The Collapse of Heaven: The Taiping Civil War and Chinese Literature and Culture, 1850–1880. By Huan Jin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2024. Pp. 360. $59.95.

In this book, the author surveys different types of writings to argue that the trauma resulting from the violent upheaval of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (*Taiping tianguo* 太平天國), or the Taiping civil war, gave rise to new modes of sentiment and expression that mark the beginning of Chinese literary modernity. We should probably qualify this by limiting this claim to male elite literary writing, since no writing by women is covered. This is not intended as a criticism, but some research on the topic does exist, for instance by Susan Mann and Grace Fong.[1] Huan Jin's discussions of post-civil war literary change are detailed and insightful, and for me the most important contribution of this book. In this review I will presume basic knowledge of the Taiping movement and the civil war. I will focus on those aspects where I think more research and fine-tuning can be done, but I should state very clearly that as a social historian of religion I enjoyed reading this book with its literary perspective very much and learned a lot.

The author starts by discussing a number of texts which have been produced on the Taiping movement itself (Chapter One). Here she places the interpretation of Thomas H. Reilly central, which is, as Joseph Esherick pointed out already at the time, extremely selective and teleological (one might even say theological).[2] As I will argue further below, the precise details of his, the author's, or indeed my own interpretations of Taiping lore do not matter that much to the core of this book, which is about the literary response to the trauma of massive civil war violence, rather than an intellectual or theological

[1] Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Grace S. Fong, "Signifying Bodies: The Cultural Significance of Suicide Writings by Women in Ming-Qing China" on the poetic writings by Huang Shuhua 黃淑華 (1847–1864), in Paul Ropp, Paola Zamperini, and Harriet T. Zurndorfer, eds., *Passionate Women: Female Suicide in Late Imperial China* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 105–42, esp. 121–28.

[2] Joseph W. Esherick, "Review of Thomas H. Reilly. *The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom: Rebellion and the Blasphemy of Empire*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2004," *The American Historical Review* 110.5 (2005): 1498–99. I leave my criticisms at that.

response to Taiping beliefs. The author discusses a number of Taiping texts, which is one possible selection and others could have been made as well. What is important is how she discusses them in detail, pointing out how they adopted competing imperial formats and made ample use of printing. I could add that this is the first "rebellion" (including the successful ones that founded a new dynasty till the twentieth century) that made such an intensive use of printed propaganda.[3] While the author is quite right that the Taipings expected their followers to be aware of the new ritual practices and theological contents, having produced substantial printed propaganda to this effect, it is much less clear (and in fact quite unlikely) that these followers "received" this propaganda in the way that it was intended. Perhaps unavoidably, this book also does not solve that dilemma. One thing that the female writers studied by Susan Mann complained about, following male authors with the same point of view, was: "The long-haired rebels want us to call our father 'brother,' and they would have your uncle call his daughters 'sister.' If a wife calls her husband 'brother,' how could she possibly sleep with him? These barbaric outlaws will put an end to the family forever!"[4] While not a theological response to the Taipings, it certainly was a social or moralistic one.

Particular attention is devoted to the case of Zhou Xineng 周錫能 (d. 1851) and the role of possession of Taiping co-leader Yang Xiuqing 楊秀清 (1823–1856) by the Heavenly Father (pp. 45–48). One suspects that this is also because this specific case is a well-known topic of Chinese-language studies of the practice of possession by the Taipings. The numerous possession records of the movement are not fully analysed, or the author would not have made the claim that "some of the followers . . . experienced a series of 'spirit possessions' in which they believed they had directly experienced God and Jesus Christ" (p. 38). An important dimension was that a number of claims of possession by not-so-Christian divine beings were also made. These happened in Hong Xiuquan's 洪秀全 (1814–1864) absence, and so the two particular claims could

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[3] I see this as an expression of the same late imperial development as the increased printing of morality books, referenced further below. See my "The Religious Program of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace," in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), https://oxfordre.com/religion/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-733.

[4] Mann, *The Talented Women*, p. 160.

no longer be stopped, resulting in the rise of two competing leaders, the voice of Jesus in Yang Xiuqing and of the Heavenly Father (~God) in Xiao Chaogui 蕭朝貴 (*c.* 1820–1852). Rather than seeing these as sources of cohesion, these spirit possessions sowed the seeds of discord culminating in the 1856 massacre of Yang's faction.[5] Contemporary descriptions are quite right to call this a rebellion inspired by both Hong Xiuquan and Yang Xiuqing, rather than only the first.

