Both China and the West have viewed the Boxer Uprising of 1898-1900 as a pivotal moment in Chinese history, though the understanding of the meaning of the uprising varied significantly over the course of the 20th century. Through the lens of this specific historical moment, Paul Cohen explores the craft of history: first in its typical incarnation as reconstruction of events, second in the more contested realms of personal experiences, and third in the political uses of history over time. Cohen’s longest section, “Experience,” illustrates how the actors in the uprising interpret their experiences without the benefit of hindsight or completeness. Drawing upon a wide variety of sources, including oral history, journalism, illustrations, and literature, he is able to provide a rich description of the historical moment, including depictions of drought, hunger, rumor and adolescence. Cohen’s chapters on “myth” are intended to reach beyond event and experience-based history to discover the adaptable uses of the Boxer story for later anti-imperialists, New Culture reformers, and Cultural Revolution propaganda. Cohen’s conclusions about the importance of the experienced and mythic past in historical writing, regardless of what they say about the cause of the event, is a valuable one. While not specifically seeking to dislodge prior reconstructions of the Boxer history (particularly Esherick’s), Cohen adds dimensions to that history and alerts readers to the tensions always present in writing history, but which are so seldom expressed.

Questions and Observations:

This book was assigned to me when it was still quite new, and it had a profound effect on the way I understood the historical profession. While most of the sources I’d encountered to that point were primary sources, I’d encountered some contemporary histories and a few works of historiography. History in Three Keys was the first book I’d read that explored historical theory without employing obfuscating language and circular logic (an obvious bias of my own for which I am very sorry!). While it can be read in a straightforward sense, as a really fascinating treatment of the Boxers, it is at the same time a very accessible book about the way many historians are re-envisioning history—its uses and its presentation—in light of the shaky ground of objectivity.

As a result, I’ve often recommended it to folks doing readings outside the China field, as a possible teaching tool. To my disappointment, most people ignore the suggestion, possibly (probably!) because they imagine any China-related subject matter to be too far afield for them or their readers . . . which is really a pity.

In light of what you said about the divergence of opinions about how to approach China studies (via Western models, or through a China-centric lens), and Cohen’s tendency towards the China-centric model, I wonder whether this book fits squarely in that, or whether it could be viewed as a more centrist approach. While the experience section, (like American use of oral history and cultural
documents) is without a model, Cohen makes a strong argument for this approach in the conclusion. He’s putting this style of historical inquiry in opposition to European-style social or economic histories, which follow long trends rather than intimate events or personal recollections. For these, it’s important to use things like a statistical norm, whereas when talking about the Boxers, it may be more important to look at individual, personal eyewitness accounts.

I found Cohen’s sections on drought, anti-foreignism, spirit-possession, and “rumor-panic” interesting—maybe because they get at the cause from a roundabout way. (They are also chock full of really compelling primary sources, which adds to the interest.) Anyway, using a sort of diachronic (maybe?) approach, to understand all the influences of the moment, acting in conjunction with each other makes for a more complicated, and more complete understanding of why the Boxers would have formed around the turn of the century, and what accounted for their momentum, in the face of terrible odds! I also like the way Cohen has woven in threads of past movements and historical “ghosts” like the White Lotus sect, or anti-foreign sentiment earlier in the 19th century, which indicates that he knows this isn’t simply an exceptional event or turning-point, but has a long and maybe cyclical history behind it.

I’m curious to know what Esherick’s book says about the Boxers, and what sort of response he might have had to this book. (later: Esherick’s review was positive.) Similarly, I’d like to know if this was translated or is known in Chinese academia, and if so, what the reception might have been. It’s critical of the various interpretations of the Boxers in China, but not particularly hostile (if that makes sense). I think some of that (appearance of) gentleness comes from Cohen’s admission that the use of history for mythmaking is universal, and he cites plenty of American examples of it. (later: it has been translated, and reception has been good.)

I haven’t yet had a chance to look at reviews, but I will have done by Monday. More questions forthcoming, no doubt!