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REVIEWS

Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China BY PAUL A. COHEN. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Pp. xxiv + 354. \$25.95 paper.

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In recent years the global reach of the hurt feelings of the Chinese people has attracted increasing attention, as well as a good measure of popular (and, in private, diplomatic) derision. “The feelings of the Chinese people” (*Zhongguo renminde ganqing*) is a phrase invoked by both the party-state and writers of various persuasions (and constituencies) to protest against perceived slights to the People’s Republic and its interests. It serves also as a ready indictment of “the West” for its historically biased treatment of “China” and “the Chinese” today.

In December 2008, Joel Martinsen of the Beijing-based media group Danwei reported that a Chinese blogger writing under the name Fang KC had scanned the electronic archives of sixty years of the *People’s Daily*—from 1946 through to 2006—and discovered that nineteen foreign countries and international organizations had, up to that point, officially “hurt the feelings of the Chinese people.” Of these, most had inflicted injury not just once but on numerous occasions.¹

In his overview of these findings, Martinsen noted that: from 1985 Japan had hurt Chinese feelings no fewer than forty-seven times (and that was before the controversy over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in September 2010!); the U.S.A. had done so twenty-three times, starting

My thanks to Gloria Davies and Duncan Campbell for their meticulous reading of, and numerous comments on, this essay.

¹ Joel Martinsen, “Mapping the Hurt Feelings of the Chinese People,” 11 December 2008, Danwei at: http://www.danwei.org/foreign_affairs/a_map_of_hurt_feelings.php.

in 1980, when Los Angeles flew the flag of the Republic of China; NATO no fewer than ten times, mostly in relation to the bombing of the Belgrade embassy in 1999; India seven times, starting in 1986, and generally in the context of border disputes; France five times, starting in 1989; the Nobel Committee four times (again, this was prior to awarding Liu Xiaobo the Peace Prize in October 2010); Germany three times, starting with a meeting with the Dalai Lama in 1990; and so on.

All told, one-fifth of the world's populations has to a greater or lesser extent "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people."² It is this mixture of abiding victimhood and the sense of humiliation clad in a ready pose of high dudgeon and hauteur that seems to characterize many Chinese articulations of nationhood today. As William Callahan suggests, using one of Raymond Williams's signature concepts in his analysis of the People's Republic of China as a "pessoptimistic nation":

Rather than simply being "a land of contradictions" that suffers from "national schizophrenia," I think it is necessary to see how China's sense of pride and sense of humiliation are actually intimately interwoven in a "structure of feeling" that informs China's national aesthetic. "Structure of feeling" is a useful concept because it allows us to talk about the interdependence of institutional structures and very personal experiences.³

In his 2009 book *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China*, Paul Cohen concentrates on one story from ancient Chinese history, and the expression (*chengyu* 成語) that encapsulates it, to investigate and reflect upon what we could call "the deep structure of Chinese sentiment" (pace Lung-kee Sun, author of the controversial book *The Deep Structure of Chinese Culture*).⁴ In so

² I recall the first formal accusation that I, along with colleagues at the Long Bow Group in Boston, had "hurt the feelings of 1.2 billion Chinese people." It was 1996 and our documentary film *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* had been included in the program of the Washington International Film Festival. Having got wind of this the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Washington sent a letter of protest to the festival organizers demanding that our recently finished film (I was the main writer and associate director for the project) be withdrawn. As the Embassy wrote: "As is well known, a very small number of people engaged themselves in anti-government violence in Beijing in June 1989 but failed. . . . The film the 'Gate of Heavenly Peace' sings praise of the people in total disregard of the fact. If this film is shown during the festival, it will mislead the audience and hurt the feelings of 1.2 billion Chinese people."

³ William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimistic Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 10.

⁴ See Sun Longji, *Zhongguo wenhuade "shengceng jiegou"* (Hong Kong: Jixian she, 1982);

doing Cohen chronicles the permutations of a story that has resonated powerfully throughout China's modern history, one that touches the core of "the feelings of the Chinese people."

