The Picasso of Chinese Studies

Jonathan Spence talks about how the subjects of his studies find their voice.

Interview by Donald Yerxa and Karl Giberson

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Jonathan D. Spence enjoys a special place of eminence among historians of China. He is perhaps the leading Western scholar of China today. Born in England in 1936, he received his graduate education in Chinese history at Yale University, where he has also spent his professional academic career. At Yale he has served as chair of the Council of East Asian Studies, chair of the Department of History, and director of the Division of the Humanities. Currently, he is Sterling Professor of History.

Spence is one of the most respected writers of history in our time. Reviewers use such words as *elegant* and *immaculate* to describe his prose. He is the author of a remarkable body of work, including the following mentioned in the interview below: *The Death of Woman Wang* (Penguin, 1978), the tragic story of a seventeenth-century Chinese farm woman; *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (Penguin, 1985), a creative portrait of the brilliant sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary; *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K'ang-hsi* (Vintage, 1988), a life of the Ch'ing emperor crafted from his own words; *The Question of Hu* (Vintage, 1989), the story of the unfortunate trip to France in the 1720s of John Hu, a Chinese research assistant, whose inexplicable behavior resulted in his confinement in an insane asylum; *The Search for Modern China* (Norton, 1990), a massive text of the last four centuries of Chinese history; *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (Norton, 1996), an account of the Taiping Rebellion and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of the 1850s and 1860s as portrayed through its leader, Hong Xiuquan, "God's Chinese Son"; and *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (Norton, 1998), a series of "sightings" that traces how the West has viewed China since the thirteenth century. Donald Yerxa and Karl interviewed Spence on November 19, 1998, in the Green Room of the Boston Public Library.

DONALD YERXA: You've spent most of your adult life in the United States, but you were born and educated in England.

Would you tell us something about your life before you came to Yale in 1959?

I was born just before World War II, so I grew up in the emotional atmosphere of that war. My father was in combat most of the war, so I had a child's view of what that was all about through the family. I went to local schools in Berkshire in central England, but then very early, following the English system, I went off to boarding school just before I was eight. For the next ten years, I was in two different boarding schools, where I had a pretty intensive education. In both cases, it was a Protestant education—Anglican. To some extent, I grew up with the Bible as orchestrated by my schooling. It was massively a Western humanist education. When that was over, I spent two years in the army, not as a volunteer, but in the national service. And when that was over, I went to Cambridge, where I again studied very much Western history. And it was in 1959, when I graduated from Cambridge, that I got this offer of a two-year fellowship to Yale [the Clare-Mellon Fellowship], about which I really had no anticipation at all.

YERXA: So you hadn't been planning on doing graduate study in the United States?

It was really a startling development. I had never been to the States, and I knew almost nothing about the country, except both of my parents subscribed to the *New Yorker*. So I had a sort of dazed vision of the brilliance of American fiction and poetry through the *New Yorker*. The writers I knew about—whose books my father had in his library—were Dorothy Parker, Ring Lardner, and James Thurber. These to me were the American mythic writers of extraordinary brilliance. And so it was with that rather inadequate training that I plunged into American education—an M.A. program. And it was an open program, just to accumulate a number of courses and then go back to England. I had been offered this fellowship, so I was looking around at Yale for something that might be really unusual and interesting to study for the master's. I have to confess that I thought I ought to do more physics, so I thought of trying to do some aspect of physics that I really knew nothing about.

But at the same time, I thought that, on the humanities side, the subject I knew as little about as advanced physics was Chinese, and that idea was perhaps somewhere spinning around in my head because of the saturation of the Western humanistic education I had and the sense that, of course, China had been very much in the news—not only because of the Korean War, but also the Great Leap Forward was just building up when I was making this decision. The double ignorance of what the revolution had been all about and what the Korean War had been all about was a spur to me. The Korean War was the first time I had school friends sent off to combat. When I was 13, there were 17- and 18-year-olds going off to Korea, and they weren't coming back. For a teenager, that was a shattering realization, and as I looked back, it brought home to me how little I knew.

So Yale gave me a chance to plunge into China studies, which I did initially out of curiosity and a sense of adventure and then with absolute fascination. And I have stayed with it ever since that initial incursion in 1959-60.

