Scholars of the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64) already have a wide selection of original materials at their disposal, including official Taiping publications and the reports of Western observers. However, The World of a Tiny Insect is unique among existing sources in that it records events that were experienced by a child. Zhang Daye, the author of this fascinating memoir, was only seven years old when the Taipings captured his hometown (Shaoxing, Zhejiang) in 1861. His memoir not only highlights the extreme violence and chaos that characterized Chinese society during this tumultuous period, but also reveals the traumatic impact of such violence on an individual who experienced it as a child.

Zhang wrote his memoir in 1893–94, approximately thirty years after the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion. Although the memoir has a clear tripartite structure, Zhang seems to have intentionally avoided a linear narrative, shifting back and forth between the past and the present in a way that encourages the reader to partake in the act of remembering. The first part describes a trip to Tiantai and Shaoxing that Zhang undertook in 1893. During this trip, Zhang paid his respects to a deceased friend (the stated purpose of the trip) and made sacrificial offerings to family members who had died during and after the Taiping Rebellion. The second part of the memoir transports the reader back to 1861, describing Zhang’s experience of the Taipings as a young child. Zhang recalls how he and his mother, following their escape from Shaoxing in 1861, had to move to various places in Zhejiang in order to evade the Taipings. This section, which represents the core of the book, also includes detailed descriptions of Zhang’s traumatic experiences during the Taiping Rebellion. The third part brings the memoir to a close with Zhang’s reflections on the Nian Rebellion and the post-Taiping era.

Zhang’s description of life and particular experiences during the Taiping Rebellion graphically illustrates the violence and chaos of the period. As a young child who “knew no fear,” Zhang on one occasion went to watch a battle between the Taipings and a local militia. After the victorious Taipings had left the battlefield, Zhang went over to their fallen soldiers, identified those who were not yet dead, and then kicked and trampled them in order to vent his “loathing and resentment” (p. 85). The fact that Zhang’s father occupied a middle-level official post in Jiangsu may explain why he felt (or was taught to feel) such hostility toward the Taipings. Later, Zhang explains that, following the fall of Bao Village, the Taipings drove thousands of men and women into various houses and then set the buildings ablaze. The dead included Zhang’s maternal cousin and his wife, which further highlights the familial context in which his feelings of loathing and resentment may have emerged and developed.

Zhang’s memoir records a number of other horrific events that he experienced (or heard about) as a child during the Taiping Rebellion. While Zhang and other local people were hiding in the mountains, he witnessed a man tear his three-year-old son apart with his own hands because he was afraid that the child’s crying would reveal their location to the Taipings. Zhang remembered “seeing guts spilling out and blood flowing all over the place,” which caused him to tremble with fright (p. 83). On another occasion, Zhang saw a Taiping soldier cut off the arm and breasts of a woman who was being playfully disrespectful toward him. Just as Zhang had experienced physical contact with the dead following the Taiping battle, so too he handled one of the blood-soaked breasts on this occasion, after which he was
“seized with a great terror and went home” (p. 97). Zhang’s other direct encounters with the dead included watching a friend retrieve the decapitated head of his brother and seeing floating corpses on a waterway that he was attempting to cross. The quantity of corpses was so high that they brought Zhang’s boat to a stop and produced “an accumulation of white ‘corpse wax’ that was several inches thick” (p. 106). Maggots filled the boat, and the stench of death made Zhang and his relatives so sick that they believed they were about to die.

Zhang’s detailed description of his personal experiences provides, on the one hand, an insight into the ubiquity of death and disorder during the Taiping Rebellion. Zhang’s account of mass killings, mutilated bodies, and floating corpses adds flesh – quite literally – to the claim that the Taiping Rebellion was one of the bloodiest uprisings in modern world history. Death toll estimates and other quantitative data may convey the general impact of the Taiping Rebellion, but *The World of a Tiny Insect* makes the human cost of the rebellion more concrete and comprehensible, especially for students.

Another important contribution of this book is that it highlights the traumatic impact of the Taiping Rebellion on an individual who experienced it as a child. As Zhang “knew no fear” as a child, he was willing to approach and even touch the corpses and mutilated body parts that he encountered during the rebellion. In addition to kicking the bodies of dying soldiers and picking up a woman’s severed breast, Zhang, together with other young children, once tried to put a dead man’s neck through an iron shackle that was attached to a statue of a Wuchang demon. While this encounter with the dead was a source of amusement for Zhang as a child, the memory of it and other similar experiences later haunted him as an adult. The trauma that Zhang felt is particularly apparent in this extract from one of his poems:

Tipsy with wine, face flushed; But when all the singing is done, who can bring consolation for all the things one has witnessed? At the end of the road, how much repressed resentment? In this drifting life, how many dusty burdens? Everything is murky and gloomy, bright onl for a moment, and dim again [p. 156].

The impact of the Taiping Rebellion is often analyzed at the macro level. For example, historians of modern China have sought to explain its contribution to the demise of the Qing dynasty. This book supports an alternative (and more personal) approach to the study of impact by showing how the Taiping Rebellion affected one individual, psychologically and emotionally, for the rest of his life.

Xiaofei Tian has done an excellent job as translator of *The World of a Tiny Insect*. The translation is very clear and helpful notes have been provided to clarify and contextualize particular details in Zhang’s account. The introduction is also excellent and should help readers unacquainted with modern Chinese history to navigate through the text. The discussion of the manuscript’s reception in mainland China during the 1950s is particularly good, showing how Chinese historians edited the text (in particular, expunging the record of violent excesses) in order to highlight the discipline and “revolutionary” nature of the Taipings. This particular interpretation was part of a broader historiographical campaign to present the Taipings as revolutionary ancestors of the Chinese Communists.

This book will appeal, first and foremost, to scholars of the Taiping Rebellion and historians of late imperial and modern China. Such scholars will find Zhang’s memoir a unique and extremely valuable source for understanding rebellion and its impact in nineteenth-century China. More broadly, Zhang’s account of life as a child during a period of intense conflict may appeal to non-China specialists researching the impact of war on childhood, memory, and personal identity. Finally, the accessible and highly engaging nature of the text would make it a useful resource for undergraduate teaching, especially for modern China courses that involve a session on the Taipings or rebellion in nineteenth-century China.