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## The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds

**Review Number:**

79

**Publish date:**

Wednesday, 1 September, 1999

**Author:**

Jonathan Spence

**ISBN:**

9780393027471

**Date of Publication:**

1998

**Pages:**

279pp.

**Publisher:**

W.W. Norton

**Publisher url:**

<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=6658>

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

John A. G. Roberts

Professor Spence is described on the dust-cover of this book as 'perhaps now the leading historian of China in the English-speaking world'. Without doubt he is the most imaginative and the most versatile scholar working in that field. *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, first published in 1981, was a history of modern China as seen through the lives of Chinese writers and intellectuals. *God's Chinese Son*, which appeared three years ago, told - in the dramatic present tense - a 'story as strange as any to be found in Chinese history,' the life of Hong Xiuquan, the leader of the Taiping Rebellion. Now Spence has turned his talents to another field, and has written a survey of Western views of China from William of Rubruck, the first Westerner to cross Asia and provide a reliable source of information on China, to Jean Levi, whose *The Chinese Emperor*, published in France in 1985, was an account of the life of Qin Shi Huangdi, the First Emperor, and at the same time an allegory of the excesses of the country's rulers throughout history.

*The Chan's Great Continent* is an eminently readable book, which wears its scholarship lightly. It had its origins in a series of seminars and then a programme of lectures which the author gave to students and the general public at Yale University in 1996, and this ensures that it is accessible to a wide audience. It is written in an engaging style and illustrated with vivid extracts from the texts, some of which are amusing, others touching. He quotes Goldsmith's mock encomium of himself, written in the style of a Chinese man of letters. He recounts the plot of Jack London's 'The Chinago' and includes the section of the story where the

hero Ah Cho is condemned to twenty years' penal servitude, and later guillotined, through the operation of a legal system he did not understand, and for a crime he did not commit.

A valuable feature of the book is that it provides an excellent summary of recent studies of the outstanding contributors to early views of China, such as Leibniz and Montesquieu, and of modern contributors to that topic, such as Ezra Pound, Andre Malraux and Bertold Brecht. Some of these writers have been discussed previously by P.J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams in *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of the Enlightenment*, and by Colin Mackerras in *Western Images of China*. However Professor Spence includes a number of American and French writers whose work is less familiar in this context.

The core of the book is a discussion of 48 writers whose reflections on China are distilled into twelve themes. Their texts are described as 'sightings' - a term which Spence acknowledges is ambiguous, for it may imply a fleeting or intermittent encounter, a range-finding process, or even an obsolete gaming term for cheating at dice. Nowhere does he give a convincing justification for his choice of writers, which includes some idiosyncratic choices and some notable omissions. The chapter on the Enlightenment makes no mention of Denis Diderot, whose lead article in the *Encyclopedie*, PHILOSOPHIE DES CHINOIS, advanced a powerful critique of Chinese religion and philosophy. The nineteenth century - surely a key century in the formation of Western attitudes is poorly served. A strong candidate for inclusion in this context would be George Wingrove Cooke, *The Times* first Special Correspondent to China, whose reportage of the Arrow War and of the personality of Ye Mingchen, the Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi, whom he accompanied in exile to India, provided the most immediate and authoritative account of events in China yet to appear in the Western media. The chapter on Women Observers (of which more later) stopped at 1900, and made no mention of key figures such as Agnes Smedley and Anna Louise Strong, whose contributions to modifying American views of Chinese Communism were comparable with that of Edgar Snow, whose *Red Star Over China* is discussed at length.

A notable feature of the book is Professor Spence's unwillingness to incorporate a theoretical dimension into his discussion. The names Said and Foucault go unmentioned, nor is there any attempt to deconstruct the texts. In the chapter entitled 'The Realist Voyages', Spence notes that 'George Anson personified the new assertive side of an expansionist Great Britain', and related that to Anson's (or perhaps his secretary's) sour comments on the reception he was given at Canton, but that is as far as he allows his theorising to go. Anson's criticisms of China have been seen as the beginning of a major shift in Western views of China. The various reasons which have been put forward to explain this change of attitude were reviewed in Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, but Spence does not extend this analysis. The absence of any theoretical underpinning may be justified by assumptions relating to the anticipated readership of the book, or it may derive from what Spence has defined as his purpose: 'to give a sense to the multiplicity of intellectual and emotional attitudes that Westerners have brought to their attempts to deal with the phenomenon of China.' This statement may imply that Western responses to China are so varied that no general explanation, for example Foucault's power/knowledge theory, can be made to fit. That may be true, but the failure to consider the case suggests that this book is intended more to stimulate discussion than to further the study of a complex issue.

