

The Art of History: A Conversation with Jonathan Spence

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JONATHAN D. Spence, Sterling Professor of History at Yale University and President of the American Historical Association (AHA), visited the Georgia Institute of Technology and Georgia State University in April, 2004. During his visit, I had the opportunity to ask for his views (as the Chinese would say, qingjiao) on various issues related to Chinese history and historiography.¹ We had mutually agreed that this was not to be a formal interview but rather a series of “chats.” Our conversation, however, did touch upon a wide array of topics: history and literature, narrative and theory, social history and daily life, tradition and modernity, the policy implications of historical writing and its impact on popular knowledge, Chinese historians in the U.S., the future of China, and so on. Although most of the questions asked reflected my own interests, Professor Spence’s insights on the subjects discussed no doubt will be of benefit to a broad spectrum of China scholars and historians.

In what is a rare achievement for a historian, Jonathan Spence has attained an eminent status in academia while enjoying great popularity among the educated general public. This is particularly remarkable considering that Chinese history is, to be blunt, marginal in American historiography. Spence’s dual feat of historiography is self-evident in the

¹ Professor Spence delivered a talk, “China Today: The Persistence of the Past,” at the Georgia State University and a seminar on “How Dynasties Fall: A Seventeenth-Century View” at the Georgia Tech.

fact that his books have occupied a prominent place in the catalog of *Barns & Noble* for decades and that, in 2004, he has been elected as the AHA president, the first Yale professor to serve in that post in more than thirty years and one of only three China historians ever to have been accorded that honor (the other two being John K. Fairbank and Frederic Wakeman, Jr.). His remarks on various issues recorded here, if I may summarize, constitute a record of a historian's wisdom on the art of history.

Since Professor Spence's Chinese name, Shi Jingqian (史景迁), might be translated — or rather interpreted — as “A historian who admires Sima Qian,” our conversation starts with the great Chinese historian, Sima Qian (司马迁), and the issue of historical writing as a literary tradition.²

Lu: China has a literati tradition that does not clearly distinguish literature from history. Sima Qian's *Shiji*, for example, is a history as much as a work of literature. China's rich literary notes and sketches (*biji xiaoshuo*), for another example, are valuable historical materials. It seems to me that most of your work can also be seen as both historical and literary. *The Death of Woman Wang* and *God's Chinese Son*, for instance, are as riveting as a detective novel and a tragic epic. They are nevertheless most solidly crafted history. I see this style without parallel in the field of Chinese history today, but in some ways it can be related to the Sima Qian tradition of “wen shi bu fenjia” (no divisions between literature and history). Could you please comment on that?

Spence: My feeling about this is that saying that history and literature come together is immensely different from saying history and fiction come together. So, by using the word “literature,” whether you call it *wen* or

² An elegant seal reading “Shi Jingqian” in traditional Chinese *zhuanshu* calligraphy graces the cover of Spence's book, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990, 1999), a *New York Times* bestseller.

wenxue and in that sense, literature and history, you are using the word “literature” as something like a quality, judgment, or category of a certain kind of approach to words. When you say a word like “fiction,” you are talking about a methodology, which needs have no relationship to truth, except for some kind of broader storytelling truth.

Lu: It seems to me that literature in the sense we are using the term could also include fiction.

Spence: Well, *xiaoshuo* (novel) is usually rather different from *wenxue* (literature), isn’t it? I would say *wenxue* is linked more to a philosophical tradition. The word “literature” is also linked to an artistic tradition, and in that case to say that I link literature and history doesn’t put me necessarily in the same tradition as the scholars as great as Sima Qian — I mean, how could I have any possibility of that level? But it does mean that I care passionately about the writing style of history. So the only way I would accept this kind of definition is if you say that among historians it seems that I try to write to a more conscious effect, that I try to structure a book so that the words used at one level will be accurate, but at another level they will convey emotion and they will give a richer background to a topic. It’s like using art: you’re trying to approximate art, in order to make a deeper impact. I think that is self-conscious with me because I love these literary figures from the Western tradition.

Lu: *Shiji* also created a literary tradition. It has been the source of literary quotations and allusions. It has become part of the culture.

Spence: Right. So much input puts a huge amount of pressure on the modern reader, particularly the Western reader, because we don’t know enough history. People like me do not know enough history. So reading Sima Qian I always need lots of notes to explain it. But a Chinese scholar from a classical tradition could read Sima Qian entirely for fun.

Lu: Yes. Lots of proverbs and idioms originally came from *Shiji*.

Spence: Well, the stories are so rich. But the idea of verisimilitude doesn’t worry Sima Qian too much. He was trying to make a moral point. And so he was interested in using his language in order to make an effect as well.

Lu: Do you also try to make some moral judgments like this?

