

Paul A. Cohen: *A Path Twice Traveled: My Journey as a Historian of China*

xii, 303 pp. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. ISBN 978 0 67423729 2.

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Academic autobiographies are often overlooked. Few of us live lives spiced with daring, and not many of us grapple with issues of truly earth-shaking consequence. But historians of China in North America have over the past seven decades lived through an era of very rapid, even spectacular, change, during which the story of the Chinese people has emerged from an obscure specialization to one of immediate everyday public concern. This shift is often summed up by reference to the work of John K. Fairbank (1907–91), and though of course he did not respond in isolation to the momentous developments in China that brought the history of that nation to the attention of a wider circle of historians, since many of his peers were Chinese scholars working in North American universities, the young men and women he trained at Harvard undeniably went on to make major contributions to the field. Among these Paul Cohen holds a special place that quite justifiably calls for further examination.

The fear for any autobiography is that the author's work will be dismissed as self-regarding, but this charge can be readily dismissed here. On the recommendation of others enough personal detail is included in this book to make its narrative intelligible, yet this is not a presentation of Paul Cohen, but of his work: the double journey named in the title is that of his writings over the years, and of the process of retracing that shows us how these came about. But to this reader the personal details, even if grudgingly provided, do serve to illuminate something very important about all this that makes the author stand out from his peers. For in his younger days, the writing of history was not for him a fixed ambition; rather, as the introduction to this study shows, he entered Cornell as an engineering student, and after some years casting about for an alternative almost randomly took up an East Asian studies AM at Harvard, gradually developing his focus on the history of China as he went along. Consequently, it seems to me, one feels in reading his research that a lingering question lies behind it: "What are we up to here?" The result has therefore been a subtle and quite distinctive awareness of what we term historiography, not just what happened but how we write about it.

Though this awareness is quite explicit, for example, in his writing on the Boxers, his 1997 study was in effect deploying insights already announced in his survey of American writing on China of 1984, an interrogation of the approach of Fairbank and others that could be seen as mildly parricidal. It is therefore of immense value to have here a narrative history of what was going on in the background to that 1984 publication, and of the way in which the conventions of publishers' reviews and peer recommendations dealt with this ticklish manuscript. All graduate students thinking of embarking on a career in Chinese history would therefore do well to read this book, for even if they are operating outside the constraints of the North American system, it is best to be aware of the factors that tend to shape the monographs authored by their colleagues there.

But the further trajectory of Paul Cohen's writing is also well worth considering. His 2009 study of how a king of the fifth century BCE came to live again in the imagination of twentieth-century China teaches us about another aspect of history there that we sometimes overlook, though Lawrence Schneider in his work on the image of Qu Yuan in history does afford some sort of parallel case. In the Anglophone world it is possible to conjure up imaginative sympathy for an Alexander Hamilton, or in England further back a Thomas More or Thomas Cromwell; elsewhere in the British Isles other figures may have been brought to life again, though I do not know if Shakespeare's Glendower should count. When, however, Shakespeare bids us interest ourselves in the personality of Coriolanus he is surely taking us to what was clearly another time and another place, even if it was a time and place more familiar to at least some of his audience than to us now. But in China the imaginative range of history is deeper, and broader, its discontinuities – though certainly there – less evident. There is plenty of further work to be done by those who would do it, and they might do well to start at the end of this book, where on pp. 249–55 as a bonus we find a complete bibliography up to 2018 of everything Paul Cohen has written for us to enjoy. The topics I find of personal interest in Chinese history are generally not those about which he has written, but I for one value this book, and the guidance it provides to his many thought-provoking publications.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X23000290

Richard Van Ness Simmons (ed.): *Studies in Colloquial Chinese and Its History: Dialect and Text*

x, 286 pp. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022. ISBN 978 988 8754 09 0.

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In 1995, Jerry Norman and W. South Coblin published an article that came to be known in certain circles as “the manifesto” (“A new approach to Chinese historical linguistics”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115/4, 576–84). The two North American linguists, experts in Chinese dialectology, argued convincingly against the prevailing twentieth-century model of Chinese language history and its associated methodology of historical dialectology. The model asserted that the numerous living varieties of speech in the Sinitic language family were, with trivial exception, descended directly from an attested medieval northern Chinese language known as “Middle Chinese”. The “rhyme books” (*yùnsū* 韻書) and “graded rhyme tables” (*děngyùntú* 等韻圖) of the period were presumed to encode phonological categories of that language, allowing its lexicon and sound system to be reconstructed with a high degree of accuracy. This meant that comparison of character pronunciations in modern dialects with their pronunciations in the reconstructed Middle Chinese framework could mechanically reveal the set of sound changes that had taken place in the evolution of each dialect. In combination with analysis