The story of King Goujian 勾踐 dates from the Warring States period (722–481 B.C.E.). Goujian of Yue (located in the area of modern Guiji outside Shaoxing, Zhejiang) invaded the neighboring Kingdom of Wu in 494 B.C.E. Repulsed and eventually besieged, Goujian, on the advice of his counselors, agreed to the enemy's terms and in 492 subjected himself to humiliating bondage to the victor. For three years the fallen king suffered, returning to the defeated land of Yue only when his captors deemed him no longer a threat. In reality, during the hard years of subjugation Goujian cultivated and nourished a profound resentment. It is said that he constantly reinforced his resolve to revenge the humiliation visited upon him and his kingdom by sleeping on brushwood (*wo xin* 臥薪) and daily tasting bile (*chang dan* 嘗膽), a bitter reminder of his benighted state. Freed from the bonds of servitude, Goujian raised up his kingdom once more and exacted a devastating revenge on Wu. The hubris of victory and paranoia, however, led Goujian to the fatal purging of his own supporters and advisers.

Recorded by the Han-dynasty historian Sima Qian, the story of Goujian was only occasionally referred to before the late Qing era. But in the decades of post-Opium War decline, as writer-activists excoriated their fellows and the Chinese empire for the supine response to foreign incursion, national collapse, and the bankruptcy of the country's civilization, the tale of Goujian and a taste for revenge came into sharp focus. At a time of mounting national crisis, when many feared that China itself could well perish (*wang guo* 亡國), ancient heroic exemplars like Goujian, as well as other historical incidents of moment, were actively recalled by contemporary writers to rouse a spirit of fortitude and determination in their readers.

In his earlier *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, a work published a decade before *Speaking to History*, Cohen makes the point: "When the past is treated as myth, its meaning is governed to an overwhelming extent by the concerns of the present. As the center of gravity of present concerns shifts, therefore, the meaning of the past necessarily shifts along with it, sometimes to quite

Geremie Barmé and John Minford, eds., *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1988), pp. 30–35.

an extraordinary degree.”⁵ For Cohen it is stories in time—history—that play a crucial role in his study: “The prior existence in people’s minds of a paradigmatic narrative, a kind of template, that shaped (or at least colored) the ways in which they processed contemporary experience” (p. 49). It is the story of Goujian then, and the lapidary phrase “sleep on brushwood and taste bile” (*wo xin chang dan*) that in the present work Cohen identifies as, more than any others counseling “hope when things were at their bleakest. It was an optimistic story that promised national success, so long as the Chinese people did not forget the humiliations of the past and worked tirelessly to build up the country so that it could exact revenge for the wrongs it had suffered” (p. 228).

Cohen follows the revival and frequent reinterpretation of the story of Goujian from the late Qing period to the present day. He combines intellectual history, cultural thought, politics, and social studies to produce an account that speaks to, around, and through the modern device of turning a story into a national allegory. He thereby creates a work of fine or “slow” reading that presents historical anecdote as historical paradigm; in so doing he addresses both historical issues and cultural evocations as well as the symbolisms at work in the language of modern China.

Although the Goujian story is relatively simple, it is complex enough to allow for varying adaptations and interpretations, and overarching themes—and language—that would become paradigmatic in China’s twentieth century; interpretations of it would change to suit the needs of individuals, groups, political parties, and the nation itself. It is the adaptability of this particular historical tale and what it reveals about the uses of history, narrative, and character upon which Cohen dwells. “All cultures have shared stories,” he writes. “Some stories will be widely known throughout a culture, others will be known primarily within particular subgroups, while still others will in general be familiar only to the better-educated members of the culture” (p. 230). He argues that the encrypted Goujian story and its tag *wo xin chang dan*, this “coded means of cultural communication,” would speak to Chinese of all backgrounds and interests but at the same time “bars—or at least substantially impedes—understanding by anyone who has not been socialized in the Chinese world” (p. 231).

⁵ Cohen, *History in Three Keys* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 238.

