The timing could hardly have been worse, coming just as the foreigners in Shanghai were bracing for the approach of Li Xiucheng’s armies. In such uncertain times, this was news to silence any voice that might speak in the rebels’ defense. Because for the time being, at least, it appeared that the Taiping’s most enlightened king—the gentle, round-faced darling of the foreign missionaries, the figurehead of a new regime to steer China into the global currents of the nineteenth century—had all along been nothing more than an illusion. And as the Shield King’s outer semblance dissolved into the ether, the dark being that stepped from the wings to assume its place was a monster, just like all of the others. (260)

1. He is also the author of *Provincial Patriots: The Hunanese and Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2007).

2. Subtitle: *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (NY: Norton, 1996).

Platt paints a similarly lively portrait of the head of the imperial efforts against the Taiping, Zeng Guofan. Despite assertions in contemporary Chinese biographies, Zeng was no military hero to start with, but an official and scholar with only vague ideas of how to wage war.

By February 1854, Zeng Guofan had thirteen battalions of land troops ready to fight, supported by ten naval battalions with a fleet of more than two hundred war boats, a hundred river junks bearing supplies, and one large, grand vessel for a flagship. But it turned out that as a tactical commander, the bookish Zeng Guofan was an utter disaster. He was physically inept and could barely ride a horse. After some small initial success in pushing the rebels northward out of Hunan that spring, a brutal series of defeats sent his forces scurrying back through the province all the way to its capital, Changsha, as the rebels overran territory he had thought was secure. (127)

Platt shows how desperate Zeng grew as the situation became increasingly hopeless. Indeed, the dynasty seemed to be at its end. Finally, persistence, not heroism or genius, brought the major turning point of the war, the siege of Anqing, which Zeng ultimately won, ignoring events in other theaters as well as orders from the imperial government (190–215).

Besides these brilliant personal narratives, Platt offers two innovative interpretations of the Taiping: the first is his characterization of the conflict as civil war. Hitherto, historians have spoken of the Taiping “rebellion” or “uprising,” implying an illegitimate movement against the rightful imperial government. Platt emphasizes that the war’s outcome was uncertain for several years and many contemporaries believed the Qing dynasty had reached the end of its dynastic cycle. But, he writes, the Taiping forestalled many elements typical of Chinese revolutionary movements near the end of the nineteenth century, for example, the claim to be fighting for the national cause of the Han Chinese against the degenerate and foreign Manchu.

The second innovative aspect of the book is Platt’s firm placement of the Taiping War in relation to the contemporary American Civil War. From summer 1861 onward, “Britain was trapped between the two wars” (232). As Platt convincingly demonstrates, in contrast to the benevolent neutrality of the British toward the Confederacy, in China they decided in favor of the Qing, forgoing the impartiality they had maintained since the early 1850s.

Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom is a wonderful combination of scholarship and readability. Those unfamiliar with the complex history of nineteenth-century China will find most helpful the various maps, detailed chronology of major events, and, most of all, helpful overview of the many actors who feature in the narrative. Though written for a wide audience, the book will prove invaluable for scholars of both the Taiping period and the late Qing Dynasty.