Although Professor Spence refers to the 'multiplicity of intellectual and emotional attitudes' to be considered, the range of attitudes surveyed in the book is quite narrow, for example little attention is paid to the evolution of Western perceptions of China's cultural achievement in the arts. There is, in the section on Ezra Pound, mention of his admiration for the Tang poet Li Bo. This admiration was a modern phenomenon. J.F. Davis, in a pioneer work on Chinese poetry published in 1834, commented that Chinese literature had been given 'an indifferent reception in the West.' A similar revolution in perception can be traced in the response to other literary forms and in particular to the Chinese novel, to Chinese ornament, and perhaps most notably to Chinese painting. In 1858 a note referring to a forthcoming exhibition of Chinese art to be held in London remarked that 'everything about China seems to be quaint and strange and madly comical.' Half a century later, when Herbert A. Giles published *An Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art*, he claimed that this was the first attempt, in any European language, to deal with the subject. Nowadays the esteem in

which Chinese art is held is confirmed by the prices important works achieve at auction and the prominent place Chinese art and artifacts occupy in leading museums and art galleries.

This narrowness of approach is also evident in the omission of reference to the wide range of less intellectual stimuli which have derived from China and impinged on European minds. William of Rubruck is quoted on the Chinese use of the pulse in diagnosis, but that is the only reference to Chinese medicine, which in the nineteenth century was denigrated, but which now holds a place of honour in the list of alternate therapies, most conspicuously in the form of acupuncture. It has been suggested persuasively that the most-frequently reprinted translation of any Chinese work is the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*. Leibniz's consideration of the work is noted, but its modern use for divination, in the belief that it is a distillation of oriental wisdom, is ignored. Likewise the current Western preoccupation with *fengshui*, the spirits of wind and water, the art of geomancy, goes unmentioned.

Early in the book Professor Spence comments that it is 'an assumption of mine that the impact of China need have little to do with the literalness or precision of an actual experience'. This assumption allows him to include in his range of writers a majority who had never visited China. It is certainly true that perceptions of another culture expressed from a distance may be influential. Jean-Baptiste Du Halde compiled his *Description de l'Empire de la Chine* from Jesuit reports sent to Europe. His work was to be a prime source of reference for Voltaire and Dr Johnson, and was to be found in Lord Macartney's library. Professor Spence discusses in detail Andre Malraux's novel *Man's Fate* which was set in Shanghai and Hankou, and dealt in detail with the revolutionary struggle which took place there in 1927. Malraux most probably never went to China, although he had spent time in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, according to Spence, he was the first writer to bring these revolutionary stirrings to the attention of a large, popular readership. However, it must be allowed that in modern times the most consistent and influential presentations of China have come from those who have had direct experience of the country. In the nineteenth century 'Old China Hands', Westerners who had spent years on the China coast and in particular who had learned some Chinese - people described by George Wingrove Cooke as the 'twenty-years-in-the-country-and -speak-the-language-men' - who claimed superior knowledge of the character of the Chinese. This century has seen the rise of the China expert, either a Sinologist, or a China-watcher. It is their views which, at least at a certain level, are attended to and are formative of Western perceptions of China. Works of imagination do indeed tell us something of what China means to Western minds, but in the modern world, with improved communication and a multitude of sources of information, imagination may collide with fact, or what is taken for fact. The issue of the evaluation of the source, a practice central to the historian's craft, is only partially considered in this study. This is a complex issue, which includes not only the personality, experience and intentions of the writer - matters which are discussed in the book - but also the deliberate or accidental manipulation of the opinion of the writer, a theme discussed by Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba*, first published in 1981.

