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Jonathan Spence's Yale Lectures: A Memoir

June 25, 2008 in [Watching the China Watchers](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [2 comments](#)

One member of the China Beat team, Susan Jakes, has had the unusual experience of both taking Jonathan Spence's famous "History of Modern China" course as a Yale undergraduate, and then later returning to the university as a graduate student and serving as a teaching assistant for a later version of the same class. As a complement to our series on Spence's Reith Lectures, we asked her to reflect on this experience.

By Susan Jakes

I first heard Jonathan Spence give a lecture thirty minutes or so after the first time I heard his name. It was the beginning of my fourth semester at Yale in 1995 during the chaotic week known on campus as "shopping period," when students are allowed to attend any classes they choose. My roommate had announced that she was going to "shop Spence" and invited me to join her. Fortunately, she wasn't too aghast to bring me along after I'd replied, "Sure, I'll come with you, but what's Spence?"

I don't remember precisely how she answered, but whatever she said persuaded me to get dressed in a hurry and follow her to Yale's largest auditorium a full half hour before the first lecture of History of Modern China was scheduled to begin. As my roommate had predicted, the huge room filled up quickly. A few minutes after we arrived, a figure in a hooded coat slipped through the crowd toward the blackboard and began, silently, to fill it with a list of unfamiliar words written in slender uppercase letters. When he took the lectern, he made no sales-pitch to the assembled shoppers. He said only, "I'd like to start now" and began a lecture he called, "Ten Things I Find Fascinating About China." I've lost the notes I took that day—though I'm fairly certain the list included the Three Gorges Dam, the future of the one-child policy and the legacy of June 4th—but what has stuck with me, indelibly, is how quickly after Spence began to speak I knew that anything he found fascinating was something I needed to hear more about.

I wasn't the only one. When the lecture ended, there was applause. I don't how long it lasted because my roommate, whose wisdom I was beginning to appreciate, insisted we sprint to the bookstore a block away and buy the books for the course before they sold out. Which they did. Before we'd even left the store.

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Spence lectured three times a week that year, which meant he had about forty lectures to span the period from just before the Manchu conquest to the present, or roughly a decade per each 50 minute class. The course moved chronologically, but it did so at what felt like an unhurried pace, with time for detours into art or literature and often deep within the layers of individual lives.

The lectures had the feel of finely crafted short stories, and at times full-length novels. They were beguilingly titled—"The View from Below," "All in the Translation," "Into the World," "Bombs and Pianos"—and they built in intensity to end in startling revelations or quietly delivered lines of poetry. Often they played on the juxtapositions in their titles to explore social tensions: "Famine and Finance," "Sects and the Social Fabric," "Warlords and Bandits," "Socialists and Revisionists." Spence liked to put two biographical sketches side by side to capture different dimensions of a given moment, a technique he used to electrifying effect on Yuan Mei and Zhang Xuecheng in the "The Poet and the Historian," and on writers Ding Ling and Xu Zhimo in a lecture called "Being Modern."

Even in less experimental modes, he always put individuals front and center. No event worth mentioning was too large to be refracted through a single human life and no life was too minor to have its humanity summoned up from the past alongside the abstraction of its historical significance. Spence could manage this level of detail even in a 50 minute lecture because of his knack for drawing a profile out of a single image—the Kangxi Emperor advising a bondservant on his health, Ding Ling's mother running around an athletic field on her newly unbound feet, a Boxer victim's Steinway piano,

Mao aboard his private train. He could “catch the essence,” as he sometimes describes it, of people and of historical moments so they lit up like lightning bugs in a jar.

Not that his delivery was flashy. He spoke casually, musingly, from behind a sheaf of yellow notepaper, in a way that sometimes made it sound as if what he was saying was only dawning on him at the moment he said it. The effect was disarming. There was an open-endedness about the way he presented even the subjects he knew best that invited us to feel a part of them. Seldom did a lecture not include the phrase, “I’ve always hoped someone would write an essay on this subject.” Questions were as much a part of the lectures as exposition and from time to time he answered them, “Well, we’re not sure.” But for the most part, his lectures held out the promise that China and its past could be, if not quite within our reach, than at least a little closer than they seemed.

Among some of my classmates this promise produced an almost instantaneous decision to reorient their studies or move to China. I came more hesitantly to the subject and the country, but I am sitting in Shanghai as I write this, quite as certain as one can be about historical causes and effect, that had I not found my way to that lecture hall in the spring of 1995, or if Spence had been lecturing on astrophysics or on Luxembourg, I would not be here.

