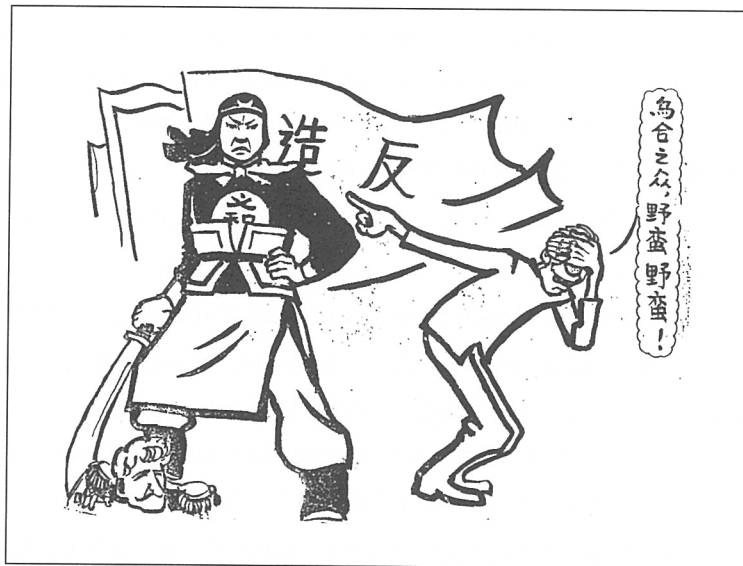


Writing History or Collecting Facts? Different Ways of Representing Modern Chinese Rebellions



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1. SOME GENERAL REMARKS ON CHINESE SCHOLARSHIP

Social rebellion, or the so-called peasant uprising, is one of several sub-fields that have been fully developed in Chinese Communist historiography since 1949. The White Lotus Rebellion (1796), the Taiping Rebellion, (1850), the Nien Rebellion (1853), and the Boxer Uprisings (1900), have all drawn wide attention among Chinese scholars specializing in Ch'ing history. Collections of rare materials, original documents, records of official interrogation, and confessions of the rebels, and oral interviews, are published in copious volumes, which offer valuable, handy reference works for later historians.

For the purpose of this talk, it's interesting to see how Chinese historians build up their own research on the basis of this raw material. Except for the comparative scarcity of work on the White Lotus Rebellion, the great majority of works on the Taipings, the Nien rebels and the Boxers share some common features.

First, they all intend to give a comprehensive presentation of all the facts of every respect of the movement or the event, when it involves military actions. Readers will be bombarded unexceptionally with excessive details about each campaign, about factional struggles among the major or minor leaders, about the daily military action of all parties involved, the numbers of soldiers, guns, horses and so forth.

Secondly, when dogmatic Marxist explanations gradually give way to more "objective" analysis, we usually don't find a satisfactory theoretical replacement. Trivial facts take the place of a structure based on theory or themes in putting together a book.

Thirdly, when the scholars are busy themselves with the reconstruction of "objective" reality, the readers lose track in the jungle of facts. Without being able to follow the major routes on the map, the work that aims at a comprehensive and authoritarian guidance to the major landmarks of modern Chinese history, loses its function as a useful tour guide.

Fourthly, the advantage of having a good command of one's native language turns out to be one major source that counts for the failure of Chinese scholars to write readable history for their own nation. What we usually see in their works are long, even tedious, quotation without further analysis, and accumulation of minute facts in large numbers. The way they use raw material is as if they believe that facts will tell the story automatically, so there is no need to make distinctions, select, or digest. When history is rendered into a professional labor of fact collection, the issue of writing skill or style will of course not rise from the horizon. Meanwhile, the ancient legacy of history as writing is lost too.

This is not to say that Chinese historians after 1949 have not paid attention to popular writing at all. On the contrary, trained under a proletarian regime, some historians are quite aware of the need to educate the masses through popular historical writings. Thus, we see some well-written and highly readable small pamphlets aiming at the public. The fascinating life stories of such intellectuals as Wang Fu-chih, Huang Chung-hsi and Ku Yen-wu are driven by the success of their popular works. The Taipings received more publicity than other

rebels in these small pamphlets. In addition to the biographies of Hung Hsiu-ch'uan, Lo Er-kang's *History of the Kingdom of Heavenly Peace: An Outline* stands out prominently as a model work that combines both historical information and an elegant lucid writing style.

