

Book Review

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Huan Jin,

The Collapse of Heaven: The Taiping Civil War and Chinese Literature and Culture, 1850-1880

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Huan Jin's *Collapse of Heaven* is an important and welcome addition to the study of the lasting cultural impact of the Taiping Civil War. Jin's study is distinguished by the great breadth, in both genre and perspective of the materials it discusses, ranging from the propaganda produced by both sides in the midst of the war to survivors' attempts to come to terms with their traumatic memories through direct records or fictional and dramatic recreations. The book lives up to the compelling metaphor of the title: this was a period in which the fundamental constants of the universe seemed suddenly upended.

Previous pathbreaking English-language work on the Taiping period

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and its aftermath has come from cultural historians, most importantly Tobie Meyer-Fong's *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China* (Stanford University Press, 2013). Meyer-Fong defines her task as "making a place for individual suffering, loss, religiosity, and emotions" in our understanding of the era, drawing on the voices included in "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" (15). Jin has a concern for similar themes, but the center of gravity for her sources shifts towards literature, broadly defined, overlapping with Meyer-Fong in scrutiny of memoirs, diaries, histories, and religious texts, but adding plays, novels, and strange tales.

Jin's work is thus not only a contribution to the study of the Civil War, but to Chinese literary history as a whole. Periodization as well as a master narrative of the decline of traditional literature and the rise of modern literature has resulted in the neglect of the period at the center of Jin's study. From the perspective of Ming-Qing literature it was dismissed as an era of decline, but nor does it belong to modern literature. David Der-wei Wang's argument about repressed modernities (*Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1848-1911*, Stanford University Press, 1997) has inspired reconsideration of the late Qing over the past several decades, but the period from 1880-1911 has still received greater attention than the years immediately preceding it.

Jin's chapters are structured both (loosely) chronologically, beginning with texts written during the war and moving to remembrances, and by genre. Part One, "Competing Visions of Heaven and Hell," deals with texts from the war years; Part Two, "Making Sense of the Present and the Past," with those composed afterwards. It is the latter part that relates more directly to Meyer-Fong's earlier study.

Chapter One begins with the Taipings' own texts. This is a bold and

significant choice in a book in which most of the other sources treat the rebels as an unknown and possibly inhuman force. Among all the understudied texts in the book these are the most neglected, first by the victorious Qing's control of the narrative, and then by the PRC's endorsement of the Taipings as revolutionary ancestors, which while celebrating them also simplified them, dismissing their religious convictions. One meaning of Jin's title is the way the Taipings actually redefined the central concept of *tian* 天 by using it as the translation for "God." She gives a thorough survey of two classes of texts, those that frequently appeared on lists of approved texts, and those that did not. She compares texts from different stages in their movement and charts the evolution of their ideology as they respond to external pressures and inner power struggles. As she observes, the Taipings' common use of vernacular language even for sacred and authoritative texts is a striking development. The most intriguing of these texts, and the one she uses to close her chapter, is the *Taiping Heavenly Chronicle* 太平天日, the only history of their movement written by the Taipings themselves, which however remains incomplete.

The second chapter turns to the Qing side's response to the Taiping challenge. Jin shows how the ostensibly conservative use of ideas of damnation in service of imperial ideology was in fact revolutionary. The central text is *Miraculous Proofs of the Sacred Edict* 聖諭靈徵, a combination of moral maxims from the Kangxi Emperor as well as popular ideas of retribution and infernal punishment coming out of popular traditions of religious tracts and morality books. It claimed authority through prefaces attributed to various divine beings. The bulk of the book is composed of scenes of wrongdoers' interrogations and judgments in Hell. Didactic works teaching traditional morality have often not been the focus of scholarly attention, dismissed as boring or simplistic; Jin reveals their complexity. Jin's discussion on changing ideas about moral instruction during and after the war could be productively brought into dialogue with Katherine L. Alexander's forthcoming monograph on the moralist Yu Zhi's 余治 (1809-1874) works in popular performance

genres (*Teaching and Transformation: Yu Zhi and Popular Confucian Literature in the Late Qing*). In the conclusion Jin points out the features shared between the Taipings and the Qing in terms of moral absolutism and the focus on punishment, and drew on some of the same popular texts for their ideas of righteous heroes wielding justified violence.

The third chapter turns from these collective visions of hell to individuals' experiences of survival of what often seemed like hell on earth. Her central text is the diary of an otherwise virtually unknown man, Shen Zi 沈梓 (1833-1888), recording the events of 1860-1864 in his hometown of Puyuan, Zhejiang. Introducing this book, which survives in a single manuscript copy in a provincial library (Jiaxing), to the world is one of Jin's greatest contributions. Although, as she describes in the introduction of the chapter, many personal accounts of wartime experiences survive, Shen's is unique in its material traces of the process of recording and revising memory. As it was written on scraps of paper pasted into account books as well as includes both brief notes on events and later expansions of those notes, Jin's study allows the reader to apprehend how memories were literally stitched together in the most material sense, looking at revision over periods of historical distance. An instructor wishing to lead a seminar on personal memory of the Taipings could effectively assign this alongside Xiaofei Tian's translation of Zhang Daye's 張大野 (b. 1854) memoir, *The World of a Tiny Insect* (University of Washington Press, 2014).

