PROLOGUE

The Historically Reconstructed Past

In March 1989 the Tony Awards administration committee ruled that the musical "Jerome Robbins's Broadway," which had received rave reviews, was not a "revival" and was therefore eligible for the award as "best musical." The decision, which ended a hard-fought battle within the committee, had important financial implications, since the show, although doing excellently at the box office, had been very expensive to produce, and the best musical award, which it was now the hands-down favorite to win, carried the potential of millions of dollars in added ticket sales. The reason for the dispute in the first place (apart from the financial stakes involved) was that, although the Robbins show as a whole had never been presented on Broadway, it consisted almost entirely of elements that had.[1] It was an open question, therefore, whether it was a new show or a revival.

The question the Tony Awards committee resolved may also be posed with respect to the past as reconstructed by historians: revival or new show? Is the consummation of the historian's labors in essence a gathering together and re-presentation of things that have already happened, or is it in important respects a new production, lacking some elements that existed in the past and incorporating others that did not? People who are not historians may well be inclined to answer that it is the former, that retrieval of the past is precisely what historians are expected to do, and if they do something other than this, the end result is not history.

The position taken in this book is the exact reverse. However counterintuitive it may seem, I would argue (and I believe most practicing historians would join me) that the history the historian creates is in fact fundamentally different from the history people make. No matter how much of the original, experienced past historians choose or are able to build into their narratives, what they end up with will, in specific and identifiable ways, be different from that past. This is so, moreover, despite the fact that the process of narrativization in which the historian engages is not, in my

view, intrinsically different from the process of narrativization in which the direct experiencer of the past also engages.

Before taking a closer look at what, exactly, it is that the historian adds to the past to make it "history," let me clarify briefly the narrativization issue just raised. The problem, basically, has to do with how we go about defining the relationship between "history" (in the sense of the history that historians write) and "reality" (in the sense of the history that people make and directly experience). This has been a very controversial issue not only among historians but also among philosophers and literary theorists who concern themselves with historical matters. Some individuals (Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur are two of the best known) have taken the position that there is a fundamental discontinuity between history and reality. History, they believe, is basically narrative in form, while reality is not. Therefore, when historians write history, they impose on the past a design or structure that is alien to it. Other individuals, among whom I have found David Carr to be one of the clearest and most persuasive, argue that "narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence, independently of our contemplating the past as historians." Since narrative is, for Carr, an essential component of the past reality historians seek to elucidate, the relationship between history and reality, or, as he puts it, "narrative and everyday life," is one marked not by discontinuity but by continuity.[2]

My own stance lies somewhere between these two polar alternatives, although it is closer to Carr's. I agree with Carr that narrative is a basic component of everyday existence, not only for individuals but also for communities, and that therefore the narrativization of the historian does not, in itself, create a disjuncture between the experienced past and the historically reconstructed past. However, there are other characteristics of the process of historical reconstruction, *as practiced*, that do create, if not a complete disjuncture, at least a very different set of parameters from those demarcating immediate experience.[3] At the bare minimum, all historical writing, even the best of it, entails radical simplification and compression of the past; an event, such as the Boxer episode, that took several years to unfold and spread over much of North China, is transformed into a book of a few hundred pages that can be held in the hands and read from start to finish in ten hours.

In Julian Barnes's novel, *Flaubert's Parrot*, a meditation (at least on one level) on the impossibility of ever recovering the past "as it actually was," Geoffrey Braithwaite, the narrator, makes the following observation: "Books say: She did this because. Life says: She did this. Books are where

things are explained to you; life is where things aren't. I'm not surprised some people prefer books."[4] "And when you and I talk about history," Claudia Hampton, the main character in Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, muses, "we don't mean what actually happened, do we? The cosmic chaos of everywhere, all time? We mean the tidying up of this into books, the concentration of the benign historical eye upon years and places and persons. History unravels; circumstances, following their natural inclination, prefer to remain ravelled."[5]

These two statements make essentially the same point: that actual experience (Braithwaite's "life," Hampton's "circumstances") is messy, complicated, opaque, while history (or "books") brings order and clarity into the chaos. One person might join the Boxer movement out of hunger; a second might join it because of hatred and fear of foreigners and foreign influence; a third might find in the movement an ideal vehicle for taking revenge against old enemies; and a fourth might support the Boxers out of fear of what would happen to him and his family if he didn't. It is the job of the historian of the Boxer movement to try to find some meaningful pattern in this jumble of motives, to transform an event of exceptional complexity and confusion into an account that is coherent and makes sense. History, in short, has an explanatory function; the historian's objective is, first and foremost, to understand what happened in the past, and, then, to explain it to his or her readership.

While I basically agree with this formulation of the historian's role, there is an oversimplification buried in the neat contrast between experience and history that needs to be addressed. The experienced past may well be messy and chaotic to the historian, but it is not to the immediate experiencer. It is not that there isn't mess and chaos in people's lives, but our lives, *to ourselves*, are not messy and chaotic. It is precisely here that the narrative function, at the level of individual, personal experience, is so important. As we live our lives, we instinctively place them in a narrative framework. We "tell stories" to ourselves that make sense of our experiences: biographical, not historical, sense. So it isn't entirely correct to say, paraphrasing Geoffrey Braithwaite, that books explain while in life things simply happen. In life, also, there is a powerful need for understanding and explanation, which all of us experience, subjectively, every moment of every day.

This need operates on a community-wide level as well. People talk with one another about their shared experiences and together construct interpretations of what is happening to them. These interpretations may take the form of well-thought-out analyses, in which case the direct experi-

encers of the past in effect become historians of their own experience. Or, they may be manifested in informal conversation or rumors or even gossip. Whatever the case, the interpretations advanced by the immediate participants in past events are likely to be quite at variance with those put forward by historians, who operate within a basically different field of consciousness. This was the distinction Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum had in mind when, after describing the late seventeenth-century New England social order as having been "profoundly shaken by a superhuman force which had lured all too many into active complicity with it," they observed: "We have chosen to construe this force as emergent mercantile capitalism. [Cotton] Mather, and Salem Village, called it witchcraft."[6]

Although the direct experiencer of the past has a need for order, clarity, and understanding that is, then, not all that different from that of the historian, it is driven, in general, by a quite different set of motives. Participants in the making of the past engage in a continuous process of renarrativization, reconfiguring their own past experience again and again in response to new circumstances, with a view—always—to maintaining a sense of personal integrity and coherence. A Chinese friend who had lived through the Cultural Revolution told me that, in the conversations she had with friends and relatives on her periodic visits back to China, the same individuals would remember the same experiences differently every time they discussed them. Primo Levi, shortly before his death, wrote of "the construction of convenient truth [that] grows and is perfected" the further events fade into the past.[7] As people engage in one or another form of autobiographical mythologization, in short, they—we—are concerned at least as much with the fashioning of a past that is psychologically tolerable as with uncovering the "truth" in a rigorously objective manner.

The historian, on the other hand, assigns paramount importance to constructing a picture of the past that has validity in an intellectual, rather than a psychological, sense. Although as human beings we are subject to the same spectrum of emotional needs as anyone else, in our capacity as historians our efforts to understand the past are guided by a conscious commitment (never fully realized in practice) to a socially agreed-upon and enforced standard of accuracy and truth. This commitment defines us as historians. We are all subject to other commitments as well, but if these other commitments—say, a feminist historian's desire to give voice to women who have previously been silent and, by so doing, contribute to the empowerment and liberation of women in the present and future—take precedence over the goal of understanding and explaining what happened in the past in accordance with a generally accepted set of professional

guidelines, we abdicate our responsibility as historians and move in the direction of mythologization.[8] This would not be a problem, perhaps, if the truth about the past were always liberating and empowering. But if one believes, as I do, that, on both the individual and the community levels, myths are often far more empowering than truths, it has the potential to become a very real problem, indeed.

Another defining mark of the historian's craft is that it operates with known outcomes. In contrast with the participants in past events, who at the time do not know how events in which they are participating are going to turn out, the historian knows this in advance. Indeed, the process of historical reconstruction generally takes as its point of departure a known outcome and then attempts an explanation of how this outcome was brought about. Thus, although the *product* of the historian's efforts, the history he or she writes, customarily begins at some point in the past and moves forward, the historian's *consciousness* begins at a subsequent point in time and moves in reverse. The secret of the historian's success, as G. R. Elton wrote, "lies in hindsight and argument backwards."[9]

There is a problem here, which all good historians know about and do their utmost to mitigate. It is the problem of assuming, mistakenly, the necessity of the outcomes that have in fact occurred. Or, as Elton phrased it: "We know what happened next, and the risk is always considerable that the historian will fall victim to the false old proposition, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, the succeeding event being read as a necessary consequence of the earlier event."[10]

Many practicing historians have commented on this issue. "Writing history or biography," cautions David McCullough, author of a highly regarded biography of Harry Truman, "you must remember that nothing was ever on a track. . . . Things could have gone any way at any point. As soon as you say 'was,' it seems to fix an event in the past. But nobody ever lived in the past, only in the present. . . . The challenge is to get the reader beyond thinking that things had to be the way they turned out and to see the range of possibilities of how it could have been otherwise."[11]

In a related vein, Boyer and Nissenbaum observe:

> No one could have realized, back in February, or even as late as April or May, that the traditional responses of prayer and prosecution would not speedily put an end to the [witchcraft] outbreak. Something was subtly different about the situation in Salem Village in 1692, something which no one anticipated beforehand and which no one could explain at the time. . . . And yet speculation as to where events might have led . . . is one way of recapturing the import of where they did lead. And if one reconstructs those

> events bit by bit, as they happened, without too quickly categorizing them, it is striking how long they resist settling into the neat and familiar pattern one expects.[12]

So, too, with the Boxers, it is an open question at what point they become irrevocably "the Boxers" of history. At what point does the Boxer phenomenon force itself on the consciousness of the world and cease to be an event of merely local import, even within China? As Boxer historians have repeatedly noted, it was not until December 31, 1899, that the Boxers killed their first foreigner (a missionary, S. M. Brooks, in Shandong), and, prior to May 31, 1900 (the date on which, in response to the mounting threat in the Beijing area, legation guard reinforcements began to arrive in the capital), Brooks was the only foreigner to have suffered death at the Boxers' hands.[13] If (to indulge in the sort of fruitful counterfactual speculation Boyer and Nissenbaum appear to endorse), as late as mid-May, the court had moved decisively to suppress the Boxer movement with force or the drought in North China had broken, encouraging farmer participants in the movement to return to their fields, many of the subsequent developments that transformed the Boxers into a crisis with global ramifications might never have taken place, China's own history in the first decade of the twentieth century would likely have been quite different, the Boxers as a field of academic study would very possibly never have amounted to much, and I would almost certainly not be writing this book. In probing the origins and history of the Boxer phenomenon, in other words, we have to be extremely careful, at every step along the way, not to assume with excessive haste that the outcomes we know took place were preordained.

