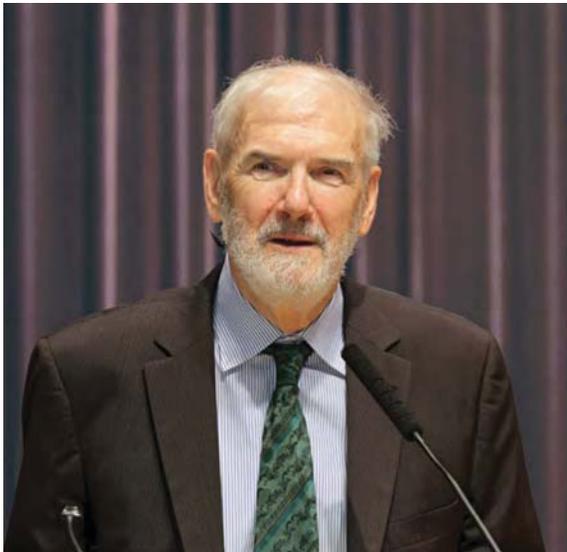
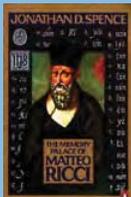
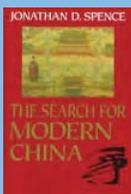


Finding the simple folk



Jonathan Spence holds the title of Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University and has long been regarded as one of the most influential historians of Chinese history. His writings have ranged from the life and missionary career of Matteo Ricci to works on the Taiping Rebellion, the Chinese Revolution, and Mao Zedong. Spence's magnum opus, *The Search for Modern China*, remains one of the most important introductions to Chinese history, well-loved by readers, scholars and students.



Spence won a Guggenheim fellowship in 1979, and a MacArthur fellowship in 1988, the same year he was appointed to the Council of Scholars for the Library of Congress. He was made a corresponding member of the British Academy in 1997, and Queen Elizabeth II named him, in 2001, a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George. In 2004 and 2005, he served as president of the American Historical Association. In 2010, he delivered the annual Jefferson Lecture at the Library of Congress, the US federal government's highest honour for achievement in the humanities.

A view to the next century

Organised by the Faculty of Arts as part of its Centenary celebrations, the Second Century Lecture Series brings the most distinguished scholars in their field to Hong Kong, to share their experiences and wisdom with the University and the public. The event was supported by the Faculty of Social Sciences and The Hong Kong International Literary Festival, and sponsored by United Airlines and The Peninsula Hong Kong.

On May 14, 2013, Professor Jonathan Spence was invited to deliver the inaugural lecture on *Below the State: The Many Lives of Those Contesting Authority in Eighteenth Century China*. It examined how early Chinese sources from three hundred years ago guide us into the worlds where the ordinary bureaucrats lost their way. It looked at the universe of peddlers and doctors, exiles and wanderers, exam candidates and temple guardians, forgers and inn-keepers, fortune tellers, mountain dwellers and travelling salesmen.

Peddlers and fortune-tellers, exiles and inn-keepers: these are some of the simple folk who emerge from official documents of the early 18th century Chinese state. Their experiences illustrate the complex tapestry of life that existed below the reach of the bureaucracy, and the social history of China in this period was explored in an engaging and fascinating lecture by Professor Jonathan Spence, long regarded as one of the foremost scholars of Chinese history.

Professor Spence's exploration of the social history of early 18th century China grew out of his interest in Emperor Yongzheng (雍正皇帝), who reigned from 1722 to 1735, a time when the state was at the pinnacle of its effectiveness.

"He was an extraordinarily complicated man," says Professor Spence. "The more I read the more impressed I became and one could get a sense of what it was like to rule China in the early 18th century."



Wherever there is heavy-handed government, there will inevitably be a counter-force of opposition and people who will "do everything they can to establish their own definitions of what is say-able and of what is permissible," Professor Spence says.

By examining documents from the time, such as legal texts and regular news missives published by the

living below the state

Emperor's court, Professor Spence identified five categories of people living below the state, exerting some degree of personal power under the level of imperial control.

He characterised these as peddlers and doctors, internal exiles, examination takers, inn-keepers and fortune-tellers. Of these the peddlers and doctors, who often worked closely together, were the most mobile. "People pop out of pages all over the place selling, giving away, recommending or manufacturing medicines," says Professor Spence.

Peddlers travelled enormous distances on foot. "They were herbalists who sold medicines and treatment herbs but they were also interested in teaching their skills, informally with no state involvement." Peddlers maintained friendships with doctors based on shared learning, often across huge distances. "The amount of hospitality in the texts is startling. Every linkage we can pursue goes into the towns and out again to the countryside, with youngsters being trained along the way. So you have a sense of a society in motion, looking after its own health, a sympathetic, learned sub-culture."

Malfeasance against the state was typically punished by exile. "Internal exiles come up again and again among those on the roads, brushing shoulders with the doctors and the peddlers," said Professor Spence.

Small groups of such convicts would be escorted into exile by militia. At night, the two groups would pitch camp together, share food and perhaps a bottle of liquor, and discuss the news of the day, with the conversation ranging across the latest missives from the north via the palace bulletins, and the counter-current of local news. "They would reflect on the emperor, on society," notes Professor Spence.

Those who successfully or unsuccessfully took the imperial examinations formed another sub-set of society: educated men who could not find employment within the state bureaucracy, whose lives revolved around the world

of the examinations. They fostered a sub-culture of learned exchange based on a sharing of books, meals and reminiscences, also with no involvement of the state.

Two common social meeting points – inns and marketplaces – were where the other important players in this tapestry of life beneath and beyond the state could be found. Inns were typically walking distance from each other and close to important intersections and centres of social life such as temples.

The inn-keepers were connected to the scholars and the peddlers and they knew in fine detail the mountain trails and paths that connected communities.

Those who professed connection to forces beyond the human realm, the fortune-tellers, played a significant part in daily life, typically offering their services at markets. For eight copper coins a farmer down from the foothills could ask for a prognostication on the fate of his crops and "erudite men came looking for certain kinds of data from fortune-tellers," says Professor Spence.

"I have been on the watch for the simple folk. Social history can show us that there were very tight inter-connections between the individuals who were critical of the state structure."

The seditious potential of this geographically mobile, often well-educated, opinionated and well-informed population was not lost on Yongzheng.

"He woke up thinking: they're after me," says Professor Spence. "This was a conquest generation, the Manchu rulers who had conquered the Chinese, and people did often hate their rulers."

Should there be any doubt about the utility of studying early 18th century Chinese history, Professor Spence points out that across 300 years, it is not difficult to identify potential parallels with the present-day authoritarian regime.

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