

JONATHAN SPENCE



THE CHAN'S GREAT CONTINENT

CHINA IN WESTERN MINDS

'Jonathan Spence is not only one of the greatest historians of China; he is as good as any historian writing today about anywhere'

Chris Patten, Daily Telegraph

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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For HAROLD BLOOM

—biding the moon

Till dawn should clear that dim frontier, first seen

—The Chan's great continent . . .

—Hart Crane, "The Bridge"

Preface

THE SHAPE AND CONTENT OF THIS BOOK REFLECT THE form in which the material was first presented—as the William Clyde DeVane lectures at Yale University in the spring of 1996. These lectures, named in memory of one of Yale's great teachers who also served as dean of the college from 1939 to 1963, are customarily delivered to an audience composed jointly of Yale students and members of the general public. They are thus expected to be scholarly enough to meet some basic academic requirements, but accessible to anyone who cares to attend.

Since I delivered them, these lectures have undergone various modifications. Partly these are the inevitable changes that accompany the shift from an informal oral presentation based on notes to a finished written version. Partly they involve the inclusion of quotations—sometimes fairly lengthy—from the original works cited, since in the lectures themselves each oral presentation was supplemented by assigned readings from the relevant texts. In some cases I have made cuts in the interests of concision, and at other times additions for the sake of clarity. In keeping with the original lecture format, notation is held to a minimum. Notes are used mainly to identify quotations, and occasionally to highlight a useful supplementary source. There is no attempt to give a comprehensive bibliography for each person discussed, or of works about them. Indeed, for most of the close to fifty people included here, discussions of China formed only a fraction—albeit to me a significant one—of a given writer's complete work.

Before I was invited to give the DeVane lectures, I had for some

years at Yale led a small seminar in which the students and I read and discussed numerous examples of the ways that China had been refracted over time in Western minds. I would like to thank those students collectively for the range of figures they came up with, and the adventurous ways in which they explored them. Several of the sources included in the lectures came from their suggestions, including the unlikely trio of Mary Fraser, Steinbeck's "Johnny Bear," and Richard Nixon. The current selection of forty-eight figures is culled from a number perhaps three times as large whom we read or discussed in one way or another; many of the figures omitted had striking or subtle things to say about China and their reactions to it, and their inclusion would have greatly broadened the panorama subsequently offered in the lectures and in this book. At the same time, however, they would have threatened to compress an involved story into a catalogue, and I wished to avoid that at all costs.

Each of the twelve DeVane lectures was followed by an hour of usually lively and sometimes excitable questions and discussion, and a certain amount of thoughts derived from those sessions has undoubtedly filtered in here. The same is true of audience comments at Princeton, Peking University, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where I explored some of these topics. I also owe thanks to my editor at Norton, Steven Forman, whose consistent skill in asking innocent-sounding questions that are almost impossible to answer, has, I trust, smoothed many rough edges and brought more clarity to the presentation. Mei Chin, acting as roving researcher, explored the worlds of eighteenth-century British taste and French late nineteenth-century exoticism with her customary imagination and aplomb, for which I am sincerely grateful. She, along with Annping, Yar, and Maddux, ensured that bringing this book to completion was more of a joy than a travail.

West Haven
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Introduction

ONE ASPECT OF A COUNTRY'S GREATNESS IS SURELY its capacity to attract and retain the attention of others. This capacity has been evident from the very beginnings of the West's encounter with China; the passing centuries have never managed to obliterate it altogether, even though vagaries of fashion and shifting political stances have at times dulled the sheen. The sharpness of the feelings aroused by China in the West, the reiterated attempts to describe and analyze the country and its people, the apparently unending receptivity of Westerners to news from China, all testify to the levels of fascination the country has generated.

This book seeks to give a sense of the multiplicity of intellectual and emotional attitudes that Westerners have brought to their attempts to deal with the phenomenon of China. So as not to give too formalized or deliberate an air to this process, I borrow the title from Hart Crane's idea of China as imagined by Columbus, sensed rather than seen in the pre-dawn dimness. The Chan (or Khan) had ruled China at the time of Marco Polo's thirteenth century account of the fabled land. In Columbus's mind he ruled it still. Drawing the term from the history of navigation and exploration, we would call such a moment a "sighting." A sighting in those contexts was fleeting or intermittent: one seized on whatever chance one had to get one's bearings; one found oneself by the often random viewing of the anticipated destination. By extension of this idea, in gunnery the act of sighting was the act of finding the range, of getting a balance or a bracketing effect so that one's own shots would hit the tar-

get. In earlier times, for example in the 1750s when Oliver Goldsmith, Commodore Anson, and Montesquieu were all writing in their very different ways about China, “sighting” was also used as a gaming term, specifically in the sense of cheating at dice. In the thirteenth century, at the time William of Rubruck and Marco Polo were first sharing their thoughts on the Chinese with a select few Western readers and listeners, “sighting” served as an alternate form for “sighing,” and “weeping and sighting” were not uncommonly found in conjunction.¹