Foreknowledge of outcomes, to summarize, empowers historians to engage in a process of explanation that is different, in important ways, from the processes of explanation engaged in by direct participants (who, among other things, do not ordinarily spend a lot of time and energy trying to figure out the origins of the events in which they are taking part). But—and this is the key point of the immediately preceding paragraphs—we must move with great caution, lest we conclude prematurely, in our reconstruction of the past, that things had to turn out the way they did.

There is another, closely related, aspect of our advance knowledge of historical outcomes that is crucially important. Such knowledge enables historians to assign meanings to prior events that literally did not exist at the time they occurred and therefore could not possibly have been known to the people who made and experienced the events (although they could, in certain circumstances, be guessed at). This process of retrospective assignment of historical meaning takes place at all levels of generality. At a fairly

specific level, every major event is composed of lesser events which in other circumstances would doubtless be lost in the historical shuffle but come to be invested with substantial meaning once historians begin the process of piecing together the larger event's origins and evolution. The Marco Polo Bridge incident of July 7, 1937, instead of being a forgettable skirmish between Chinese and Japanese troops in North China, like many previous such skirmishes, is transformed into the first act in a drama known to the Chinese as the War of Resistance and to much of the rest of the world as World War II. The Chinese Communist movement's Long March of 1934–35, rather than signaling in quiet obscurity the movement's imminent expiration (as it might well have, had subsequent history taken a different turn), is heralded as an event of epic proportions that both symbolizes and makes possible the Communists' eventual triumph. Both the Marco Polo Bridge incident and the Long March become, in other words, parts of larger stories, and their historical valences change appreciably in the process.

Paralleling the part-to-whole relationship between simple and complex events, such as Marco Polo Bridge and World War II or the Long March and the ultimate victory of the Chinese Communists, we also have, at a higher level of generality, the relationship between events, simple (such as the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima) or complex (like the Second World War), and the more elaborate event structures, constituting broad substantive themes of a country's or the world's history, within which these events are nested. The part-to-whole relationship at this level may be formulated in various ways, depending on the particular event structure that is of interest to the formulator. Among the thematic contexts in which historians have placed the witchcraft outbreak in late seventeenth-century Salem, for example, are: "the history of the occult, the psychopathology of adolescence, the excesses of repressive Puritanism, the periodic recrudescence of mass hysteria and collective persecution in Western society."[14] And the atomic bombing of Hiroshima may be—and has been—seen as the beginning of the end of World War II, an especially horrible instance of white racist victimization of yellow people, or the opening act of the nuclear age.

The Boxer episode, too, formed part of a plurality of larger event structures, including (but not confined to) the pattern of recurrent domestic violence in the late imperial era, the growing problem of rural breakdown,[15] the history of conflicts between Christians and non-Christians from the mid-nineteenth century on,[16] and Sino-foreign diplomatic relations. Since these event structures extended not only backward but also forward in time, the historical meanings of the Boxer uprising were indeterminate at the time it occurred and could only be supplied retrospectively, by histori-

ans or others with a knowledge of post-Boxer developments.[17] Sometimes the act of supplying such meanings was performed at an even higher level of generality, the Boxer phenomenon being situated on a trajectory embracing, if not all of Chinese history, at least vast stretches of it. Harold Isaacs referred to the Boxers as "the last feeble challenge of traditionalism to the inevitability of change."[18] G. G. H. Dunstheimer situated them "at the divide between two historical eras: the Chinese Middle Age . . . and Modern Times."[19] "The patriotic, anti-imperialist Boxer movement that burst forth in 1900," according to historian Li Shiyu, "set off the second revolutionary upsurge of modern Chinese history."[20] And Zhou Enlai in 1955 hailed the heroic struggle of the Boxer movement in resisting imperialist aggression as "one of the cornerstones of the great victory of the Chinese people fifty years later."[21]

All of these statements, some of them going fairly far in the direction of mythologizing the Boxer experience, are predicated on awareness of a post-Boxer context. Implicitly or explicitly, they incorporate, like Merlin the magician or the omniscient narrator in a work of fiction, a foreknowledge of what comes next. As such, they reflect a consciousness fundamentally different from that of the direct participant in the making of the past, who, lacking such foreknowledge, still inhabits a world crowded with live possibilities, many of which—the precise ones cannot be identified at the time—will be foreclosed by the future and never come to fruition.

It would oversimplify things, on the other hand, not to point out that this distinction between the knowing historian and the unknowing participant, however important, is not absolute. Historians, also, are trapped in a present marked by indeterminacy, and this affects every phase of the process of historical reconstruction in which we are engaged, including what we choose to focus on and emphasize in our assertions about past events. Such assertions can be extremely unreliable, the more so the more general the level at which they are framed. General statements about the past (above all, I think, statements about the meaning of this or that "turning point" or "watershed") tend to have a larger mythic component than more bounded statements and, as such, reflect to a higher degree the passions and concerns of the persons making them and the times in which they live. The reason this is a problem is that the passions and concerns of the present have a way of changing abruptly and capriciously, and when this happens the general assertions about the past that embody such passions and concerns quickly lose their currency.

The point is made nicely by Vera Schwarcz in her commentary on Joseph Levenson's characterization of the meaning of the intellectual and

political developments known in China as the May Fourth Movement of 1919. In his essay "The Day Confucius Died," Schwarcz writes, "Levenson had tried to endow the event of 1919 with a decisive, epoch-making significance not unlike that assigned to it by Mao Zedong in his distinction between 'new' and 'old' democracy. For Levenson, May Fourth marked a point of no return between tradition and modernity, between Western inspired solutions to China's dilemmas and the once universal truth claims of Confucianism." Ironically, not too many years after Levenson wrote his essay (1961), Confucius was dragged through the streets of Cultural Revolution Canton in effigy, a fairly clear sign that his influence in China was not moribund at all. Reflecting this and other realities, scholarship on May Fourth, according to Schwarcz, had by the 1980s moved away from the bloated language of earlier times and was less likely to embody "such extreme claims as Levenson's."[22]

The knowledge historians have of what comes next, their ability to move forward in time from any point in the past, is paralleled by their wide-angle vision, their capacity to range freely across a vast terrain, to sort out how the experiences of some individuals related to those of others and how a plurality of discrete events widely scattered over space (and time) combined to form event structures of broader scope, often—perhaps always—too broad to be encompassed in the experience of any one individual. This wide-angle vision distinguishes the historian from the participants in the making of the past.[23] But here again the advantage is a qualified one. Although, paradoxically, historians frequently have, in their reconstructive work, far more (and a more comprehensive sampling of) evidence at their disposal than was available to contemporaries, it is never enough, history being "full of missing pieces and indecipherable shards."[24]

Not only is the historian's evidence insufficient in a purely quantitative sense, it is also almost always stacked qualitatively. It does not present a representative sample of the totality of experience encompassed by the past. Nor does the evidence that survives necessarily reflect, as many might assume, the things in the past that were most important. "Survival," Daniel J. Boorstin demonstrates with depressing persuasiveness, "is chancy, whimsical and unpredictable." Because of the "happy accident" that the Babylonians wrote on clay tablets instead of on paper, "we know more about some aspects of daily life in the Babylon of 3000 B.C. than we do about daily life in parts of Europe or America 100 years ago."[25]

Boorstin generalizes from this that certain types of evidence have a greater propensity to survive than others. Besides evidence recorded on durable material (such as the cuneiform tablets of the Babylonians), these

"biases of survival" include evidence that is "collected and protected" by contemporaries (official documentation, for example), records pertaining to controversial issues, information relating to success as opposed to failure, and so on.[26] Any practicing historian can come up with other such evidentiary survival biases encountered in his or her own work. In the case of the Boxers, apart from a few hundred notices and other brief writings created by Boxer leaders and/or supporters and some oral history testimony collected over a half century after the uprising ended,[27] virtually all of the data that have survived—Chinese official documents (except those written by pro-Boxer officials), elite Chinese chronicles, the letters, diaries, and other writings of contemporary foreigners—are written from an anti-Boxer perspective. Rank-and-file Boxers, mostly illiterate and functioning within an oral tradition, created much in the way of history but left little to show for it. In reconstructing the perspectives of the Boxers themselves, therefore, historians must rely heavily on indirect strategies, teasing information from materials that very often are slanted against the Boxers and portray them in unflattering terms.

This sort of difficulty is one that historians encounter with great frequency, and it must be added to the other difficulties discussed earlier. It is not, however, necessary to conclude, as some have done, that because of the multitude of serious obstacles historians face, the activity in which we are engaged is without merit and our efforts at bottom little more than a sophisticated form of deception. Those who have taken such a position have tended to hold to a misguided notion (occasionally, I'm afraid, abetted by the careless assertions of historians themselves) of what exactly it is that historians are supposed to do. Because we can never meet the standard they have in mind, our efforts in their entirety are dismissed as being of questionable value.

If, on the other hand, we do not ask of historians something they cannot deliver—the past as it actually was—and recognize that the kinds of interpretive understanding and explanation historians *can* deliver are of value partly at least because of the ways in which they differ from the kinds of understanding and explanation available to the original creators of the past, all is not lost. It may well be true, as writer John Vernon has put it, that "history's ultimate unknowability" mocks those with a passionate interest in it; Vernon writes of "the powerful feeling that history is simultaneously there and not there, real and illusory—a ghost forever trailing behind, which vanishes when we turn around."[28] But it is precisely this elusive, incomplete, ephemeral quality of the past that fascinates and challenges the historian, who, with the evidence available and all the imaginative

powers and skills at his or her disposal, strives to make sense of it. The end result, the kind of sense the historian makes, is not a revival of the past in its pristine wholeness. Nor is it a simple evocation of the historian's present values and wishes masquerading as a narrative about the past. (This happens, of course, all the time. But when it does, what we are confronted with is not history but mythologization.) Rather, the reconstructive effort of the historian entails a complex set of negotiations between present and past, incorporating something of vital importance from both and transforming, along the way, the consciousness that each brings to the negotiating process at the outset.

