A Writer Takes the Stage: Jonathan Spence’s Lectures, Part 1
Jonathan Spence’s elegant writing and his creative efforts to test the limits of standard genres of historical presentation have secured him a special status within both the interdisciplinary field of Chinese studies and the American historical profession. His reputation—as many or perhaps even all readers of this blog know—is based primarily on a string of successful books. These range widely in format, running the gamut from slim volumes that try to bring to life obscure or famous figures from the Chinese past to a large textbook. And while most of his publications focus on events and individuals of the opening centuries of rule by the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), he also shows great temporal range, as he has written compellingly about both earlier and later periods as well. But even though it is his writing that has earned him most of his many honors, including a MacArthur Fellowship and election to a term as President of the American Historical Association, the special series of “China Beat” posts on Spence that I am using this piece to introduce will not focus on what he has written but what he has said. We will focus on the writer as orator, in other words, looking at lectures he has given at Yale University, where he has taught since the 1960s, and ones that are currently being aired on British radio, as Spence serves as the latest in a sixty-year line of BBC “Reith Lecturers,” the first of whom was Bertrand Russell. Spence’s ability to hold an audience’s attention and enlighten his listeners has been well known for some time, albeit within a smaller circle than were aware of his gifts as a writer. His modern Chinese history undergraduate survey at Yale, which he offered for the last time this spring, has for decades been one of the most popular classes offered at that New Haven campus. It has routinely boasted enrollment levels in the hundreds, and at one point, at least according to what I heard on a recent visit to Yale, had close to a thousand students sign up for it in a single semester. Having been lucky enough to sit in on one session of the class back in the early 1980s, when I was visiting graduate schools trying to decide where to go, I can easily understand why the course drew the crowds it did. I don’t remember the topic he lectured on that day, as it was over a quarter-century ago, but I do recall finding the presentation inspiring. It was thus no surprise when, passing through New Haven a few weeks back, one thing that several people wanted to tell me about was what a special moment it had been when, just before I arrived in town, Spence had given his last lecture ever for that famous course.

Readers of this blog who want to know additional things about Spence’s Yale survey course and its recent ending will get a chance to learn much more from a memoir that Susan Jakes is writing for China Beat as part of this series. And she will bring a distinctive perspective to the topic, as someone who took the course as a Yale undergrad and then, after doing various things (including writing for Time in China), came back as a graduate student and served as a teaching assistant for a later version of the same class. Most of the entries to come, though, will concentrate on Spence’s lectures to an audience larger than even the biggest classrooms at Yale can hold. That is, they will discuss his “Reith Lectures,” two of which have already been broadcast and another pair of which will air soon.

I should note that Spence has ties to many of us at this blog. There are people other than Jakes who have taken courses with him, served as his T.A., or done both of these things. Kate Merkel-Hess studied with him as an undergrad, for example, and Ken Pomeranz did so as a doctoral student. Other involved in China Beat, myself included, have benefited in other ways from his advice and support, whether in the form of blurbs on the back covers or positive reviews of our books he has published, or via suggestions he has made about our work. This series, though, will strive to be more than an uncritical tribute, for we will invite a different commentator to weigh in on each of his lectures and expect those who write these guest posts to offered varied mixes of appreciation and critique.

Going back to the written word, for a moment, I want to end with a personal and topical postscript about one of Spence’s most enduringly popular books, The Death of Woman Wang. It is a very special
work to me, since had I not been assigned it as an undergraduate, in one of my first college history classes, I might not be teaching Chinese history today. It made a deep impression on me then, due to the care with which it sought to evoke the rhythms of daily life in a far-off place and time, and the innovative use Spence makes in it of fictional materials and devices. I was also struck by the emphasis it placed on a woman’s experiences at a time when most of the historical works I was reading still focused nearly exclusively on men. It is a book I’ve re-read often. Usually I do this because of a class: I’ve assigned it to undergraduates in general surveys, used it in upper division seminars on women in Chinese history, and taught it in a graduate class I gave her at UC Irvine on “Historical Writing,” as well as in a graduate class I co-taught with Deidre Lynch at Indiana University on “History and Fiction.” But once I revisited it because of something I was writing or rather co-writing with China Beat’s Susan Brownell: the “Introduction” to *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities*, a book that she and I co-edited.

I’ve just realized that I now need to re-read it yet again, and this time for an all too topical reason. This is because the book opens with an account of the physical, psychological and social toll that an earthquake took centuries ago on a region whose inhabitants included the eponymous Woman Wang. The first chapter in this book—which first appeared in the United States almost exactly 30 years to the day before the ground began to shake so violently in Sichuan earlier this year (its official publication date was May 15, 1978)—begins with the following evocatively worded account of a long ago catastrophe that has a straight-from-the-headlines feel when re-read in 2008: “The earthquake struck T’an-ch’eng on July 25, 1688. There was no warning, save for the frightening roar that seemed to come from somewhere in the northwest. The buildings in the city began to shake and the trees took up a rhythmical swaying, tossing ever more wildly back and forth until their tips almost touched the ground.”