Soulstealers Book Critique

Daniel Stambler
AS.100.347: Early Modern China
Professor William Rowe
February 28, 2019

Philip A. Kuhn's historical work, *Soulstealers The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768*, offers the reader deep insight into the mid-eighteenth-century Ch'ing imperial bureaucratic administration. Using intriguing narrative and a unique case study, the author shows how active Ch'ing dynasty emperors were able to control their government officials. Despite the insightful narrative, the historiography suffers from a dubious connection between the topic of Chinese government and the case study of "soulstealing" in 1768.

Soulstealers focuses on the actions taken by the Qianlong Emperor, Hungli, around the year 1768. The story is set in the Yangtze river valley area which was a prosperous region of China during this period. The book describes the epidemic of "soulstealing" and "queue-clipping", which deeply bothered the superstitious Chinese populace in the region. Both were considered a form of sorcery and were thus unlawful.[1] Soulstealing was considered the art of writing down someone's name and then using that written name to steal that person's soul. The populace believed that doing so would cause the target to fall ill and perish.[2] Queue-clipping, or the act of cutting off another man's back braid, was believed to have similar results. However, queue-clipping also had political implications as after the Ming dynasty fell, Manchu conquerors forced Han men to wear the queue: voluntarily cutting off one's queue was seen as treason and was punishable by execution.[3]

Furthermore, the suspects of sorcery were typically religious Buddhist monks, Taoists, wanderers, and beggars.[4] The author shows that a mob typically formed in such cases, forcing the constables working for the yamen or government to arrest the suspects, who were accused of

---

[1] Philip A. Kuhn, Soulstealers The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768, (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1990), 1-29.

[2] Ibid., 4
[3] Ibid., 54-56
[4] Ibid., 107-115

practicing sorcery.[5] The accused usually landed themselves in this type of trouble after interacting with male Chinese children. According to the author, Chinese male children were believed to be the targets of the accused because society was heavily patriarchal.[6] After suspects were arrested, magistrates tended to either sweep the case under the rug or torture the suspects to extract a confession. Afterwards, the cases would eventually make it up to the provincial level where they would be given more scrutiny.[7]

The greatest strength of Kuhn's historiography is the presentation of his book's major subject; Chinese government administration. Kuhn's presentation is both chronological and argumentative, starting with an incident of Buddhist monks accused of soulstealing. The story then shifts over to a description of Emperor Hungli's lineage and backstory as well as a description of the Chinese governmental administration.[8] Throughout his book, Kuhn transitions between anecdotes and explanations of the inner machinations of China's government. The presentation is not chronological; some stories, such as a brief narration on the Manchu subjugation of the former Ming empire, are used by Kuhn to back his argument about the merits and demerits of how the imperial throne controlled Chinese officials. Not every chapter follows the exact same structure as some focus more on narration and less on argument. In addition, the main case study about the sorcery scare of 1768 is laid out chronologically.

The end of the soulstealing narrative leads into one of Kuhn's key points about how the Chinese imperial throne was able to check the power of its bureaucracy, while failing to properly discipline underperforming administrators.[9] I believe this structure works effectively as it

---

[5] Ibid., 26-28
[6] Ibid., 11
[7] Ibid., 19-21
[8] Ibid., 51-94
[9] Ibid., 181-186

provides an excellent account of imperial politics during the mid-eighteenth-century Ch'ing empire. Anytime Kuhn makes a detailed political point, he can cite a historical account or tie in multiple narratives to substantiate his argumentation.

Soulstealers also has a minor topic associated with the narrative, that of the soulstealing scare and the paranoia surrounding the practice of sorcery. This case study does, at times, a decent job of illustrating aspects of the Ch'ing government. For example, one instance of a soulstealing accusation references how constables and runners were not direct government employees and were examples of how the Ch'ing dynasty was able to keep its administration relatively small by relying on locals.[10] Furthermore, the way officials treated the soulstealing cases, either by covering them up or by reporting them are great examples of how the throne valued obedient bureaucrats over well-performing ones.

