

## BOOK REVIEWS

# History in Three Keys

## *The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*

BY PAUL A. COHEN

NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997

XVIII + 428 PAGES

The Boxer Uprising is one of the few events of modern Chinese history to have become an enduring part of popular mythology, in the West as well as in China. Some of us are old enough to remember David Niven and Charlton Heston defending Western civilization from Boxer hordes in *55 Days in Peking*, a 1963 film reflecting the demonization of what we then called Red China. Recently, at the urging of one of my students, I read Neal Stephenson's 1995 science fiction novel *The Diamond Age*, in which twenty-first century Boxers attack Shanghai, a bastion of Westernization, cybertechnology, "parking lots and chaos."

Paul Cohen's *History in Three Keys* examines the tension between the way the Boxer Uprising was experienced by participants, reconstructed by historians, and mythologized in response to later preoccupations. This is an excellent account of the Boxers, but even more significantly it is a superb meditation on the nature of history, historical writing, memory, and myth.

Cohen begins with a clear and concise narrative of the Boxer Uprising, drawing from Joseph Esherick's *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* and recent Chinese scholarship. In Part II, "The Boxers as Experience," Cohen makes his own contribution to our understanding of how the Boxers and their enemies understood and experienced the event. He suggests, for example, that anxiety over drought was the basic cause for the outbreak of violence, placing less emphasis than Esherick does on the direct effect of foreign presence. Missionaries and Boxers, Cohen points out, shared a religious construction of drought, attributing it to supernatural agency. Unfortunately for the missionaries, the Boxers blamed them for upsetting the natural order. Cohen gives us insightful examinations of the relationship between Boxer practices and beliefs and Chinese popular culture, the Boxer use of magic to control their environment, the Boxers' belief in the magical power of women to further or frustrate their efforts, the role of rumor (an "opportunistic information virus") among Boxers and their enemies, and the ways that death was routinized and the enemy dehumanized by each side.

Part III, "The Mythologized Past," shows how later generations of Chinese have interpreted the Boxer Uprising in light of their immediate concerns. The New Culture Movement intelligentsia generally dismissed the Boxers as superstitious and feudal. In 1918, for example, Chen Duxiu argued that the Boxers exemplified the backward features of Chinese national character: autocracy, superstition, and theism. Imperialism was the consequence of China's weakness, not its cause, he believed. But six years later, Chen wrote that the Boxers, "in their contempt for the treaties, their repelling of foreign force, foreign goods, and Christianity, and their attacks on Christians and others who had dealings with Westerners—the running dogs of imperialism—were beyond reproach." Yet though Chen's attitude toward the Boxers had changed, the way he used them had

not. Chen's aim in both cases, Cohen points out, "was not to probe the events of the past for greater historical understanding but to use a particular reading of the past . . . to change the outlook of educated compatriots in the present" (244). Chen typified the political mythologization of the Boxers. After the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925, the Boxers increasingly became a symbol of anti-imperialist resistance, not backwardness. Many years later, during the Cultural Revolution, when historical scholarship became completely subordinated to political ends, the romanticized Boxers of political myth completely supplanted independent analytical treatment of the movement. The Boxers served as a weapon in factional politics, and also represented more substantive issues, a model for the attack on foreign bourgeois culture, Confucian patriarchy, and the subordination of women.

This book is engaging reading. It is ideal not only for courses in modern Chinese history, but also for courses that examine the different ways history is understood by those who make it, those who write it, and those who turn it into myth. ■

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# Ethnicity, Security and Separatism in India

BY MAYA CHADDA

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286 PAGES

This book posits that Indian foreign policy has been analyzed up to this point through one of two lenses: India is either attempting to gain hegemony over its neighboring states, or it is a helpless giant and is forced to take the actions it does by circumstances beyond its control. Chadda proposes a different framework within which to examine Indian foreign policy, namely, that of relational control and interlocking balances. It is a more nuanced view of these matters than previously attempted, and sheds some important light on issues of regional conflict, domestic politics, multinational states, and the impact of subnational populations which live on both sides of an international border.

Many people have pointed out that postcolonial states in Asia and Africa have boundaries which were drawn mainly for the convenience of their colonial rulers, and that the successor states have had to deal with the fallout of these borders throughout their existence. This is very apparent in South Asia, particularly in regard to the Indo-Pakistan and Indo-Bangladesh borders. Drawn in secrecy at the last moment before partition in 1947 and then suddenly revealed, these borders cut through heavily populated areas which contained groups of people who had, at least until shortly before that time, considered themselves to be of one community. The attempt of the political movement of the Muslim League to get Indian Muslims to make their Muslim identity para-

mount to any other prior identity (Punjabi, Bengali, Indian, or of a particular sect) led to the partition of two of India's most populous provinces (Punjab and Bengal). The fallout from this partition continues today, and is one of the major topics of Chadda's book.

