Joshu, Sanjay

Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India
New Delhi: Oxford University Press
209 pp., $29.95. ISBN 0-19-564562-6
Publication Date: July 2001

Fractured Modernity is a good book: substantively rich, theoretically well-informed, and based on a variety of sources in English, Hindi, and Urdu. Sanjay Joshi critically engages a diverse body of writers, ranging from Habermas, to Christopher Bayly, to influential members of South Asian history’s Subaltern Group. He makes stimulating comparisons between middle-class formation in colonial India and in Europe and finds, overall, that the processes were more similar than dissimilar.

Joshi, a member of the history department at Northern Arizona University, anchors his book within the context provided by the north Indian city of Lucknow between 1880 and 1930. He is, however, never parochial in his approach. Indeed, he has set himself where more discussion of what happened specifically in Lucknow would have been welcome.

Joshi argues that Indian middle-class formation was a self-fashioned cultural project, wherein a body of educated men, and later some women, made themselves socially and politically important through cultural entrepreneurship conducted primarily in the arena of public-sphere politics. “The definition and power of the middle class in colonial India came from its propaganda of ‘modern’ ways of life” (2). The middle class made themselves the arbiters of the ideology of modernity, both as its producers and as its products. They created an increasingly powerful position separate from the previous elite, whose position they undermined, and from those who had been below them and over whom they continued to claim superiority.

The project of middle-class making, therefore, was closely tied to modernity. It was, however, a fractured modernity full of contradictions, as older and newer ideas were loosely tied together. A commitment to democratic forms, progress, and egalitarian ideals coexisted with a belief that the “better” service classes, who generally constituted the middle class, were naturally superior to the lower classes; reworked patriarchal and hierarchical—were the two closely linked—ideas and practices led to gender relationships and assertions of respectability that were both liberatory and oppressive; and concepts of inclusive secular nationalism, Hindu-Muslim antagonism, and religious nationalism coexisted. Changing contexts shaped the particular stances of Lucknow’s middle class. Consistently, though, the middle class pursued its own empowerment and in so doing espoused a situationally expedient, fractured modernity.

In sum, Fractured Modernity is an important book. Everyone seriously interested in colonial and postcolonial South Asia should read it. Moreover, Joshi’s comparative stance makes the book important for all social and cultural historians interested in class formation and development.

IAN J. KERR
University of Manitoba

Rowe, William T.

Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China
Stanford: Stanford University Press
601 pp., $60.00. ISBN 0-804-7373-55
Publication Date: May 2001

Confucianism has been the subject of numerous works of Chinese history. Recently, late imperial Chinese elites as a social category have also been the subject of inquiry of many Chinese historians. William T. Rowe’s new book, among the few, sets itself a deceptively simple question: “What did the individuals who inhabited the eighteenth-century Qing bureaucracy think they were doing?” Rowe intends this question in an intellectual, even ontological, rather than practical sense: His interest is in how Chinese bureaucrats of the eighteenth century “conceived [their] universe and society” and how they understood their own actions as components of “the effort to save the world” (446).

Rowe, a professor of Chinese history at Johns Hopkins University, is the author of two earlier books on the nineteenth century. Both had to do with elites, urban and commercial. In Saving the World, Rowe continues his interest in elites through a biographical study of the period’s most important official, Chen Hongmou (1696–1777). Chen Hongmou, a field administrator who rose ultimately to the position of Grand Secretary, embodied, as Rowe effectively demonstrates, the multiple tensions that characterized elite consciousness in the period.

Rowe is acutely aware of the potential distortions attendant on the biographical genre, but in his capable hands the exploration of one individual becomes the occasion for investigation of a number of the most important questions regarding elite Chinese life in the so-called Qing period. The success of the venture is attributable to Rowe’s choice of format: Rather than write a straightforward, chronological exposition of Chen Hongmou’s life, Rowe instead organizes his book around various themes and subjects (home, politics, study, food, production, people, community, and so on) and manages both to illuminate those broader themes through his detailed study of Chen Hongmou and to more richly portray the man by carefully situating him in a broader context.

Rowe is thus able to reach an important, and convincing, conclusion: that the “big ideas conventionally identified with the development of elite consciousness in early modern Europe—statism, liberalism, and...