Barbarians: Remixed

Episode: Jeffrey Wasserstrom on the Boxers

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Jeremiah (00:09): Welcome to Barbarians at the Gate podcast. It's a podcast of history, language, and culture broadcast from Beijing. And I'm here today with my co-host, David Moser, zooming in from OKC. How are you doing, David?

David Moser (00:21): Pretty good.

Jeremiah (00:22): We're really pleased today to be joined on the podcast by Jeffrey Wasserstrom. So Jeff is the Chancellor's Professor of History at the University of California at Irvine. He not only writes for many academic journals, but he also contributes to the Chicago Times, New York Times, the Atlantic, the Los Angeles Review of Books. And I think it's safe to say that Jeff really is, for me anyway, the model of what a public intellectual should be, someone who both does a great deal of important scholarly research, but also makes that research accessible to a general audience as well and bridges both worlds in a way that I think is really admirable and something again that I've tried to emulate in my own really, really, really small way in my own career.

He's the author of many of my favorite and most often recommended books on China, including along with Maura Cunningham, *China in the 21st Century, What Everyone Needs to Know*, *Eight Juxtapositions, China Through Imperfect Analogies from Mark Twain to Manchukuo*, and most recently *Vigil, Hong Kong on the brink*. And you're here today to talk to us about the Boxers.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom (01:24): Yeah, it's a pleasure to be here and thanks for that very generous introduction.

David Moser (01:29): So Jeff, just dive in here. This is a usual historian's problem, which is the Boxer's Rebellion and all aspects of Chinese history have been covered so much by so many people in so many great versions. Can you give us a kind of a thumbnail sketch of how your book is going to differentiate itself from all the other great books on the subject?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom (01:49): Yeah, it's a tricky question because there are two really wonderful prize-winning books from the 80s and 90s that I think about a lot, Joseph Esherick's *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* and Paul Cohen's *History in Three Keys*. And I mean, one of the clear things that I think differentiates what I'm doing is a lot of the books written in English about the Boxers end the story where the credits roll for the Hollywood film, *55 Days at Peking*, which is basically when the foreigners who were trapped inside the legation quarter of Beijing are freed, when this allied army comes in and lifts the siege, defeats the Boxers and the Qing

who have backed the Boxers, then that's where the story largely ends. And that's really just the midway point in a lot of the Chinese stories about the Boxer crisis.

In which what follows is then months of a military occupation of North China, in which a lot of atrocities are committed by Western troops and troops from Japan and Russia as well. So one of the differences is that I just want to give both halves of that crisis attention. But the other thing about this book that's different is it's not really about the events as much as it is about the way the stories of the events are told.

The competing narratives between Chinese and Western accounts, but also the differences among Western accounts of it. And one of the things that I've become really fascinated with, is that even when people around the world seem to be following a single news story, if we think about the story part of the news story, they actually are interpreting it in very different ways because of the way it relates to stories they already know, things that have happened in the past that they think the current crisis is similar to. And that leads to some really radically different ways of thinking about 1900, even within the West. Americans and Britons thought of the events while they were taking place very differently and how the events are remembered later, are remembered differently because of which parts of history people thought were relevant at the time and also what other things going on in the world were seen as related to what was going on in China. It's a globally minded book. It moves more across the world than some other accounts do and it moves more through time by thinking about what historical precedents were seen as relevant in 1900 and also the legacies 1900 has had afterwards.

Jeremiah (04:20): You know, one of the things when I teach about the Boxers, one of the challenges I have is, what do we call this? And the name of your title of the book that you're working on is *Ghosts of 1900, Stories of China in the Year of the Boxers*. And that seems to kind of get around this debate. Is it a Boxer uprising, Boxer rebellion? I often call it the Boxer war. I'm curious your thoughts on that and maybe why you avoided choosing any one of those terms for the working title of the book.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom (04:47): Yeah, so they're, I mean, I joke about the fact that Boxer rebellion is a perfectly good term, except they didn't box and they weren't rebels. You know, they did use martial arts techniques and one of their names for themselves in Chinese refers to righteous and harmonious fists. And some of their critics call them the fist bandits in Chinese, Chuan Fei. So Boxer, Boxer is okay. You know, it's not great because it conjures up images, including sort of bad cartoons about showing them as if they had boxing gloves or something, but Boxer's okay.

