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The Body Beautiful: Jonathan Spence's Final Reith Lecture

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By Xu Guoqi

Jonathan Spence gave his fourth and last Reith lecture on "[The Body Beautiful](#)." This is a perfect fit for China's Olympic year and a wonderful conclusion talk after his first lecture on mind ("Confucian Ways"), then on Chinese interactions with the former superpower (the second lecture "English Lessons"), and the current one (the third lecture "American Dreams"). From mind to body, from China as an ancient civilization through its turbulent relations with Western powers to a nation which is determined to compete with the world in hard power either economically or physically, the topic was extremely well thought. The lecture was given at no better venue: Lord's Cricket Ground, London, which will play an important role in the 2012 London Olympic Games, according to the host of the lecture. Everything seems great.

The 2008 BBC's Reith lecturer entertained us with a brilliant explanation on issues such as ancient Chinese discussions of sports and athleticism, their practices of women's Polo and men's kickball roughly one thousand years ago, modern meets in the 20th century, and, most importantly, this year's Olympics and its implications. His lecture also dealt with the transition from sports for the sake of personal character to sports in the name of nationalism. This is a great treat from a master.

Listening to Spence's many lectures always reminded me of Lao Zi's political idea: "治大国若烹小鲜," or it is the same to rule a big nation as to cook a small fish. Any topics for Spence, including this one, seem so easy for him to address, just like cooking a shrimp.

But it is exactly Spence's brilliance that presented some problems for this lecture. As Daoist theory points out, misfortune can become a base of fortune, and fortune can lead to failure. In the short presentation, Spence dazzled us with all the great stuff, and like a talented chef, served us a delicious dish. But for some of us who are greedy, that dish tasted so good that we wanted more—a feast. For instance, Spence explained in a relatively detailed way China's past participations in Olympic Games and touched upon the issue between Taipei and Beijing of who should represent China in the Olympic family. But he did not elaborate on Beijing's withdrawal from the Olympic movement nor the PRC's absence for over two decades from the most of the world's sports activities.

One key issue in influencing Chinese attitudes toward body and sports was the label of China as "Sick Man of Asia." But Spence did not pay attention to it in his lecture. Even after Rana Mitter, an Oxford China historian, asked him during the question and answer period about the impact of Social Darwinism on China's sports, Spence responded by commenting on PRC's obsession with the perfect athletic body, still ignoring the idea of the "Sick Man of Asia."

Moreover, while Spence correctly emphasized two important elements which were important in influencing China's body and sports, namely women's foot-binding and men's pigtailed (or queue), he totally ignored the influence of civil service examinations, although he did mention military examinations. It seems to me that the civil service examination had a longer and deeper negative influence on Chinese body and Chinese attitudes toward sports than men's pigtailed, whose history was much shorter. The Reith lecturer began his talk with a discussion of Chinese ancient texts and philosophers' thinking on body and sports, but did not examine Mencius' famous argument that the man who works with his mind rules and man who labors with physical strength is ruled. This idea, I am afraid, greatly and negatively affected Chinese men's attitude toward physical exercises for perhaps over one thousand years.

It is also interesting to notice that Spence mentioned that Chinese smoke cigarette, but did not make reference to opium's influence on Chinese body and mind and the potential to affect their capacity to do sports. Since Spence gave a vivid description of polo, golf, kickball in ancient times, it might also have made sense for him to add in his lecture that the Chinese, especially the men, have been frustrated by their national men's soccer teams' frequent failure to enter the World Cup and thus have had serious doubt about the nation and even their manhood.

To be fair, some of the problems, of course, are not his fault at all and even beyond his control. Spence is a master. But as an interesting ancient Chinese story suggests, masters need *zhiyin* (知音), or an audience who really understands his ideas. In that sense, the BBC and its Reith Lecture organizers might have to take some blame here since it seems to me that most members of the audiences (judged from the questions raised after the lecture) are either not China experts or seemed to be interested only in current affairs.

Among the eight individuals who took part in the Q and A, I got the impression that only Rana Mitter cared about theoretical and deep-seated historical issues. All other questions dealt either with the 2008 Olympic Games and how the Games would affect China politically and diplomatically, or China's current attitude toward disabled people or other human rights issues. In addressing these questions, Spence basically argued that he did not expect to see the Games solve all crucial problems, and he did not agree that Chinese people were really discriminating against disabled people, although he had noticed that in Chinese buildings and transportations there were not enough facilities for these folks. It seems that many questions about current issues might go beyond the master's expertise, while the master must often wonder where his *zhiyin* are.

Another problem for this Reith lecture is that Spence has less than 30 minutes lecture time to discuss the wide-ranging and complicated topics of the body beautiful. It would be amazing if Spence could accomplish this seemingly impossible mission with such limited time. A Tang poet once wrote, "春风得意马蹄疾·一日看尽长安花。" Or roughly put, when one feels so good it seems that everything can be done in a short time, including appreciating the beauty of all flowers in Tang's capital in a single day. The master in this lecture did show us many beautiful flowers, but it is up to us to slowly appreciate and perhaps find out what he has left unexamined.

Confucius once famously declared that when he reached 70 years old, he would have whatever his heart desired, but would not depart from his established practice. Master Spence seems to have got closer to Confucius' standard. No matter what topics he chooses or is invited to lecture on, the audience will get a typical treatment of Spence's brilliance. Many of us in the China field have benefited enormously from Spence's writings, lectures, influences, and manuscript evaluation reports. Thus it is fitting to conclude this piece by quoting Sima Qian, a master historian two thousand years ago, to express my admiration of Spence: "高山仰止,景行行之,虽不能至,心向往之。" Although most of us cannot even dream to reach Spence's level, we all try hard to follow the master's footprint and examples.

Xu Guoqi's recent book, [Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008](#), published recently from Harvard University Press, has a detailed examination of Chinese attitude toward sports and body.