KARL : Your writings reveal that you have a rather high degree of biblical literacy. Could you speak to how you learned the Bible and the role it played in shaping you as a young person growing up in the Anglican tradition?_I would modify that by saying I have a very modest level of biblical literacy when I compare it to that of people I have met who have serious knowledge. Mine is the sort of knowledge that comes from reading the Bible and having it read to me and being brought up on the Book of Common Prayer. I have thought about this a lot. These were Christian schools that I attended. You simply went to chapel every morning and that was that. You went twice on Sundays and three times on Saturdays. You proceeded to confirmation and that was that. You met the bishop and that was that. And then you add early Communion to the rest of your services, and then you had evening prayers. I was probably participating in 22 different religious sessions in a week.

A lot of my fascination with Christianity was actually with language, and I know that was kindled by the King James Version of the Bible—I am convinced of it—and the absolutely

extraordinary language of the British Book of Common Prayer. To me this was the peak of the English language, and it fitted very well Shakespeare and Donne and other people I revered. To give a more personal side to it, one reason I later became much less assiduous in going to Christian services was change in the language of the Bible. I never had any interest at the same level in the New English Bible—nothing. I had had 10 to 15 years of the same language—which to me was the religion, for whatever that is worth.

In both schools I attended, we not only had passages from the Bible read aloud every day in chapel, but we had to read them on assigned Sundays. I can remember just shaking. "Ezekiel 4:9-12 was you, Spence." A little boy going to the lectern way up there, and the headmaster had to put it down. That was my first example of reading aloud to a literally trapped audience.

I remember taking that very seriously; we used to practice the readings. After 14 other little boys, it would come back to you again. And, of course, you did what you were told; you read whatever passage it was. And some of these were utterly bewildering or completely opaque, depending on the complexity of the biblical passage. Nobody ever really tried to explain them. I wasn't given a seminar on it. But I absorbed the language and a sense of solemnity. I was clearly awed by what I was reading. So if I possess any biblical literacy, it is from repetition and a real sense of occasion.

: Can you describe your faith journey from your fairly conventional upbringing within the Anglican tradition to the point where you are now?_I suppose I am without faith in a strictly religious sense, but at the same time not without some faith in human nature, human power. Certainly I am not unaware that destinies are driven by complex forces that I do not understand. I don't think that an historian can have an all-encompassing analytical power, but that doesn't necessarily mean I believe in a transcendent power. I am quite willing to accept that we are on a mysterious journey, and I don't find that hard to live with. I think probably in my midteens I was fairly religious. I went to confirmation and Communion with some real passion and felt very committed. I think it was partly a slow

fading, and as I said, it was also linguistic shock.

It seems too pompous to say that I lost interest in the Word; but I lost interest in the way the words were represented because I had other words. Teachers kept telling me that the New English Bible was much more accurate. And I said, but it is not "And now you see through a glass darkly and then face to face." I don't want to look at someone clearly. I want to see through a glass darkly and then face to face. And they would say, "Well, that's wrong; it's not in the Greek." And that happened again and again and again to all the most cherished verses. That was hard to take. And then I think the hurly burly of the army, the intensity of a much more secular university—I never really came back in an organized sense.

My family had what I would call a comfortable Anglicanism. Certainly my parents would never have called themselves atheists, not even agnostics. We grew up in a village with an eleventh-century Norman church. It was very much what I would call a Christmas, Easter, and Harvest home, my family.

It would never occur to my parents not to go to church on Christmas and Easter and Harvest Festival; it was just impossible not to go. But it was almost inconceivable to go any other time.

YERXA: Thank you for your willingness to speak to these rather personal questions._Yes, it is actually rather personal. I hadn't shared that with anyone.

YERXA: You have been described as a brilliant, discursive writer. In fact, one reviewer over a decade ago called you "the Picasso of Chinese studies."_Oh, that could mean many things [laughing].

YERXA:How would you characterize your style?_Well, there is no simple way to say it. I would say that I have an absolute love of words. I believe that one can find the right—or something close to the right—word if one works hard enough. As a corollary to that, I think there is almost no sentence that couldn't be better. It is very hard to think of a sentence that in some way could not be a better sentence, if you go at it again and again. I write always in longhand, and I think about the act of hitting,

touching the page. I like to shape words, and I am often crossing them out as I go, changing them already.

In one side of my writing, I try never to do what I have done before, which is maybe what that Picasso remark was meant to mean [pointing to a stack of his books on the table before him]. My books are all very much different. It's not a deliberate quest for variety; it's a sense that everything one tackles—or chooses to tackle—may have a way in which it wants to be expressed. So in a sense, I am looking for the language that will catch what I am trying to do. And sometimes, to me, I think that works. To me the book in which it worked the best is *The Question of Hu*. I think it has the tightest parallel between what I wanted to do and the way the words came out.