Spence: I think I feel I have some moral purpose, yes. But I don't have Sima Qian's energy or erudition to make it. So it is hard for me to be consistent like a great writer like Sima Qian. I mean, Sima Qian is famous for making moral statements at the end of each chapter. I don't usually break away like that. I try to let the structure of the work create the moral commentary and environment.

Lu: This is like what we talked about yesterday, in *Treason by the Book*, the way Yongzheng handles the letter that denounces his regime can be related to Mao's tactic of using "negative example as a lesson" (*fanmian jiaocai*) in the People's Republic.³

Spence: I don't make it obvious. I leave that to the reader, and if the reader doesn't know who Mao was, that's okay because not everybody knows who Mao was, particularly in the West. And so that is why I don't want to make the parallels explicit because I think it makes the book dated. I would rather write a book that would not date it to a specific time when the book only has a point when one knows who Mao was.

Lu: Most scholars of Chinese history have limited influence outside their own field. You have attained a great stature in the field while having a significant audience among the educated general public. Your influence outside the scholarly community perhaps has matched if not exceeded that of John King Fairbank. In my view it is important, where it is possible, for scholars in the "ivory tower" to reach out and contribute to popular history. To accomplish that requires a delicate art of making serious scholarly work that can be accessible to and appreciated by the public. Could you please comment on how one balances the two?

Spence: Well, what may be the difference between impact and influence in the first place? To have a good many people read what one writes is lovely. It is wonderful — but it doesn't necessary mean you are influential or

³ See Spence's *Treason by the Book* (New York: Penguin, 2002) about how Emperor Yongzheng (reigned 1723-1735) handled a dissident case in 1728 and ordered treasonous documents to be published and distributed throughout the empire as a civics lesson for his subjects.

having great impact. It could mean that you interest them, and that would satisfy me. I would like to interest people, and I am not sure that I always have a strong enough moral purpose in order to try and actually immediately change their way of thinking.

You mentioned John Fairbank. I was lucky to know him well, and he was my teacher's teacher, so he was my "grandfather" — he was Mary Wright's teacher, and she was my teacher. It never occurred to me that I would in any way be compared with Fairbank. He really was the major builder of the whole field in the United States, and I don't think I have developed any field or such. . . I have mainly been working as a teacher. I have tried to give the most of my intelligence I could to the students' own ideas, so I have never tried to have a school, like a Kangxi school or a Yongzheng school. The point about the difference is very crucial. Fairbank's goal in most of his books was to influence U.S. foreign policy, especially in *The United States and China*, which was immensely successful. That book truly was influential because Fairbank's goal was to aid United States policy implementation. He had specific goals as a policymaker, and I don't think I have such goals. Professor Fairbank was trying to shift the direction of foreign policy in the United States, whereas my goal is simply to encourage people to want to know more about China. My goal would be to have Americans or Europeans or other people — that's why I like having many translations — in many countries read what I say. They may say "Well, I quite like this book" or "Maybe I like this book," but the crucial thing is they say "and now I want to go ahead and learn more." Even if the book may sort of look like what people call a popular book, I always try and give people advanced readings, more readings, tell the reader where to go, in the hopes that they will develop their own private interest. But that is rather neutral in terms of policy implementation because my books might end up making them either sympathetic or hostile to China. I would try to create a kind of literary balance. You are not necessarily making a moral judgment all the time. You are making a stylistic judgment.

Lu: Nevertheless the result is that you are now arguably the best-known China scholar among the general public. Your books can be easily found in local bookstores.

Spence: Maybe in Barnes & Nobles or Borders — I mean that's nice enough for me. First of all, the important thing is to have your books in

print and ready. As I said, for me, the bottom line in the American school would be to have somebody read *The Death of Woman Wang* and then — although it's not necessary — it would be nice if they said “Now I want to read another book by the same man.” But I would rather they said, “Now I really want to find out about Chinese rural society.” That would be exciting enough to have them make that sort of inquiry. Sometimes people in policy positions have read and enjoyed my books. But our talk isn't usually about exact details for American policy. It's more about what did Hong Xiuquan think about this and what did Woman Wang think about that, and what was Cao Yin's (Ts'ao Yin) or Zeng Jing's attitude to the state.⁴ That's enough for me, so to speak.

