This book examines the transformation of Nanjing’s cityscape throughout the nineteenth century. Drawing on a wide selection of original materials (including poetic works, gazetteers, reports, biographies, Taiping publications, Qing government documents, memorials, and proclamations), Chuck Wooldridge skilfully demonstrates how different political movements altered the cityscape – both physically and semantically – to project their utopian visions of the world. In developing this argument, Wooldridge suggests that the transformation and representation of urban space are deeply political practices that can provide insights into the communication of ideologies and the naturalisation of authority.

The book is structured chronologically, looking at shifts in the physical appearance and political meaning of Nanjing from the late eighteenth century to 1911. The first chapter examines the Qianlong emperor’s tours of Nanjing between 1751 and 1784. The analysis shows how Qianlong used the tours to enact his multiple roles as emperor (patron of Buddhism, Son of Heaven, and champion of martial values) and to confirm that the centre of the empire was the person of the emperor, rather than a particular city. The second chapter looks at how this emperor-centred vision of empire was challenged by Nanjing literati in the early nineteenth century. The chapter discusses how Nanjing’s educated elites, through ritual practices and social activities, presented themselves as the principal guardians of the virtues on which social and political order rested. Wooldridge insightfully argues that the purpose of such claims was to elevate Nanjing to a central position and make the political involvement of its elites seem natural and necessary.

The third and fourth chapters represent the analytical core of the book, showing how Hong Xiuquan and Zeng Guofan separately depicted Nanjing as a utopian model of world transformation. Focusing on the Taiping occupation of Nanjing (1853–64), chapter three reveals how Hong and the Taipings radically redefined the city as a spiritual utopia called the Heavenly Capital. The chapter also discusses the iconoclastic and ritual practices through which the Taipings enacted and embedded their utopian vision at Nanjing. The fourth chapter develops this theme by looking at the post-war reconstruction of Nanjing under the leadership of Zeng Guofan. Believing that education and ritual were the foundations of a harmonious society, Zeng used construction projects (for example, repairing the examination compound and rebuilding the prefectural school) and ritual practices (for example, offerings to Confucius and the war dead) to show that Nanjing was a ‘city of virtues’ that could act as a microcosmic model for the whole empire. The final chapter on Chen Zuolin’s poetic city reveals how the physical reconstruction of Nanjing under Zeng Guofan coincided with a more specific effort to revive the city’s literary traditions. By restoring Nanjing’s textual heritage and writing biographies of local martyrs, Chen and other educated elites contributed to the broader effort at Nanjing to promote a virtue-focused vision of social progress.

The most insightful aspect of Wooldridge’s analysis – at least for someone interested in the legacy of the Taiping Rebellion – is the examination of Zeng Guofan’s vision and the ways in which he embedded that vision in the urban environment of Nanjing. Despite an imperial edict ordering the repair of the Ming tomb complex (an important site for dynastic legitimacy), Zeng chose to prioritise other projects, such as the repairing of the examination compound, that would further his vision of a harmonious society that was based on education.
and ritual. Wooldridge uses such evidence of autonomous action to suggest that ‘Zeng Guofan and his personal bureaucracy had more say than the central government in determining priorities in the rebuilding of Nanjing’ (p. 137). The obvious implication of this argument is that the transformation of Nanjing’s cityscape under Zeng highlights a shift towards greater regional authority in the wake of the Taiping Rebellion. Further research on urban reconstruction projects could help to establish whether the situation at Nanjing was representative of a more general phenomenon in late nineteenth-century China.

In summary, *City of Virtues* is a carefully crafted work that provides an incisive analysis of some of the major utopian visions that emerged in nineteenth-century China. The book’s discussion of the relationship between space, ideology, and power will not only appeal to historians of late imperial and modern China, but should also attract non-China specialists whose interests relate to the fields of urban history and political culture. The clarity and analytical coherence of the work will also make it a useful resource for students of Chinese history.

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