A closer look at these very detailed possession records would also have allowed the author to provide a better dating for the identification of the Manchus as devils (i.e., *yao* 妖). First of all, I would turn this statement around, since devils had been a threat in Hong's original vision and an important part of Rudolf Wagner's 1981 famous study of the vision was that the interpretation of these devils (*yao*) evolved from ancestors and local deities to Manchus only later on. Secondly, it is quite likely that the first identification dates back to the military struggle to break out of the Manchu army encirclement in the late simmer of 1850. At this point, both the Punti enemy and the Manchu armies in question were already referred to with the term devil.[6]

One of the most original contributions of the book is the use of the *Miraculous Proofs of the Sacred Edict* (*Shengyu lingzheng* 聖諭靈徵) to analyse the counterpropaganda of the Qing dynasty. The author describes in much detail how this text used narrative of visits to hell to demonstrate the evil nature of the Taipings. Her discussions are detailed and fascinating, as a reflection of what at least one anonymous author thought about the Taipings and moral issues in general. Whether he represented "the" Qing might be another matter; the author shows later on that the journalist and missionary chief-assistant Wang Tao 王濤, for instance, had quite different ideas. As a genre the text derives from a longer tradition of morality books that had flourished in particular since the last few decades of the Ming dynasty and continued

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[5] Barend J. ter Haar, "China's Inner Demons: The Political Impact of the Demonological Paradigm," in Woei Lien Chong, ed., *China's Great Proletarian Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 27–68.

[6] Barend J. ter Haar, "The Demonological Framework of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace," in Margo Kits, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Religion and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 428–42, esp. 437–38.

to do so with enormous fervour throughout the Qing dynasty and after. The author provides this historical context of morality teaching, but her use of the notion of "popular" is a bit misleading. She compares the genre with Precious Scroll (*baojuan* 寶卷) recitation (pp. 87–88), but these are really very different customs—at least until the latter practice was taken over by late Qing moralist reformers. The Precious Scroll was in essence a bottom-up phenomenon, in which literacy attained by people outside the examination system trajectory used writing to fix and then spread their religious ideas in a format akin to Buddhist sutras. These texts were typically recited collectively. Morality books were usually short treatises, which could be published separately, but were often put into larger anthologies. They were part of a top-down didactic movement to inculcate local people with elite moral values. Here an important omission is the 1960 standard work by Hsiao Kung-ch'üan, who was part of the exodus of Chinese scholars after 1949 who then formed a crucial generation in the growth of post–World War II Chinese studies in the USA.[7] His book was an important source of information for my own work on the same topic, in my study of the Lord Guan 關帝 cult which is briefly referred to by the present author.

In the author's discussion of the belief in punishment in Hell for moral (and other) misdeeds, we see a lack of background knowledge on Chinese religious culture. I completely agree that there is much common ground between the Qing on a leadership level, lower elites, local communities, and the Taipings, for instance in thinking about moral retribution. Chapter Two fleshes this out on the basis of miracle stories in the above collection which were explicitly directed at Taiping followers (esp. pp. 98–104). There is much to be learned in reading this chapter and it was fun learning about underworld trials against Taiping followers, but some corrections must be made: The claim that the "Buddhist image of Hell . . . spread through the mediation of the popular tract *Jade Records*" (p. 75), in particular, is surprising to say the least. It is Buddhism that introduced a violent underworld to China in the first place, and this took place long before the Sui and Tang dynasties. Further innovations, especially the belief in the Ten Kings, took place later on (as shown by Stephen

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[7] Kung-chuan Hsiao (Xiao Gongquan 蕭公權, 1897–1981), *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1960).

Teiser, who is in fact referenced in the book), but underworld beliefs as such were old and widespread.[8] During funerary rituals as well as Water and Land Gathering rituals throughout the centuries, paintings of the Ten Kings and their respective underworld would be displayed prominently (I have one hanging next to my bedroom as a reminder). It could also be performed, for instance by shadow puppeteers with their greater flexibility in creating images of the underworld than real life acting.[9] The underworld was graphically depicted in the temples for the Eastern Marchmount and the City God. In a religious world based largely on oral culture, the rise of written texts such as the *Jade Records* (*Yuli baochao* 玉歷寶鈔) introduced an additional dimension, but not one of substance. Generally, we have to be really cautious in gauging the real impact of textual propaganda in traditional China.