Cohen's work allows us to address concerns about how, in the age of China's global importance, students of contemporary China can become more broadly (and productively) engaged with "things Chinese." Elsewhere I have spoken of my own view of this in terms of what I choose to call "New Sinology." This is a sinology that although grounded in the scholarship of the past and sensitive to its approaches, is also keenly alert to the cultural, intellectual, and political burdens that have been visited upon (or rather evoked through) the practices of the modern Chinese world. The idea of the "new" in this sinology bespeaks a conscious effort to relate constantly the study of China to uses of written and spoken Chinese (as well as the many dialects and languages that operate within the Chinese cultural sphere); Chinese, in other words, is a language in which people are constantly making new senses of the world, a language that is always being renewed.

New Sinology commemorates the past endeavors of individuals and broader communities of scholars to understand the complex living heritage of China's past and how it relates to a broader humanity. Located in the present, it is also an attempt to articulate a generous academic approach to China that is ever mindful of the importance of the conditions of historical conciliation (that new-found *rapprochement* between the dynastic, the Republican, and the People's Republic eras of China), such that from a Western perspective "China" becomes understood, studied, and appreciated. In brief, New Sinology locates itself *inside* the Chinese world and seeks to find ways of communicating what makes sense and animates and inspires this world.⁶ For this reason, this broad approach is one that emphasizes an attention to detail that will enable the shadows, legacies, ligatures, burdens, possibilities, and constants of China's contending pasts to come to light.

This is a description of practices that, regardless of their particular disciplinary inflection, critical approach, or academic *habitus*, takes Chinese ways of sense-making (or the creation of meaning using the various languages and ideas of the Sino-sphere) seriously. In particular what I call New Sinology is attentive to what Cohen calls the "undercurrent[s] of meaning flowing beneath the surface of conventionally recounted history" (p. 240), as well as to the ebb and flow of cultural, historical, and philosophical meaning, that are of such

⁶ For more on New Sinology, see <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/pah/chinaheritageproject/newsinology/>.

importance to an understanding of China today. In the revenant China of the present, in which the party-state celebrates the “great renaissance of the Chinese nation [race]” (*Zhonghua minzude weidade fuxing*), to use Jiang Zemin’s expression of 2001, these undercurrents of sinophone meaning and sense-making are particularly complex. This is a time when disparate traditions and histories are being assiduously mined by Chinese historians and thinkers of all kinds with an equanimity that was absent during the fraught years of the Republic and the early People’s Republic. These issues require us to attempt to understand and engage critically and holistically with the conspicuous and ever-growing presence of China’s past. In his work Cohen addresses the anxieties of history writing, memory, and evocations of the past; he also hints at that elusive but crucial quality necessary for those who would engage with the Chinese world from within while maintaining the probity of scholastic disinterest. It is an approach of grounded intellectual empathy that perhaps helps bridge better the gap between the “insider cultural knowledge” of which Cohen writes and the practice of principled intellectual engagement. This approach, one that is grounded and empathetic while independent and critical, is, in my view, vital to our studies of China.

If I am enlisting Paul Cohen as a practitioner of New Sinology, I do so with the intention of recommending his work *Speaking to History* as an exemplar of the kind of scholarship I think so important. Cohen is a significant historian who is thoughtful in his reading of traditional, modern, and contemporary Chinese texts. In this recent book, as in his earlier work, he articulates well the concerns of the China historian. Offering multivalent accounts of two particular histories he teases out the historian’s anxieties, explicates them, tests them, and offers them to the scrutiny of the reader. In the process he presents fresh perspectives of vital interest to any who would understand modern Chinese history and the continuing impact of events, be they modern or ancient, on the Chinese world.