A welcome inclusion in the list of themes explored by Spence is that of 'Women Observers'. As suggested above, the choice of writers discussed might be questioned, but the value of examining Western women's views cannot be gainsaid. This task was tackled in greater detail by Elisabeth Croll in *Wise Daughters from Foreign Lands: European Women Writers in China*, 1989. Both Croll and Spence discuss the observations of Sarah Pike Conger, the wife of the American Minister in Beijing at the time of the Boxer Uprising. Their summaries illustrate how widely interpretations of this type of material may differ. They agree that the particular interest of women's writings on China is their concern with the domestic scene. However Spence's main point, derived from a letter written by Conger in 1899, is her bemoaning the 'system' which prevents a Chinese from going to the assistance of another. Spence compares her reflection with Montesquieu's pessimistic view of Chinese society. Croll, however, concentrates on Conger's life after the siege of the Beijing legations, noting how she gained access to Chinese households and learned some thing of the domestic life of Chinese women and of the respect paid to the elderly.

*The Chan's Great Continent* contains some thought-provoking assemblages of texts, perhaps none more so than those included under the title 'The French Exotic.' Spence defines this as deriving from four main elements: an appreciation of Chinese delicacy which became the basis of a new aesthetic; an awareness of

Chinese sensuality; a sense of Chinese violence and barbarism; and the idea of China as the realm of melancholy. He then explores the theme through the references to China in the writings of Prosper Giquel, Gustave Flaubert, Pierre Loti, Paul Claudel and Victor Segalen. The place of Giquel in this list may be queried. Giquel was a French officer who fought on the imperial side in the closing stages of the Taiping Rebellion and kept a journal recording his experiences. In his observations Spence has discerned 'all the elements of the emerging Chinese exotic' although they are 'still presented in a raw, undigested form'. However a reading of Giquel's journal elicits little to support that statement. His descriptions of Chinese violence and barbarism are better described as laconic. On one occasion, having remarked that the road he was using was excellent and paved, he then added that it was lined with more than two thousand partially dismembered and half-consumed corpses 'exuding an unbearable odor'. His presentation of China offers little in the way of melancholy, his main preoccupations being the advancement of French interests and of his own career. He subsequently became the director of the Fuzhou arsenal, where he initiated training programmes for Chinese engineers which were notable for their practicality and effectiveness.

In the chapter on 'An American Exotic', there is a brief but interesting section on D.W. Griffith's film *Broken Blossoms*. The only other reference to the visual representation of China is the illustration used for the dust-cover, a detail from an eighteenth-century tapestry showing the emperor on his travels. Visual representations of China and the Chinese, either fabricated by Westerners or chosen by them from Chinese stock to represent China, played a major role in fixing the image of China in Western eyes. In the eighteenth century these often promoted an idealised vision of China. Through the nineteenth century a stream of dismissive pictures and cartoons, for example in the pages of *Punch*, expressed more vividly than words the disregard in which the Chinese were now held. This disregard lasted well into the twentieth century, and persisted in populist forms, for example in the illustration to be found in the Everyman edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, where the demeaning description of a Chinese man's eating habits are accompanied by an equally demeaning illustration.

Paul A. Cohen, in *Discovering History in China*, explored some aspects of American historical writing on the recent Chinese past. He noted that each of the three paradigms he had been examining shared a common theme: a high degree of Western-centredness. Professor Spence's book, because of its subject matter, naturally exhibits the same characteristic. Cohen then asserted that this was 'a Western-centeredness that robs China of its autonomy, and makes of it an intellectual possession of the West. His assertion is amply supported by the texts and themes explored in *The Chan's Great Continent*. Many of these were written to mount an oblique attack on Western society, or to assert the superiority of Western culture and mores at the expense of those of China.

In an earlier essay, 'Western Perceptions of China from the Late Sixteenth Century to the Present,' which appeared in Paul S. Ropp ed., *Heritage of China*, 1990, Professor Spence concluded that it was not adequate to view the majority of Western views of China as 'solely reflecting the biases within Western culture or a patronizing and exploitative attitude toward Eastern civilizations,' an opinion he attributed to Edward Said. He argued that there have been so many twists and turns in the depiction of China over the last four hundred years that no such broad generalizations could hold. He suggested instead that 'the more blurred and multifaceted our perceptions of China become, the closer we may be to that most elusive thing: the truth'. *The Chan's Great Continent* is an elaboration of this statement. Whether it brings us closer to 'the truth' remains a matter of opinion.

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