David Moser (05:20): The real full term I guess was shadow boxing, that people saw these martial arts moves and said they were doing shadow boxing. And I think that's where the term comes from, if I'm not mistaken.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom (05:30): Yeah, that's part of it. You know, the boxing part, they did put on these martial arts displays to help draw people, draw crowds that they then sort of proselytized to. So, you know, the martial arts was important. The problem is really rebellion. Rebellion suggests that they were trying to overthrow the dynasty when in fact their enemies were the

Christians, their enemies were the foreigners. They appealed, they claimed that they wanted to basically restore China to control by the dynasty and help the dynasty out.

That they were a kind of loyalist militia. So rebellion has a real problem there. Uprising works better. You know, Joe Esherick uses that in his *Origins, the Boxer Uprising*. The problem there is that by the end of the summer, the uprising is over and yet the crisis continues. And so I think uprising can kind of lead you to downplay the military occupation afterwards. So that's why just calling it the year of the Boxers suggests all of 1900, or actually a little bit from sort of January of 1900 through February of 1901, which was the gengzi year from lunar new year to lunar new year. That is how it's often referred to in Chinese texts. Some Chinese texts refer to it by referring to the group, but some just refer to it as the chaos or the tragedy of the gengzi nian. And so I kind of like playing with that year of the Boxers as a way to emphasize the before and the after both being important.

David Moser (06:58): Maybe talk a little bit about how it plays out differently in China and maybe some historical parallels that we Westerners would not even consider, but the Chinese might, or as a historian, someone like you who finds interesting juxtapositions would be good at this, I think.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom (07:14): So yeah, I mean, the film, *55 Days at Peking* is just wonderfully over the top in many ways. And it's basically a Western. It really casts it as a kind of Western. The Boxers end up looking a lot like Native Americans in classic Westerns. And that was a trope of how I mentioned that the British and the Americans saw the events a bit differently while they were taking place in 1900, thinking about comparisons and juxtapositions.

In the British press, there was a lot of talk about the Boxers being similar to the people who had risen up in India and had trapped some foreigners in a siege in 1857. So in the siege of Beijing, there was a lot of discussion as, this is like Lucknow, what people experienced 43 years before. But in the US, there was some discussion of it as being like a ghost dance rising, because the ghost dance rising had Native Americans who thought they could make themselves invulnerable to bullets, which the Boxers did as well, thought they could call spirit soldiers down like the Boxers did as well. And actually before *55 days at Peking*, long before it, Buffalo Bill's Wild West show in 1901 put on a reenactment of a battle in China in which Native American cast members dressed up to play the Boxers and were defeated.

And here you had the ending, the kind of Hollywood ending was first put on in Madison Square Garden with Buffalo Bill and company, where the white men on horses defeat the Native Americans dressed up to be Boxers. And the American flag goes up on stage and the crowd cheers. There's a wonderful article about this by John Haddad, "The Wild West Show Goes East," I think it's called. And he points out that one member of the audience wasn't there to cheer, it was Mark Twain, who actually thought that the Boxers had a certain justification to want to kick the foreigners out of their country. And so he left, even though he and Buffalo Bill were friends, because he didn't want to see this, what he saw as a travesty of the story of what had happened in China.

One way the story is told in China is there are different ways it's told at different periods. So under Mao, it was told as the Boxers were heroes. They had right on their side, they were trying to kick the imperialists out of China. They didn't have advanced enough views of understanding of capitalism and imperialism to lead a successful revolution, but they were essentially heroes. In later periods, sort of from the reform period on, the kind of anti-modernization side of the Boxers, the Boxers didn't just kill Christians, they also tore up railroad tracks and tore down telegraph poles because they had some beliefs that those kind of Western objects were destroying the feng shui of the land, were disrupting the natural order.

The Boxers aren't easy to square with the kind of vision of China as a modernizing technological state now, but the invasion by the foreign armies is now what's really emphasized as the terrible part of the story. So what you have in a lot of Chinese versions of the story that you'd learned about, say, in school on the mainland now, you kind of have a certain amount of attention to the Boxers and their... They come across as a group that had strange ideas, but a justifiable grievance. And then you have the foreign armies come in, the Baguo Lianjun, the Eight-Allied armies, because of eight different foreign powers contributing soldiers, that then carried out an invasion and committed atrocities and did terrible things to the people of China.