Chadda examines the Nehruvian approach to dealing with ethnic demands, contrasts it with the approaches of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, and those of India's non-Congress government, and finds some common threads and some significant differences between the various approaches. But she argues that the underlying motive for all Indian governments was to maintain "relational control," meaning the ability of the Indian state to maintain its own security vis-à-vis its neighboring states, and to keep other powers (the U.S., Russia, China) out of South Asia.

While focusing exclusively on the Indian case, this book could be a useful reading for any class focusing on ethnic conflict, international relations, or post-colonial states. The cases Chadda studies cover all of these areas, and give concrete examples. These examples would be very useful for discussion in undergraduate level courses and possibly in some high school classes. This book provides an alternative framework for discussing "ethnic conflict" to what is often heard in the media, i.e. that wars such as those in the former Yugoslavia and in Central Africa are the outcome of "age-old" conflicts. Rather, as discussed by Chadda, they are often the outcome of actions taken by governments which do not have the desired effect.

The weaknesses of this book include Chadda's too-forgiving attitude to the Indian government's heavy-handed approach to the insurgencies in Punjab and Kashmir, as well as a need for closer proofreading to catch not only typographical errors (of which there are many) but errors such as this: "Raju Thomas calls this the 'Rodney King' complex: anxiety for status and a nagging sense that India has not received its due as a major regional power" (p. 206) [italics added]. I believe the Rodney to which she wishes to refer is *Dangerfield*.<sup>n</sup>

Keith Snodgrass

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## Stalking the Elephant Kings *In Search of Laos*

BY CHRISTOPHER KREMMER  
HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 1997

Once drawn into the vortex of the Cold War and a key Southeast Asian "domino," contested violently and vigorously by the U.S. and USSR superpowers, Laos later slipped into relative oblivion and became what journalist Stan Sesser describes as the "forgotten land." The Australian Christo-

pher Kremmer's intriguing new volume draws attention to a "landscape as dramatic and beautiful as any, and people of great civility, charm, and generosity. . ." (p. 213). Kremmer's "search for Laos" was his sideshow while working as a journalist in neighboring Vietnam. The major motif of the volume is to uncover the "secret" history of what happened to the principal royals of Laos following the communists coming to power in 1975. Kremmer is an excellent writer with a real talent for powerful imagery, and the book reads like a mystery novel. His distaste for, and devastating critique of, the current regime will be welcomed by many of the Lao diaspora scattered around the globe.

Unlike many Westerners and Thais who travel to Laos for only short periods of time and never venture beyond the capital of Vientiane, Kremmer spent "many" months traveling to the remote parts of the country, particularly in the northeastern areas of Sam Neua and Viengsay in Huaphan Province. He also traveled to the ancient royal capital of Luang Prabang, the Plain of Jars, and the southern area of Champasak and the ancient Khmer ruins of Wat Phu. The bulk of the book consists of reflections on these travels, and interviews and conversations he had primarily related to the fate of Laos's last royals.

Kremmer must be admired for his boldness in seeking out interviews with key and prominent figures. Among individuals interviewed were: Princess Mahneelai, wife of the last Crown Prince of Laos, Vong Savang; Prince Sauryavong Savong, the last king's sole surviving son living in France (phone interview); Sisana Sisane, the official historian of the Lao PDR; Souphaxay Souphanouvong, one of the sons of Prince Souphanouvong, the "Red Prince," and currently a well-placed technocrat; and Peng Dee, a former dancer at the Royal Court of Luang Prabang. These interviews provide a rich diversity of views on both contemporary Laos and the "secret" history which Kremmer is seeking to uncover.

Despite its highly readable mystery style mystique, the volume is flawed by Kremmer's superficial, ethnocentric, and often distorted views of the Lao PDR, reinforced by a virile anticommunism. He refers to Vientiane (except for the Buddhist temples), the capital of Laos, as "a mouthful of rot" (p. 212). Actually, Vientiane is a charming city nestled along the majestic Mekong River. In describing a major political ceremony, he refers to Lao ladies as "pear-shaped" (p. 202). He compares the exquisite Lao national dance of *lam vong* to slow motion karate (p.92).

Overreliance on a single key informant results in numerous errors and misinterpretations. Among noticeable and serious factual errors, Kremmer refers to the Thais shelling the capital of Laos in the late '80s. There was indeed an intense border conflict between Laos and Thailand in late 1987 and early 1988, but this fighting occurred far from the Lao capital. He also describes Kong Le, who carried out a dramatic 1960 coup, as a general. In fact, he was only a simple captain. Among serious misinterpretations are references to "begging" bowls of monks, and monks not being able to speak to women. Also, Kremmer's attempt to use Lao language terms leads to a number of embarrassing comments. Kremmer, for example, refers to himself as a *felang*, not realizing that this word in Lao, unlike Thai, means Frenchman.

Another misunderstanding of Kremmer relates to his overly romanticizing the monarchy that was deposed after the communist revolution. While there have been great kings in Lao history such as Fa Ngum, Samsenthai, and Surinyavongsa, the last two Lao kings