There are many other trademarks of the historically reconstructed past that I could dwell on. The characteristics discussed here—the goals of understanding and explaining, knowledge of future outcomes, privileged access to a wide-angle picture of what happened—are the ones that, over several decades of life as a practicing historian, have impressed me as the most distinctive and important. The narrative reconstruction of the Boxer episode that follows reflects, indeed is wholly dependent upon, each of these defining features of the historian's craft. It is a narrative that neither a direct participant in the episode nor one of its mythologizers would—or could—relate.

CHAPTER 5

Rumor and Rumor Panic

The month before last Yizhong told me that when a certain photographic studio [in the capital] had been set on fire some fresh litchis from Guangdong were found inside. When they were passed around and examined, the consensus was that they were gouged-out human eyeballs.[a] Everyone bristled with anger. People didn't realize that what they had found was a food product that was sweet and refreshing. It was like mistaking a camel for a horse with a swollen back. In the unsettled conditions of the present, eight or nine out of ten things one hears are rumors of this "tiger-in-the-marketplace"[1] sort.

Ye Changchi, Beijing official

On a certain day red-colored marks that looked like bloodstains suddenly appeared on people's doorways. On account of this rumors sprang up all over alleging that the blood had been smeared by Christians. One rumor had it that, if there was a bloodstain on a doorway, the Boxers' magic would not work. Another claimed that in only a hundred days time [the people within the house] would kill each other off. Still another alleged that in only seven days the house would catch fire. No one knew who had said "in only a hundred days" or "in only seven days." Those who repeated these statements didn't realize how absurd they were; those who heard them believed them to be true. How detestable is the ignorance of these foolish people.

Liu Mengyang, resident of Tianjin

Various stories were set afloat as to the power of the missionaries to prevent rain, ascribing almost superhuman strength in the way of controlling the elements. Clouds were constantly being driven away by fierce winds, which led to the story—thoroughly believed by all the people—that we went into our upper rooms and drove the clouds back by fanning with all our might. The

[a] For years one of the most widely circulated charges against Catholic missionaries had been that they removed dying converts' eyes (usually under cover of administering extreme unction), which they then used for medicinal and other purposes.

story was changed as regards the T'ai Yüan Fu [Taiyuan] missionaries, that they were naked when doing the fanning.

C. W. Price, American missionary, Shanxi

One day a rumor spread from Tianjin to certain places in the Beijing area to the effect that, when the foreign soldiers and Boxers fought, the Boxers only had to bow and, without taking a step, could advance forward. If they bowed once, they advanced several hundred steps. If they bowed three times, they engaged the foreign soldiers directly, and before the latter had a chance to fire their guns they were killed. . . . Therefore the foreign armies all went down to defeat.

Guan He, resident of Tianjin

On that night [the seventh day of the seventh month (August 1, 1900)], . . . inhabitants [of Taiyuan, Shanxi] became alarmed for no reason. The men howled and the women cried. All night long they remained agitated. The next morning when they were questioned they said a black wind [*heifengkou*][b] had come, but in fact no one had seen it. Also, they didn't know what evil spirit the black wind represented. Nevertheless, from this time on, the mood of the people in the city remained unsettled. They said the black wind emerged at night to bring harm to people. Everyone, male and female, old and young, carried leather whips to protect themselves and drive off the black wind. (Word having gotten around that the black wind feared leather whips, whips for a time became very expensive.) This strange situation lasted for half a month.

Liu Dapeng, teacher, Taigu, Taiyuan[2]

Ralph L. Rosnow, summarizing recent research in the field of rumor generation and transmission, characterizes rumors as "public communications that are infused with private hypotheses about how the world works." Rumors, he elaborates, "give vent or expression to anxieties and uncertainties as people attempt to make sense of the world in which they live." The creation and passing of rumors, he hypothesizes, occurs when there is an optimal combination of four variables: personal anxiety, general uncertainty, credulity, and "outcome-relevant involvement" (by which he means an individual's personal stake in whether a rumor's content turns out to be true or false).[3]

Rosnow, in another context, distinguishes "rumor" from "gossip," suggesting that while rumors tend to be about a topic of emotional importance

[b] The "black wind" or, as here, "mouth [*kou*] of the black wind" was a terrible wind that was believed to accompany or signal the arrival of a kalpa calamity. It was associated with White Lotus teachings that frequently became intermingled with Boxer beliefs at the height of the uprising; it was also related to popular wind-divination beliefs.

to the teller, gossip need not be. "Gossip," he observes, "is small talk, a kind of intellectual chewing gum, while rumors have the feel of something of great substance."[4] More pertinent for our purposes—and also more difficult to characterize with confidence—is the distinction between rumor and belief. Ordinarily (although not invariably) we think of rumors as being *spread*, beliefs as being *held*. Rumors, by definition, contain unverified information, while for beliefs that are held with conviction the question of verification generally does not arise. Of course, it is often the case that beliefs are not held with conviction. Or they may be so held under conditions that are temporary in nature—a period, for example, of high anxiety, when people are more apt than otherwise to suspend disbelief, especially when other members of their communities are engaged in a similar suspension of disbelief—and then relinquished when these conditions have subsided.

Beliefs, in the form of stereotypes, also may influence the degree to which a rumor finds acceptance and what sort of spin the person who hears and transmits the rumor chooses (often quite unconsciously) to put on it. Rosnow tells of an especially grisly rumor that erupted in Detroit in the winter of 1967–68: A mother and her young son were in a department store. The boy at one point went to the lavatory. When he did not return, the floor supervisor, at the mother's request, entered the lavatory, where he found the boy lying unconscious on the floor, castrated. Salespeople recalled some teenage boys having gone into the lavatory shortly before the boy entered and then leaving prior to the boy's discovery. What is interesting is that, almost predictably, when this rumor was told in the white community, the teenagers were black, the boy and his mother, white, while the exact reverse occurred when it was told in the black community. "Given that such rumors are intrinsically disturbing," Rosnow observes, "passing them may be a way of validating one's prejudices as much as sharing one's fears . . . in an attempt (not always successful) to dissipate discomfort."[5]

The Number and Variety of Rumors in 1900

Li Wenhai and Liu Yangdong, in their very interesting analysis of the social psychology of the Boxer period, point out that at no other juncture of modern Chinese history did rumors flourish as they did at the turn of the century.[6] This unusual proliferation of rumors was widely noted at the time. In Dengzhou, on the northern coast of the Shandong peninsula, "rumors fell like snow in winter."[7] In Beijing, in the early summer of 1900, Ye Changchi observed (as we have already seen) that "in the unsettled conditions of the

present, eight or nine out of ten things one hears are rumors." As the influence of the Boxers spread in May, according to Guan He, "rumors and falsehoods filled the ears on a daily basis." Guan speculated on the reasons the population of his city, Tianjin, now became such easy prey to rumormongering: "The root evil is still that the people are uneducated and know of nothing but ghosts and spirits, while the educated do not understand the times and lack fixed views about anything. Deceiving them is therefore easy and frightening them not hard."[8] Liu Dapeng, a local teacher who supplied over a dozen examples of rumors that circulated in the villages of Taiyuan county in July and August, described a population in that area that was in a state of near total panic, inclined to sudden outbursts of violence and prepared to believe almost anything. "For the rampant spread of rumors," Liu declared, "no time was worse than the juncture of summer and autumn of the 26th year of Guangxu [July-August 1900]."[9]

Foreign observers also attested to the widespread rumors. The *North-China Herald*'s Tianjin correspondent reported in early June: "The public mind (native) here is almost inconceivably excited. No rubbish is too preposterous for belief—the Boxers can fly, they can spit fire; even the most sober-minded, sensible Chinese are persuaded that they (the Boxers) are immune to steel and lead. The infection is running to craziness." Grace Newton (American Presbyterian) wrote from Beijing on May 30 that the city was "so full of wild and exaggerated rumors that it is next to impossible to tell the truth" and again on June 2: "I could fill a mail bag with the rumors we have heard."[10] Luella Miner wrote (in May) of the "absurd rumors" with which the town of Tongzhou and surrounding villages had become filled. Foreigners were accused of hiring people to poison wells. Foreigners were "responsible for the terrible drought." If people burned kerosene, which was all imported from abroad, their eyes would drop out after two days, and if they inhaled the odor from foreign matches, some other dreadful thing would happen to them. Miner, who was exceptional among the missionaries of the day for being possessed of a highly developed sense of humor, recounted a fantasy that struck her during the hymn-singing at a Sunday afternoon women's meeting: "I could hardly keep from shaking during the singing of the first hymn because I had a vision of a roomful of people with their eyeballs all rolling down into their laps and around on the floor like marbles."[11]

The great variety of rumors that circulated in North China in the spring and summer of 1900 may usefully be seen as a symbolic roadmap to the wide-ranging emotions buffeting people at the time. As always, in a setting characterized by a scarcity of reliable information and an abundance of

credulity, there was, for certain individuals, an irresistible temptation to fabricate rumors for the sake of material gain or some other form of personal advantage. During the Battle of Tianjin, it was reported that the face of the Guandi statue in one of the temples in the Tianjin area had suddenly broken out in a profuse sweat, it being claimed that this was because of Guandi's efforts in behalf of the Chinese side in the fighting. As word of the miracle spread, worshipers converged on Guandi temples in droves to express their gratitude. According to the recorder of this rumor, what actually had happened was that the Buddhist monks in the original temple were having difficulty making ends meet, as a result of the sharp fall-off in temple incense-burning (occasioned presumably by the extreme scarcity and resulting price inflation of incense owing to the heavy emphasis the Boxers placed on family incense burning for protective purposes).[12] The monks, therefore, secretly placed ice inside Guandi's hat, and when the ice melted in the summer heat it ran down the statue's face, looking just like sweat. The monks spread the word all over, to publicize the miracle and encourage people to come to the temple with their alms.[13]