: I was very struck by your prose in that book. It is written in a stark, literary style that gives it almost a fairy tale-like quality. And I had to keep reminding myself that this is history, not some sort of interesting allegory. These were actual events. The prose seemed to transport me._[Chuckling] I'm glad you were transported.

: What were you attempting to do with *The Question of Hu*? _I was trying to express Hu's bewilderment about the West. And I was trying to see us all through his eyes.

I was reversing Matteo Ricci in many, many ways. I was thinking what a complete converse this is from Ricci, with his urbanity and his really dazzling education—an amazing polymath—struggling all his life to deepen his faith but also to really learn Chinese and really understand classical Chinese texts. And I was thinking of Hu as a kind of total reverse of all those things. Occasionally, my books have formed pairings that are reverses, so that, for instance, *The Death of Woman Wang* was a reverse of *Emperor of China*.

Emperor of China set out to render perhaps the most powerful person on the planet between about 1670 and 1710, the Emperor K'ang-hsi. Then *Woman Wang* seems to me to capture as close to certain levels of entrapment and hopelessness one could get—the social predicament of an enforced marriage with a

husband who you hate, in a godforsaken peasant village in a cold part of China with no way out. And then you got killed by your spouse. And yet, at the same time, I realize that Woman Wang is triumphant in a sense in death, while K'ang-hsi is helpless in the face of his own children. That was a reversal.

So without being terribly conscious of this—I don't strive for literary effect; I try to just get it right—this is the way I work. Hu just started to write himself—pushing through with his feistiness. Somehow a voice is meant to grow if I am lucky, and the voice for Hu was meant to be a rather bewildered friend, somebody who was watching all this, an imaginary Chinese companion, somebody who would have understood what he was going through.

My favorite sentence in that book is "Hu won't go." He's got the chance to go to Rome to meet the pope, everything he wanted to do, but at that moment—maybe we've all lived through moments like that—he just won't go. And that sentence presented itself, and it is one of the only sentences I've written that I don't think could have been better. "Hu won't go." It's clear; it summarizes exactly that moment; it's nicely brief. And it's really staccato. That's that.

YERXA:The Hu story is a fairly small-scale narrative in the scope of human history. Are you also making a larger statement about China-West relations—for example, the mystery of the encounters between the two civilizations and the frequent mutual disappointment with the exchanges?_Yes, absolutely. It is probably about the ways we want to be represented as opposed to what really happens. So that in Hu's case, the kind of answer to the question of Hu - if you asked Hu, as I ask him at the end of the book: "What's it like in the West?"—Hu's answer based on his experience would have to be: "It's the inside of an insane asylum." And he would be accurate. So that's why I end the book that way. "Being in a civilization in which because they can't speak your language, and they don't understand you, they put you in an insane asylum in solitary confinement for two years." In that sense, it is about the tragedy of complete cultural miscomprehension, but also the sense that we often flatter ourselves too much about how we are

regarded. We are very busy, as I am in *The Chan's Great Continent*, trying to show all the different ways we look to China. But we don't necessarily think it through backwards very subtly to see how cruel our culture can be on its own terms. So a book like this got its own style—a staccato rhythm. It wanted to be short. It didn't occur to me: Why don't you say more about Chinese society? This is what Hu wanted us to know.

YERXA:What do you want your readers to understand about China?_Well, there's no particular central message. I would say that it is different in every work. I am not pushing an analytical agenda. I do think I have a genuine interest—maybe it's deeper than that—to somehow make Chinese history more accessible to Western readers, to make people realize that the Chinese experience is ultimately similar to our own. It is the reverse, in a way, of my original fascination with the difficulty and strangeness of China.

On the surface, there are striking differences. Punishments can be so different. Family expectations can be so different. Sex can be different. Hopes and fears can be in different categories. But I also want to show a common humanity that I think does lie there. I'd like to bring China into the Western human family—if that's not too pretentious—so that we'd have a sense of what we fundamentally share.

For the first time now, my books are going to be translated into Chinese, and this is very exciting for me. This year a whole group of Chinese publishers were in touch with me, representing completely different firms. I have pretty much reached an agreement with one publisher to start with translations of six of the books, followed by the rest in a couple of years' time. What will happen then about reaching commonality I don't know, but I am intrigued by the prospect.

:Your current book is *The Chan's Great Continent*. What are you trying to accomplish with it?_This was, as I said in the preface, actually a drawing together of a multiplicity of images about the endless variety of the ways that China can impinge on Western consciousness. It is only a minute selection; any reviewer can find lots of things that are not in

there. But I wanted to try and give as much range as I could in the space of what was after all twelve lectures or twelve very short chapters without allowing it to become a catalog.