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That first Spence lecture was very much on my mind this January as I returned to the auditorium, amid the hubbub of another shopping period, to hear Spence teach a course now called “History of China: 1600 to the Present”—this time as a graduate student and one of his teaching assistants. Little had changed at Yale in the intervening 13 years, but China was a different place or at least it meant something different to my students than it had to me. During my first meetings with them I asked them to write a few sentences about why they were taking the course. A few wrote that they had heard the class was excellent or that Spence was “awesome.” But the vast majority explained their interest in terms of China’s prominence in world affairs, its power, its “rise.” Some of them explicitly related their interest to future careers in business. One described the class as “a necessity.” They were at least as interested in China’s future as they were in hearing about its past.

That China had become a much more forceful presence in the consciousness of his students must have been on Spence’s mind as he began his first lecture. He spoke about what he called “the extraordinary drama of emotions aroused by China,” and said he found “depressing” the recent “great emphasis on the negative aspects of China.” In place of 1995’s list of ten fascinating things, he gave two lists, one on China’s frequently emphasized negative sides (pollution, corruption, tainted products, Tibet, etc.) and the other on developments he saw as more encouraging, including “the development of urban restoration” and “Chinese presence in Africa” along with the transformation of the middle class, stability in recent leadership transitions, the Olympics and the fact that “China [was] working enormously hard on energy.”

If I found it hard to share his optimism on some of these counts, I was reminded at the end of that first lecture of just how much change in China’s present Spence has witnessed in the years he has been studying its past. “I started out studying China here at Yale in 1959,” he told the final group of students who would hear him teach the course, “We weren’t being told very much...We really didn’t realize that one of the largest famines in China was happening—a missing cohort of 20 million to 30 million people...The People’s Republic was only 10 years old—now it’s 58 years old and somewhere in there is my life.”

This year’s lectures moved more briskly than they had in 1995. There were only two a week now and an extra decade to cover. But even in more compressed form they teemed with the kind of detail that had captivated me the first time around. Spence reflected more often about the development of his scholarship, and on his own encounters with contemporary China. Often when the class ended, he would climb down to the corner of the room where the teaching assistants sat and regale us with anecdotes or questions he hadn’t had time to include in the formal part of the class.

One side of the class I hadn’t remembered was the way Spence used humor, the way his formal British diction could give way to a reference to Kangxi as Yongzheng’s “old man” or a description of

people in the 17th century “visiting tea houses for R&R.” He likened the life of a low-level Chinese scholar to “being trapped in high school your entire life—a grim prospect for many of us.” When the Yankee Doodle, a local greasy spoon where Spence had eaten his first American meal in 1959 closed its doors this winter, he asked the class for a moment of silence. Then he said, “Don’t write this on the midterm but Kangxi would have liked the Doodle and Qianlong wouldn’t have gone near it and that may explain my feelings about those two emperors.” Watching my students respond to these moments of playfulness, the way their affection and awe for their teacher drew them closer to his subject, I understood a little better how I had wound up where I was.

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Spence used his final lecture to explore seven “enduring themes” in Chinese life that spanned the four centuries covered in the course—and new pressures on Chinese society. Another two lists. The first included the absence of permitted public debate on leadership transition, the closeness to power of highly educated male elites, the lack of a powerful nationwide religious structure, “good order” as a high state priority, changing borders and ideas about borders, pressure on scarce resources and rich aesthetic and cultural realms including wit, erudition, sensuality and history. Among the new stresses were the internationalization of China’s strategic interests, the scale of urbanization, the collective leadership of the CCP, the availability of capital for “colossal projects,” environmental degradation, the battle for control of information technology and “seeing China as a source of change for the rest of the world.”

In closing, Spence turned toward one last enduring theme, one that was much closer to home and yet more fleeting. To an unusually packed house full of former as well as current students and a good number of colleagues, he read aloud Mark Strand’s poem, “The Whole Story.”

How it should happen this way
I am not sure, but you
Are sitting next to me,
Minding your own business
When all of a sudden I see
A fire out the window.

I nudge you and say,
“That’s a fire. And what’s more,
We can’t do anything about it,
Because we’re on this train, see?”
You give me an odd look
As though I had said too much.

But for all you know I may
Have a passion for fires,
And travel by train to keep
From having to put them out.
It may be that trains
Can kindle a love of fire.

I might even suspect
That you are a fireman
In disguise. And then again
I might be wrong. Maybe
You are the one
Who loves a good fire. Who knows?

Perhaps you are elsewhere,
Deciding that with no place
To go you should not
Take a train. And I,
Seeing my own face in the window,
May have lied about the fire.

"The only gloss you need is that 'train' is Yale," he had said as he began to read, "and the fire is China."