Another example of what we may call the charlatan syndrome was reported by Luella Miner during the siege of the legations. Because of the complete cutoff in communication between the besieged and the outside world during the initial weeks of the crisis, the legation quarters were aswirl with rumors and Chinese "soldier-spies" were regularly despatched to find out what they could about the anticipated relief expedition from Tianjin. Miner's sense of the absurd again rose to the occasion in a journal entry (of August 1) describing the report of one such individual: "The soldier-spy came as usual to give his information and collect his dollars, but having marched our foreign troops too rapidly, so that we ought to be able to hear their cannonading from the city wall, he was obliged to have them retreat. He landed them back at Ma-t'ou [Matou, less than halfway from Tianjin to the capital] this morning, and if we had given him time, he would doubtless have marched them in good order all the way to Tientsin." The soldier-spy, confirming foreign suspicions, was revealed to be "a yellow-journalist of the worst type" when a letter arrived from the Japanese general in Tianjin dated July 26 and announcing a delay in the departure of the relief force because of transport difficulties.[14]

People also generated rumors to explain phenomena that seemed to them otherwise inexplicable.[15] Sometimes, as in the Detroit example cited earlier, such rumors gave expression to people's stereotypical beliefs and prejudices; at other times, they were deeply conspiratorial in nature. Thus, in June 1900, when Nie Shicheng, in response to telegraphed orders from

Zhili Governor-General Yulu, took his well-armed modern forces to Tianjin to deal with the mounting crisis in that city, the Tianjin population, keenly aware that Nie, a steadfast opponent of the Boxers, had recently fought a series of bloody battles against them along the Beijing-Tianjin railway, reviled him as "Devil Nie" (Nie guizi). The Boxers, against this backdrop, fabricated the rumor that Nie was in league with the foreigners and had been bribed by them to suppress the movement in Tianjin.[16] Ironically, Nie Shicheng fought against the foreigners in the Battle of Tianjin and was killed in action on July 9. A former Boxer's recollections managed to preserve the conspiracy rumor intact, while at the same time accounting for Nie's death at the hands of his alleged coconspirators: Nie had made a secret peace with the French, so the foreigners would not attack him. Nie's army was outside the south gate of the city. As the French forces approached, Nie, to disguise the conspiracy, waved his flag and ordered his men to fire in the air. The French, not realizing that this was a ruse, thought Nie's men were firing on them. They attacked and Nie was killed![17]

Wish Rumors

Many rumors, as we might expect, were energized by wishful thinking. Among foreigners trapped in the legation compound in the hot summer months, such thinking quickly became a staple of life. "Rumors of troops coming to our relief," reported Sarah Goodrich in late June, "are the order of the day." On July 8, weeks before the foreign relief force even left Tianjin, she wrote in her journal: "Yesterday the French Minister was sure he could hear artillery not farther than six miles away. Last night some said Russian troops were at the Western Hills, and would come in this morning by seven o'clock." After hearing "good rumors," according to Emma Martin (Methodist Episcopal), people often sang "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp the Boys are Marching," to try to make themselves believe it was so.[18]

In a particularly elaborate example of wish rumor on the Chinese side, the Tianjin Boxers on July 4 told people that their teacher, after rendering himself invisible, had entered the foreign concession (Zizhulin), where he came upon a tall building that was vacant. Making himself visible again, he went inside. The building had four stories. There was nothing on the first two floors. But the third floor was filled with gold, silver, pearls, and precious gems, and on the fourth floor he encountered an elderly foreign couple seated facing each other. The couple performed the *koutou* before the teacher. They said that they were husband and wife and were over one hundred years of age. Suddenly bursting into tears, they said they knew that

the teacher's magic was very powerful and also knew that he was to come on that day. Therefore, they were waiting for him. They said that the foreign countries had only firearms to rely on. Today the foreigners were to be destroyed. Heavenly soldiers had come into the world. The firearms would not fire. The foreign countries had therefore resigned themselves to being extinguished. They invited the teacher to go to the middle floor and help himself to the gold, silver, pearls, and jewels. They then announced that they were going to die. When they had finished talking, they both seized pistols and shot themselves in the chests.

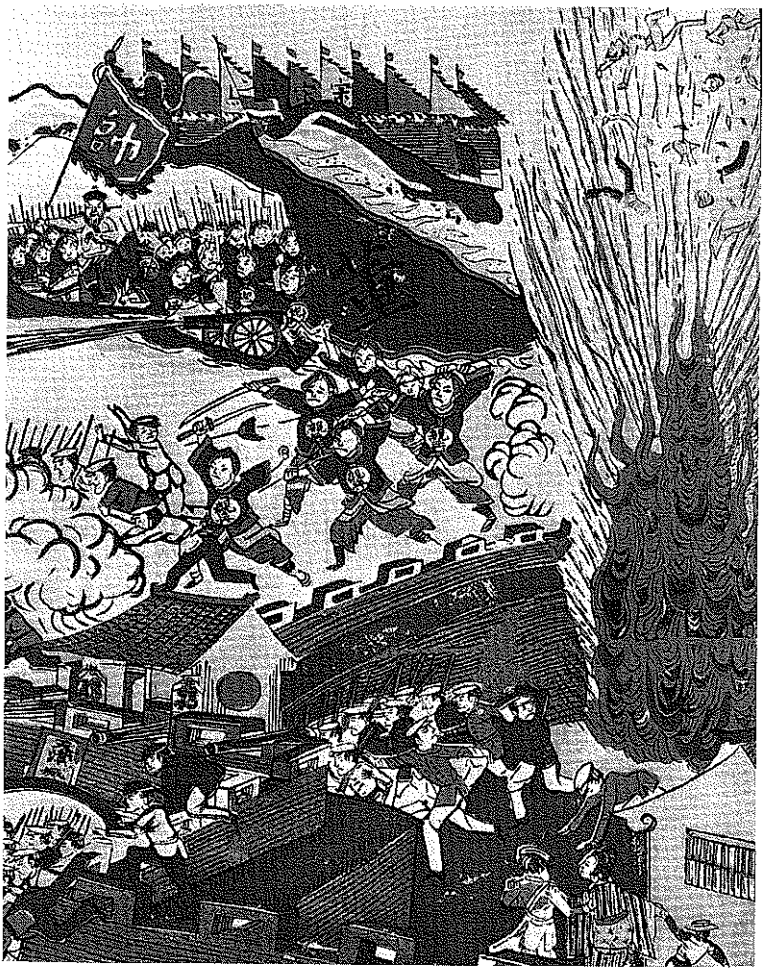
"The Boxers," we are told, "took much pleasure in telling this story and the people of Tianjin were convinced it was true. Suddenly, they spread the word that the government forces and Boxers had repulsed the foreign armies and that the Chinese had taken Zizhulin. . . . The news circulated noisily through the streets of Tianjin. Only after a long time had passed did people discover that it had no basis in fact."

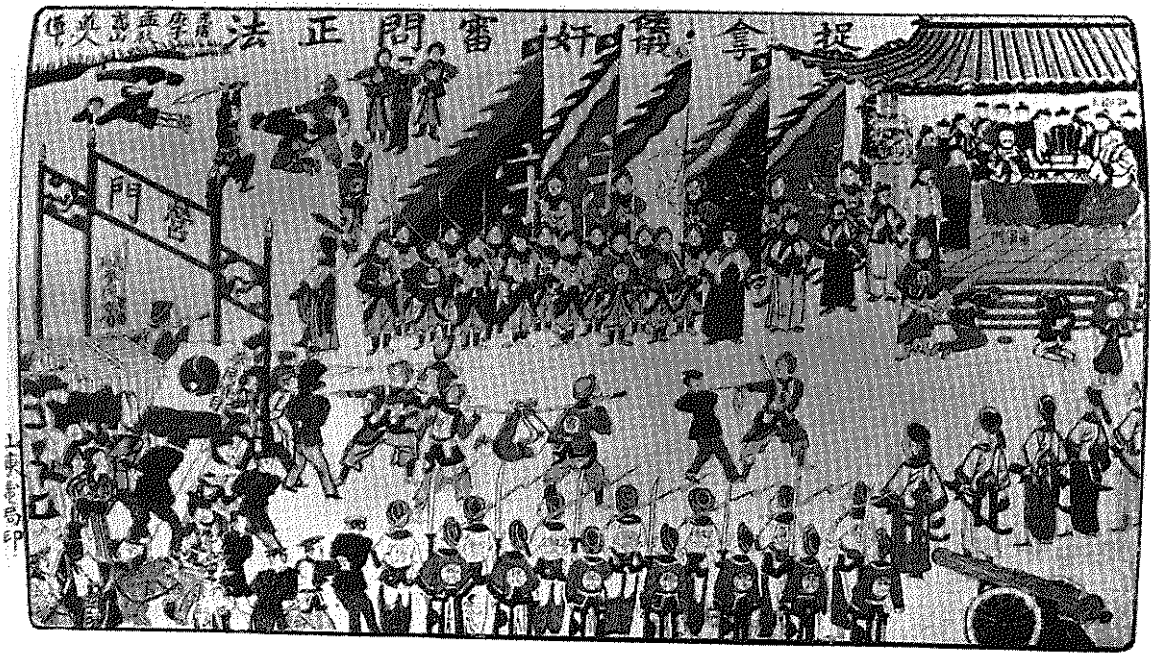
A related rumor that circulated at the same time asserted that the foreigners had fled Zizhulin, that the government forces and Boxers had entered the area and quartered themselves there, and that within the concession they had found forty crates, each containing 280,000 *liang* of gold (1 *liang* = 50 grams). Neither the government troops nor the Boxers took the gold; instead they presented it to the governor-general's yamen (office) to be used for relief purposes.[19]

There were a number of wishes symbolized in these rumors, and they had to do with people's deepest and most pressing concerns. On the most obvious level, of course, there was the wish, shared by both the Boxers and the population at large, that the Chinese side would be victorious in the Battle of Tianjin and the foreigners go down to defeat. (This wish was also given expression in the woodcut art of the day, which frequently showed the foreigners being overwhelmed by the Chinese in military encounters or humiliated by them in some other way.)[20] In an area suffering from the effects of protracted drought, there was also the wish, expressed in the second rumor (and implying a possible divergence of interest between the Boxers and the general population), that ordinary people (not the Boxers or the government soldiers) would be the beneficiaries of the precious-metal windfall discovered in the foreign concession. Finally, and perhaps least obvious, the first rumor incorporated the fantasy that the foreigners (as represented by the truth-telling elderly couple) accepted the efficacy of Boxer magical claims and had bought into the master narrative of the heavenly nature of the Boxer movement and its mission, thereby confirming in the most powerful way the validity of the Boxer cause.