Fairbank was very much interested in illuminating the roots of Chinese foreign policy and I think he was very interested in looking at the roots of Chinese communism as well. His methodology was very much geared to the abilities of Western scholars who were meticulously trained in the early 1950s — really through the civil war in China and even into the 60s. It was very hard for most Western scholars, even for Fairbank's generation, to live in China and really get the kind of training he had. I mean, he was working as a graduate student in Beijing, like Arthur Wright and Mary Wright. These people were all working in Beijing during the Republic. They got their training under the old generation of major Chinese scholars. But they also knew that as America expanded China studies, they needed more new blood, new people to come in. Fairbank decided the best way was the case study of polity, particularly of the self-strengthening movement. His main theme, I think, was [China's] adaptability to the West. By adding the study of Chinese communism, he used the same kind of theme but took it in a different direction and looked at Marxism, Maoism, and the ideology kind of imposed on the Chinese. The adaptability sprang from their response to the West, as he called it, so most people think of this as “response to the West” theory. But that was criticized in [later] years as limiting the Chinese and limiting the sense of Chinese purposefulness, as the Chinese are seen as secondary agents in that way.

Lu: And later he modified it a little bit.

⁴ These figures are the protagonists of Spence's three books: *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), *Ts'ao Yin and the K'ang-hsi Emperor: Bondservant and Master* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), and *Treason by the Book*.

Spence: Well, he was very, very effective. He also did very important work to help the discipline. Fairbank did many works on bibliography with scholars like K.C. Liu, Teng Ssu-yu, and others. He also did very important administrative study. He believed in studying the Qing administrative records and did it very carefully, such as *Huidian*, *Da Qing shilu*, and so on. Fairbank always said, “Don’t ignore the more easily accessible sources just because you want unusual sources.” I thought he was a powerful person in the field. I think he did have a clearer vision of building. He was very Harvard-centered and was deeply loyal to Harvard. He made it America’s major center, no doubt about it, by his energy and fundraising. I was always impressed by him. As I said, he was my “grandfather,” teacher’s teacher.

Lu: So your interests are not so much in policy implications.

Spence: My interest was in arousing interest. I guess if I had a school of interpretation or something, it would be more like making the reader or encouraging the reader to think: “This is a really complex and interesting society. There are things here we haven’t thought about. Things that we as Westerners haven’t thought about and we should think about if we want to try to understand China, or even work with China without understanding it.” We just need to understand certain things if we can. We need to let the Chinese tell us their story; we shouldn’t be telling them what to tell us all the time. So whenever I can, I try to let Chinese use their own words. Like in much of *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, I try to use their own words, and in much of *Woman Wang* I try to use the local history, *difangzhi*, to let those compilers tell the story.⁵

Lu: Speaking of *The Death of Woman Wang*, you also use sources like Pu Songling’s *Liaozhai zhiyi*. I was a bit surprised when I first read the book. You know, I was trained in China where historians usually do not use works like *Liaozhai* or *Honglouneng* as sources.

⁵ Although it is an imperfect translation, *difangzhi* is commonly rendered as “local gazetteers.”

Spence: Because we know they are fiction. And yet at the same time we know that Pu Songling lived in Shandong in exactly this period. We know, whether it is fiction or not, it represents certain preoccupations. We found Pu Songling in his *Liaozhai zhiyi*. He also wrote many essays, anecdotes and other things, some of which I thought to look at. We can use the source even if this is not accurate social history. We cannot say that is accurate social history, but we can say that they represent intellectual conceptions of the time. He wrote a lot about his local area and the area near his home. And he also wrote a lot about what we now call street people, peddlers, and magicians. He also wrote about the people who have no base in a society — I think we call them drifters. So his people move in and out. We also know from his writing that he actually was in Tancheng (T'an-ch'eng) just about at this time. One of his stories was signed and dated to a town that was just south of Tancheng, on the main highway running through Shandong to Pei in Jiangbei (northern Jiangsu). So, I just thought Pu Songling was a Chinese voice from his time. The book *Woman Wang* is meant to be like Chinese voices. Also, Pu Songling was interested in the violence Chinese do to themselves and to each other. It wasn't just me saying, "I am guessing what happened," it was me saying, "We know there was this murder, and we know Pu Songling cared about such violence, and so maybe we could juxtapose the two: a factual record from *Fuhui quanshu* with the fiction of Pu Songling."⁶ It was much criticized. Some people like the book, other people say that is going too far.

Lu: We don't have many sources to write about people who lived at that level of society.

Spence: I know. So that's what I thought: "Here's a very, very brilliant Chinese man in his sixties or seventies, in just the same area, thinking through the same problems. Let's use him as an ally, not just ignore him." He was a good ally. He was interested in the same thing, just like Huang Liuhong (Huang Liu-hung) was interested. Huang Liuhong was from the elite, *Woman Wang* was from nowhere, at the bottom of society, and yet Huang Liuhong cared about her. That really is the purpose of the book: to

⁶ For the English translation of *Fuhui Quanshu* (*Fu-hui ch'uan-shu*), see Huang Liu-hung, *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence: A Manual for Local Magistrates in Seventeenth-Century China*, translated and edited by Djang Chu (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984).

say that this magistrate was willing to have a proper autopsy to try to get to the truth, and then later to remember and tell what he thought was the truth, and to draw some moral lessons from it. So it makes Huang Liuhong a good social critic. So again using the same word, Pu Songling was a useful ally for me.