The second half of the book turns to three literary genres: the vernacular novel, drama, and the classical tale. With its emphasis on individual construction of experiences of those trapped between the absolutist ideologies of the two sides, the chapter on Shen Zi's memories seems to me to fit better with the second half of the book than the first, though that would have disrupted the symmetry of three chapters each.

Chapter Four discusses the literati novel *Traces of Flowers and the Moon* 花月痕. Recalling Shen Zi's stages of revision, there are sections of this largely autobiographical novel written both during and after the war, but

the stitching together is more concealed. Jin unearths them by looking at the same poems in the context of the author Wei Xiuren's 魏秀仁 (1818-1873) poetry collection and the novel. The central concept of the novel is "traces," figures of attachment to the lost. Wei attempts to use the literary models of *Dream of the Red Chamber* 紅樓夢 and *Peach Blossom Fan* 桃花扇, but ultimately is unable to do so. While Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (ca. 1715-1764) could completely recall a lost ideal world, Wei can only recall shards of that world (166). "Daoist enlightenment and female virtues symbolic of political integrity in *The Peach Blossom Fan* appear only as residual fragments in *Traces of Flowers and the Moon*" (175). The part of the novel written after the end of the war turns to supernatural wish fulfilment, with female forces on both sides. The autobiographical self is both a banished immortal and a ghost. The writers attempt to apply the models learned from texts documenting the Ming-Qing transition (ways of which often fail); "it is a world both fragmented and worn out" (203).

After the focus on the individual in the previous two chapters, the chapter on drama is subtitled "The Reinvention of Community." The passions on stage that have previously received the most attention are desire and longing, with *Peony Pavilion* 牡丹亭 at the center (for a classic study, see chapter two, "The Late Ming Moment," in Wai-yee Lee's *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature*, Princeton University Press, 1993). Jin turns instead to how rage and violence are written in the plays working through the Taiping trauma. The play at the center of her analysis, *Karmic Ties in a Dream* 夢中緣 is the longest of the group, centering on five sworn brothers waging righteous war against the bandits. She delineates the play's attempts to emulate the model of *Peach Blossom Fan* in rendering history as drama and the ways in which that model falls short. Jin pays attention not only to the plays themselves, but to their paratexts. The prefaces and laudatory verses reveal a network of playwrights engaged in a communal endeavor to make sense of their experience. For both the sworn brothers within the play and the community of

writers outside of it, “karmic ties” 緣, as concrete human connection, is the only thing they can hold onto in a world unmade.

Chapter Six, “Fantasies: Transcendence and Defiance,” studies classical language narratives, with *Strange Tales from Liao Studio* 聊齋誌異 as their most influential predecessor, by Wang Tao 王韜 (1828-1897) and Xuan Ding 宣鼎 (1832-1880). Xuan Ding’s tales have been understudied overall, and only those of Wang Tao’s tales that depict Europe and Westerners have received consistent critical attention. Jin compares Xuan and Wang as representing tradition and modernity, respectively, in their moral stances and attitudes towards the supernatural, but at the same time shows how both are equally influenced by the new print environment of the late nineteenth century. She explores how the two use two central themes of the strange tale tradition, ghosts and escaping to transcendent worlds, to think through the Taiping trauma and its alternatives.

In her conclusion, she discusses a well-chosen and suggestive tale from Xuan Ding’s collection. A shipwrecked Confucian scholar becomes a teacher to demons trapped in a cave on a distant island. Later, the demons are reborn as the Taiping rebels wreaking havoc, but they meet their teacher again and honor him. The ambiguity of this tale, with the affective tie of teacher and student remaining when teaching has had no effect, undermines the absolutes of the Qing and Taiping visions discussed in the opening chapters.

The genre missing from Jin’s picture, with the greatest need to be studied in her own or other scholar’s future work, is poetry. She does discuss poetry in its relation to other genres, but there are large bodies of poetry written during and after the rebellion still largely untouched by research. How did the limitations of applying received literary models to unprecedented times work out in those literary spaces?

Jin’s consideration of Taiping texts in the context of all the anti-Taiping works is a significant contribution. It is a limitation of the extant sources rather than her work that the perspective of the ordinary Taiping soldier, rather than

the leadership, remains largely elusive. There is a related geographic imbalance in the sources: much of what we have documents the experience when the war came to Jiangnan, rather than at its place of origin in Guangxi.

Neither of these points are shortcomings of the present volume, but rather proof of the enormous scope of the conversation Jin has started. *Collapse of Heaven* is a masterful study of great breadth, based on impeccable and ambitious library work. It is an important milestone along the path to having scholarship on this period stand on equal ground with that studying the Ming-Qing transition and the revolutions of the twentieth century, and confirms that any attempt to understand Chinese culture's transition to the modern without study of the Taiping war and its long aftermath would be incomplete.

