

If local people's congresses are institutionalized, why is courage required to report what they do? In short, it could be that Cho's optimism is based on an inappropriate teleology of modernity and that his qualifications are by far the most important part of the picture. Nonetheless, this remains a useful book that could be put to good purpose in many graduate seminars.

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**Paul A. COHEN**, *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009. xxiv + 354 pp., with notes, character list, images, bibliography, and index. ISBN: 978-0-520-25579-1 (hc). Price: £23.95.

The story of King Goujian (d. 465 B.C.E.), as Paul Cohen demonstrates in this thoughtful and thought-provoking book, has had a remarkable life in modern China. Originally a tale of humiliation, perseverance, and revenge set in the Spring and Autumn period (722–481 B.C.E.), the Goujian narrative was widely referenced in both popular media and officially sponsored publications in the early 20th century as an example of how national humiliation could be avenged (ch. 2), adopted by writers in post-1949 Taiwan first as an anti-Communist device and later as a vehicle for commenting on political unification (ch. 3), and deployed by intellectuals in the People's Republic to underscore the importance of self-reliance and self-strengthening (ch. 4) as well as to channel political criticisms (ch. 5). Even in the highly commercialized context of present-day China, the story of Goujian has continued to live on both as an education tool and as a source of tourism revenues (ch. 6).

The story Cohen has chosen to tell is a fascinating one. But while he has shown convincingly that the Goujian story (or stories) has been highly versatile and influential, he has been less able, as he aspires, to explain why the adaptation of "the contents of the Goujian story to the requirements of different historical situations" has been deemed "so critically important" (p. xxi). Quite often, Cohen's claims in this regard seem more declarative (or speculative) than explanatory. Thus, during the late Qing and early Republican periods, commentators "looked again and again to the example of Goujian" (p. 37) in part because, "in China since remotest antiquity," there had been "a strong, almost instinctive tendency ... to match specific stories to specific situations" (p. 41). During the Nationalist era, "the strong identification of the Guomindang with

the example of Goujian” might have “reflected the profound sense of connection that Chiang Kai-shek himself felt with the Yue king” (p. 70). And novelists and playwrights in post-1949 Taiwan and the People’s Republic would return time and again to the subject of Goujian in part because they wanted their audience “to consider the resonance” between the issues found in the story and their “close analogues in the contemporary Chinese situation” (p. 169).

To be fair, the question of why the adaptation of the Goujian story has been deemed “so critically important” in modern China is probably not one that could easily yield a satisfactory answer. Even Cohen himself seems to have thrown up his hands when he suggests, perhaps in jest, that the reason it is important for the Chinese to communicate through stories is that “this is the way it has been done in China for as long as anyone can remember” (p. 235). According to Cohen, since Chinese people had long developed “the notion that history had a way of repeating itself” (p. 235), when they were faced with difficult situations, it was “natural” for them to seek guidance or inspiration from the life stories of exemplary historical figures. Although Cohen’s invocation of concepts such as “cultural resource” (pp. xix, 82, 122), “cultural knowledge” (pp. xix, 57, 232–3), “root metaphor” (pp. xxi, 240), “reverberation” (p. 57), “sympathetic vibration” (pp. 86, 236), and “cultural common” (p. 230) is in many ways suggestive, I am not convinced that the bifurcation of observers into cultural “insiders” and “outsiders” (pp. xix, 232–3)—at least as it is formulated in the book—is a particularly fruitful way of exploring the gaps, ambiguities, and contestations inherent in stories such as that of King Goujian.

In general, I agree completely with Cohen—who approvingly cites Ernest Renan, Benedict Anderson, among others—that stories such as that of Goujian are important because they help us understand how cultural boundaries are defined and how national communities are bound together. I am sympathetic to the desire to place the experiences of China in a comparative context, but I am inclined to see the primary task of the historian not as identifying cultural essences but as understanding how such seemingly timeless attributes have transformed over time. Cohen might not have chosen to frame the issue this way, but it is a testament to this exceptionally rich book as well as to his extraordinary body of scholarship (for an overview, see the essays collected in his *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past* [London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003]) that we are now able to reflect more intelligently on some of the most fundamental questions historians—whether of China or not—must face.

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