Lu: And of course you also used *difangzhi*.

Spence: I think *difangzhi* are very good. But then again, *difangzhi* were composed by the elite and they praise their own families.

Lu: That's why it is hard to do research on the lives of the common people.

Spence: Right.

Lu: Most historians in the China field are in favor of working on narrative history, and are less concerned about applying theory in their writings. Yet in recent years significant efforts have been made to apply social science theories to Chinese history. For example, the debates on development and underdevelopment, civil society and the public sphere, postmodernism, etc. How would you evaluate narrative history and the seemingly more cutting-edge approaches that tend to combine history with various social science theories and models?

Spence: I have some thoughts about this problem. There are many, many fine historians of China, I think, in the West. There are many good ones, who know much, much more than I do about Chinese history. I have never seen much value myself — just my personal opinion — and I wouldn't even push this on my students: but my personal opinion is that a kind of overstatement of a theoretical approach is somehow limiting. We know from experience, or just from history, that most social science theories are quite fleeting. They were quite transitory. They were taken immensely seriously by scholars of the time. But very occasionally you have someone like Marx or Weber. Most of the others might have a strong impact more recently, but usually did not last for very long. And to simply impose a social science analysis would not be appropriate, whatever it might be — whether it is deconstructional, or post-colonialism, or post-modernism, or subaltern studies, or the “public sphere.” Most of these are already passing us by.

I have read a certain amount of other people's discussions of theory. But in that case I probably would just rather read the original work. I don't want to read a whole chain of works using Habermas or something to illuminate one particular aspect of Chinese history. I might try and find out a little bit about these theories. If I were quite interested in some aspect of theory, in my own book I would use it in a way I would call anonymously. But I would concentrate on certain aspects of a society that I would not have done before. Sometimes I am interested before there is much theory. I was interested in the death of "Woman Wang" before really most people had studied much about Chinese women.

Lu: And social history.

Spence: And social history was to me just natural. But at the same time there were a lot of theories about the uses of social history and the importance of social history and the relevance of feminist theory to social history. I tried to digest some of that, but I would simply — when I thought it was valuable — let it shape the way I presented the information. And now I think we have seen a world in which much post-modernist theory or even post-post-modernist is simply about the views of the viewer and is about multiple levels of reality and is about the impossibility of factual certitude and so on. These theories are very widespread. But I think in someone like Zhang Dai these preoccupations existed in the late Ming and the early Qing as well.⁷ Many Chinese scholars were observing the observer. There are many examples like this. So again I wouldn't say I am not going to tell you [the reader] all about this theory. I would start trying to tell a story about Zhang Dai telling a story about somebody else. To me, that is much more exciting — that's the way I like to do it. And somebody can later say: "Oh, that is using post-modernist theory." I say: "Well, maybe, and maybe not — maybe it's just a human value that makes sense." The same way we might use a Marxist approach or others.

Lu: But you won't name it or state it when you are applying a particular theory or a theoretical approach to your writing, right?

Spence: Right. I think it's suitable, or helpful, or useful.

⁷ Professor Spence is currently writing a book on Zhang Dai (1597-1679), a literatus who lived in Zhejiang in the transitional period from the Ming to the Qing dynasties.

Lu: Since most of the recent theories originated in the West and derived from Western experiences, do you think there might be a tendency in the field for people sometimes to kind of force Chinese reality or Chinese history into a certain Western-derived model or theory?

Spence: I don't think they need to do that. The theory may grow from some particular Western philosopher or Western thinker. That does not mean that that philosopher or thinker has any kind of monopoly on truth, nor does it mean that that philosopher or thinker is only reflecting Western society. I think there are many universal aspects to human behavior. There are also strong cultural differences. I would say Marxism, as we think, can be applied very differently to China or to France, or to the Great Britain, or the United States. And different people can apply, say, deconstructional theory to Chinese fiction or to Western fiction, whatever it may be. That seems to me okay, but I wouldn't say that we shouldn't use such theory because it was written by somebody in the West anymore than I would say we shouldn't look at Daoist paradoxes just because they originated in China. I think we should see them both, share them both, cross-culturally.

Lu: Perhaps we just need to do so carefully.

Spence: Carefully, yes. I would use the word again, anonymously. I'm not interested in putting theory in the middle of my writing — maybe one footnote to say "I'm now interested in de Certeau." But I certainly wouldn't have a paragraph in the middle of my narrative saying "Now I'm gonna to tell you all about Habermas" or "Now I'm going to tell you all about de Certeau, or something." I don't find that interesting.

