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Reith Lectures: English Lessons

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By Graham Earnshaw

Jonathan Spence is of course one of the great authorities on Chinese history, but the value of history is in its relevance to the present, so at a time of such huge volatility in the affairs of China, there is great curiosity as to how he views current trends. We have the means to find out in his current series of Reith Lectures being given one per week in England and broadcast through the BBC’s websites, currently non-blocked in China.

**The first lecture** was about the role of Confucius and Confucian thought in Chinese history, and in the q&a section, Spence was coaxed to explore the significance for modern-day China (he was optimistic that continued questioning of authority and pressure for pluralism could be expected regardless of the resurgence of confucianism). **The second lecture** turned outwards, and featured a gallop through the history of West-China contacts from 1620 to the twentieth century — trade, violence, misunderstandings, cultural awareness, diplomacy, war, opium, unfair treaties, migration, racial tensions in Chinatowns, Chinese boycotts of foreign goods and the almost hidden and forgotten role of Chinese migrants in fighting the world wars, and building cities like Liverpool, where the lecture took place.

All good stuff, and a useful summary. But it was again in the q&a section that Spence addressed how the historical relationships impact on today. In response to a question about the legacy of the Opium War of 1839-42, he made a point that I really wish the Propaganda Department would seriously consider:

“You might think it would be a forgotten memory by now, but the Opium War has been used in countless publications to define the beginning of modern Chinese history, and I find it very self-defeating to choose to study your own modern history based upon a period of humiliation and failure (instead of providing) more of a sense of the reality about what the Chinese were achieving during the nineteenth century.”

“The issue is now no longer a real one in any important sense,” he added in response to a follow-up question. “To harp on it now is not something the Chinese have to do. It is something they can do if they wish to keep an old pain alive.”

Bravo. My own response, when the opium wars come up in conversation, is to smile and bow my head in mock shame and express fullsome apologies on behalf of my ancestors. Keeping the topic alive (China’s own textbook problem) simply encourages the Chinese sense of being bullied, which does not help them as they struggle to find a new way of relating to the outside world in the twenty-first century.

Another question, from a Chinese attendee, basically asked Spence whether he agreed that the Western media had handled recent events — Tibet and the torch — unfairly. His response was polite and guarded: ”There was not much sympathy expressed for the Chinese government in this predicament and (the media) was sharp in its bias in many cases, so in that sense you have a point.”

But he expanded on this in response to a follow-up, also from a Chinese student taking in essence the same line: they are bullying us.

“What can be seen here is that Western feelings about China are very emotional and very volatile and they change with great speed.”

By which he meant the reaction to the earthquake.

“The build-up of sympathy did not need to be created on any political grounds at all,” he said. “It was natural. And this agonizing situation I think forced people to realize that there is more going on in this country than just some kind of political repression.”
And that, I think, is the third take-away from the lecture series so far: that while a robust approach to China’s human rights situation is reasonable (lecture 1), the West’s view of China is often much too simplistic (lecture 2).

Lecture 3 is coming up next week.