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To determine the cause of a specific sorcery panic may be a meaningless pursuit, in one sense, to author Philip Kuhn. However, to examine a single historical moment of panic—one that attracted a personal campaign against sorcery by the Qianlong Emperor (Hongli)—illuminates not only the larger social issues at work, but also the political and cultural consequences of that hysteria. In *Soulstealers*, Kuhn is not after the more mundane causes of mass hysteria. Instead, he is interested in the general state of society during a century of abundance, the bureaucratic response to the accused and accusers, and understanding of “sorcery” across class levels. In particular, Kuhn examines the reasons behind the Emperor’s campaign against sorcery, which were mostly prompted by a fear of sedition. And, as in many works of history, this one makes clear its implications for the contemporary world.

Throughout 1768, in the eastern coastal provinces of Qing China, stonemasons, Buddhist monks, beggars, and unemployed drifters (41) found themselves accused of stealing souls, or attempting to steal souls by means of written names, and clipped queues. The supposed aims of soulstealing might be productive (to help the masons rebuild a difficult bridge) or nefarious (to exact personal vengeance on enemies), but in either case, common people, police, and lower-level officials had specific reasons for making accusations and bringing suspects to trial.

Poverty alone played a crucial role in the early accusations. As Kuhn amply demonstrates, in tale after vivid tale, the people accused and tried for soulstealing were poor, and in some sense, outsiders. They represented a burden on a large society of people who occupied positions that were only precariously better. The police who investigated or arrested the accused, were not civil-servants, and typically supported themselves by “demanding ‘customary fees (20).’”
extortion seems to have led to falsified evidence, torture, confessions under duress, and the ultimate involvement of higher courts.

Mercifully, in many of the cases that Kuhn highlights, justice was ultimately had. However, the accused were not exonerated before much suffering occurred, as well as the spread of rumors of soulstealing that fueled further panic. In the midlevel courts, the bureaucratic machine was forced to walk a fine line between placating the public, so as not to be seen as “soft” on sorcery, and making sure that “public credulity [did not] damage civic order (7).” However, the local understanding of sorcery, and its response to it, was quite different from the Hongli’s response to the problem. If local populations were turned into lynch mobs and torturers, it was at least in part a response to poverty. Hongli, however, chose to view the sorcery and queue-cutting as evidence of anti-Manchu acts by people with heterodox beliefs.²

Kuhn is adept at reading 18th-century Chinese history against the grain. He writes that the self-styled “Prosperous Age” of the Qianlong Emperor, and the more recent Western historical accounts that present a “celebratory” vision of the 18th century are ignoring the problems that this early modernity created: overpopulation, a “worsening ratio of resources per capita,” and declining social mobility (228-9). Inside the prosperous Kiangsu and Chekiang provinces is an undercurrent of poverty and unemployment. In fact, Kuhn spends the majority of his second chapter discussing the changes in agriculture, production, and urbanization, and the problems (admitted or not) that went hand in hand with this particular kind of prosperity. In the following chapter, he describes the kind of mindset that allowed Hongli to suspect treasonous behavior.

It has been said that the point of a narrative history can be defined by its beginning and end.³ He begins with a thought-provoking, engaging question about the emergence of modernity in China, particularly during the rule of the Qianlong Emperor, and the connection that nascent modernity might have with episodes of mass hysteria. His ending point also deals with modernity—but in different ways.

² Or at least, in the case of the Buddhists, a failure to behave by Confucian standards.
³ William Cronon, “A Place for Stories.”
First, Kuhn’s emphasis on political crime in an increasingly unwieldy society has implications for present-day America as well as China. And furthermore, rather than giving a customary nod to history’s applicability to the present, Kuhn sounds genuinely concerned about a Chinese future without an intractable bureaucratic wall to stand between zealotry and a vulnerable population.5

Some attention should be paid to Kuhn’s sources, since he had both opportunity and time on his side in collecting them. Kuhn was apparently one of the first to gain access to archived Qing documents in 1979. In order to invoke the “real” Hongli, rather than his ghostwriters, Kuhn attends closely to the vermillion comments of Hongli in his documents.6 Also, by the 1990 publication of Soulstealers, Kuhn must have been intimately familiar with a number of Qing sources, having completed a book about them in the 1980s. Soulstealers is a highly readable narrative history that was bound to interest those outside academia. As a result, it was reviewed in newspapers and popular publications as well as in scholarly journals. In some cases, no ordinary reviewers were selected. Kuhn had the reputation in the China field to merit reviews by luminaries such as Frederic Wakeman Jr. and Jonathan Spence. In part this is due to a small community of scholars—but much of it is probably due to Kuhn’s stature. All in all, he has given us a vivid, identifiable past, and made not one case, but several, for interpreting this small slice of history in a much more immediate way.

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4 As I understand it, this indicates the use of an issue like sorcery for Hongli to exact more complete, if arbitrary, power over the bureaucracy. ??
5 This no doubt has its origins in 1989’s student protests—I wonder if Kuhn’s position has changed or not?
6 At times, Hongli (in translation) is vicious, sarcastic, and quite funny. For instance, see pages 144-145.