Today it is easy to translate serious efforts such as the work of Cohen and other historians into the vulgate of the mass media. Since its publication, simplistic “take-home” messages drawn from Cohen’s nuanced work have been used by journalists and China commentators to provide a handy gloss on complex contemporary Chinese realities. Similarly, some scholars and writers of popular works on China (be

they overseas or in China) glibly apply gimcrack versions of “tradition” to their endeavors. This is not surprising. Given China’s economic ascendance, editors and journalists often require that stories offer a “China angle.” In the welter of reporting hack writers anxiously grasp for a ready-made tale from the Chinese past to apply as a decorative footnote to their lucubrations on the present. Others, while paying lip service to the importance of appreciating cultural traditions and histories in understanding that country, apply what I think of as a kind of “Sino-babble” shellac to matters of high moment. Think tanks and policy advisers, too, scramble for a handy historical figure or incident, a fitting allegory or anecdote, an example of “traditional wisdom,” or some revelation by a “China insider” to leaven their writings. The work of Cohen and others thus can reach a popular audience, but often in the context of such glib bowlderisation. Academics may celebrate this as precious evidence that serious scholarship can arrest the attention of the influential; but it is important to remember that the auto-orientalizing Chinese party-state, that also twists the past to serve its purposes, employs similar tactics in pursuing its brand of Chinese exceptionalism, all the while formulating what in it is framed as “China’s story” (*Zhongguode gushi*). Cohen’s work should actually be an antidote to such simplistic approaches.

It is common enough also for specialists to overlook salient features of a culture or a field of research. Paul Cohen makes the point that the story of Goujian, King of Yue, and the set expression *wo xin chang dan*, might have featured prominently in the minds as well as in the popular culture of Chinese from the late Qing onward, but he notes that their preeminence and significance have been overlooked by Western China scholars and historians. Although this may be true for the author’s acquaintances, for those who lived in China during the latter part of the Cultural Revolution (students from various European, African, and Asian countries, as well as from Canada and Australia, who studied in Maoist universities from 1973 on), Goujian was no stranger, and his complex tale and its resonances were not unknown.

The reader of *Speaking to History* might at times feel that the author is being overly meticulous in recounting the various permutations of the story of Goujian, noting tirelessly each change of emphasis, nuance, and character wrought by the writers who shaped the account not only to accord with their artistic license, but to reflect their times

and how they thought the Goujian story chimed with their circumstances. I remember well sitting through one of the first performances of Bai Hua's *Wu wang jing Yue wang jian* 吴王金戈越王剑 (The golden spear of the King of Wu and the sword of the King of Yue) in Beijing in 1983. Having heard the story of Goujian as a student in the dying years of the Cultural Revolution and read Cao Yu's play about the King of Yue (1961), I was fascinated to see how a tale of patience and revenge would be presented and received at a time of mass rehabilitation in a city full of people who were biding their time. Already well versed in the Communist Party's system of "esoteric communication," I, along with my Chinese friends and mentors, was nonetheless bored rigid by Bai Hua's heavy-handed drama. In his worthy retelling of the play, Cohen recapitulates in detail the way the playwright handles this story at a crucial moment in China's partial de-Maoification and how that relates to Bai's overall writing career, yet he offers the reader little sense either here, or indeed in other renderings of the tale, of the extent to which a compelling story has been so poorly served by the artistic talents of twentieth-century China.

To be sure, the array of cultural works that Cohen covers provides an insight into shifting modern sensibilities as seen through discontinuities in the interpretation of a much-revered anecdote. However, something that strikes one about the plays, stories, and operas Cohen recounts is their generally dreary nature, their lack of any fresh insight, and an overall failure to produce works of abiding art, even as there has been a bounty in repertoire pieces that are restaged as part of China's post-socialist claim on tradition. In modern bombastic works that give voice to a "structure of feeling" but have little sense of aesthetic architecture, the grandeur of royal decline and tragic loss, and the senseless hubris resulting from political blindness, which are enduring motifs of the Chinese literary tradition, are absent. Is this perhaps because the imperatives of China's politically driven culture, and the mission-consciousness of the country's thinkers and artists, have stymied imagination, artistic license, and creativity?