Another wish rumor, from the same source, disputed the report that after the foreigners' victory in the Battle of Tianjin in mid-July the Boxer leader Zhang Decheng had been captured and put to death. On the contrary, according to the rumor, after his capture Teacher Zhang had made himself invisible and gone to the market town of Duliu, where under his leadership the Boxers experienced a revival. (Duliu was the base for

5.1 Battle of Tianjin. This is a detail from a larger patriotic print depicting the use of a variety of weapons (including explosives) by glowering Chinese troops in a victory over the foreigners. From C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Horizon History of China*. By permission of The British Library.





5.2 Execution of Russian and Japanese Soldiers. This print shows Russian and Japanese prisoners being hauled before Prince Duan and Dong Fuxiang for judgment (upper right), and their subsequent execution (upper left). From H. C. Thomson, *China and the Powers: A Narrative of the Outbreak of 1900*.

Zhang's famous "Number One [Boxer] Unit under Heaven," which he had established there in the late spring.)[21] Several tens of thousands of new recruits joined up. Boats coming from Tianjin were detained and their cargoes of clothing and other articles seized.

In this rumor, we find encoded not only the fantasy of the indestructibility of the Boxer movement[22] but, again, the notion that participation in the movement would be materially rewarding. The author of the account in which the rumor is reported states that on July 21 he journeyed to Duliu himself and found it completely quiet, with no trace of Boxers.[23]

At the time of the circulation in the Tianjin-Beijing corridor of the rumor alleging bowing to be part of the Boxers' magical repertoire when engaged in combat against foreigners, a story was told of a Tianjin rickshaw puller who inadvertently offended a foreigner and was about to be rewarded with a thrashing. The frightened rickshaw puller instinctively bowed, whereupon the foreigner threw away his stick and fled in panic. Although comical from our perspective and doubtless also from that of the skeptical Chinese writer who recounted this rumor, from the standpoint of Chinese who believed in Boxer magic, the story's deeper symbolic meaning was that, like the fable about the ancient couple in the building in Zizhulin, it confirmed foreign acquiescence in the Chinese worldview.[24]

Some of the "wish rumors" spread in the summer of 1900 had a decidedly political cast and appear, from their contents, to have been generated by elite supporters of the Boxer movement. One such, playing on widespread hostility to Li Hongzhang for allegedly having betrayed China's interests at the Shimonoseki peace conference of 1895, claimed that Li's nephew was the son-in-law of the Japanese emperor. Another was the "Twenty-Five Article Treaty," printed and circulated in Hengzhou, Hunan, on July 3–4, 1900, in conjunction with the burning down of Italian, French, and British church buildings in that city. This was a completely fabricated document, assuming the form of an edict issued by the Empress Dowager. Patriotic and intensely antiforeign in tone, it called for an almost complete rollback of the imperialist incursions of the preceding decades, including cancellation of all of China's indemnity obligations, Japan's return of Taiwan to China, Germany's return of Jiaozhou, Russia's return of Dalny (Dalianwan), foreign payment to China of 400 million taels to compensate it for its military expenses in the Boxer War, payment of an additional 400 million taels to the Boxer forces to compensate them for their expenses, confiscation of all churches in China and expulsion of all missionaries, restoration of Chinese supervisory power over Korea and Annam, Japanese payment of tribute to China as in Qianlong times, the

 performance of the *koutou* by Japanese and Westerners when received by Chinese officials, a doubling of the duties collected on foreign imports into China and also of those collected on goods exported from China to foreign countries, a prohibition of foreign travel in China for pleasure, and so forth. That the "Twenty-Five Article Treaty" went beyond the simple antiforeignism of most Boxers is indicated by its clear acceptance of trade and other forms of intercourse with foreign countries, provided Chinese sovereignty was fully respected.[25] That it represented wishful thinking is clearly shown in the Boxer Protocol of 1901, which reflected far more faithfully the harsh realities of the Sino-foreign relationship at the time.

Dread Rumors

It is no surprise to learn that, in an environment stalked by drought and the threat of untimely death, another major category of rumors that were epidemic in North China in the spring and summer of 1900 were those driven by fear and anxiety. The connection between drought and the explosive growth of rumors was made by many observers, Chinese and foreign. In Tianjin Liu Mengyang reported that, when the rains still did not fall in March, "rumors proliferated," generally targeting the foreigners and Christians.[26] C. W. Price of the ABCFM in Shanxi wrote in his diary in the second half of June: "It was about 1st June that we began to hear vague rumours of unusual unrest and talk against the foreigners and Church. This was caused by the continued drought, which was already being felt in the scarcity of food, and also by the lack of any useful employment for the people, so that they could congregate in the streets and talk over grievances, seeking to find a reason why this suffering should come upon them."[27] Olivia Ogren of the CIM in Yongning, Shanxi, after noting the growing restlessness of the local population owing to the "long-continued drought and threatened famine," described some of the specific rumors that began to circulate shortly after the first arrival of Boxers in the area in mid-June: "Whispers soon were repeated . . . to the effect that the Boxers wore buttons which kindled fires (celluloid), and that they were stealing girls to recruit [into] the 'Red Lantern Society.' Absurd stories stating [*sic*] the arrival of foreign soldiers in packing-cases, and that 'the Heavenly Soldiers,' as the Boxers were called, had flown away into heaven at their approach."[28]

Fear rumors, as the observations of Ogren suggest, were greatly encouraged by violence and the threat of harm. Roland Allen recounted a story initially related by the friend of a Christian in the capital in early June: The friend was returning home one evening when he saw a boy of about sixteen

walking down a street marking certain doors (but not others) with a piece of white chalk and then bowing before each marked door. Presently, as the boy's behavior was noticed, people came to their doorways in a state of great agitation and began to discuss what it portended—whether the marked houses signified friends or foes of the Boxers, the saved or the doomed. The Christian's friend went up to the boy, seized him by his queue, and asked him what he meant by such foolishness. The onlookers seemed astonished at the boldness of this man who dared to interfere with the secret emissaries of the Boxers, and the boy himself at first tried to brazen it out, but when the man threatened to take him to the police station, he fell to his knees and protested that he was only doing it as a practical joke to frighten people. "So men lived in those days," commented Allen, "ignorant what might be the meaning of the simplest acts, a prey to wild terrors roused by any unusual sight or sound."[29]

Sometimes being "prey to wild terrors" had dire consequences. As a small detachment of American marines was about to set out from Tanggu to relieve the foreign community in Tianjin in June, all sorts of rumors were spread about the fate (including ambush by fanatical Boxers) that awaited them. One frightened young marine, with little if any combat experience, rushed about from one Chinese to another at the marine camp, desperately seeking details on what might be expected if the marines were indeed ambushed and he were captured. The natives accommodated him with a generous supply of bloodcurdling tales of all the tortures to which captured enemies were subjected, and the poor fellow was soon on the verge of a breakdown. No sooner did the marines get under way than a shot rang out. The agitated young man, "after hysterically shouting something about ambushes," had put a bullet through his heart and died instantly.[30]

Recent research on rumor control indicates that, while anxiety is often a source of rumors, it can also be aggravated by them.[31] Indeed, it has been suggested that rumors may be viewed as "a kind of opportunistic information virus, thriving because of their ability to create the very anxieties that make them spread."[32] This reciprocal action between rumor and anxiety was a familiar experience in North China in 1900. In the Tianjin area in late May–early June, at a time when people's nerves were already frayed owing to the drought and the rising incidence of Boxer-related violence, rumors calculated to further aggravate popular anxiety rose on all sides: "There was a rumor that the [Boxer] bandits cut off men's queues[c] when

[c] It was widely believed among the populace that sorcerers used queue-clipping to steal men's souls.

158 they weren't looking.[33] There was a rumor that red circles drawn by the Boxers at night had suddenly begun to appear on people's doors. And there were also countless other rumors designed to terrorize their hearers, with the result that the Christian inhabitants of Sanyi village in the vicinity of Tianjin, in great fright, fled their homes under cover of dark. Popular anxiety intensified owing to this."[34] In the area around Taiyuan in July and August there were frequent alarms sounded that the foreigners were about to enter the city or that the Christians in such and such a village had risen in rebellion. Each time a rumor started, according to Liu Dapeng, the people became frenzied with fear. Two incidents recounted by him follow:

> On the ninth day of the sixth month (July 5), after the sounding of the second watch, a rumor suddenly spread among the residents of Wangguo village that the Christians from Dongji Gully were coming to kill them. The people were panic-stricken and everyone fled. Before long the inhabitants of Three Family village, Long Lane village, North-South Great Monastery, Little Station Camp, and Little Station village were in a state of utter turmoil. People screamed and cried out for help. Men, carrying their wives on their backs, sons their mothers, fled by the light of the stars in all directions. Some hid in nightsoil pits, others in pigpens, still others in reed fields, rice paddies, and lotus ponds. The bedlam lasted the entire night. Only when dawn broke did people discover that it was a false alarm.
>
> On the fifteenth day of the seventh month [August 9, 1900], in the dead of night, someone reported that several hundred armed Christians from Willow Grove village [in the vicinity of Taiyuan] had taken advantage of the night to cross the Fen River in a westward direction and, to avenge their group's grievances, were acting in a wantonly brutal manner. The villagers upon hearing this became agitated and a thousand of them assembled and went to the southeast corner of the village, where they arranged themselves in several rows and waited with their weapons. When they peered toward the distant banks of the Fen in the bright moonlight, it seemed as though there were people there, a row of whom were swarming toward them. When they wiped their eyes and looked again, it seemed that the people had stopped and were no longer advancing. They were by turns afraid and suspicious, but no one dared to go and investigate. When dawn broke, they realized that what they thought had been people were actually young millet stalks in the fields swaying in the breeze. They had been so nervous that "every bush and every tree looked like an enemy." This really happened.[35]

