

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

Fall 1979

Review Of "The Death Of Woman Wang" By J. D. Spence

Lillian M. Li

Swarthmore College, lli1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Lillian M. Li. (1979). "Review Of "The Death Of Woman Wang" By J. D. Spence". *Pacific Affairs*. Volume 52, Issue 3. 514-516. DOI: 10.2307/2757671
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/300>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Review

Author(s): Lillian M. Li

Review by: Lillian M. Li

Source: *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Autumn, 1979), pp. 514-516

Published by: [Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2757671>

Accessed: 26-06-2015 17:55 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pacific Affairs*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

neogrammarian rigour in postulating phonetic change. His ideas on semantic interpretation also seem to me to be still too strongly tied to etymology based on graphic analysis, even though supplemented by phonetic notions, and too little controlled by close study of actual usage in early texts. It is as important to determine the way in which cognates differ in meaning and to try to relate those differences to their phonetic differences as it is to find cognate relationships in the first place.

However one judges the value of his ideas, there is no doubt that Dr. Cohen has performed a useful service by gathering together Boodberg's published and privately circulated writings and making most of them available in this convenient form. Also included are the necrology by E.H. Schafer and R. Cohen's bibliography of Boodberg's writings, previously published in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 94 (1974). One has a few minor complaints. The "selection" in fact includes almost, but not quite, all the published articles and privately circulated notes. It is understandable that, as we are told, some items from the series *Hu T'ien Han Yüeh Fang Chu*, issued in the 1930s, which anticipate later, more mature, publications or contain experimental ideas that were later discarded by the author, should have been suppressed. The omission of two short book reviews is also of small concern. We are not told, however, why two, and only two, articles published in the fifties, "The Chinese script: an essay in nomenclature" (*BIHP*, 29 [1957] 113-120) and "Ancient and Archaic Chinese in the grammatonomic perspective," in *Studia Serica Bernhard Karlgren Dedicata* (1959), as well as Cedulae 15 and 35-52 have been left out. They all have to do with ideas on alphabetizing the Chinese script. Did Boodberg later reject these ideas? Or does Dr. Cohen find them embarrassing? It would have been more candid to explain.

Another complaint concerns the quality of the reproduction. It is evident that a Xerox process has been used. This has sometimes resulted in smudgy, almost illegible Chinese characters and, where a bound volume has been used, in showing the curvature at the inner edge of a page. One appreciates that costs of printing have become inordinate and that measures of economy were necessary, but surely a little more care in photographic reproduction, even to the point of undoing and rebinding a bound volume or two, would have been worthwhile in order to avoid these shoddy touches on what is justly intended as a lasting tribute to a great man.

University of British Columbia

E.G. PULLEYBLANK

THE DEATH OF WOMAN WANG. *By Jonathan D. Spence. New York: Viking Press. Markham, ON: Penguin Books Canada. 1978. 169 pp. US\$10.95.*

Book Reviews

JONATHAN SPENCE has here once again presented us with a vivid re-creation of history. However, unlike his earlier work, *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K'ang-hsi*, which sought to evoke the world of Manchu court from the perspective of the emperor, this volume attempts to portray life in T'an-ch'eng, a county in Shantung province, in the late seventeenth century from the perspective of the local people. Spence's reconstruction is based on three sources: (1) *The Local History of T'an-ch'eng*, compiled in 1673; (2) *Fu-hui ch'üan-shu*, a magistrate's handbook compiled in the 1690s by Huang Liu-hung, who had served as magistrate of T'an-ch'eng between 1670 and 1672; and (3) the stories of the writer P'u Sung-ling, who lived in an adjacent county and often based his stories on local incidents.

The picture painted by Spence from these sources is one of hardship, violence, and greed, only occasionally relieved by incidents of heroism and human feeling. T'an-ch'eng was hardly an important or distinguished locality. It had suffered unusual adversity during the first half of the seventeenth century—including rebel depredation, banditry, numerous floods and famines, and an earthquake in 1668, which wiped out a substantial portion of the local population. T'an-ch'eng was not known as a manufacturing or a commercial center. Nor could it claim any influence in the outside world: between 1646 and 1708 not a single local candidate passed the *chü-jen* examinations.

Under these harsh material conditions, human relations also deteriorated, a process observed by contemporaries and described by Spence, who stresses three main themes. The first could be termed the plight of women or, more specifically, the despair of women faced with impossible choices. These included widows who committed suicide out of loyalty to their husbands, widows whose relatives tried to cheat them out of their inheritances, women who fought off Manchu soldiers, and women who defied society and ran away. The final story in the book concerns the Woman Wang of the title, who ran away with her lover, only to be abandoned by him and forced to return to her husband, who then brutally murdered her. He dragged her body out into the night, abandoning it in the street, and later accused a neighbor, with whom he had been feuding, of having had an affair with his wife and then killing her. Only the clever detective work of Magistrate Huang unraveled this case and permitted a rough justice to be done—but literally over the dead body of Woman Wang.

The second theme is the pervasiveness of lawlessness and disorder. One chapter focusses on a bitter feud between two families, with a denouement, as exciting as any cowboys-and-indians shoot-out, in which Magistrate Huang personally led an attack on the headquarters of the bad guys. Indeed this is one example of how truth, even if not necessarily stranger than fiction, is at least as interesting. While P'u Sung-ling's often fantastic and romantic stories form the high-

lights of Spence's account, they are judiciously counterpoised with incidents from historical sources. The result is a richness of detail and texture seldom found in works on Chinese history.

The third related theme could be described as the constant effort of government to eliminate, or at least contain, lawlessness. The interplay between the government and the law, on the one hand, and the banditry and disorder, on the other, is perhaps the most striking aspect of Spence's narrative. Although T'an-ch'eng was a locality plagued by troubles of various sorts, and although many offenders managed to evade the law and get away with murder, story after story shows the extent to which the arm of the law nevertheless did reach the common people, and very much impinged on their lives.

Indeed this is only one of several ways in which *The Death of Woman Wang* is a highly instructive book. Not only is it an eloquent and poignant evocation of history for the specialist and general reader alike, but it is especially well-suited, in my opinion, to classroom use. Its treatment of seventeenth-century rural society in Shantung challenges widely-cherished notions about the stability of traditional society, the harmony of the Confucian social system, and the superficiality of the authority of the Ch'ing state— notions that die hard among the very young as well as the relatively old.

Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania

LILLIAN M. LI

THE CRISIS OF CHINESE CONSCIOUSNESS. Radical Anti-traditionalism in the May Fourth Era. *By Lin Yü-sheng. Foreword by Benjamin I. Schwartz. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1979. 201 pp. \$20.00.*

THE STUDY of the intellectual history of China has taken a number of twists and turns in recent years, including the publication of works that highlight the alleged significance of minor "neo-traditionalist" trends; but, as Professor Lin Yü-sheng's highly stimulating and intelligent book on radical antitraditionalism amply demonstrates, serious discussions of modern thought invariably must focus on the complex May Fourth intellectual revolution. The novel feature of the era was the phenomenon of totalistic cultural iconoclasm. The question of the origins and consequences of Chinese anti-traditionalism continues to be extremely important, not simply because iconoclasm was the dominant intellectual trend of the twentieth century, but, more importantly, because intellectual leaders in other traditional non-Western societies have in various ways tended to defend traditional cultural values as they adjust to the imperatives of the "modernization" process. The Iranian revolution is only the