Over the past century many scholars have observed that the exigencies of national salvation and political agitprop in China have resulted in artistic deficiencies. The motivating ideas behind Goujian and his endeavor may well speak across the ages, but I fear that the art of those who freight the story in modern times can barely resonate beyond the

moment. What does remain is perhaps something that is as laconic as it is powerful: the deathless four-character expression, a cliché that still resonates with real force: *wo xin chang dan*. It is this short-hand formulation then, not the surrounds of Guiji in Zhejiang, the spot where the celebrated “sword of Goujian” was said to have been unearthed, that is a “lieu de mémoire,” a “site” of literary evocation of the kind so insightfully discussed by Frederick Mote and Pierre Ryckmans.⁷

The story of Goujian dates back to the fifth century B.C.E. and Cohen uses the Sima Qian account of Goujian in which “tasting gall” is featured (although that account makes no mention of him “sleeping on brushwood”). It would appear that it was not until over a millennium later, in the Tang dynasty, that the formulation “[Goujian] tasted gall whenever he went out and at night made a pillow of his sword” (*chu ze chang dan, wo ze zhen ge* 出則嘗膽，臥則枕戈) first appeared, and that was in an annotation to a poem by Du Fu 杜甫. Thereafter, it was the Song scholar-official Su Shi 蘇軾 who created the saying *wo xin chang dan* when writing about Sun Quan 孫權, a hero of the Three Kingdoms. During the embattled years of the Southern Song the expression was popularized in the writings and memorials of officials who would gesture toward biding their time in the hope of dynastic revival. Over the years “sleeping on brushwood and tasting bile” has been forged into one of those multiple-*chengyu* clusters drawn from various historical sources and anecdotes that are a hallmark of China’s market-socialist hyperbole. Thus, the indomitable spirit of the Chinese is now frequently celebrated as an exemplary steadfastness hardened by “sleeping on brushwood and tasting gall, enduring humiliation so major tasks can be achieved, while being tireless and resilient, and never relenting despite all obstacles” (*wo xin chang dan, renru fuzhong, jianren bu ba, bai zhe bu nao* 臥薪嘗膽、忍辱負重、堅忍不拔、百折不撓).

One piquant twentieth-century version of the story of Goujian and the commemoration of national humiliation (*guochi* 國恥) does, nonetheless, speak beyond its circumstances. It was written by

⁷ See F. W. Mote, “A Millennium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time and Space Concepts in Soochow,” *Rice University Studies* 59.4 (1973); Pierre Ryckmans, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” The Forty-seventh George E. Morrison Lecture, 16 July 1986, online at: http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=014_chineseAttitude.inc&issue=014.

Feng Zikai 豐子愷, the often-neglected Republican essayist and artist (not “cartoonist” as Cohen calls him). Feng’s coevals were generally ensnared by the political and cultural exigencies of the day, but his approach was *sui generis*. In an essay written in 1936 as a meditation on the earnest commemorations of the country’s long list of national humiliations, Feng addresses his readers in the voice of a high-school instructor, one Teacher Qin. Qin acknowledges that China was enduring a period of hardship and struggle, and then asks the class to consider the consequences of a crude utilitarianism that would see art education abandoned in favor of practical studies that fail to address the human condition. The teacher also raises doubts about the value of perfecting artistic talents that may merely end up serving a narrow political agenda. Throughout his adult life Feng Zikai articulated similar concerns in essays, artwork, and translations, creations that have survived well past the evanescent victory of radical revolutionary politics. Cohen quotes Teacher Qin’s concluding remarks: “We do indeed live in a time of hardship and struggle.” But the teacher is at pains to point out:

But under no circumstances can the study of art be abolished, and we must also not mechanically use art as an instrument of struggle, coveting a small benefit and losing a large one. Starting today, all of us should work hard to train our visual, manual, and mental powers, in the hope that in the future each one will become a complete citizen and a complete person. When we have reached that point, we will have nothing more to fear. (P. 67)

For all his punctiliousness in accounting for the Goujian story in modern China, Cohen overlooks a remarkable and still-remembered observation on the ancient King of Yue made by the rather Goujianesque figure of Mao Zedong. In November 1959, in the wake of United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’s announcement of a policy aimed at ensuring the “peaceful evolution” of China’s Communist regime into a democratic system, Mao addressed an elite party audience at the Dahua Hotel in Hangzhou. In his remarks he warned of the potential dangers of Dulles’s strategy. Later, while strolling on the shore of West Lake, the Chairman observed to his bodyguard Li Yin-qiao that the long-term peril for revolutionary China would come not from its poverty but from the threat of future prosperity. Quoting the story of Goujian, Mao said somewhat portentously:

