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Jonathan Spence’s Third Reith Lecture: Dreams, Paradoxes, and The Uses of History

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By Charles W. Hayford
In the third lecture of the Chinese Vistas series, “American Dreams,” Jonathan Spence talked about American dreams of China and, more tantalizing, Chinese dreams of America. He sees a series of “paradoxes” from the American Revolution to the present which set Chinese and American dreams at odds.

In the question period, another paradox emerged, one between different uses of history. The lecture was broadcast from the Asia Society on Park Avenue in New York, where the initial questions came from Richard Holbrooke, President of the Asia Society and heavyweight diplomat, and Henry Kissinger, an even heavier weight (Spence had written about him, so it must have seemed strange). The questions asked if China had been more xenophobic than other countries, if industrialization would change Chinese mentalities, if China would be expansionist, and so on.

After responding to several questions, Spence started his answer to another by saying “I don’t know.” This was refreshing but perhaps it was also a tactful rebuke to the type of questions he was getting. Spence is not a present minded policy advisor, he is a public intellectual who writes about history to address questions of general meaning. Another Qing historian was recently asked what he told policy makers who sought his advice. He replied “as little as possible.” One of the few authentic lessons of history is that history does not offer “lessons,” much less predictions or tips on the horses, only stories of complications and confusion.

Of course, we might conclude, along with my Alan Baumler, my colleague at Frog in a Well, that Chinese History Sucks, but we could also just admit that historians are a feisty bunch and that they work in different ways.

Some historians use explicit theory to fit their material into patterns and compare it to other times and places. Theory works for them but tends to limit their audience to fellow academics. Other historians, including Spence, want to show us what is often called “the strangeness of the past.” Like poets, they give us the particular and the peculiar. Spence takes contemporary poetry seriously but his favored genre is biography, which by nature does not demand theoretical generalization and PhDs tend to avoid it.

Yet Spence’s work shows that writing history without explicit theory does not have to be mere antiquarianism nor do biographies of unrepresentative people have to be, in the phrase of a contemptuous scientist, “stamp collecting.”

Spence’s To Change China: Western Advisers in China, 1620-1960 (Little Brown, 1969) almost off-handedly set up a framework which we all still use. The biographical sketches, a seeming patchwork, start with the Jesuits, then tip toe through several Protestant missionaries, Michael Borodin, and Joseph Stilwell.

These “China helpers” certainly showed the “strangeness of the past” and Spence did not connect them to the Vietnam War, but he put his judgments clearly in the “Conclusions”: After a long cycle, China regained the right of “defining her own values and dreaming her own dreams without alien interference,” so the virulent anti-imperialist pronouncements of the 1960s were a “paradoxical combination of hostility and relief.” Westerners had thought that packaging technology and Western values together would change China. They were wrong.

The phrase “to change China” entered our vocabulary, but to my mind Spence’s most fruitful book on East-West perceptions is The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds (1998), originally a series of lectures. It’s a tour de force of insights yet there is scarcely a theoretical generalization in it, simply groupings of Western “sightings” of China. Like a good host at a party, without seeming to
strain, Spence introduces us to any number of voluble guests from history and by his craft lets them tell their stories. Among his subjects was Henry Kissinger, whose memoirs portrayed Mao in the “grand exotic tradition of the Chinese emperor,” ascribing “enormous calculation and cunning.”

Which brings us back to the Reith Lectures and the series of paradoxes. Spence at one point confesses that he “jotted down” ideas for the paradoxes, and, to be honest, some of them seem forced. The initial paradox involves Americans on board the ship Empress of China who arrived in Canton in 1784. The British there apologized for the recent wars and offered their support: together, we’re unbeatable. On the other side, the Chinese government forbade the teaching of the Chinese language on pain of death (Chinese language teachers should have a prize in memory of Liu Yabian, who was executed in 1759 for that crime).

Spence inserts a fascinating little discussion of a problem in political science which frustrated the Chinese. In figuring out the nature of the American system they debated how to translate the word “president” – should it be “head man”? At one point baffled translators simply call him “huangdi,” or “emperor.”

The next paradox was that Protestant translations of the Bible sparked the Taiping Rebellion which the Christian powers then supported the imperial government in suppressing. Another was that sympathy for the Chinese Republic did not mean that Wilson’s call for self-determination was extended to Asia. Chinese who dreamt that their own world would be made safe for democracy felt betrayed by Versailles, a partial explanation for the bitterness and complexity of the 1920s radical revolution.

American missionaries and the YMCA brought a package of technical aid, education, science, and Christianity, but the Nationalist Party unbundled it and removed the democratic values. An even more bitter paradox was between Open Door paternalism and American refusal to confront Japanese aggression until the attack on Pearl Harbor.

These are some of the well turned vignettes, but they leave me wanting something richer. I’d like to have heard Spence take the whole four lectures to talk about any one of the topics. Then we’d have more gems like that fact that in the nineteenth century there were ninety different Chinese terms for “America.”

If Chinese had trouble fitting concepts such as “president” into Chinese, English lacked important words to fit what Westerners saw in China. In the second lecture Spence remarked on the usefulness of Pidgin, which, like chop suey, has been disrespected for fear that it’s not “authentic,” whatever that means, there was also a China Coast vocabulary. For instance, government office in England and North America was allotted by patronage or aristocratic inheritance, but China had no aristocracy, so office was given on merit as determined by examination. What word would translate guan? The British adopted “mandarin” from Malay, originally from the Sanskrit for “official.” Did there need to be a new word for “common laborer”? “Coolie” was taken from Hindi to fill the gap (it later made its way into Chinese).

I’d be willing to skip lunch to hear Spence talk about this and how he chose the word “dreams” for the title of this talk. Of course, dreams come up often in his writings, such as Hong Xiuquan’s dreams of his Heavenly Father in God’s Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan (Norton 1996), and in the common Chinese view dreams reveal alternative realities. I can see why Spence passed over “images,” which is tired and misleading, even though many works used it creatively. The metaphor behind the word implies that China is just passively out there and impinges on our eyeballs and is interpreted by our brains. The process only goes one way. An image just sort of happens spontaneously, not like an analysis or interpretation or observation or representation or construction, which require thought.

In the end, the policy questions from Holbrooke and Kissinger miss Spence’s point. History is definitely (in another historians’ cliché) the search for a “usable past,” but not for answers to a quiz. No prognostications. When the United States and China wake up from their “American dreams,” the policy makers take charge, not historians. We can only hope that their eyes have been trained by history as they deal with the “strangeness of the present.”
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