Tang Yan, a teacher enroute from Beijing to Huaian county (in western Zhili) in mid-June, noted a similar condition of jitteriness in the localities through which he passed. Twice in two nights rumors circulated that

armed Christians were about to launch an attack on the town in which his inn was located. The first night this proved to be a false alarm. On the second occasion, just as Tang was about to go to bed, he suddenly heard the jingle of horse bells, followed by someone knocking with urgency on the inn door and shouting: "Several hundred secondary hairy ones [Christians] have already gone up the mountain. They're not far away. Hurry and make yourselves ready." The innkeeper awoke in a state of fright and became agitated. Tang and his traveling companions told him of the rumor of the previous night (which, as it turned out, had been ignited by the sound of gunfire from a neighboring county) and eventually persuaded him to calm down and go back to sleep.[36]

Rumors that were linked to a sudden change in circumstance had unusual potency and were widely believed. On August 15, the day after the arrival of the foreign expeditionary force in Beijing, word spread far and wide that the foreign soldiers were trigger-happy and were going to blow up the entire population. Those who valued their lives, therefore, abandoned their homes and possessions and fled the city.[37] In Tianjin, after the foreigners took the city in mid-July, it was much the same, except that the target of the rumors shifted. Chinese Christians, according to Governor-General Yulu, were reported to have disguised themselves as Boxers by putting on red or yellow turbans ("It was impossible to identify them") and to have concealed mines both inside the city and in the area immediately surrounding it.[38] In another, more elaborate, rumor, word spread that on such and such a day Chinese government troops were going to attack Tianjin with heavy artillery. Gen. Song Qing had carried nine cannon into the city. Land mines had been hidden in certain places. A huge force of Boxers was coming from somewhere to seize the city by force. The residents of Tianjin, according to Liu Mengyang, were terrified and the numbers of those seeking to escape from the city soared.[39]

Rumors similar to the "total destruction" ones just described were also rampant in early June among foreigners in Beijing, as tensions mounted in that city. Mary Porter Gamewell (Methodist Episcopal) described the prevailing mood: "Rumors fill the air. A new edict only seems to give permission for further violence. At the Post Office they say we are safe. At the legations they say we are safer in Peking than in Tientsin. Yet the Chinese say tomorrow is set as the day for the destruction of all foreigners in Peking!"[40]

In situations where there was no change of circumstance and the same rumors were spread day in and day out, on the other hand, there was sometimes a tendency to discount the rumors. "Were it not that the day has been set for our extermination at least fifty times since I came to China,"

160 Courtenay H. Fenn (American Presbyterian) wrote from Beijing on May 3, "it would be difficult to keep a restful mind."[41] When Fei Qihao (Fei Ch'i-hao), a Christian associated with ABCFM missionaries in Fenzhou, Shanxi, was urged on August 14 to flee for his life, as his foreign patrons in Fenzhou were all to be killed, Fei said that this made little impression on him, as he "had been hardened to hearing such rumors. For two or three months there had not been a day when men had not been saying on the street: 'Today the foreigners will be killed,' or 'Tomorrow the houses will be burned.' "[42] In somewhat different circumstances, it was of course possible to dismiss the specific timing incorporated in a rumor but still give credence to its underlying message. In the journal of Rowena Bird, although rumor after rumor proved unfounded, the death that the rumors predicted closed in on the author with fearsome inevitability.[43]

Danger, Uncertainty, and the Proliferation of Rumors

All the rumors so far discussed, whether circulated among foreigners or Boxers or ordinary Chinese or Chinese Christians, and whether centering on wishes or on fears, flourished because of the crisis situation virtually everyone in North China faced in the spring and summer of 1900. Like many crises, this one was made up of two essential ingredients: a sense of immediate danger and an agonizing shortage of information either about what was happening (or had already happened) elsewhere in space or about an indeterminate future that held tightly within its grip the answers to people's most pressing questions.

The agony of uncertainty in such situations and the role that rumor plays as a palliative appear universal and have been attested to again and again. Rosnow asserts that "rumors flourish in an atmosphere of uncertainty because they attempt to relieve the tension of cognitive unclarity."[44] "In circumstances where numbers of people are together without adequate information, such as concentration or prisoner-of-war camps," Gustav Jahoda writes, "a series of rumours almost invariably arises. Although most of these tend to be largely untrue, they do at least serve to still for a while the suffering caused by uncertainty."[45]

"War rumors" present a special case, but one that is highly pertinent to the situation in North China in 1900. Paul Fussell confirms the judgment of Rosnow and Jahoda in the following insightful commentary: "In the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty for all and mortal danger for some, rumor sustains hopes and suggests magical outcomes. Like any kind of narrative, it compensates for the insignificance of actuality. It is easy to under-

stand why soldiers require constant good news. It is harder to understand why they require false bad news as well. The answer is that even that is better than the absence of narrative. Even a pessimistic, terrifying story is preferable to unmediated actuality."[46]

The most dramatic instance of the "false bad news" phenomenon on the foreign side in 1900 was the announcement in mid-July that all foreigners in the capital (save two) had been killed on July 6–7. Headlines such as the following appeared in much of the world's press: "ALL MASSACRED IN PEKING," "PEKING MASSACRE IS CONFIRMED," "MASSACRE STORY ACCEPTED AS TRUE," "ALL BELIEVED TO HAVE PERISHED." Accounts of the massacre were filled with details: The attack had been launched by the Boxers' main supporter at court, Prince Duan. The streets around the legations were strewn with dead bodies of Chinese as well as Europeans. Prince Qing, a leading anti-Boxer figure, upon hearing of the assault, had brought in his own troops, but these were outnumbered and defeated and the prince himself slain. In celebration of his victory, Prince Duan had distributed 100,000 taels and huge quantities of rice to the Boxers. The *New York Tribune*, in an article datelined London, July 17, after denouncing the "utter worthlessness of all the detailed accounts which have been, or may be, published," stated authoritatively that, despite confusion over the date, "the fact that the massacre was complete and ruthless cannot be questioned." There was "profound gloom" at the highest official levels in Washington, London, and other world capitals. As the rumor panic continued, the accounts of what happened became ever more detailed. Then, magically, news was received that nothing at all of what had been reported contained even a grain of truth.[47]

One of the things that happens in situations marked by great danger and an almost complete absence of reliable information is that "standards of plausibility" change. Just at the moment when the hunger for information is greatest, as a result of the danger, access to information is cut off. In such circumstances, people become far more suggestible than they would otherwise be, prepared to accept as fact assertions that in a calmer state they would instinctively challenge.[48] They hope for the best, but imagine the worst. And if the predisposition to think badly of a particular category of people is already in place, certain kinds of rumors, which attribute terrible acts to such people, are much easier to accept as factual. In the United States in the 1980s charges of cannibalism, the eating of human feces, and the drinking of urine and human blood, leveled against satanic cults, were believable to many people because of widespread prior acceptance of the symbol of Satan as evil incarnate coupled with a long-standing fantasy that

there actually existed groups of human beings in America pledged to Satan's service.[49] In much the same fashion, in the Western world in July 1900 it was relatively easy to be persuaded that a massacre of all foreigners in Beijing had been carried out because Westerners at the time assumed that the Chinese were entirely capable of just such behavior.

Generic Rumors: Antiforeign and Anti-Christian Lore

Predictably, a similar pattern may be discerned on the Chinese side in 1900: the "false bad news" about foreigners and Christians that was widely disseminated in this year was readily believed by masses of Chinese in part because they had long been conditioned to think ill of precisely these categories of people. In contrast with many of the rumors dealt with so far in this chapter, which have tended to be situation-specific and nonrecurrent, these rumors were more generic both in nature and in content. Also, because they threatened not just the Boxers but the entire Chinese population, the former, by spreading them and not infrequently portraying themselves as protectors against their injurious effects, were able to use such rumors to broaden support for their cause. One variety of "false bad news" rumor drew on the venerable Chinese tradition of scabrous, harrowing, often racist lore about foreigners in general and Christians in particular. The other, although also in this instance targeting foreigners and Christians, may best be represented as a form of mass panic or hysteria of a sort commonly encountered in previous periods of Chinese history (not to mention crisis situations elsewhere in the world) and focused unequivocally on death.

The Chinese store of anti-Christian and antiforeign lore embodied a number of themes. Although some of these themes were traceable as far back as the late Ming, they became especially pronounced after 1860 when foreign missionaries for the first time in over a century were given permission to operate throughout the Chinese empire. Sometimes this lore focused on the weird social and sexual practices of foreigners—and by extension Chinese Christians, who had in one way or another been contaminated by foreign contact. These practices included improper mixing of the sexes, copulation during religious services, mother-son incest, the smearing of menstrual fluid on the face, serial copulation with young girls who had been purchased and placed under a spell, and so forth. People who engaged in such behavior were defined explicitly or implicitly as enemies of the moral and civilized orders; lest there be any doubt as to their lack of qualification for being considered human, they were often represented pictorially as sheep, pigs, and other animals.[50]

Another theme of anti-Christian and antiforeign lore was more sinister, directly threatening the Chinese populace at large in the most gruesome ways and presenting Westerners (the external enemy) and Chinese Christians (the enemy within) as the very essence of evil. A Christian in Hunan was said to have cut off the queues of men, the nipples of women, and the testicles of little boys. The practices of Catholic priests were particularly suspect. The administration of last rites was, as we have seen, easily misconstrued as masking the priests' real purpose, which was to gouge out the dying person's eyeballs. The establishment of orphanages for abandoned children was another Catholic practice that was readily misunderstood. In the aftermath of an antimissionary incident that took place in Nanchang, Jiangxi, in 1862, some of the inhabitants of that city, when asked by representatives of the governor whether the missionaries' practice of rearing abandoned children was not a good thing, replied: "Locally, our rearing of abandoned children is limited to taking in and nursing the newly born. But in their orphanage the boys and girls bought are all over ten *sui*. Do you think that their purpose is to rear children or to avail themselves of this as a pretext for cutting out their vital organs and severing their limbs?"[51]

