

Professor Jonathan D SPENCE

Citation

When it comes to the study of Chinese history, there is one living historian you cannot ignore: Jonathan D Spence. You get a sense of how important he is when you try to borrow his most famous book, *The Search for Modern China* from the University library. It is one of the very few books on a strictly two-hour loan, when you can take out almost any other books for more than two months. There is a reason for his popularity.

Prof Spence spends his entire adult life trying to understand this ancient nation. His decades of immersion in his subject have given him a Chinese persona: loyal to his friends, modest to a fault, and respectful of learning. He is better known to tens of thousands of his Chinese readers by his Chinese name, aptly chosen to mean “the changing scenes of history”. His knowledge of things Chinese is such that he has something interesting to say about almost anything within the Chinese universe, across the span of centuries, from Confucius to Mao to Yao (as in Yao Ming), from films to sports.

Prof Spence is no ivory-tower historian. His historical writings have been described as “a miracle in readability”. His peers say that he “writes like an angel”, enabling him to reach the general readers instead of just a small circle of the initiated. It has been said that when he was young, he wanted to be a novelist, and that he considered himself something of a poet. That is good news for the people who love Chinese history.

Significantly, Prof Spence is the first scholar in the West to use secret imperial court memorials in the study of the Qing dynasty. His PhD dissertation on Emperor K’ang-hsi and his bondservant not only won him a contract with a publisher but also a much-coveted prize, leading a fellow historian, Joseph Levenson, to declare that “Qing historical studies will never be the same again.” Through him, the voice of China’s leaders and the led and lowly came to us vividly and compellingly, courtesy of his novelistic skills. The sights and sounds of a society long since gone leap or echo from the pages. And yet his critical imagination is tethered to a scrupulous fidelity to the sources and a disciplined regard for archival authority.

For his contributions to the historical understanding of China, Prof Spence is much honored by the world — with eight honorary doctorates from around the world, including one from Oxford University, and made a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George by the Queen of England, not to mention becoming a visiting professor at Peking University and an honorary professor at Nanjing University. Now, more than ever, a country which has undergone the biggest transformation in the history of the world and is taking her place as a major player on the world stage, needs a dispassionate interpreter. Knowledge of China has assumed global significance and urgency. Prof Spence has famously said that “To understand China today, you have to understand its past.” He refers sympathetically to Fairbank’s belief that “the Chinese have a different approach to the relationship between the individual and

the collective...they tend to give different and higher values to ideas of harmony than to ideas of striving. They have a different perception of the role of time and leadership in history.” Prof Spence goes on to quote approvingly of Fairbank’s observation that “Ignorance of these differences... lies behind the various failures in the missionary, business, diplomatic and military ventures that the United States has embarked in China across the span of the last two hundred years.” The writings of historians such as John K Fairbank and Jonathan Spence may be just the guidepost the world needs, as the din of a trade conflict grows louder, and the perceived geopolitical threat of a rising China is gaining currency in the US and among some of her allies.

China is finally leaving the shadows cast by her past humiliations and is now the object of serious interest by a watching world. Her growing importance is naturally magnifying the importance and influence in academia and beyond of those who study her history, Prof Spence notably among them. At this historical juncture, the world needs a perspective on a nation in transition, away from the vagaries of electoral politics or economic exigencies. We deserve a more balanced view than is afforded by the frequent swings of the pendulum from naive fascination to deep mistrust of a nation once crudely described as a sleeping giant.

It is revealing that on the dedication page of his famous book, *The Search for Modern China*, Prof Spence states simply “For my students”. This is the gesture of a caring teacher that reveals much about the author. Prof Spence’s love of his students is equaled only by his love of his subject. For those lucky enough to have attended his dazzling lectures, there was nothing more exciting than to see the master thinking out loud, sharing his latest

thoughts about a subject he passionately pursues. Prof Spence is a scholar who lives for the next book, for the next new insight, even though he has already given the world a continuous stream of books on China, among them *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K’ang-hsi*, *God’s Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*, *The Question of HU*, *Chinese Roundabout*, *To Change China: Western Advisers in China 1620-1960*, and *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*. Is it any wonder that his undergraduate course at Yale University on the history of modern China was always over-enrolled and overflowing with adoring students? Today, we are here not only to celebrate a great historian, a great scholar of a great subject, but also a great teacher.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, on behalf of the Council of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, I have the high honor of presenting to you Prof Jonathan D Spence, Professor Emeritus of Yale University, for the award of Doctor of Humanities *honoris causa*.