



Nanjing in the Wake of the Taiping War: History, Ritual, and Politics in the Late Nineteenth Century

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Chuck Wooldridge's presentation dwelt on one of the chapters of his forthcoming book *City of Virtues: Nanjing in an Age of Utopian Visions*. His study was situated in 19th century China in an attempt to study the period for *itself* rather than a period that led on to something. In that sense, 19th century was seen as a period when various changes in the social, political and economic fields conspired to weaken the Qing Empire but at the same time gave space to a variety of groups to imagine new ways of ordering the empire. These groups were not about preserving the past or about leading to modernism. Rather, according to Wooldridge, they were purely about nationalism.

One such group was the Taiping, which established Nanjing as its capital between 1853 and 1864. The Taiping introduced radical reforms such as distribution of land, separation of men and women dorms and common treasury. There were other groups loyal to the Qing who too were engaged in a similar quest to imagine a new way of ordering the empire. However, these iconoclastic groups, especially the Taiping, alienated the literati class from politics and rather espoused radicalised religious ideas/virtues that challenged the authority of the central government. In fact the wresting of Nanjing from the Taiping in 1864 by the Hunan army under the leadership of Zeng Guofan, an official of the Qing government, was the climax of the support of the alienated literati class which earlier supported the Taiping.

In that sense, Wooldridge forwarded that Taiping war was the central event in the lives of the residents of Nanjing. As such, he thought it useful to analyse the life of Chen Zuolin (1837-1920), a member of a literati class, a Taiping war survivor and a Nanjing resident, in the reconstruction of Nanjing history and 19th century China. Chen's main focus seemed to be to prevent another Taiping war. Therefore, he with others, emphasised 'stability' and 'harmonious governance'. Chen, in that sense was not very much concerned about modernisation or industrialisation. Chen was influenced by the history, architecture and ruins of Nanjing city, and saw these as useful instruments to harness for present coherence. In that, he asserted the role of literati in this process. Further, his sense of self was so tied to the cityscape that Chen was afraid of dying in another part of Jiangsu or China.

When General Zeng Guofan came to Nanjing in 1864, the city had been razed to the ground by his Hunan army. Different groups thus used the cityscape or its space to argue out their versions of cosmos and state. This led to the physical manifestation of ideas in the creation of urban spaces, architecture, buildings, neighbourhood and models in Nanjing. Thus, important vision of cosmos created to suit political programme. Wooldridge saw Chen Zuolin as a critical figure of this period, especially in the city of Nanjing.

The autonomous groups/movements were seen as being utopian in character and emphasising political visions. Different strategies or tactics were employed to achieve these goals. The elements of buildings, graves, poems, histories and rituals were institutionalised and embraced by these movements. For Taiping, it was churches and palaces, whereas, Zeng Guofan supported the creation of examination compound & government buildings. The followers/adherents were to embody and emulate certain virtues (texts used on dead shrines displaying exemplary virtues) that could help to realize transformation of government and society and resulting in the 'perfect world'. Both the Taiping, and their enemy groups promised a future in which government could correspond to cosmic truths using Nanjing as an epitome in realizing their goals of governance. The speaker noted that, though these groups had different political visions and ideologies, they had similar tactics and strategies to achieve these ideals.

After returning to Nanjing in 1865, Chen Zuolin became a gazetteer of city history and recovering and publishing of literary works of Nanjing. He went on to become a teacher and a librarian in the early 20th century. A self-proclaimed member of the self-strengthening or *zì qiáng* (自強) movement, Chen wanted to re-invigorate the polity, not primarily through armaments and technology, but, rather by showing how quotidian acts of the city people can lead to great bounty. Chen argued that virtues can lead to great wealth and power. The argument forwarded was: quotidian actions will lead to good governance. The literati were seen as an important part of this process.

Wooldridge enumerated four kinds of *practices* initiated in Nanjing after the Taiping War.

1. Recovering and publishing of rare texts
2. Writing of large scale comprehensive histories or *tongshi* (通史) of Nanjing
3. Cataloguing and commemorating the dead defending the Qing in the war
4. Writing the detailed descriptions of Nanjing neighbourhood

Recovering and publishing of texts after the war was initiated as most of the city's repertoire of books and libraries were burnt down in the war. Attempts were made to make the texts and literary works available. Zeng Guofan, personally started a 'Book Bureau' or *shuju* (书局) publishing classics and commentaries for civil service examinations. A Sutra Publishing Bureau which published Lotus Sutra still exists in Nanjing today. Besides, there are other numerous book bureaus that published works such as 'Exemplary Poems of Nanjing Residents' and gazettes of Nanjing. On the role and importance of literati in the society and state, Wooldridge noted that Chen Zuolin's task was not only in showcasing the literary

accomplishments of previous generations, but also in highlighting the virtues of the compilers of these works.

Writing comprehensive histories included biographies, annals and account of wars in Nanjing and Jiangsu from antiquity to present. This practice brought to account the role of virtues in the family, monastic order and its relationship with the state. The essence of virtue was important in documenting biographies and stories and thereby bringing moral order in Nanjing. Chen saw this as creating a moralistic and harmonious society or *tianxia datong* (天下大同).

The third practice of commemorating the dead involved glorification of the sacrifices of the people who had fought in the Taiping war. Their act was again termed as virtuous. The fourth practice of writing detailed descriptions of the Nanjing neighborhood helped understand the socio-economic conditions of Nanjing's inhabitants. Chen saw this as bringing to light the fecundity and productivity of the area and its people and how virtue was connected to economic prosperity. In conclusion, Wooldridge mentioned that each of these various strands of virtue remain in China today. Whether nationalism, political power, urban spaces have their manifestations in influencing the political decision-making in China.

Discussion

To a question raised on Chen Zuolin's loyalty and spatial depiction of Nanjing in his works, Wooldridge responded that Chen was a native of Nanjing, and always identified his duty towards the city. On the 1911 Revolution and Chen's reaction to the Manchu Qing Empire's downfall, Wooldridge responded that Chen Zuolin's son and grandson have held offices under the Nationalist government. So it was not much of the problem per say.

On the question whether the proliferation of local groups and movements in the aftermath of the Opium War could be seen as the beginning of alternative history from below in China, Wooldridge responded that they should be seen as one of the many such developments in 19th century Nanjing rather than a harbinger of such a development.

To the question on creation of virtues or norms and relationship between thing and ideas, Wooldridge argued that Chen's ideas were not new; rather, he was basically looking to the past to shape present and future norms. Wooldridge also did not agree that Chen was trying to appease the masses and the literati with his support of the practice of commemorating the dead.

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