Lu: Part of reason that I asked this is that journal or book editors and referees, when they review manuscripts, tend to ask: "Well, all these materials are fine or wonderful, but so what? What's the —"

Spence: What's the theory?

Lu: Yes, What's the theory?

Spence: Well, I say the theory is that we are trying to learn about human nature. We are trying to discuss human behavior, motivation; we are trying to discuss what works, what doesn't work; what makes people happy, what makes them miserable; why states rise and fall.

Lu: You probably do not see yourself as primarily a social historian, yet your work contains significant contributions to social history and pioneering efforts to understand, as you put it, the "sinews of society." If Fairbank and his generation were "not especially sympathetic to the new practitioners of Chinese social history,"⁸ social and socioeconomic history has nevertheless been a mainstream research focus since the late 1970s. The Yale program, for instance, has trained since the 1970s some first-rate social historians, such as Sue Naquin, Sherman Cochran, Ken Pomeranz...

Spence: They are all very broad historians — I mean I don't think that I have pushed it on them. I think one of the things in teaching I would put ahead of theory was — for some draft or an earlier essay, there would be some small details, and I would say, "I think this is really fascinating." For instance, it could be Cochran talking about the very first use of advertising. I remember what he told me: he had found the cigarette cards for the B.A.T. tobacco sellers in China and, should he use them? We were not used to thinking of a cigarette card as a source. And I said, "This is fantastic."⁹ Sue was initially working with Mary Wright before Mary Wright died and Sherm also worked with Mary Wright. But when Sue began to find these testimonies from the arrested secret society, *Baguajiao*, again, instead of saying what's the theory or what's the detail — and we talked about this — I said, "This tells us something very important about the human spirit. This tells us about how people get to the stage of risking everything against the state." These tiny details make a universal, comprehensive story, and far from dropping the details, one should study the details more carefully, so as to build up a broad and in-depth picture of the working of society.¹⁰ Pomeranz is the same in *The Making of a Hinterland*. It is the detail he could find about people watching crops,

⁸ Jonathan Spence, *Chinese Roundabout* (New York: W. W. Norton 1992), 345.

⁹ See Sherman Cochran, *Big Business in China: Sino-Foreign Rivalry in the Cigarette Industry, 1890-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

¹⁰ See Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China: The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

sitting on the ditches for emergency, so you've got a deeply impoverished peasant society, and they are still willing to find the money to pay somebody to watch their crops, which were almost dying anyway.¹¹ And to me it is not just a detail and it is not just social history — though it is both of those as well — it is an amazing insight into the endurance of the rural population. It is like the French use of *mentalité*. I think it is a very powerful idea and that to me was intuitive about being a historian. I remember at Yale once I met Carlo Ginzburg, who did the *Cheese and the Worms*, but I had not realized that we both had somewhat similar interests until I read his book.¹² We had a great talk about what is the detail that captures the world. So again, it is rather like you were saying about theory, it is probably about self-consciousness. I don't say, "Okay, this week I'm going to write social history."

Lu: You don't really bother that much to define social history, social-economic history, intellectual history, or —

Spence: They are all parts of history. Some people's lives in the past are representative of different elements strongly. Of course, I wouldn't reject them, and I wouldn't embrace them if they only illuminate one aspect of social history. Otherwise, we would end up like the social realist view from Vietnam that you must only have wicked landlords or you must only have virtuous peasantry. I think if they are good landlords, you should talk about them; if they are wicked peasants, you should talk about them. If they are kind factory owners, okay; if they are savage workers, okay.

Lu: So, basically, the name is something to be put on later: when you finish your work, then people can judge it and put it in different categories.

¹¹ See Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Making of a Hinterland: State, Society, and Economy in Inland North China, 1853-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹² See Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992 [1980]). The book has been regarded as one of the most significant contributions to a burgeoning field of study, the popular culture of early-modern Europe.

Spence: That's right. That's fine with me. Of course they are going to do that, if they want to. It is like the category of biography. I don't think I really write biography, but some people think I do.

Lu: Like your book, *Emperor of China*?

Spence: Yes, in a way. I call that self-portrait, so that's more like autobiography.

Lu: Here is a question I have been thinking about for quite a long time, which is about the daily life of the common people. It seems to me that the study of the daily lives of the common people in China is still not up to the level it should be. *The Search for Modern China* has admirable descriptions of food, housing, and so on, of the ordinary people. But most history books on modern China give too much weight to the elite and neglect the lives of the common people. As far as research materials are concerned, is this because the research materials on daily life are too extensive or too scarce?

