

BOOK REVIEWS

History in Three Keys

The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth

BY PAUL A. COHEN

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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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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-