ZENG Guofan

Zēng Guófán 曾国藩

1811–1872 Qing government official

Zeng Guofan was a leading government official during the mid-nineteenth century who initiated the decentralization of power and the rise in influence of regional officials that took place during the final decades of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). He is best known for his role in suppressing the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) and for his efforts to modernize China’s military and improve its industrial capabilities.

Zeng Guofan (Tseng Kuo-fan) was born in Xiangxiang, Hunan Province. He received the jinshi (advanced scholar) degree at the age of twenty-seven (1838) and was appointed to the prestigious Hanlin Academy in Beijing. He served on various boards in the capital during the next fourteen years and was promoted to the position of junior vice president of the Board of Ceremonies. In 1852 Zeng returned to his home province as commissioner for local defense, charged with the task of suppressing the Taiping rebels. He raised a province-wide militia, the Hunan Braves (later known as the “Hunan Army” or “Xiang Army”), personally selecting the officers and insisting on Confucian discipline among the troops. In August 1860 the emperor appointed Zeng governor-general of Jiangsu and Jiangxi provinces (liang Jiang) and granted him the political authority and fiscal independence he needed to coordinate the military campaign against the Taiping rebels. Together with the armies of Li Hongzhang and Zuo Zongtang, Zeng captured the city on 19 July 1864, bringing to an end the devastating rebellion. For his role in suppressing the Taiping rebels, Zeng Guofan was awarded the title of “marquis of the first class.” He was the first civil official to receive this honor.

After the Taiping Rebellion Zeng returned to Nanjing to take up his post as governor-general. He initiated a number of policies aimed at inspiring obedience to local and central authorities. He opened printing offices to republish classical Confucian texts and reinstated the provincial examinations at Nanjing. In 1865 he established the Jiangnan Arsenal in Shanghai to produce modern weapons and gunboats. In addition to manufacturing rifles, ammunition, cannons, and steamships, it housed a school for training technicians and translators. In 1867 Zeng was appointed grand secretary and the next year was made governor-general of Zhili Province. In 1870 he was ordered to negotiate a settlement with the French over the Tianjin Massacre (21 June 1870). His conciliatory approach to foreign demands during these negotiations conflicted with the hard-line position of many officials in Beijing. He was replaced by Li Hongzhang and reassigned to Nanjing, where he died.

Zeng Guofan’s importance in late Qing history is undeniable. He was instrumental in preserving the dynasty during the Taiping Rebellion. The reforms he enacted after the rebellion helped to stabilize and strengthen the country. His arsenals provided modern weapons...
to protect the nation’s sovereignty. Perhaps most significantly, however, Zeng’s career symbolized a turning point in late Qing political affairs. His ability to independently raise, train, finance, and command the Hunan Army indicated a shift in power from Beijing to the provinces. From this time onward provincial officials would most often take the lead in introducing new technologies, modern industries, and advanced educational systems.

Daniel J. MEISSNER

Further Reading


Make a decision when a decision is called for. Hesitation only brings disaster.

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