Spence: There's a huge amount of material, though it often comes through legal sources or tax data or the kind of material that is probably better suited to quantitative history of various kinds. Many of the records were with this level of people who are very near the edges of society or certainly nowhere near the elite. The trouble is that it is very, very hard to get detailed information that is sharply different from different people. It is not the people's fault, it is the fault of the society that looks after them, or historians' fault. Quantitatively, that is a very good way to work. You can find out the average income, you can find out average life expectancy, you can find out average calorie intake, and you can get a kind of profile of the population. But it is fairly rare — moderately rare at least — to find a case like the one I used in *Woman Wang*, where you just have about ten lines — ten or fifteen lines — that is all we have in the *Fuhui quanshu*. But from there, you can enter society in a broader sense. That is what I did in that case.

My feeling was that it is not that these sources on daily life are either too extensive or too scarce. There are plenty of them, but there is not too much of anything. They are just hard to use because those sources are not differentiated. They don't differentiate the personality in a way that a poem might do. A poem doesn't necessarily do that, but I know there was

a policy recommendation by a bureaucrat. Members of what we call the elite, members of what we call intellectual classes are more likely to have a wider range of expressions.

Lu: And they write about themselves.

Spence: They'll write about themselves. They may be lying. . . .

Lu: But ordinary peasants or workers, they don't write.

Spence: They often don't. They don't have a chance because they don't know how to write. But we might get to record their conversations. Somebody might record their conversations. The police might record their conversations. So legal sources are very important, but they are also very biased, because legal sources only cover people who are having trouble with the law and most of us try not to have trouble with the law, and so we are outside the record. But I think there is lots to say about the common people. It is a very difficult kind of history to write.

Lu: But I think that is a very important field to explore.

Spence: It is a fascinating field.

Lu: For Chinese politics we may look at the big picture of power struggles in Beijing. But ordinary people in China would say that they judge the political situation through their food baskets, *cai lanzi limian kan xingshi*.

Spence: Well, that makes a lot of sense to me. You can certainly do that kind of history. I applaud it, but it is very hard. It is particularly hard to get a rich narrative if you want to do that for the general reader, because you tend to have more minute pieces of evidence that are better calculated to build up a broader picture rather than to get into individuality. But occasionally you are really lucky. In a case of complexity suddenly something is caught in a testimony, or a neighbor's or a friend's conversation. In *Treason by the Book*, that is in the Yongzheng Emperor's reign, even Yongzheng's interrogators are taking down a lot of ordinary conversations, because people are spreading the treason through casual conversations. The Chinese state — the Manchu state — realized that. Of course some of these are coerced testimony and some are voluntary or

semi-voluntary. But the details you can get from that are often details of everyday life: people selling medicine, peddlers selling small goods, people are taking a boat trip, people are trying to find a sedan chair, people not having shoes. These are all the things that I found in the Yongzheng sources.

Lu: Yongzheng was a hardworking emperor.

Spence: He was hardworking. He probably didn't care too much about his details, but I do, and they enable a historian to recapture the time. These are the *zhupi yuzhi*.¹³ They were read by Yongzheng and those are now published in facsimile both in Taiwan and in China. So, mostly I used those very long memorials on which Yongzheng wrote his *zhupi*. Good libraries have those collections, and they are very exciting.

Lu: I see much of what has happened in China in the recent quarter of a century as some kind of revival of a tradition that was more or less established in the early twentieth century prior to the victory of the Communist revolution, such as May 4th liberalism and the commercial culture represented by Shanghai in the 1930s. Could you please comment on that?

Spence: New elements were coming into play in China in the 1930s, then in some cases got suppressed, and then they merged together in the 1990s. So, that is why in the West there is now more interest in Guomindang and Republican era history than there used to be, and perhaps fewer people studying Mao or Mao's theology than they used to do. But that doesn't necessarily mean that it was exactly a tradition in the 1930s. It means that in the 1990s some rather similar economic ambitions and economic possibilities surfaced in China, but they also existed in the 1930s. These were often linked to mass media and the sorts of things you and others have studied: radio, popular music, and the switch to story-telling, teahouse, theater shifting, and clothes shifting. I don't think it is for the 1990s a reviving of this as a tradition. I think people were given the same opportunity to explore new media and technology. So in the 1990s as well as the year 2004, people are going to be interested in Western-style shoes

¹³ *Zhupi yuzhi*, imperial remarks and edicts written in red with a brush, often in the margins or at the end of an official document.

and new makeup patterns, and they are going to be interested in the Internet, they are going to be interested in cellular phones. Those weren't introduced as a tradition, they were modes of entertainment and communication that got real resonance in China and now the Chinese people have the same possibilities of acquiring. So it is a return of acquisitiveness. The idea of acquisitiveness was encouraged in the Republican period by vigorous advertising. And now again very vigorous advertising is all over China. So the idea of brand name and brand name products is now lively again in China, perhaps a kind of cosmopolitan moment. I wouldn't say that there was a new tradition that was lost and then re-created. I think it is a new opportunity that existed and vanished, and then it came back again.

