Because of his lack of institutional affiliation or denominational ties, he had to combine evangelizing with employment as an interpreter (initially on opium vessels and later with the Hong Kong government) to pay his living expenses. His major institutional effort, the Chinese Union, collapsed because of criticism of its Chinese evangelists as opium-smoking profit seekers who rarely left Hong Kong to evangelize (p. 241). Gützlaff died exhausted at the age of forty-eight.

Aside from some repetition that could have been eliminated by better editing, Lutz’s book is a fitting culmination to her long and productive career in modern Chinese history in the areas of Christian colleges, Protestant missionaries, and women.

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There is something about Hunan. For most of late imperial Chinese history, Hunanese played marginal roles in national politics. Candidates from the south-central province sitting for the Confucian civil service imperial examinations were among the worst performers for centuries. But this changed in the mid-nineteenth century, when Hunan began to produce more than its share of reform and revolutionary leaders, including, most famously, the Great Helmsman himself. Hunanese took the lead in virtually every major reform and revolutionary movement, from the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion to the launching of the Self-Strengthening Movement, from the revolution of 1911 to the rise and ultimate success of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949.

That so many leaders hailed from Hunan is not a coincidence. Steven R. Platt painstakingly shows how Hunan went from a sleepy province to a leader in political reform and revolution. At the heart of his analysis lies the untangling of a complex web of personal ties connecting teachers and students, fathers and sons, officers and soldiers, fellow classmates, and their descendants across Hunanese time and space as part of a conscious tradition. For nearly a hundred years, Hunanese leaders rallied around the writings, interpretations, and reinterpretations of the great seventeenth-century Ming loyalist hermit scholar Wang Fuzhi (1619–92). Platt traces the rediscovery and uses of the figure and work of Wang to the mid-nineteenth century. In 1839, Wang’s descendants, who had preserved his writings for 150 years, approached Deng Xianhe, who had written about the glorious history of the province. A coterie of scholars, which bridged generations and locations and included the statecraft scholars Zuo Zongtang and Zeng Guofan, formed around the editorial work of preparing Wang’s work for publication.
Zeng Guofan’s later organization of the Hunan Army propelled this Huna- nese network onto the national stage. A desperate Qing government, unable to suppress the Taiping Rebellion with its own forces, permitted Zeng to raise an army, using, for the first time in imperial history, personal ties of loyalty between officers and the soldiers under their command. This innovation helped create a military force powerful enough to help defeat the Taipings, launched the national careers of scores of Hunanese, and formed a sense of Hunanese identity through the shared military experiences of soldiers. Sub- sequent generations, including Guo Songtao, China’s first minister to England, and Tan Sitong, a leader of the Hundred Day Reforms of 1898, used their national positions, in turn, to promote the cult of Wang and, by extension, the cause of Hunanese nationalism.

Platt’s book redirects the history of Hunanese national leaders away from a narrowly teleological endpoint with the birth of “Chinese nationalism” and instead toward the emergence and persistence of “Hunanese nationalism.” This distinction is critical. Platt reveals that Hunanese were loyal to a vision of a shared provincial identity, history, and mission. They sought a separate nation-state first and a larger Chinese nation-state or federation second. Hunanese nationalism was not merely a way station en route to Chinese nationalism. The history of the province, then, is not simply a window onto the broader phenomenon of Chinese nationalism, or a “case study,” but an end in itself. By uncovering why Hunan played such a critical role, Platt raises questions about key aspects of modern Chinese history, particularly the assumption that Chinese modernity was exclusively made in coastal Chinese treaty ports such as Shanghai and then spread to the backward interior provinces. Likewise, Platt convincingly argues that historians, in their rush to include border regions in a new grand narrative, have skipped a key center of innovation in the interior, burying this alternative beneath an assumed eternal and unchallenged narrative of the desire of all Han Chinese for unity. Human was, in short, an “alternative center of cultural gravity,” which generated centrifugal forces still at work in China today.

This is a beautifully written book. The arguments unfold over the chapters rather than in a snappy paragraph or two, making for subtle prose that rewards patient readers. Platt masterfully anticipates and answers obvious questions raised by his story. Readers may want to know how leaders in other provinces tackled the same issue. Were there Yunnanese nationalists, too? In an all-too brief section (pp. 121–23), Platt surveys the writings of other provincials and concludes that Hunanese were uniquely self-centered. Similarly, the book is full of important (and amusing) details. Who knew that when looking for ideological justifications for self-government, Hunanese nationalists turned to the work of the South Carolina–based political philosopher Francis Lieber? While readers may find things to quibble with, such as the lack of a bibliography or of any Chinese characters, they will be entertained by this representative of historical monograph writing at its best.

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