Concurrent with the American Civil War, the Taiping Rebellion in mid-nineteenth-century China was a civil war on a much larger scale, resulting in far heavier human cost—20 million lives are believed to have been lost in the era due to both the Taiping war and other rebellions. The past scholarship, however, has seldom focused on the victims of civil war, although the damages to the Qing dynasty’s economy have been generally acknowledged. Meyer-Fong’s book is arguably the first attempt to reconstruct the experience of millions of people caught in civil war in the Yangzi River delta, i.e., the Jiangnan region. Meanwhile, it also sheds light on another topic that has been largely overlooked, namely commemoration of the war dead.

After the Taiping rebels captured Nanjing in 1853 and set up their capital there, for some years they concentrated on securing their territorial holdings in the upper Yangzi valley. Not until 1860 did the Taiping armies turn south-eastward to the Yangzi River delta. Militarily brilliant, those expeditions nevertheless inflicted unprecedented havoc on the densely populated and most productive region in China. For nearly five years, many affluent cities and towns in the region were attacked or occupied by the Taiping, or changed hands repeatedly. Hundreds of thousands of people either were killed or committed suicide, while even more were dislocated, separated from their family members, and struggling for survival either as captives or refugees. Rescuing the civil war’s human dimension from the state of being “strategically forgotten,” Meyer-Fong lets the victims speak for themselves. In the chapter “The Words,” she tells how Yu Zhi, a school teacher in Wuxi, tried to make sense of the catastrophe by turning to religiosity. Through Yu’s writings and a pictorial pamphlet to document war suffering that he compiled, Meyer-Fong reveals how the disaster reinforced the local elites’ reckoning on moral rectification, which in turn reinvigorated their philanthropic passions. In the following two chapters, “Marked Bodies” and “Bones and Flesh,” she examines how the war affected individuals personally and intimately. They had to change their hair style and way of dressing, sometimes repeatedly as their areas were under see-saw battle between the two sides. They had to decide either to live as captives or end their lives by committing suicide. If they died, their dead bodies might have ended up being sold to and eaten by hungry survivors, or been exposed in the open air for a long time before being buried in mass graves. When narrating their experiences, Meyer-Fong always provides historical and cultural contexts
to illustrate what those people would have otherwise done in making their
hair, dressing themselves, burying the dead and so on. The contrasts between
the norms in peacetime and the grisly scenarios in civil war are tragically pow-
erful. This book makes it difficult for anyone who studies the Taiping war to
take its huge collateral casualties only in statistical terms.

In the last two chapters, Meyer-Fong discusses commemoration of the war
dead in Jiangnan, the other main theme of the book. The chapter “Wood and
Ink” examines collective projects sponsored by the state, provincial leaders,
and the local elites, such as collecting and investigating victims’ names and
stories, building shrines, and compiling martyrologies. Meyer-Fong offers here
piercing analysis of the symbolic meanings imbedded in those commemora-
tive activities; the war dead were consumed in helping the Qing dynasty mend
its shattered legitimacy. Meanwhile, she shows eloquently how the local elites
took advantage of those state-sanctioned activities to serve their personal and
community interests. In doing so, Meyer-Fong adds a new dimension to what
has been common knowledge that the civil war helped provincial leaders,
some of whom had led the war, to expand their power and influence at the cost
of the central government, and that the local elites became more assertive in
articulating their local identity and protecting their own interests. Nevertheless,
with the end of the Qing dynasty in 1912, all the commemorative efforts became
obsolete when the new Republic had its own martyrs to honor. The last chap-
ter, “The Loss,” is devoted to individuals’ remembrance of the catastrophe in
Jiangnan. Centering on one individual, Zhang Guanglie, who was a small boy
when his home city, Hangzhou, was captured by the Taiping armies and his
mother was killed by the Taiping in front of him, Meyer-Fong points to the
lingering trauma even decades away from the event. Zhang was certainly not
alone. In the late nineteenth century, memoirs and commemorative writings
by the victims multiplied. And they did not always follow the lines set by the
dynasty in perceiving the catastrophes.

An advantage of studying the Taiping civil war is that there are enormous
amounts of materials left from the era and after. In addition to the Taiping
publications and documents, the Qing records, and semiofficial local gazet-
teers, there are large numbers of private records ranging from memoirs, dia-
aries, commemorative essays, and miscellaneous notes to poetry. Moreover,
many foreign missionaries, businessmen, and diplomats were eyewitnesses to
the civil war; some of them even participated in the war on one side or the
other. Delving into her numerous sources, some of which have not been often
used, Meyer-Fong has salvaged many stories of civil war’s collateral casualties,
which had been neglected by historians satisfied with crude statistics or dreary
generalizations. Her noble effort not only enriches the scholarship on the