Hell was depicted in a very gruesome manner in the *Miraculous Proofs* (pp. 93–98), but the claim that this means, according to the book, "Qing society in the mid-nineteenth century . . . could be regarded as a literal living Hell" (p. 98) is a step too far for me. I have argued elsewhere that the excessive (at least to a Northwestern European reader) violence we see in narrative as well as visual depictions of the underworld was also a rhetorical strategy.[10] It was not intended to reflect society in a conventional descriptive manner, but of course it does provide plenty of information on how people viewed their lives. If we do wish to conclude from the descriptions in the *Miraculous Proofs* that at least the author of this book had a dim view of his times, then this would have been true for many centuries before given the prevalence of descriptions of visits to hell and its importance in narrative literature (think of Tang Emperor Taizong's visit to hell in the *Journey to the West*).[11] We have to be careful in presuming

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[8] For a study of early depictions, see Costantino Moretti, "Scenes of Hell and Damnation in Dunhuang Murals," *Arts Asiatiques* 74 (2019): 5–30.

[9] Frank Kouwenhoven and Antoinet Schimmelpenninck, "The *Guo Guan* Ritual Shadow Play of Huanxian," in Maghiel van Crevel, Tian Yuan Tan, and Michel Hockx, eds., *Text, Performance, and Gender in Chinese Literature and Music: Essays in Honor of Wilt Idema* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 361–88, esp. 372, 375–76.

[10] Barend J. ter Haar, *Religious Culture and Violence in Traditional China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 37–49.

[11] Depictions date back to the late Tang dynasty, but also see the wonderful website by Kenneth Brashier, http://www.hellscrolls.org/ (accessed 5 October 2025).

that gruesome depiction directly reflected someone's perceptions of it, rather than moralistic religious views and propaganda.[12]

A central claim of the Chapter Two is that by evoking the authority of the god of literature and culture (Wenchang 文昌) and Lord Guan, the *Miraculous Proofs* opens up "a hermeneutic space that is potentially subversive to Qing state ideology; its publication is part of the long process of decentralization extending to Qing frontiers in the nineteenth century" (pp. 69–70), with a reiteration towards the end of the chapter (pp. 107–8). Of course, we know that the Qing eventually fell apart, although it did so more than half a century after the Taiping civil war. But how did the *Miraculous Proofs* contribute to that kind of result? I am not certain, and the topic is not really investigated in this book, but only stated. Both deities are the authors of earlier morality books as well as throughout the Qing dynasty. Lord Guan could be worshipped by the Triads as well as ordinary communities in the north praying for rain, and by both soldiers and traders in most urban centres. In the course of the nineteenth century, a new dispensation was created in which Lord Guan replaced the Jade Emperor, which became influential among spirit writing religious movements in- and outside imperial control. He helps people facing the disasters of the end of time in another important genre of late imperial and Republican period texts. The belief that decentralization weakens the state is also just an a priori, and frankly rather undemocratic belief. After all, countries like the USA, Germany, or Switzerland are decentralized in many respects, but are we willing to argue that therefore they are weak? Incidentally, this kind of "hermeneutic space" always existed in traditional China with the abundance of narrative reworkings of historical events, in oral folklore, vernacular literary traditions, as well as literary Chinese historiography, let alone religious traditions.

Supporting local cults was a conscious strategy of the Qing after the Taiping civil war (p. 81, and numerous examples in my own work on Lord Guan), but this was hardly a new phenomenon at all. Precisely because local

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[12] A good example of this is the author's use of a gruesome anecdote at the beginning of Chapter Three as if it reflects a real event, rather than gossip. A similar example were the claims of Iraqi cruelty at the beginning of the Kuwait War of 1990, which continued to be transmitted even though patently false. See the thorough study by Human Right's Watch, https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/k/kuwait/kuwait922.pdf (accessed 5 October 2025). Throughout the book a bit more scepticism about the various accounts would have been in place.