So you end up with something if people are saying now that something's happening in China that is reminiscent of 1900. If you've grown up or you're familiar with the Western story, you might think that what's familiar about 1900 might be xenophobia on the part of hyper nationalist young Chinese who you say are hating the West and are irrationally like the Boxers. But you might have from a Chinese side that when foreign powers are treating China unfairly or the Chinese people unfairly, that's a reminiscent thing of 1900.

And I had a direct experience of this, one of the only times I've been in China when anything dramatic happened. I'm usually there at fairly unimportant times in history. But I was there in 1999 when NATO bombs had hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese people. And there were protests against American and British imperialism because NATO was carrying out these bombing raids against Serbia to push back against ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, but China was an ally of Serbia. And so this was actually seen as NATO, group that shares some of the same characters as that Baguo Lianjun Eight-Allied armies term and shares some of the same members of that Eight-Allied army. That the idea in the Chinese press was this was foreign powers getting together to transgress against another country's sovereignty and Chinese people were dying again.

One way that the Belgrade bombing was understood in Chinese discourse was it's like 1900. Here we are almost 100 years later and still the kind of abuses are going on that happened in 1900. So angry young Chinese gathered outside the American embassy and the British embassy. The American ambassador was trapped inside the embassy for a certain amount of time. At the high point of the Boxer uprising or most tense moment, foreign diplomats were trapped inside their houses. So USA Today said, look, this is almost 100 years after the Boxers and China still is doing the same kind of thing. And the Boxers were supported by the Qing. The protesters who were out on the streets denouncing American imperialism were being backed by the Chinese Communist Party. So you could see how there was a way in which you could squeeze that into the 1900 narrative, but it's totally different 1900 narratives on both sides that were being

invoked. So you had this odd moment of people saying, isn't it kind of like 1900, even though we're almost a hundred years later, but what they meant was something radically different.

Jeremiah (13:23): Jeff, I have a question. Maybe it's a teaching question. I'm sure that many of your students over the last few years especially for modern Chinese history courses have been from China or from Hong Kong or from Taiwan. And I'm always curious, you know, when you're teaching this in a lecture or you're going over, say, an event like the Boxers. And of course, there are different interpretations and people, of course, are coming out of different educational background. In case of American students, this may be the first time they're ever hearing that this even happened. But obviously, for students who grew up in Asia, particularly in China, this has been something that's been part of their education and media landscape since they could, you know, since they were aware.

Have you ever had any discussions or has there been any moments in the classroom where you've had to interpret, if you will, or maybe a better way of putting it would be to kind of reconcile some of these different interpretations?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom (14:14): That's a really great question. I don't get that many students from China, even though Irvine has a lot from the mainland. They tend to take science subjects and they have to take American history. It's a required course. I'd say the biggest thing that I deal with when I'm dealing with students specifically from the mainland, this is a different issue than Taiwan and Hong Kong, I think, is really, a more meta question. It's getting across the idea that what studying history means is studying competing interpretations of an event, as opposed to figuring out what the right line on an event is in a certain sense. So that's, I think, the challenge. And so one thing I try to do is bring up examples from both the American past and the Chinese past, even if it's a Chinese history course, to try to get that across, to say that often people within any country only learn part of a story and that there are multiple ways of seeing virtually any story and that even people who Americans might grow up learning about as heroes, there might be some parts of their lives that are kind of brushed under the rug.

I give some examples and one of the examples I give to try to make this not being that China is the only place that gets it wrong. I say that, you know, in the United States, when you're growing up, you hear that Martin Luther King was a heroic figure. And Martin Luther King is considered a heroic figure in China too. So this can be a kind of meeting ground. And I'll say, well, but when young people in school in the United States hear about Martin Luther King, they tend to only hear about his, "I have a dream" speech, and they hear about his views of racial equality.

But what often gets brushed under the rug is his intense criticism of the Vietnam War and his actually intense criticism of some things that we might describe as kind of capitalism and his concern with poverty. And so I say, you know, actually then one of the things about studying history in college is even with something that you think you know about, you want to say, well, what else was going on? And you want to discover, well, there is a Martin Luther King holiday, but there was a period when people were denouncing Martin Luther King for being anti-American. So what's going on? What are the stakes in this? And then that can be a way to lead into, so let's take an event you know from Chinese history and let's think about what are the sides

of that story that don't fit in with the narrative that the Communist Party has told you in your textbooks growing up.

Jeremiah (16:38): I just want to follow up on that for a moment too. How is the narrative different in schools in Taiwan and Hong Kong?