2. THREE CLASSICAL WESTERN WORKS ON CHINESE REBELLIONS

Compared to the fact-oriented work by Chinese scholars, American scholars seem to be more conscious of strategies in approaching the rebels they are confronting. The three most representative studies, on the Taipings, the Niens and the Boxers, respectively, all leave their readers with indelible impressions by offering fresh interpretative frameworks to the otherwise formidable masses of data.

Philip Kuhn's *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China* (Harvard University Press, 1970) is among the first works that break new ground on a topic that has been thoroughly documented by Chinese historians. Unlike his Chinese counterparts, Kuhn is very restrained in quoting raw material and attending to details on names, dates, battles and internal factional struggles. His terse, even dry, manner in constructing the event differs not only with Jonathan Spence and Frederic Wakeman's lucid and luxurious styles, but also with his own narration of the history of the soul stealers written 20 years later.

Actually, we can say that Kuhn's main interest in the first work on the Taipings is not to tell the story of the makers of a new Kingdom. Rather, he aims at establishing an overall theory of Chinese local society in late imperial times. Borrowing from Maurice Freedman's classic study on the Chinese family system and William Skinner's seminal papers on the market system, Philip Kuhn builds up an order of Chinese local society with an eye toward the principles and hierarchies on which local organizations structured themselves.

Elizabeth Perry's *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945* (Stanford University Press, 1980) deals with a century of violence in Northern Anhwei. Inspired by the conception of "long duration" of the Annals School, Perry seeks to maintain a balance between ecological determinism and human agency. While Chinese scholars committed themselves to the struggles among various Nien sects, the exact dates and locations of each campaign, and the precise nature of the Society of the Red Spears, Perry provides a bigger and more attractive stage on which collective violence broke out. She bypasses all the minute details that concern Chinese scholars, endeavoring instead to offer more persuasive interpretations for the anti-governmental actions of the Niens in the 1850s, the Society of the Red Spears at the turn of the twentieth century, and the Communists in the 1920s and 1930s. In place of Marxist dogmas and traditional views of rebels, her idea of rational choices makes far better sense of the reasons why the rebels chose to lead precarious bandit careers instead of earth-bound lives. Factors like ecological conditions, patterns of crop production, systems of salt monopoly and practical concerns of different rebellious organizations, when

woven together seamlessly by the author, tell a more compelling story about the rebels in Northern Anhwei than the sterile accumulation of facts, however comprehensive.

Joseph Esherick's *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) draws more extensively from Chinese scholarship on the Boxers, both secondary study and the raw material, including official documents and oral interviews conducted by the students and teachers of Shantung University. Like his Chinese colleagues, Esherick also shows great interest in tracing the many different sources of ideas and organization of the Boxers prior to 1898 when the Boxers assumed their official name. What distinguishes Esherick from his Chinese colleagues is that Esherick is also able to anchor his masses of data in an overall interpretative framework. William Skinner's theory of macro regions and the Annals School's concern for ecological conditions provide a more sophisticated historical stage -as we also see in Perry's work- on which Esherick undertakes a detailed investigation of the activities of the Boxers before the outbreak of the war in 1900.

Once the stage is set, Esherick further borrows from E. P. Thompson's view of popular culture to interpret the power of "irrational" beliefs in shaping the character of the Boxer Movement. In Thompson's conception, it was the legacy of popular culture which workers inherited from their rural environments, rather than the Marxist theory of class struggle, that shaped the workers' group identity, sense of pride and mode of behavior.

In Esherick's hands, just as British popular culture gave form to the protests of England's working class, beliefs and practices that the Chinese boxers inherited from their rural culture played an equally decisive role in determining the peculiar forms the Boxers would assume to register their protest. Possessed ignorant men and women, superstitious beliefs, and an assortment of weird modes of actions, all find an extremely sympathetic translator here.

When the historian lacks a strategy toward data, an analytic framework, and an awareness of the necessity of proper writing skill, accumulation of minute facts seems to be the only alternative .