May Fourth is different and more complicated. I don't think it was tradition. I think the May Fourth was a mode of inquiry. I call it a classic mode of inquiry, often headed by members of an elite itself with good classical education. Now there are opportunities for inquiry. They are still not universal at all in China, but they are widening rapidly, and so we get a sort of May Fourth-looking response. I don't think it is the same as May Fourth, I think it is a willingness to challenge inherited belief, and the government does not always want that. It depends on how you do it. The liveliness of Chinese criticism is enormous.

Lu: There are about one hundred Chinese historians, who came to the U.S. after Mao, now teaching at American universities or colleges. They are obviously not as well trained in classic Chinese as older generation scholars such your teacher, Fang.¹⁴ Could you please comment on their work in comparison with the older generations of Chinese historians in the U.S.?

Spence: They have different kinds of training. They probably don't read quite so deeply in the earlier texts and maybe they don't read so many of the conventional classics. I know so many really good Chinese scholars living in this country now or in China. As far as I can tell the history profession is flourishing. And some of the interest in Western theory is because those people are much more relaxed about using either socialist or Marxist theory, they feel now more open to explore other avenues. And I

¹⁴ Fang Chao-ying (1908-1985) was Professor Spence's Chinese language teacher in Australia in the early 1960s. In 1985 Spence wrote an essay in memory of him; see *Chinese Roundabout*, 350-54.

think that some of the Chinese historians are also content, maybe like me, not to have theory at all, not really to have a theory, to be content with the exploration.

I think Chinese historians in the U.S. have had a huge effect, certainly on me. From the very beginning, because Mary Wright was my teacher, she believed passionately in the work of great Chinese historians. Of course she knew best the ones living in the United States in the days after World War II. Some of them, as you know, later went back to China. But when I was her student, the first people she introduced me to — because I hadn't studied any Chinese, I was just reading in English — she immediately introduced me to the work of Ch'u T'ung-tsu and Ho Ping-ti. The first thing that I did was read Ch'u T'ung-tsu on local government and Ho Ping-ti on social mobility. Then she introduced me to Chang Chung-li and his work on Chinese gentry and then to Hsiao Kung-chuan.¹⁵ While I was studying, I was reading also Fairbank and Mary Wright's own books, and Albert Feuerwerker from Michigan, and also Paul Cohen, Harold Kahn, Philip Kuhn, Frederic Wakeman, and Joseph Levenson.

Lu: In recent years social history has been a new trend in China. Chinese historians claim this trend has been brought in or at least influenced by historiography in the West, particularly in the U.S. Social history in China is also combined with cultural studies, known as *shehui wenhua shi* (sociocultural history). Could you comment on that?

Spence: We talked about *shehui wenhua* before. I am interested in *shehui* and *wenhua*. The question is how can you use the actual structure of language to illuminate the *shehui*? There was a *shehui* you can study as a social scientist, like many people did in China, Fei Xiaotong, Chen

¹⁵ See T'ung-tsu Ch'u, *Local Government in China Under the Ch'ing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), Ping-ti Ho, *Ladder of Success in Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962 [1980]), Chung-li Chang, *The Chinese Gentry: Studies on their Role in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1955), and Kung-Ch'uan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960). In a speech delivered in 1980, Philip Huang presented these four scholars and their work as the representatives of the Chinese historians of the post World War II generation that was "implanted" in the United States. See *Zhongguo shi yanjiu dongtai* [The State of the Studies of Chinese History] (no. 9, 1980), 3-5.

Hansheng, and others, particularly in the 1920s and 30s. But I would like to get maybe a more intellectualistic aspect, more like the mentality of the *shehui*, and then present that in a literary form, which is absorbing to the reader. But again I think of it not as an ideology, I think of it as a methodology. I try to look at individuals in society, but also I try to look at the individual before I look at the society and use the individual to illuminate the society.

Right through Mao's period and maybe later, Chinese historians were encouraged to study the underside of society. In other words, there were rules for studying China, and one of the things a scholar could do and keep his job and also be creative in research was to study either the peasants or the workers, to some extent maybe also the small merchants and the poor, and you were in fairly good position, academically. You could also study the Taiping and you could also study the Nian, or you could study the resistance to the British in the Opium War. These topics were very interesting and they were also acceptable to study. At least in the area of Taiping, it is up to 1982 that scholars on the mainland started to study the Taiping Christianity, the social structure, victimization, and the need to rebel against the state. It was the loosening up of China that did that, that is, after Deng Xiaoping got established himself in the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1978. The idea of social history has been broadened to include more intellectual history and has become much more free a discipline.