Jeffrey Wasserstrom (16:44): That's a really great question. It's actually something I'll dig into now that you've asked it. I haven't focused on that so much. I mean, I know that there's a way in which the way that the terms get used in popular discourse now are quite different, that there is a way in which, for example, there wasn't a period of romanticizing the Boxers as kind of pure heroes. There was more of a tradition in both Taiwan and Hong Kong of thinking of the Boxer side of it, the boxerism, more like the way it's thought about in the West as a group that was anti-modern and unscientific. So you actually have a fissure on the Boxers that you can go back to the May 4th movement.

The May 4th movement was about science and democracy and also about anti-imperialism. So radicals of different kind of varieties around 1918, 1919, some of them said what we need to do is completely differentiate ourselves from from boxerism, which was Paiwai Zhuyi (排外主义) anti-foreignism, xenophobia. We need to take the best ideas from the West and combine them, we need to use the best ideas that are circulating in the world. And the Boxers, that kind of rejection, the outside world is antithetical to what we're doing. When the protest against imperialism during the May 4th movement in 1919 took place, the students, for the most part, were engaging in boycotts and other nonviolent actions, whereas the Boxers had been violent. So they really tried to differentiate themselves. The Japanese press said, here are people criticizing foreigners. They're like Boxers.

The British and the Americans said, no, this is nothing like the Boxers. You're really just trying to slander these educated, enlightened youths. A few years later, though, there was an anti-British movement, the May 30th movement in Shanghai, which was, again, largely nonviolent. But the British said, these youths, they're just like the Boxers. So they're kind of using this taint of violence. So whoever was being challenged to discredit it tried to say it's just like the Boxers.

But among Chinese intellectuals, the tendency was, among the May fourth generation, to distance yourself from the Boxers and to maybe say that yes, the invasion that took place at the end was some bad things were done by the foreign troops. But you focus on the mistakes that the Boxers made that created the whole problem. But the Chinese Communist Party comes along and there's influence by the anti-imperialism of Leninism and so forth. And there starts to be a reevaluation of the Boxers to see them as flawed, but to place them within this kind of larger narrative of imperialism. And you actually have a key figure in the May 4th movement, Chen Duxiu who writes a piece in 1918 in which he's very critical of the Boxers. And then a few years later writes another piece after he's become a founder of the Communist Party that talks about the the mistaken views of the Boxers. And is a kind of self-criticism of sort of say, now wait, let's not put the blame on the wrong side here. Imperialism and foreign depredations against China are the problem. So you end up in a way, you can see those two strands. Taiwan, the story is told more in that sort of early Chen Duxiu moment where you've got this kind of focus on the need for enlightenment as opposed to xenophobia. And there is a critique of foreign aggression

against China, but you emphasize distancing yourself from the Boxers. So that would be part of the story of bringing Taiwan and Hong Kong in.

David Moser (20:23): So there's something about this 60-year cycle, the gengzi nian that we talked about with the Boxer indemnity is referred to as the geng zi peikuan right? But there's this notion of this 60-year cycle which overlaps with other cycles. The ten geng di zhi, the ten heavenly stems and twelve terrestrial branches, and the five elements, the wuxing. And a particularly terrifying and ominous year are these, they call it the metal rat years, the years that correspond with the year of the rat, and also the metal element in the five elements. And some of those events have been 1840, Britain initiated the First Opium War. 1900 of course is the Boxer Rebellion and 1960 was the great leap forward that was a gengzi nian and then 2020 the coronavirus and it's another gengzi nian.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom (21:17): I mean, we find it normal in the West to think about what was going on 50 years ago or what was going on 100 years ago or what was going on 200 years ago. And it's equally common to in a Chinese mindset to think of 60 years or 120. Though actually now in China, you think of both. I mean, centennials matter and so do 120th anniversaries. So you have these timescales.

So a few years ago, it was the 120th anniversary of another devastating event for China, the loss to Japan in the war of 1894, 95. And so when that anniversary, 120th came around, there were speeches given, let's remember what happened 120 years ago and how totally different the world is now. Look how far we've gone from that. That was a time when Japan was ascendant and China was descending. Now that could never happen again because China is once again ascendant.

Jeremiah (22:09): Well, thanks again, Jeff, for coming on the podcast. And thank you all for listening to Barbarians at the Gate. We'll talk to you again very soon.