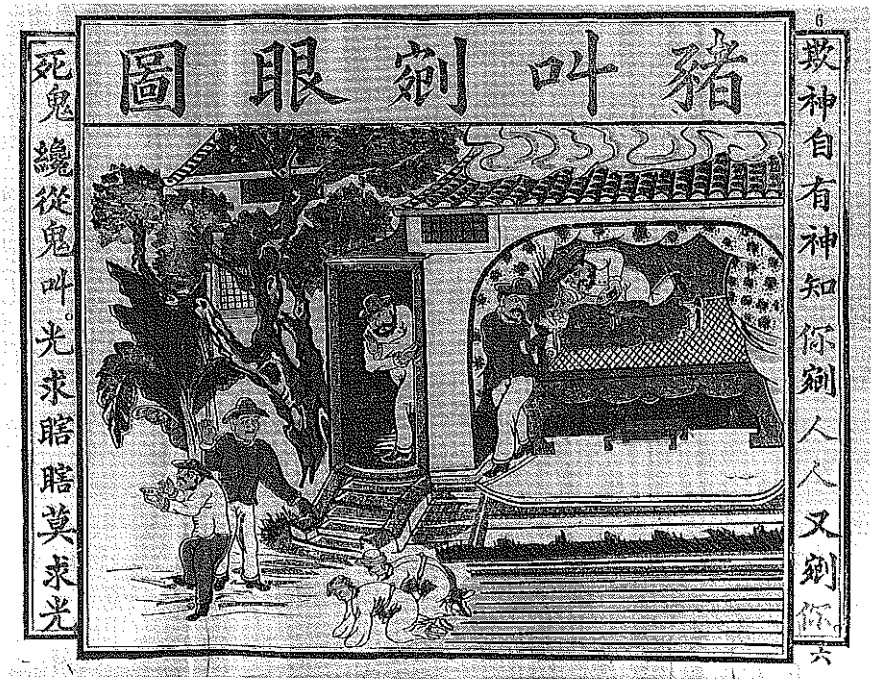
During the major incident that took place at Tianjin in 1870, suspicions surrounding the Catholic orphanage in that city were again a factor, aggravated in this instance by an epidemic in the orphanage in June that raised significantly its already high death rate and a rash of kidnappings that had broken out in Tianjin in the spring and that many residents (including non-Catholic foreigners) believed had been encouraged by the imprudence of the Catholic sisters in offering monetary "inducements to have children brought to them in the last stages of illness, for the purpose of being baptized *in articulo mortis*."[52]

Mutilation of the human body and traffic in its parts, often associated in China with kidnapping scares, and done for a variety of medicinal purposes (such as the concoction of immortality pills and potions), struck at the deepest fears of the Chinese people and had been capital offenses since the Ming period. Barend J. ter Haar has shown that these fears were part of an oral tradition stretching back at least to the Song dynasty and has argued persuasively that dismemberment, disfiguration, drugging for nefarious purposes, and other horrific charges were consistently used by ingroups (social or ethnic) to attack and demonize the members of outgroups. Rumors alluding to such behavior thus fit not only into a tradition of lore about Christians and Westerners but also into a wider tradition that had been evolving for centuries and of which the nineteenth-century anti-Christian and anti-Western tradition was but an adaptation.[53]

164 Such rumors proliferated in the summer of 1900. Two Catholic nuns living north of Tianjin were killed by a crowd of angry Chinese after (according to a former Boxer from the area) charges circulated that, among their other crimes, the nuns specialized in the kidnapping of children, whom they then turned over to church members to gouge out their hearts.[54]

Liu Yitong, one of the contemporary observers most sympathetic to the Boxers, wrote that on June 10, as tensions mounted in Beijing and the surrounding region, a large group of Christians streamed into the capital. The women's noses had been pierced and a cord passed through them. The reason for this was that, when their husbands had been hacked to death by the Boxers, the women became terrified and wanted to apostatize. The foreigners, furious at them for betraying the faith, gave them a drug, where-

5.3 Catholics Gouging Out Eyes of Chinese Christians. According to the righthand text of this late nineteenth-century poster, the gods cannot be fooled: people who gouge out the eyes of others will have their own eyes gouged out in return. The text on the left goes on to warn "dead devils" (Chinese Christians, who have become dead to all virtue) that while those with sight may seek to become blind, the blind can never recover their sight. To drive the point home, in the foreground are two converts whose eyes have already been removed by the foreigners, after whom they now crawl submissively. From *Jinzun shengyu bixie quantu*.



upon they pierced their own noses and passed the cord through them, enabling the foreigners to lead them like camels. After reaching the capital, the foreigners concealed the women in the Northern Cathedral. They covered the women's bodies with a medicinal plaster. When the plaster was pulled off, the women died. The plasters were then sold to people for two foreign dollars. Many of the people who bought them also perished.[55]

On July 1, Liu reported, three bricklayers presented themselves at the camp of one of the Chinese commanders in Beijing. They said they had worked for the foreigners for twenty-one years, but now they were so hungry they couldn't stand it any longer. The food and water supplies of the foreigners in the legation quarters were already exhausted. Therefore, the foreigners hid in the tunnels underneath the city and butchered people and horses to eat.[56]

One of the names the Boxers had for Christians, as we have seen, was "straight eyes" (*zhiyan*). They explained this, according to Guan He, by alleging that, after joining the Christian religion, Chinese often took foreign medicine, whereupon they could only stare straight ahead and no longer had the eye movements of normal people. This was one of the ways in which the Boxers were able to distinguish Christians from the rest of the Chinese population.[57]

Ye Changchi, one of whose friends in the capital related to him the story of the litchis in the photographic studio that had been mistaken for human eyeballs, was told by another friend that, after the Boxers burned down a dispensary, they found a stiff object which they thought was a cure-dried human being. There was much noise and excitement, but later it was discovered to be only a wax figure. Still another acquaintance told Ye of the formation of a "dead spirit column" (*yinhun zhen*) to defend against the Boxers. The people who formed the column, presumably Christians, ripped open the bellies of pregnant women (perhaps to generate dead spirits) and chased each other around naked to prevent the gods from possessing the Boxers.[58]

Since the Boxers believed that human eyeballs were needed for photographic work, they were said to have tied up the manager of a photo shop and forced him by means of torture to show them where he hid his supply of eyes.[59] It was also reported that, in an effort to make reality conform to fantasy, some of the girls in a missionary-run school for the blind in the capital were detained and "urged to confess that the foreigners took out their eyes."[60] In Tianjin in the summer of 1900 people said that the top leader of the entire Boxer movement, a 108-year-old man with unrivaled magical powers, on a secret inspection trip to Zizhulin had gone into a foreign building in which he came upon three earthen jars, one containing

166 human blood, another, human hearts, and a third, human eyes.[61] A particularly grisly body-parts story that circulated in Beijing alleged that Westerners confined the female members of church congregations and, after cutting out their vaginas, sold the women for three taels apiece.[62]

The anonymous author who recorded the last rumor commented cynically that the rumor had deliberately been spread by the Boxers "in order to enrage the people and cause them to hate the Westerners."[63] Such skepticism was not uncommon among elite contemporaries. But it was by no means universal. There were many other individuals, including highly educated ones, who although strongly disinclined to give credence to the more miraculous claims of the Boxers, accepted without hesitation the accusations they circulated about Christians and Westerners. Thus, Yun

5.4 Catholics Removing Fetus. Foreign missionaries were often accused of extracting the fetus and placenta from pregnant women for medicinal and alchemical purposes and for sorcery. In this poster, circulated in the late nineteenth century, the foreigners are depicted wearing green hats, symbolic of a person who has been cuckolded. The text on the right articulates the importance in the Confucian tradition of bearing sons; that on the left urges the speedy elimination of heterodoxy (Christianity) and the destruction of the foreign devils. From *Jinzun shengyu bixie quantu*.

Yuding, who frequently disparaged Boxer magic in his diary, describing it at one point as "black arts to stir up and delude the foolish people," in an entry dated June 14 (5/18) observed without a hint of skepticism that the Boxers, in ransacking churches, had found "numerous vile objects, including several dozen jars containing such things as human eyeballs, hearts and livers, and penises. There were even instances," he wrote, "of flayed human skins and hollowed out pregnant wombs, thought to be objects used by sorcerers to bring harm to their victims. These things were too ghastly to look at. Passersby were all overcome with grief and rage."[64]

Rumors such as the ones just described operated in complex and often contradictory ways. On one hand, they intensified popular fears and anxiety that were already present at the turn of the century as a result of other factors. On the other hand, they became a means of alleviating tension and stress, partly by enabling individuals to share their fears collectively and partly by transforming popular fear into popular anger concentrated on the actions of hated outsiders.

The rumors thus operated in a way somewhat analogous to "contemporary legends," as discussed by folklorists and sociologists.[65] Although some contemporary legends (also called urban legends or modern legends or exemplary stories) are quite benign, more frequently they contain horrific subject matter of one sort or another: Babies, kidnapped in Latin America, are used to provide spare parts for organ transplants in the United States. Children (or sometimes more specifically blonde, blue-eyed, virginal female children) are abducted and sacrificed by satanic cults in America. Young female clients of Jewish clothing shops in France are kidnapped and sold by the proprietors of the shops into forced prostitution.[66] And in China, at the turn of the century, the body parts of human beings are cruelly extracted by China's enemies for a range of fiendish purposes. Legends such as these often draw on centuries-old archetypal myths and vary in detail as they are told and retold over space and time. They serve, to a degree at least, to contain the chaos characteristic of situations pervaded by fear and uncertainty by naming the stress (even if only metaphorically) and locating its source. Thus they offer a clarifying narrative in a murky and threatening setting in which "even a pessimistic, terrifying story," to repeat the apt phrasing of Fussell, "is preferable to unmediated actuality."