Lu: In general, the younger generation of historians in China regard the influence from the West — scholarship and historiography — as a very important part of their work, especially after the loosening of ideological controls. The theories they try to apply seem mostly imported from the West.

Spence: Well, that may be because this is a transitional period in Chinese intellectual life. I mean, you had a very powerful ideology which was pretty much demanded of most people for nearly forty years and so; to break away from that, you would have got to need a transitional period when you're still using theories of other countries. I notice many Chinese thinkers try to develop a kind of new Chinese theoretical basis. What is the underpinning of Chinese culture like? That is a huge quest. Maybe this can be traced back to the *ti-yong* principle: what can be creatively used for things from the West while still developing a theory that's somehow

unmistakably rooted in Chinese experience and Chinese knowledge? This is supposing that the word “Chinese” still has real meaning, and there is a lot of debate about that. I mean the term is broadening so much. We have a world in which suddenly so many Chinese no longer speak Chinese, as one example, or so many Chinese no longer live in China, as another example. And this is true of many, many other cultures as well. It means one of the dangers may be a little bit of Chinese culture became merely archaic. It is just only old-fashioned and rooted in the past. So how do you somehow get this really powerful new culture that’s emerging in China and make sense of it in terms of the past? Maybe you can’t, maybe it won’t work, maybe the theory will have too many holes in it, but I find it a very exciting adventure the Chinese are doing. There are graduate students and young scholars who come to Yale from China, and I am just so impressed by many of them. Others may be not so good, but there were the ones who were good and there were the ones who were extraordinary. I would also say that is true of young scholars from Taiwan, so I absolutely don’t want to leave Taiwan or Hong Kong out of this; students from both places were trained very well also in classical Chinese.

Lu: Here is the last question, the one that is not so historical. From what I have read, your views about China’s future might be described as “cautiously optimistic.” Am I right? As a leading historian of China in the West, could you say a few words about China in the twenty-first century, or rather China in the next few decades to come?

Spence: Well, we know it is a guessing game. It depends on how much faith you have in Chinese ingenuity and skill in negotiating new situations, and how much you believe Chinese can maintain a sense of harmony among themselves, and how the Communist leadership can adapt to bring in many more people into the government structure, into the ruling group. It seems to me there is reasonable evidence that this is beginning to happen. I don’t like to use the word “adaptability” because I think that suggests somehow a kind of giving up of something that you have. It is maybe somewhat like adjusting or broadening your vision to include alternative visions. And Chinese thinkers have tried to do that across time. So, it’s really encouraging people to create a new kind of Chinese destiny, I think. I don’t know why, I guess I was born with a great faith in China. Maybe my mother was reading a book on China (laugh). Like Chang Kai-shek, his mother was chanting sutras when he was born, so he always had Buddhist

influence (laugh). I have confidence. I also see that particularly twentieth-century in China was a terrible time in many ways, a terrible time, particularly for the first three-quarters. And the nineteenth century was also extremely hard. But it produced amazing figures who were trying to, from a traditional Chinese base, think through the most amazing range of options. It's incredible: anyone from Zeng Guofan to Wang Tao to Liang Qichao, and also Qiu Jin or Zou Rong; I mean, it is just mind-boggling. These people were really trying to think through the problems and how to adjust. I find that very impressive, so I guess you could say maybe I am not just cautiously optimistic, maybe I am just optimistic. This of course does not mean they don't have problems. There are colossal problems, huge problems, so it needs a sort of intelligence and goodwill.

Lu: This probably can be related to the larger question of China's belief system. . .

Spence: Yes, China's own belief systems are very, very important and that's why I happen to love this work on bamboo slips (*zhujian*) of the Chu kingdom that were found in the Wuhan region. The explorations of this early Chinese culture give us a new view on the Confucian belief and also on Legalist belief and also on Daoism. And so now they found bamboo slips even dealing with political theory. We can start to think through the very, very early underpinning of written Chinese culture and then maybe see if there were good lessons from that. I just find that an amazingly exciting area of history which links history and theology and archeology and philosophy. That is an incredible combination. If I were a young Chinese scholar, I think I would probably go into that field, because it enjoys so many exciting things together. And then you can use that to finally make sense of the present.

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The Death of Woman Wang (1978); *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895-1980* (1981); *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (1984); *The Question of Hu* (1988), *The Search for Modern China* (1990, 1999); *Chinese Roundabout: Essays in History and Culture* (1992); *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (1996); *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (1998); *Mao Zedong* (1999); and *Treason by the Book* (2001).

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