It is a book about the fact that we see through a glass darkly; actually, we see through mist and from the pitching of a deck. It is to make readers aware that they are constantly buffeted by their own preconceptions and by the dominant views within a society at a given time. It is a book about the unlikely ways that one culture influences another. And it is a book about something very difficult to handle, at least if we are in an academic world, which is that sometimes people with less knowledge do much better at interpreting aspects of another culture than people with a lot of knowledge.

I don't see much evidence that those who know more are wiser. Some people who have never even been to China have a piercing ability to catch something that I think is real. Other people who have lived there very long periods of time seem to get simply more opaque or more prejudiced.

: There has been an argument for some time that is currently falling a bit out of fashion, according to which modern science experienced a unique birth in Western Europe in the seventeenth century. Perhaps Alfred North Whitehead made the strongest case for this, although it has also been made by Christian apologists and secular historians. The claim is that the Christian tradition provided a critically important soil in which modern science could take root. China was educated, literate, with a philosophical tradition, and technologically advanced, but science was "stillborn" there, to use Stanley Jaki's phrase._Surely you can argue that one specific kind of inquiry flourished distinctively in the West from Francis Bacon on—a bit earlier maybe. But in terms of questing for meaning of natural phenomena and astronomical observation and the attempt to understand plant life, I think in all these areas the Chinese have worked with great tenacity and thoroughness. They've had different goals, different directions. It seems to me that the difference is more about methodology rather than a specific quest for deeper meaning. I don't think the Chinese have lacked

a quest for understanding phenomena, and they certainly have had some amazingly fine empirical observers.

Of course, China has been dragged into a Western discourse of science. Joseph Needham suggests that China joins the flow of world science at the end of the seventeenth century. And I think his feeling is that then China is carried along on a Western rush. But Needham is very sympathetic to the complexity of all the evidence for Chinese observation and empirical experience—chemistry—before then.

Is there an indissoluble wisdom of science, rooted in the Western tradition and a certain way of grappling with reality? I'm not so sure. I am a layman in that area as well, and something of a nonbeliever. Science is able to change its direction, change its track, and reverse itself, it seems to me, in startling ways. Looking at the question from a Chinese point of view in terms of what bits and pieces I have read recently, for instance, in something like modern chemistry, there's a brilliant study of the way the Chinese learned to express their ideas of chemistry using a chemical vocabulary that was put back into the Chinese language by various sympathetic cultural intermediaries. So the Chinese entered the march of world chemistry around 1860, but created their own way of expressing the ideas that they were presented with in a way that owed a lot to their cultural tradition, their own language. This is all post-Needham, and this study struck me as being very impressive. And recently there was a study of quantum mechanics in China and the politicization of that, which I find very gripping: why it was so hard to accept certain developments in quantum mechanics in China because of their political implications in terms of the way that field had developed and the doubt it cast on certainties. So all I can do is to speak to individual blips. The question is just too hard for me [smiling broadly]; I haven't advanced very much since my questioning about physics when I first entered Yale. I'm sorry about that.

YERXA:What is your assessment of the role of Christianity in Chinese history?_I would say it has had very considerable impact. One of the problems here is trying to work out how broad the impact has been across the whole society. It's very easy to

find areas where Christianity has had enormous impact ever since the mid- to late-sixteenth century—and in pockets earlier. The same, of course, could be said for Islam and Buddhism. So Christianity is certainly only one of several overlapping faiths—competing faiths—whichever word you want. I prefer "overlapping faiths." Certainly, in that period, individual Chinese who had considerable influence on their culture were deeply influenced by Christianity. And there was, I suppose, a watermark somewhere between the 1770s and 1800, when there was a tilt away from the dominance of Catholic impact toward a more evangelical Protestant impact. In terms of my own writings, Ricci and Hu are on one side of that divide, and Hong Xiuquan is on the other side.

One of the ways the Christian missionaries (both Catholic and Protestant) obtained influence was by bringing new scientific knowledge to China, and this was resisted by many, but absorbed by some. And some of those were very powerful people. And so the argument is that it was actually Christian ideas and Christian modes of thought that influenced Chinese mathematics, for instance, in the seventeenth century. And certain kinds of knowledge changed because of the Jesuit quest for certain kinds of truth. And the Protestants then developed massively. The number of converts has not been large compared to the size of China's population. But a lot of people have labored mightily across time. My guess is that China's population of Christians now is higher than it has ever been.