cults were supported by local communities (p. 81, n. 39) and provided them with an identity, supporting these cults was an effective way of gaining local traction. Valerie Hansen already showed this for the late eleventh century, when she sees a considerable increase in the bestowal of official titles to local deities.[13]

One of the numerous strong points in this book is its attention to the material dimension of the books under investigation, as well as the use of language, or rather different languages, from classical or literary Chinese to vernacular (I presume *guanhua* 官話 or the bureaucratic lingua franca is meant here) and local dialect. I did not have access to the *Miraculous Proofs of the Sacred Edict*, so I cannot judge that book for myself, but I am not certain that the occurrence of the odd dialect expression justifies the claim that a book is written (at least partly) in a local dialect (e.g., p. 69). I have had little problems reading various kinds of Taiping publications, including texts based on possession seances of the Heavenly King and the Heavenly Elder Brother, which suggests to me that they were not written in any Hakka dialect (which I certainly cannot speak). When confronted with known Hakka or Cantonese speakers or written texts, I generally run into big difficulties and need outside assistance. Since reading a text aloud in a dialect, bureaucratic vernacular, or literary Chinese would have important implications for its presumed audience, this is an important detail.

With Chapter Three the author turns to the textual productions of educated elites, rather than the Taipings (although lower literati other than Hong Xiuquan himself will also have made important contributions to the Taiping printed corpus) or the Qing state (or rather the unknown author of the *Miraculous Proofs*). Whereas the previous chapters have dealt with texts directed at the Taipings or their potential followers, the following chapters deal with texts directed at the educated male elite. The first elite text to be discussed is the *Diary of Escape from the Rebels* (*Bikou riji* 避寇日記) by Shen Zi 沈梓 (1833–1888). It is a detailed and truly fascinating account both in terms of the diary's depiction of the upheaval itself and the diary's materiality, which allows the author to reconstruct the process whereby Shen Zi reorganized and restructured his memories over time. Part of it was the general suffering of him and his family, but also how he dealt with his survivor's guilt—a common trauma of those who have lost their dearest in violent upheavals, which also turns up in the

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[13] Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 79–104. I discuss the phenomenon myself in my book on Lord Guan, which is also referenced by the author.

later chapters of the present book. As far as I could tell Shen Zi does not reflect on the actual contents of Taiping propaganda as discussed in Chapter One, but most of all on the traumatic impact of the events on his own life.

A very different literary product is discussed in Chapter Four, with the novel *Traces of Flower and the Moon* (*Huayuehen* 花月痕) by Wei Xiuren 魏秀仁 (1818–1873). As the author points out, this novel is strongly influenced by the author's personal experiences of the Taiping civil war, and one should add the Qing administrative follow-up. He describes the lives of two couples who were forced apart during the violent events, which was all-too-common at the time—and one might add in preceding upheavals such as the loss of the north by the Song to the Jurchen Jin, which left its traces for instance in the famous anecdotal collection of Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202), *The Record of the Listener* (*Yijianzhi* 夷堅志). Before the rise of the increasingly autobiographical literati novel in the eighteenth century (p. 164), telling anecdotes with or without ghosts was an important means of dealing with past trauma as well. One way in which this particular novel became a very personal document is the incorporation of a large number of Wei's poems (half of the poems in the novel), rewriting them a bit to fit the literary context (pp. 159–164). Sometimes, the author reverts to historical stereotyping, for instance when she copies all standard topoi about the moral decline of the late Ming. These decades were a period of tremendous social change and economic growth and therefore experienced by some ideological-minded contemporary and subsequent authors as corrupt, supposedly leading to the fall of this last indigenous dynasty. Moral decline is always an ideological claim, not a sociological reality. She links this putative late Ming moral decline to autobiographical writing (p. 169ff), with the examples of Mao Qiling 毛奇齡 (1623–1716), whom I would see as an early Qing writer, and Wang Zhi 王直 (1379–1462), whom I would label as a mid-Ming writer at best.