King Goujian of Yue slept on brushwood and tasted bile. Ten years' effort to enrich the nation and strengthen the army was completely forgotten by later generations. China is not rich now, but when it becomes so in the future, when everyone can eat meat without a worry, there will be problems; you can be sure of it.⁸

Mao's concerns would live on after him. It was partly in response to the social forces unleashed by the reforms from 1978 that led party leaders to launch various political campaigns against "bourgeois liberalization" in the 1980s. In September 1986, anxious to reclaim its role as cultural and historical exemplar for the nation and the Chinese world (be it that for the PRC, the Republic of China on Taiwan, for Hong Kong and Macao, or for the Chinese diaspora)—a role it had originally essayed in the early 1950s—the Communist Party launched a "spiritual civilization campaign." This was the precursor to the powerfully effective post-1989 "patriotic education campaign" and it was championed by none other than the party General Secretary Hu Yaobang. The new push was to extol the heroes of China's long history and the healthy patriotism of its cultural exemplars. Among other things it resulted in the publication of such compendia as the *Jingshen wenming cishu* 精神文明辞书 (Dictionary of spiritual civilization).⁹ This tome provided educators, propagandists, and writers with an approved font of material covering Chinese civilization and acceptable interpretations of it. Books like this built on teaching materials that had originally been developed for mass distribution in the early 1960s by the Ming historian and party stalwart Wu Han and his colleagues. Their work, aimed at the edification and indoctrination of the young, was published under the general title *Zhongguo lishi changshi* (Common knowledge Chinese history) from 1963 to 1964. However, the true roots of this "patriot's repertoire" are to be found in the late Qing and early Republican eras, and although the book under discussion chronicles one particularly important story (along with its short-hand saying)

⁸ See "Xizihu pan, Mao Zedong wei guo wei min youxin chongchong" 西子湖畔, 毛泽东为国为民忧心忡忡. Accessible online at: <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=89923907>. My thanks to Duncan Campbell for his suggestions regarding the translation of Mao's remarks. For more on Mao, peaceful evolution, and Hangzhou, see Qiang Zhai, "Mao Zedong and Dulles's 'Peaceful Evolution' Strategy: Revelations from Bo Yibo's Memoirs"; online at: http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=018_1959preventingpeace.inc&issue=018.

⁹ Edited by Feng Lianhui 冯连惠 et al. (Beijing: Zhongguo zhanwang chubanshe, 1986).

and its permutations in the twentieth century, it forms only part of an approved panoply of historical incidents, individuals, and sayings developed for over a century or so that has come to form a veritable encyclopaedia of “China,” its past glories, its modern decline, and now its resurgence. Other names with complex “backstories” that feature in this pantheon include Qu Yuan, Qin Shihuang, Sima Qian, Zhuge Liang, Li Shimin, Li Bo, Du Fu, Zhu Yuanzhang, and Wen Tianxiang, to name but a few.

Cohen locates the parallels of historical revivals and the role of memory in cultures other than that of China—in incidents and figures that play a similar role. Indeed, citing Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, a writer on Jewish history and memory, he notes that perhaps everywhere at certain historical junctures, “people are capable of anamnesis, of reaching ‘back into an often distant past to recover forgotten or neglected elements with which there is a sudden sympathetic vibration, a sense of empathy, of recognition’” (p. 86). However, an important aspect of the recapture of classical figures, stories, and myths in modern China involves the “busy work” done by the party-state, during the Republic and the People’s Republic alike. These rival party-states have shared much in common, including the fact that they have acted variously as an important agent (and source of funding) in the selection and interpretation of worthy stories of China, and in the creation of the myths of which Cohen writes in *History in Three Keys*. Indeed, from the 1920s the “partification” (*danghua* 黨化) of education, culture, and thought, initiated by Nationalist patriotic thinkers in the New Culture Movement era has been a constant feature of the production of textbooks, the editing of newspapers, journals, and magazines (in particular those aimed at the growing student market from the 1910s), and the mass media market more generally. These are crucial aspects of the material cultural dimension of the story of the King of Yue and his fellow historical exemplars.

