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6-10-2008

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Bell, Daniel A., "Imperial Ways" (2008). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 218.
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Imperial Ways

June 10, 2008 in [Watching the China Watchers](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [17 comments](#)

This post is part of China Beat's [on-going coverage and commentary](#) on historian Jonathan Spence's lectures for this year's BBC Reith Lecture. In this installment, Daniel A. Bell, professor at Tsinghua University, responds to Spence's first lecture, titled "[Confucian Ways](#)."

By Daniel A. Bell

I am a big fan of Jonathan Spence's works. His books bring to life some of the great and not-so-famous characters in Chinese history and they read like novels. When I was told that he had delivered a lecture on "Confucian Ways" for the BBC, I was very curious, and clicked on the link with great anticipation. Unfortunately, I couldn't figure out how to download the programme here in Beijing, but I did print out the transcript. That's what I've just read.

The lecture was delivered at the British library, and the host Sue Lawley opens by noting that the library houses the oldest book in the world, printed in 868 AD in China. Professor Spence adds that he is pleased to start his lecture "in the British library with its immense holdings of Asian books and manuscripts." How did the British library secure those books, I wonder? Surely the weren't willingly handed over to British imperial forces. I live right next to the Yuanmingyuan here in Northwest Beijing, the Old Summer Palace that was burnt down in 1860 by rampaging British and French forces. The ruins are visited by Chinese tourists, who view them as a symbol of China's "century of humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers. Perhaps the books were taken from the Yuanmingyuan? Or maybe the Chinese handed them over in exchange for the opium that they were forced to buy from British merchants?

I somehow thought that such questions might be answered by one of the Western world's most eminent historians of China. Why else bring up the fact that so many of China's treasures are held in Britain? Seems to be rubbing salt in the wound. Imagine if, two centuries from now, China manages to buy (or steal) British national treasures, and then brags about it when a Chinese professor of British history gives a talk on John Locke at the national library in Beijing. How would the British feel?

The lecture itself was short and unsurprising (to me). Professor Spence says a bit about the revival of Confucianism in China and asks whether Confucius is becoming a replacement for Mao. He notes that much of the appeal of Confucius comes from the force of his personality: "his resonance – to me at least – comes from his lack of grandstanding, his constant awareness of his own shortcomings; his rejection of dogmatism; and his flashes of dry wit." That's all fine, but I was hoping to hear more about, say, the way Confucius differs from Socrates. Why is he so attached to ritual? Does he value empathy over truth?

As often happens, the philosophical values were distorted in practice, but Professor Spence goes on to suggest that state Confucianism was nothing but the history of oppression: "By the 12th century AD, something approximating a state Confucianism was in place and over time this came to encapsulate certain general truths that had not figured prominently in the original Analects. For example, now included under this broad definition of Confucian thought were hostility or the demeaning of women, a rigid and inflexible system of family hierarchies, contempt for trade and capital accumulation, support of extraordinarily harsh punishments, a slavish dedication to outmoded rituals of obedience and deference, and a pattern of sycophantic response to the demands of central imperial power."

Not exactly what one would expect from a subtle historian of Professor Spence's stature. Was there nothing good about Confucianism in practice? How could it last so long? Why are so many people in China now looking to history for inspiration? Perhaps they were doing some things better than Western societies at the time? And maybe we can learn something from Confucianism that actually challenges contemporary liberal-democratic ways, that allows for progress in Western societies? Why didn't Professor Spence try to challenge an audience that supposedly prides itself on its tradition of critical thinking?

Most of the transcript actually consists of short questions by the Great and the Good of the British establishment, followed by Professor Spence's answers. The word "LAUGHTER" is often capitalized in between speeches, though personally I didn't get any of the jokes. Perhaps one had to be there.

The first question is by the London-based editor of the *Financial Times* Chinese language website. He asks what Confucius might say about making money and wealth, at which point we are told there was "LAUGHTER." Perhaps people laughed because they think of the Chinese as money-grubbing materialists, unlike the civilized British. Seems a bit insensitive to laugh at people who are trying to make money in a society with 800 million farmers who live barely above the subsistence level. Not to mention the fact that the country is in the middle of dealing with an earthquake that killed over 80,000 people in one of China's poorest regions. Again, though, I may have missed the joke.

To be fair, the journalist then goes on to ask what Confucius might say about the growing wealth gap. I thought this would have been a good opportunity for Professor Spence to explain in what way the Chinese state has long had an obligation to care for the poor – centuries before such care become a public concern in Western societies – and how such obligations may have Confucian roots. But all he says is that Confucius himself didn't have a contempt for trade.

Another question was asked about The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Cormac Murphy-O'Connor. He notes that Pope Benedict called on the Chinese state to respect authentic religious freedom and how the current leadership in China might use Confucianism to respect such freedom. Professor Spence responds that it's difficult, again followed by inexplicable LAUGHTER. Then there's a discussion about how many million Catholics there are in China and whether the Chinese government will invite the Pope to the Olympics, with both Cardinal O'Connor and Professor Spence saying that the Pope should be encouraged to go, again, with more LAUGHTER.

Then somebody from Amnesty International asks how the revival of Confucianism might impact acceptance of the "international" idea of "universality" of human rights. I thought Professor Spence might say something about how Confucian values might enrich the human rights debate with its own contributions thus making the human rights regime truly international, or perhaps how Confucians might prioritize rights differently and rely on informal norms and rituals rather than legal punishments to implement the sorts of values people care about. But nothing of the sort.

The moderator then notes that she would "love to hear if there are any Chinese voices out there anywhere", but instead she takes a question from The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams. Seems a little too transparent that leading religious figures in the UK – obviously worried by the decline of religion in their own society – are looking to China as the next big market.

Then there's a question about the editor of an Index on Censorship about whether Confucianism will just exchange "one form of authoritarianism for another." Professor Spence responds reassuringly that Confucius was conscious of the dangers of speaking out, but he doesn't say anything about how Confucius's emphasis on moral exemplars and appeals to people's better nature might actually lead to something different than the free market media model with its tendency to titillating and negative news reporting.

That's followed by the BBC World Affairs editor John Simpson who notes that the Chinese authorities seem nervous about demonstrations in Tibet "which for a Western country would be pretty minor actually." I expected Professor Spence to respond that Western countries may not treat as minor ethnic riots that kill many innocent civilians and burn down whole neighborhoods, but he just responds that it's hard to answer such questions, followed by LAUGHTER. Professor Spence then goes on to note that the Chinese government seemed totally incompetent during the New Year holiday snowstorms (actually, that's when Premier Wen Jiabao first established himself as the empathetic carer for the nation's suffering victims) and he speculates about how it reminded him of times in Chinese history when such disasters had nearly brought down the government. The moderator then concludes the session, apparently having forgotten about the need to call on Chinese voices. I put down the transcript, almost ready to inquire about procedures for joining the Chinese Communist Party.

Why am I upset, I wonder? As mentioned, I'm actually a big fan of Spence's works. Perhaps nuances are lost by relying on a transcript of a lecture. Maybe I'm importing my own views more than I should. Or could it be that the whole thing was satire, in the best British tradition of dry and biting humour?

Daniel A. Bell is professor of ethics and political philosophy at Tsinghua University. His latest book is [China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society](#) (Princeton University Press, 2008).