



Zeng Guofan (1811-1872) acted as both a traditional and a modern leader. In the traditional mode he was the kind of scholar who exemplified the Chinese *wenwu* tradition, serving his country first for more than a dozen years as a scholar-official, and then for almost two decades as a scholar-warrior. In the modern mode, he was among the first of his generation that really explored the Western methods in the context of remedying the dynastic decline. As an active leader, prolific writer, and a genuine mentor to others, Zeng Guofan can be characterized as a significant world statesman of the 19th century.

Childhood and Education

Zeng Guofan was born November 26, 1811 in Xiangxiang, Hunan. Born to a family of landowners, the Zeng family stressed learning and public service. The desire to study the classics was so strong, that Zeng Guofan's father, Zeng Linshu (1790-1857), continued to take the civil service examination after the age of 40 and obtained his *Xiucai* degree one year before his son, Zeng Guofan received his *Xiucai* degree.

Early Career

Zeng Guofan, until middle-age, followed the path of a traditional scholar. He obtained the highest degree possible, the *Jinshi* degree in 1838 and at the same time became a member of the prestigious Han Lin Academy. In 1849, Zeng was promoted to the highest position he had obtained to that point, a junior vice-president of the Board of Ceremonies. Zeng Guofan married a woman of the Ou Yang family from Hunan, and they had three sons and six daughters.

As a scholar of the Song Neo-Confucian tradition, particularly the school of statecraft, Zeng was very interested in state institutions and the preservation of traditional Chinese philosophy, in an age of growing upheaval. He was on several committees, and had been on his way to administer a provincial examination, in 1852, when his the death of his mother resulted in his taking leave and returning home to Hunan for the customary mourning. It was while at home in his native province of Hunan, experiencing firsthand the emerging dangers of the Taiping Rebellion, that Zeng Guofan, at the age of 42, was to emerge as a major protector of the Qing dynasty.

A Scholar becomes a General - Suppressing the Taiping Rebellion

As the Taiping Rebellion, led by Hong Xiuquan, gathered momentum in its first few years, the scholar-gentry were called upon to serve their country beyond the tradition of scholarship, into the sphere of military organization. This was to be the fate of Zeng Guofan for the next dozen years. He was ordered to mobilize a militia for Hunan in 1852, and began this task in January 1853. Zeng's "Hunan Braves" were a provincial army who were organized and disciplined. While the Hunan army had initial success in defending Hunan, Zeng's armies experienced major defeats. For example, in early 1854, Zeng had a fleet of 240 boats and 5,000 marines, and a larger army situated in Hunan. Due to weather difficulties and inadequate training, experienced major defeats. According to the Hummel biography, Zeng Guofan was so discouraged by this kind of failure that he attempted suicide at this early stage. It was in mid-1854, however, that a major victory in Hunan was experienced by Zeng Guofan's armies, under the leadership of Ta Qibu and Peng Yulin. After this, Zeng did not lose his persistence and belief in ultimate victory. The

next decade was to bring cycles of victory and defeat for the Hunan Army. The Taiping army leadership also went through cycles of weakness and rejuvenation. The Rebellion lasted until 1864, when after a long siege, the Taipings finally surrendered in Nanjing. By the end of the Rebellion, Zeng Guofan was given the major credit for the victory, and he was made a Marquis of the first class—the first civil official to obtain this rank.

The Challenge of Westernization

Even before he commanded the defeat of the Taipings, Zeng Guofan wanted to strengthen China by using Western technologies. Zeng was instrumental in establishing both the Jiangnan and Nanjing arsenals. Writing in 1862 of a conversation he had with his staff members, Zeng recorded in his diary:

If we wish to find a method of self-strengthening, we should begin by considering the reform of government service and securing of men ability as urgent tasks, and then regard learning to make explosive shells and steamships and other instruments as the work of first importance. If only we could possess all their [Westerners] superior techniques, then we could have the means to return their favors when they are obedient, and we would also have the means to avenge our grievances when they are disloyal [Teng and Fairbank, p.62]

Zeng Guofan, along with his major proteges, Li Hongzhang and Zuo Zongtang, fostered the adoption of some of the most important Self-Strengthening initiatives. Indicative of this kind of foresight, before his death, Zeng co-authored a memorial to the throne, with Li, on the necessity for Chinese students to study overseas. Subsequently the first study mission abroad was established.

Death of a Marquis

Zeng Guofan served his country in high ranking official capacities until his death. He was appointed Grand Secretary in 1867 and Governor-General of Zhili province in 1868. His final two years were spent in Nanjing as Governor-General.