And one can look to very negative examples, too—obviously, violently negative examples where there has been a backlash against Christian influence. The Boxer Rebellion is a particular example. Much of the development of Chinese anti-imperialist thought and then some of the intersections with Marxist thought in China had a strong antimission impulse, based on a perception of what mission education would do in China and the belief that Christianity was not particularly helpful to China's own identity.

I was listening to someone recently who was pointing out that China's enormous Christian jump has taken place now, when foreign missionaries have been least present. So that the huge growth in Christian numbers seems to have been something that

the Chinese are capable of doing themselves. Indeed, this does at some level cast doubt on the efficacy of the missionary enterprise.

But the more interesting point is this. It appears that the Chinese are generating their own religious thinkers who are Christian in a deep, meaningful sense but who don't have a kind of day-by-day incursion of the Western point of view. So they seem to be constructing a Christianity that still has many of the fissures within Western development, maybe even African development, but has created its own meaning for tens of millions of people who seem to be willing to gather in Christian worship in each others' homes, or in churches if they are allowed to, or on hillsides, or in old, beat-up meeting houses and schools—in a totally satisfactory way.

I suppose they are creating their own liturgy. Somebody was telling me yesterday about the amount of hymns the Chinese have created. It's absolutely stunning. There is an utterly new structure of hymnals in China, which is entirely their own. It may indeed have antecedents right back to the Reverend Morrison; I don't know. But it seems to be just now linked to the post-Deng Xiaoping world and the reality of their experience. These hymns are now what is sung. They won't go to the old hymnal translated; they will have such and such a hymn by them for themselves. And these hymns are spread through China's congregations on their own terms with their own rhythm. So the impact has been considerable, though all the time you've got to acknowledge huge areas which aren't affected at all, and that's just part of the story.

YERXA:One last question: What is your next project?_That's what I'm talking about at Harvard tonight. It's going to be an exploration of the case in early eighteenth - century China when a middle-aged scholar, who had not been very successful, tried to launch a plot to overthrow the emperor. The center of the story was between about 1725 and 1735. I've been accumulating an absolutely amazing amount of text about this moment. Essentially, the scholar and a few coconspirators wanted to overthrow the emperor because they felt China had gone astray—nothing to do with Christian influence in this case.

They thought China had lost its direction; the emperors had gone astray morally; and the nature of government had gone wrong. It had gotten too huge. While they didn't mind China being a large country, they felt if you had such concentration of power in one person, there was no way that person could understand what other people felt. The emperor was just too far away. So they yearned for a smaller political unit, and the leader of the conspiracy said he didn't mind at all if China were *Fengjian* — what the West often translates as "feudal," but more accurately, a more localized, hereditary leadership—as long as it was moral.

The conspirators wanted a more responsive government, and they wanted a deeper morality in society at large, by which they meant very specifically a Confucian morality, not geared to law and order, but geared to moral order in the society. They wanted to get rid of the Manchus as alien conquerors. In that sense, the conspirators were nationalists of an early kind. They wanted the Chinese to control China's destiny but on a fragmented, localized scale. They wanted decency, harmony, and an end to corruption. They wanted an end to central government bureaucrats who didn't care about them one way or the other.

So I found it a very moving picture. But then it becomes a very complicated story. When the guilt of the conspirators was proven without any doubt—they had planned high treason at the most absolute level—the emperor asked all his officials for advice. Unanimously they advised him to execute the chief conspirator in the most painful way possible. But when all the evidence was in, the emperor ordered the man pardoned and then embarked on what to me is an absolutely moving explanation about both mercy and political expediency. His key point was that if you simply kill people with such a critical point of view, their views remain no matter how painfully you kill them. You don't kill the views; they simply circle around the world. So the emperor instead got the man to confess that each of these ideas was wrong. It was somewhat like the communist type of enforced public confession. And then the emperor published the entire proceedings.

But the story gets even more complicated. After the emperor died, his son (K'ang-hsi's grandson) ordered all the conspirators

arrested and had them killed by the worst possible methods. The end of the book is his explanation why he was more right than his father. So it is a book that explores the limits of mercy. The son said that "my father was my father, and he was a great man, and he said he was being merciful. But I, his son, am now an emperor, and how could any son live with people who had shamed his father as the conspirators had? So I am totally disagreeing with my father."

The dead emperor had decreed, "My verdict can never be changed." We still have the document. "None of my sons may change my verdict." And yet his son said that he was doing just that. "Not that my father was wrong. He was merciful in his way, and I am a son in my way. But now I am the emperor, and you cannot be an emperor living with such shame." Anyway, I am hoping to find a voice for it. I haven't found it yet. I don't know which voice it will be.

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