Generic Rumors: The Well-Poisoning Scare

The second form of generic rumor that was very widely circulated in North China in 1900 also focused on actions allegedly taken by foreigners

168 and Christians for the purpose of bringing dire harm to the Chinese population. Sometimes, as we have seen, foreigners and Christians (and occasionally, in an ironic reversal, Boxers) were accused of smearing blood or some other red substance on the doors of people's homes. The rumors triggered by such acts, although various, always focused on the harm promised to the homes' occupants: either they would fall sick and possibly die or they would go mad and kill each other or they would burn to death or their children would be kidnapped.[67] A Boxer notice announced that in the prefectural city of Zhengding (in western Zhili near the Shanxi border), on the night of June 22, everyone went insane after touching the circles and crosses smeared in blood on their doors.[68] The Boxers, in addition to spreading such charges, in their other role as society's protectors also counseled people that, if they found blood markings on their doors, they could prevent further harm by removing them with a mixture of lime and human urine.[69]

Similar rumors accused the foreigners and Christians of cutting human figures out of paper and placing them in the streets, where after coming to life they would bring death to large numbers of people,[70] of depositing on the roads cakes laced with poison for unsuspecting people to pick up and eat,[71] and of stealing children.[72] But by far the most widely circulated rumor of this genre was one that charged foreigners and Christians with contaminating the water supply by placing poison in village wells. This rumor appeared in Caozhou, Shandong, as early as 1899, where it was readily believed owing to the prevalence of typhus and "a certain sort of plague."[73] During the spring and summer of 1900 the well-poisoning charge became "practically universal" in North China "and accounted for much of the insensate fury" directed by ordinary Chinese against Christians.[74]

Well-poisoning was regularly alluded to in Boxer notices, which not infrequently incorporated recipes for herbal remedies to counter the effects of the poison. Thus, a placard posted in Beijing concluded with the following warning and guidance: "At present there are foreigners who secretly have placed poison in the wells. To neutralize the poison simmer seven smoked plums, five *qian* [1 *qian* = 5 grams] of eucommia bark, and five *qian* of *maocao* [coarse grass?] in water and swallow."[75] Such information, of course, while again putting the Boxers forward as society's guardians and saviors, also served, inevitably, to confirm and exacerbate the populace's worst fears.

In addition, the well-poisoning charge supplied a ready-made vehicle for people to avenge private grievances that had nothing to do with the Boxer movement and its publicly professed goals. Liu Dapeng reports that,

in the latter half of July, every day brought reports of villages in Shanxi putting to death poisoners.[76] Liu's assertion, however, needs to be placed alongside Rowena Bird's observation, frequently reiterated in her letters and journal, that the people killed were often "outside" people, who had nothing whatever to do with the local foreign community. Conditions, Bird wrote from Taigu on July 6, "are growing more and more desperate, new outrages are committed each day, till not only Christians but people generally are fearful for their lives. . . . Last night two men, not Christians, were killed in a village near[by], on the charge that, hired by the foreigners, they were poisoning wells and scattering medicines. These men had no connection with us, and respectable men in the village went security for the[m], but it was no use, they were at once burned to death."[77]

The well-poisoning scare in North China in 1900 came as close as anything at the time to a mass panic. Elvin has suggested that the population of the area in which the Boxers were most active in the latter part of 1899 and early 1900, stretching from Qingzhou and Weixian in northwestern Shandong to Tianjin and Tongzhou (outside the capital) in Zhili, was particularly prone to mass hysteria.[78] In support of this hypothesis, he draws attention to two other panics that erupted in the region in the latter years of the nineteenth century. One was a flood scare fomented in 1872 by the Shengxian sect, which was active in the area south of Baoding. The leaders of this sect, according to the *North-China Herald*'s Baoding correspondent, proclaimed that "on a certain date a flood of waters would devastate the country, and only the faithful few who prepared themselves for its coming by building boats, [*sic*] could escape—like another Noah—from the ruin that would overtake the land. Boats were built in immense numbers, and far and wide provision was made for the fated day." This day came and passed, however, "to the confusion of those whose arks, ready provisioned for a voyage, stood unconcealed before their doors. Many broke up their boats at once, but every here and there in that district you still [twenty years later] come across them half-decayed and used for all sorts of purposes."[79]

The second instance of mass hysteria cited by Elvin was a kidnapping panic that began in Tianjin in 1897 and spread rapidly to other parts of Zhili and Shandong. This panic targeted foreigners as the main culprits and was, in many ways, a dress rehearsal for the rumor scares of the Boxer period. "From Tientsin," the *North-China Herald* reported in late June, "we hear . . . that a state of absolute panic reigns in the city. The natives cannot sleep at night for fear of kidnappers, and they are being urged on by anti-foreign intriguers, and rascals who have baser ends to serve, to vent their spite on foreigners." Such kidnapping rumors apparently were circulated annually

170 in Tianjin, "about the time of the advent of the grain junks from the south," when there was in fact a greater or lesser amount of buying and kidnapping of children mainly by Cantonese junkmen. This year, however, the rumors were "unusually virulent," owing to the imminent reopening of the Roman Catholic cathedral that had been destroyed in 1870, unemployment fears attending the completion in June of the Beijing-Tianjin railway, and a number of other factors. The completion of the railway had given rise to tales in the capital "about children buried under the ties and slain to solidify the bridges." The old stories of hearts and eyes being dug out for foreign use were revived "and found ready credence." In one part of Shandong a captured kidnapper was said to have confessed to having sold a heart and two eyes to the foreigners for 100 taels, and in another part a notice was posted stating that 500 hypnotists had been dispatched from Tianjin to victimize children. Many unfortunate Chinese wrongfully accused of being kidnappers were subjected to horrible judicial deaths.[80] Then, by late summer or early fall, like the flood scare of 1872 and comparable outbreaks of mass hysteria in other places and times, the kidnapping rumors died out, as suddenly and enigmatically as they had begun.[81]

That there were prior instances of mass hysteria in the same region in which the Boxers were active from late 1899 into the summer of 1900 is undeniable. The question is: How unusual was this? Did the bouts of mass panic that can be documented for the Zhili-Shandong region result, as Elvin suggests, from the special characteristics of the inhabitants of this area or was such hysteria encountered more generally in China in situations in which, for whatever reason, collective anxieties were at a high pitch? This is not the place to attempt a comprehensive answer to these questions. It is enough to note that the researches of a number of scholars suggest that such mass panics occurred in many parts of China and with considerable frequency. The queue-clipping scare of 1768 studied by Kuhn had its origins in Zhejiang province and was mainly concentrated in east-central China. Ter Haar has documented a wide range of mass panics from the late sixteenth century onward, some centered on queue-clipping, many on kidnapping fears, and erupting not only in North China but also in Fujian, northern Hubei, Guangxi, Guangdong, and especially the lower Yangzi region.[82]

Ter Haar also makes several other points that are pertinent here. One of his key arguments—a thesis which, incidentally, the main thrust of Elvin's analysis supports—is that violent action taken against Christian missionaries and converts was, more often than not, an adaptation of preexisting cultural and social patterns that were of long standing and, in their origins, had

nothing to do with foreigners or Christians. Even more pertinent for our purposes is ter Haar's insistence upon the importance of situational factors—as opposed to the behavioral proclivities of the populace of a given region—in generating conditions conducive to mass hysteria. Thus, the antiforeign disturbances that took place in the Yangzi River valley in 1891 occurred against a background of heightened tension owing to drought (which hit city-dwellers, the main perpetrators of the riots, especially hard) and were part of a pattern of intensified criminal violence in the area that was unconnected with missionaries or foreigners. More generally, ter Haar points out that rumors spread more rapidly—and rumor panics tended to break out with greater frequency—in densely populated areas with well-frequented channels of trade and travel, which would apply, of course, not only to North China but also to the other regions in which the panics he discusses took place.[83] Another situational factor bearing on the extent and rapidity of rumor circulation, which my own reading of Boxer-era materials strongly suggests, is the response of the authorities, both central and local, to the initial appearance of rumors. One reason why North China experienced such an epidemic of rumors in the spring and summer of 1900 was the uncertainty of the court at the outset as to how to respond to the Boxer movement and its eventual decision to support it, which, from the populace's point of view, seemed to throw a cloak of legitimacy over even the wildest of Boxer claims. The spread of rumors, in such circumstances, instead of being contained (which was usually the Chinese government's interest with respect to rumors), was encouraged, and nowhere was it encouraged more than in Shanxi province, which had a governor (Yuxian) well known for his strong pro-Boxer and antiforeign feelings. This may help to account for the exceptional jitteriness of the Shanxi population, as documented by Liu Dapeng, on the Chinese side, and Rowena Bird and other missionaries, on the foreign.

Leaving aside the question of whether the population of North China, or at least large portions of it, showed an unusual susceptibility to mass hysteria, I would suggest that a question that is of at least equal interest has to do with the content of the hysteria in this case. Why mass poisoning? And why, in particular, the poisoning of public water sources? If one accepts the view that rumors convey messages and that rumor epidemics, in particular, supply important symbolic information concerning the collective worries of societies in crisis, one approach to answering such questions is to try to identify the match or fit between a rumor panic and its immediate context. In the case of kidnapping panics, which have a long history not only in China but in many other societies as well, the focus of collective concern

is the safety of children, who (as the term *kidnap* seems to imply) are almost always seen as the primary victims.[84] Rumors of mass poisoning, on the other hand, are far more appropriate as a symbolic response to a crisis, such as war or natural disaster or epidemic, in which *all* the members of society are potentially at risk.

Such is, in fact, exactly what we find to be the case. Charges of well-poisoning and similar crimes were brought against the first Christians in Rome and the Jews in the Middle Ages at the time of the Black Plague (1348). During the cholera epidemic in Paris in 1832 a rumor circulated that poison powder had been scattered in the bread, vegetables, milk, and water of that city. In the early stages of the Great War, rumors were spread in all belligerent countries that enemy agents were busy poisoning the water supplies. Newspaper accounts in 1937, at the onset of the Sino-Japanese War, accused Chinese traitors of poisoning the drinking water of Shanghai.[85] Within hours of the great Tokyo earthquake of September 1, 1923, which was accompanied by raging fires, rumors began to circulate charging ethnic Koreans and socialists not only with having set the fires but also with plotting rebellion and poisoning the wells.[86] And rumors of mass poisoning proliferated in Biafra during the Nigerian civil conflict of the late 1960s.[87]

In many of these instances, the rumors targeted outsiders (or their internal agents), who were accused, symbolically if not literally, of seeking the annihilation of the society in which the rumors circulated. This, of course, closely approximates the situation prevailing in China at the time of the Boxer uprising. Like the charge that the foreigners were the ones ultimately responsible for the lack of rain in the spring and summer of 1900, rumors accusing foreigners and their native surrogates of poisoning North China's water supplies portrayed outsiders symbolically as depriving Chinese of what was most essential for the sustaining of life. The well-poisoning rumor epidemic thus spoke directly to the collective fear that was uppermost in the minds of ordinary people at the time: the fear of death.