



The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds

By Jonathan D. Spence

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"Like everything else written by Jonathan Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent* is an absolute must-read for anyone interested in China. Spence is one of the greatest Sinologists of our time, and his work is both authoritative and highly readable." ?*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

China has transfixed the West since the earliest contacts between these civilizations. With his characteristic elegance and insight, Jonathan Spence explores how the West has understood China over seven centuries. Ranging from Marco Polo's own depiction of China and the mighty Khan, Kublai, in the 1270s to the China sightings of three twentieth-century writers of acknowledged genius-Kafka, Borges, and Calvino-Spence conveys Western thought on China through a remarkable array of expression. Peopling Spence's account are Iberian adventurers, Enlightenment thinkers, spinners of the dreamy cult of Chinoiserie, and American observers such as Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Ezra Pound, and Eugene O'Neill. Taken together, these China sightings tell us as much about the self-image of the West as about China. "Wonderful. . . . Spence brilliantly demonstrates [how] generation after generation of Westerners [have] asked themselves, 'What is it . . . that held this astonishing, diverse, and immensely populous land together?' " --*New York Times Book Review*

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Distinguished Yale historian Jonathan D. Spence examines the influence that China has long exercised on the Western imagination. Drawing on literary, historical, and travel writing from the 14th century to the present, he shows how the fabulations of medieval writers such as Marco Polo gave way to more factually minded reports from business travelers and diplomats. This then turned again to the exoticism of poets such as Ezra Pound and Charles Baudelaire, and in our time, returned to the realism of writers such as Pearl S. Buck and Edgar Snow. Spence's tour of these various ways of perceiving China yields a vigorous and interesting book that is of a piece with his many other studies of Chinese history. --*Gregory MacNamee*

From Publishers Weekly

Chinese historian par excellence Spence (*The Search for Modern China*) has taken on the formidable task of exploring how Westerners have thought about China. He starts not with Marco Polo, but with the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck, who came into contact with the Chinese inhabitants of the Mongol capital of Karakorum in 1253, some 20 years before the better-known Venetian's travels purportedly started, and ends with the recollections of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. Included in the discussion are not only firsthand accounts by Jesuit missionaries, early diplomatic emissaries and, later, observers of the Communist revolution, but also works of fiction by those who had been to China (Pearl Buck, Victor Segalen) and those who had not (Daniel Defoe, Oliver Goldsmith, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges). The overriding theme is that most Western thought on China has been colored by the religious, political, economic or personal agendas of those doing the observing, or as Italian novelist Italo Calvino says in *Invisible Cities*, his novel about Polo and Kublai Khan, "the listener retains only the words he is expecting.... It is not the voice that commands the story, it is the ear." As in any such broad survey, the discussions of individual figures and the passages from original texts included are far too brief; however, in this case, they merely stimulate the reader's appetite to explore them further. Spence's book will appeal not only to those interested in history and literature, but to anyone looking for a perspective on contemporary discourse about China.

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From Library Journal

The enigma that is China has exercised a powerful attraction on Western minds for centuries. Travelers, sojourners, and those who have visited the country only in their imagination have offered us a kaleidoscope of Chinese exoticism, utopias and dystopias, realities and phantasms. Only Spence, the Yale historian and master storyteller (e.g., *The Search for Modern China*, LJ 4/15/90), could have woven such a brilliant tapestry from the threads of these Western travelogs, novels, stories, and plays. His cast of characters ranges from Marco Polo and 16th-century Portuguese explorers through Voltaire, Oliver Goldsmith, and Montesquieu to Mark Twain, Bertold Brecht, and Richard Nixon. Spence refers to these variegated accounts of China by the nautical term "sightings," which suggests something of the complexity of the relationship between observers and observed. This graceful book reminds us of the need to reflect upon our understanding of so protean a history and culture as China's. For all libraries.

--*Steven I. Levine, Boulder Run Research, Hillsborough, NC*

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Users Review

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