What does the story of the King of Yue and its incarnations over the past century or more tell us about the living uses of history in China? Cohen himself offers a view that “we have learned how important it is for Chinese to communicate through *stories* what they want their fellow Chinese to feel and think and how they want them to behave.” Why?—“The simplest answer . . . is that this is the way it has been done in China for as long as anyone can remember.” Cohen also

reminds the reader that other cultures, including that of the United States, have their own, albeit highly different, repertoire of foundational narratives. Each has a way of commemorating in living memory the history and myths of the past, but the sheer scale and abiding impact of the practice of historical memory in China is of great significance, in particular during a time when that past is being used vitally to inform the future. Later, Cohen poses further questions that he muses are probably unanswerable. For instance, in the first half of China's twentieth century did the Goujian story

actually shape, even define, Chinese memory of past humiliations and how these humiliations should be responded to, supplying them with meanings they otherwise would not have had? Or was it simply a narrative that resonated with the memories and responses that people would likely have had anyway? (P. 85)

These are considerations of pressing relevance to those who would think about history in China today. One such scholar is the intellectual historian Xu Jilin 許紀霖 in Shanghai who, in a series of powerful essays on contemporary Chinese-style historicism, sees the dangers that the past, as melded and condoned by the party-state and those who align themselves with it, poses for the unfolding history of the present.

Cohen's particular strength is in showing the ways in which one particular story, and the catchphrase associated with it, fits into the weave of the larger narrative of modern China as an aspiring nation: one that, although it continues in the unsteady embrace of ancient grandeur, has been beset by modern challenges. That China's educated elite sought continually to draw strength and inspiration from the past in their attempts to create a modern sense of "the Chinese" is amply demonstrated throughout Cohen's work.

Although Goujian's harboring of a desire for vengeance has the power of a leitmotiv in the twentieth century, it is paradoxical that so much else in the past hundred or more years is subject to egregious collective mis-remembering or official obfuscation. Concerted institutional and commercial practice has made this so. This happens via the careful editing of textbooks and educational materials; through the agency of the guided media as well as a result of the tireless incursions of the censors, including ever-vigilant "net nannies" who constantly

nip and tuck at untoward utterances in cyberspace. There are also the mass-media blockbusters on stage and screen, as well as the smaller-scale stage plays and operas of the kind that Cohen has concentrated on in this book.

It is here in this realm of ideas, history, and audiovisual culture that the deliberate creation and evocation of the “feelings of the people of China” is important. Those feelings are evoked and guided by complex state (and now commercial) involvement and they in turn help the state shape its own responses. With the state tirelessly policing what is “objective” (*keguan* 客觀) and “accurate/correct” (*zhengque* 正確), serious limits are placed on how the stories of the past can be retold for audiences today. Such practices further erode the prospect of inspired storytelling, not to mention a meaningful engagement with, and contestation of, history. All of this has profound consequences for Chinese senses of self and of possibility, and indeed for ways that the Chinese world can be understood and perceived on a global scale.

Ancestors, Virgins, and Friars: Christianity as a Local Religion in Late Imperial China BY EUGENIO MENEGON.

Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009. Pp. xx + 450. \$49.95.

Daniel H. Bays, Calvin College

This is the first book to be published by Eugenio Menegon; I hope it will not be his last. I found this work to be conceptually creative and stimulating, carefully researched, cogently argued, and very well written. It encompasses a wide range of issues concerning the late imperial and early modern Chinese experience with Christianity, and it engages these issues quite satisfactorily. Menegon succeeds in shedding light on several large questions debated by scholars in recent years. One issue is whether, and to what extent, Christianity remained foreign to China even after the early seventeenth century, when the numbers of converts began increasing markedly. Another question concerns the actual differences on the ground between the Jesuits, who were focused on urban areas, especially Beijing, and the Spanish Dominicans, who were working in the out-of-the-way Mindong region of northeastern Fujian