Reflecting my personal academic interests, I was intrigued by Wei Xiuren's construction of the civil war in his novel as "fundamentally based on supernatural power and magical tricks," with the "real . . . as fantastic as the surreal" (p. 179). While this may well be true, Wei Xiuren was also in a very old tradition in which novelists rewrote historical events as the result of the involvement of ritual experts (often translated by us today as "magicians," which gets the pejorative context but not the actual meaning of the underlying Chinese terms). Wang Ze 王則 (d. 1048) in 1047–1048 (*Pingyaozhuan* 平妖傳) and Tang Saier 唐賽兒 (fl. early 15th century) in 1420 (*Nüxian waishi* 女仙外史) are only two examples from a much larger number. The same approach

is still visible in the stories about the female Red Lanterns during the Boxer upheaval of 1900, which were also quite fictional, but eagerly believed by historians.[14] The existence of such predecessors raises the question to what extent we can interpret the framing story by Wei Xiuren as an individual authorial choice or not. My own understanding of this type of "magical" framing is that it intends to explain the baffling initial success of this kind of unrest (rebellion, civil war) in an ideal state in which the rulers have received the Mandate of Heaven.

In the same chapter, with more discussion of similar topoi in Chapter Six, the author interprets the account by Wei Xiuren of the death of a young woman, who appears as a nude ghost covered in blood. For the author this is "a new kind of imagination about gender and violence" (p. 191ff). It is actually hard to be certain about this claim without further research into earlier anecdotes about rape and other forms of violence. In the anecdotal genre at least (which are after all intended as descriptions of reality, even if we often dismiss them as untrue), stories about ghosts covered in blood are common and they also sometimes appear without clothes.[15] In other words, these two aspects can be both true (the horrors of the civil war were very real, from both sides) and still serve as rhetorical tools. But they did so for a long time already. In all of these materials (and also see the present book, p. 207ff) the presumed fate of women is used as a metaphor for the suffering and chaos of a period.

After the more individual descriptions of their personal experiences by Shen Zi in his diary and Wei Xiuren in his novel (and poems), the author proceeds in Chapter Seven with a discussion of a number of plays, which drew a big literati audience. She sees this as a "reinvention of community," but if that is the case it is the idealized community of literate elites.[16] One theme of

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14 Unpublished research of Chen Chengyu (a former Ph.D. student of mine) and myself.

15 As becomes apparent from my go-to source for this, the above-mentioned *Yijianzhi* (the standard edition is Zhonghua shuju (Beijing, 1981), but I have a Word-version as well for easy searching) and similar collections. Moreover, we can safely assume that the murdered victims of rape were often nude and covered in blood in real life as well.

16 For a non-elite attempt to restore a sense of community, see my *Practicing Scripture: A Lay Buddhist Movement in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2014), pp. 190–92, and the more detailed original account on Pan Sanduo 潘三多 and his religious reform inspired by the Taiping civil war.

the post-Taiping plays is the violent sacrifices made by the Qing side, especially on the local level (pp. 210–18, but also elsewhere in the book). The chapter deals in great detail with a broad range of theatrical material to examine how violence is depicted and used analytically in these plays. One of the many interesting points is how in post–civil war literature, women have a degree of agency as military leaders and killers of Taiping rebels (p. 217ff), although even then this is very much an agency in male writing hands. It could be connected to another phenomenon—that of female suicides to preserve their honour.[17] Although women here too had a certain agency, like all suiciders during the civil war they did so in part within a discourse strongly determined by men. Like a play and writing a variety of paratexts for it, a suicide also contributed to a community, albeit only of its survivors who could mourn and celebrate an honorable death.

The final empirical chapter, Chapter Six, takes us into the realm of fantasy through stories of the strange. The author argues that these stories were a means of negotiating issues of identity, gender, morality, and traumatic memories (p. 246ff). I am myself not entirely certain that this is necessarily a new phenomenon, since people have always been telling stories and at some point some educated men (mostly) also started writing them down—that is to say when and where such potential authors were around, since stories of trauma otherwise remained oral.[18] This is still true in China today. At least one function of such stories would have been to deal with fears and trauma, but also topics that one could otherwise not write about. At any rate, if we want to make a case that something changed we would surely need to talk or write more elaborately what had come before in terms of stories of the strange.

Similarly, while I am happy to believe that morality is advocated as a remedy for the war-torn reality of post–civil war times in drama and ghost stories alike (p. 256), is this really new? Literate elites have been concerned with moral behaviour throughout the Chinese history and we can easily presume that for local communities as well. Moral retribution runs deep in all forms of anecdotal writing from very early (often Buddhist!) writing onwards. What does seem to be new is the increased publication since the early seventeenth

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[17] There is a huge literature, but the topic is touched upon for instance by Tobie Meyer-Fong, *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in 19th Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 109–12 and 143–45.