While Kuhn's study makes a number of interesting observations that reveal insights into Ch'ing administrative practices, I feel that the Sorcery Scare of 1768 is not a proper case study for describing the totality of how the Ch'ing government operated. The soulstealing case study does not adequately relate to every aspect of mid-eighteenth-century Ch'ing politics that Kuhn brought up. For instance, Kuhn tries to make a connection between this case study and Chinese distrust of their Manchu rulers. Kuhn also attempts to show how this case study is a good example of the emperor trying to prevent Manchu elites from assimilating into Han culture.[11] Other than the queue being a Manchu policy forced on the Chinese populace during the late 17th century, there is not any other established connection. Furthermore, the case study might only apply to the regions in which it took place and thus does not reasonably explain how magistrates, governors and governor generals administered the poorer regions of China.

---

[10] Ibid., 20

[11] Kuhn, Soulstealers, 53

One of the weakest aspects of Kuhn's historiography is the primary sources that he utilizes. They fail to justify the significance of the soulstealing/queue-clipping scare, because they do not contain accounts written by locals who would have observed this great panic. It is important to note that this is not entirely the fault of the author, as acquiring archival data and primary accounts from eighteenth century China is very difficult even today, and finding accounts written by ordinary villagers would have been even more challenging. Nevertheless, the primary sources are almost all from the perspective of the central Peking officials and the emperor. These documents include board of civil service records and the emperor's letters. The most useful resources are the confessions from those accused of sorcery and the evaluations of certain magistrates, but, by Kuhn's own admissions, the documents are "not necessarily verbatim transcripts of what a suspect said. They must be considered government documents and viewed with due skepticism."[12] He then claims that other evidence can be checked against these confessions to establish their validity.[13] However, the source selection shows a strong bias towards the opinions of high imperial officials and the emperor. Kuhn claims that in 1768, the soulstealing scare was a major phenomenon in China, but an astonishing lack of local accounts detailing such a scare makes it difficult to believe that soulstealing was as widespread of an issue in China as Kuhn claims it to be. Therefore, I believe that this phenomenon could have not occurred and the massive mobs that the author claims were forming and demanding punishment for the supposed sorcerers may have been exaggerated through the emperor's point of view.

Although *Soulstealers* does not appear to be pushing a political agenda, I believe it is important to consider the author's and publisher's biases when reviewing how the historiography was written. This book was published by Harvard University Press in 1990. Harvard University

[12] Ibid., 270
[13] Ibid.

Press is commonly considered to be heavily left leaning.[14]Thus, this information yields that this book might have a left leaning bias. Although, I believe that the bias doesn't impact Kuhn's historiography of Chinese imperial administration, I think that this left leaning bias did show itself in his overt criticism of eighteenth-century Ch'ing society.[15] Thus, Kuhn's portrayal of Ch'ing society during its golden era in its more prosperous regions might have been slightly harsher than reality.

The time period that the book was published in can also help the reader discern bias. This book was published in 1990. The typical trend in Chinese historiography around this time tended towards postcolonialist and revisionist work.[16] The revisionist trend was to show how advanced eighteenth and nineteenth century Chinese society was in order to contrast the traditional perception that China around this time was a backwards society.[17] *Soulstealers* lines up with these postcolonial trends as it does at several points allude to how society under the Ch'ing advanced. One example is the flourishing of commerce and the allusion to the abolition of the Ming dynasty's mandated labor service.[18]

Overall, this book has a strong presentation on Ch'ing politics backed by strong evidence. Furthermore, I believe that despite the sorcery case study not being as impactful as Kuhn believes, the author presents strong evidence that the Qianlong emperor did have an agenda to seize on any opportunity to expand his influence over his officials.

---

[14] David Gordon, Nilsson Per, The Ideological Profile of Harvard University Press: Categorizing 494 Books Published 2000-2010, (Econ Journal Watch, January 2011), 80.

[15] Kuhn, Soulstealers, 41

[16] Wang Xiaoping, Three Trends in Recent Studies of Modern Chinese Literature and Culture, (China Perspectives, December 2009), 119.

[17] Ibid., 119

[18] Kuhn, Soulstealers, 34-38

Bibliography

Gordon, David, and Per Nilsson. "The Ideological Profile of Harvard University Press: Categorizing 494 Books Published 2000-2010." Econ Journal Watch 8, no. 1 (January 2011): 76-95.

Kuhn, Philip A. Soulstealers The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Xiaoping, Wang. "Three Trends in Recent Studies of Modern Chinese Literature and Culture." China Perspectives, December 31, 2009, 118-26.