[18] Even though writing about post-1949 trauma is largely forbidden, that does not mean it does not exist.

century of different genres for measuring and propagating morality, first in the form of the so-called Morality Books (*shanshu* 善書) and Ledgers of Merit and Demerit (*gongguoge* 功過格), and later also lectures on morality connected to the proclamation of the Sacred Edict (eventually giving rise to such books as the *Miraculous Proofs* discussed earlier). Could it be that a new taste for moralizing propaganda entered from there into the writings of Xuan Ding 宣鼎 (1832–1880) and Wang Tao 王韜 (1828–1897), which are the focal point of this chapter? Xuan Ding thought that he owed his life to the recitation of the quintessential morality book *Tract on Divine Action and Response* (*Taishang ganyingpian* 太上感應篇) as well as Buddhist sutras (p. 249). Wang Tao became a Protestant, which is never mentioned in the book and, as Paul Cohen suggests, he may not have been a very "good" Christian. But he lived most of his working life in the close surroundings of extremely moralistic missionaries (not least the figure of James Legge himself). He also engaged himself quite actively in advising the Qing government on their fight against the Taipings, based on a real knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, something that then got him into trouble with the government.[19]

A good approach of looking at the way in which religious beliefs involved moralizing is the fear of the Wutong 五通 deities in the Lower Yangtze region, as analysed by Richard von Glahn.[20] He taught me (and many of us) how the stories about the fickle deity and his tendency to give wealth and then take it away again on a whim reflected people's apprehensions about the instability of monetary wealth. I would add to this that these stories also reflected moral disapproval about someone who got richer than the rest of the community. One of Xuan Ding's stories about silver taels turning into toads (pp. 273–75)[21] fits perfectly into this interpretation, meaning that it reflects traditional views

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[19] All of this is treated rather briefly in this book, so please consult Paul A. Cohen's classical study, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang T'ao and Reform in Late Ch'ing China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 35–56.

[20] Richard von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[21] While the page reference by the author is correct for her edition from 1987, one can only find it quickly in other editions with the additional information as follows: *Yeyu qiudeng xulu* 夜雨秋燈續錄, *xia* 下, *juan* 2, pp. 502–3. Certainly not *Yeyu qiudeng lu*, 1: 502–3. Adding *juan*-numbers helps readers finding a reference in another edition.

of money, and not necessarily the specific upheaval of the Taiping civil war. I mention this detail, because from here the author claims that we can interpret the story "as an unfettered expression of the utopian ideals of community and freedom in a most unlikely form" (p. 274). As an old-fashioned historian, I suppose I do feel uneasy with making such big statements, especially without presenting a better-informed view of what came before. I have myself made use of Xuan Ding's writings and never got this idea from his anecdote collection which is almost 1,000 pages long in the modern version used by the author, of which obviously only a small number could be analysed here. All historians, myself certainly included, face the problem that we know what comes afterwards, but we are also taught to beware of the dangers of the old-fashioned Latin phrase *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, as a warning that what follows after something is not necessarily caused by it.

Despite a quibble here and there, I enormously enjoyed reading the book and learned much from it, especially the many discussions of the use of language, the materiality of a manuscript or printed volume, and her analysis especially of literary texts. Apart from the odd sloppiness,[22] the book is full of new information even to people who are sort of familiar with the field. My main criticism would be that demonstrating change and development requires a more detailed and most of all longer-term time perspective of before and after the Taiping civil war. Unlike the author I have always found the Taipings traditional in many ways, since they ultimately drew heavily upon the indigenous demonological worldview and their use of possession or revelatory dreams also fit perfectly in traditional religious culture. In this review I have attempted to suggest some further possibilities for alternative interpretations.

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[22] Most of them can be resolved by some digging (e.g., note 21 above), but the following affect the reading. On pages 15 and 297 Philip Clart is referred to as Philip Clark. On page 171 we find a typo that makes the quote completely incomprehensible: *Leitatikel* should be *Leitartikel* and does not mean editor, as added by the author into the text, but editorial. Idema, however, explains it as follows: "a specified, generally operative norm, imbedded in a varied *Handlung*, illustrating this norm in action."