The sightings of China that we will be considering were passed on to others in many forms, as diplomatic reports or as poems, as stage plays or as letters home, as philosophical tracts or novels. In the course of this book we look at forty-eight such sightings in some detail, spread across a period of over seven hundred years, from 1253 down to 1985. The first of these dates marks the year that Friar William of Rubruck set off on an ecclesiastical and diplomatic mission to the Great Khan in Karakorum, and his experience feeds inevitably into that of Marco Polo, at once the most celebrated and the most problematical of all the sightings we will be considering.

The legacy of Polo lay to some extent in the data that he provided, but even more in the curiosity that he aroused. The development of printing in the West in the fifteenth century brought published versions of his earlier manuscripts into readers’ hands by the 1480s, and it was one of these early editions that was read and annotated by Christopher Columbus. By the 1540s, the spillover from Columbus’s discoveries had brought the Portuguese to Macao and the Spaniards to the Philippines, inaugurating what can be fittingly called the “Catholic century” of China sightings. The reports, polemical tracts, and the novels that were written at this time—we look at five such examples—rooted China with a totally new level of specificity into Western minds, and introduced strong currents of emotion into what was becoming a heated European debate over the nature of

China and its people, and over the uses to which one might put the new information.

As the seventeenth century waned, and with it the peak of the Catholic nations' program of overseas conquest and expansion, the naval powers of the emerging Protestant states were ready to seize the opportunities this offered. Diplomats and soldiers from the Netherlands and Great Britain became the next group to explore China. These men saw themselves as realists, with certain tasks to perform; they viewed with a new kind of hostility China's attempts to force them to accept traditional forms of ritualized subservience, especially the kowtow, involving a series of nine prostrations before the figure of the emperor or even before the symbols of his authority in his absence. The British, who saw in such ritual observances an abandonment of national dignity rather than a convention of international relations, were inevitably headed for confrontation: such a passage can be traced through three of the sightings left to us across the century by Bell, Anson, and Lord Macartney.

It is an assumption of mine that the impact of China need have little or anything to do with the literalness or precision of an actual experience. Thus I follow the diplomats—who would have claimed to be realists—with their contemporaries who stayed away from China, content to transpose it into fiction. There was now more than enough material around for them to do so, and the creativity and stylistic force of a Defoe or a Goldsmith, along with the irony of a Walpole, spread thoughts about China to a far wider audience than ever before. This popularization of China, along with the fashion of imitating aspects of Chinese culture, was given the name of "Chinoiserie" in the French circles where it received its greatest welcome. In yet a third reprise over the course of the eighteenth century, we can see how powerful synthetic minds were also drawn to the China they had never seen. Goldsmith had his fictional Chinese narrator wondrously observe that the English were trying to reason him out

of his own country. Leibniz, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Herder can perhaps be charged with doing that, as each of them made his own cut into the available historical records in an attempt to create a system into which the totality of China as they understood it could be inserted—though at least the first three writers corresponded or conferred with those who did know China at firsthand.

The poets of the Romantic movement clearly offer one convenient bridge for moving from the revolutionary epoch that climaxed the period of the Enlightenment into the different world of the nineteenth century. But Jane Austen forms another kind of bridge, by marking the emergence of women as the makers of China sightings. Though it is only a premonitory flash, her use of Lord Macartney's journal in her novel *Mansfield Park*, and the lived experiences of her brother Frank in Canton, prepare us for the new generations of Western women who made more personal and protracted China sightings in the nineteenth century. Many of these women were Americans, who thus brought twin new perspectives of gender and nation to the China scene: as we move from Eliza Bridgman at the century's beginning, to Jane Edkins in its middle, and on to Sarah Conger and Eva Price at the end, through their eyes we see the charm of China tinged with deeper dangers, with the Boxer Uprising of 1900 serving as the fitting coda to their experiences.

In the mid-nineteenth century, for the first time Chinese laborers began to travel to the United States in search of work, and to construct around themselves their own frail simulacra of their native land in the form of American Chinatowns. For a generation of Americans, China had now come home, and the experience was unnerving to them. The sightings of China by Mark Twain and Bret Harte were compounded of bemusement, affection, and irritation; it was hard for them to see these new settlers in the context of an existing Chinese culture, and accordingly they tried to humanize their misapprehensions, blending their own experiences into fictional forms in which

they both absorbed and opposed the implicit rules of racial discrimination. Other writers who came after took the process a step further, and a specific new series of hostile stereotypes was the result: the Chinatown fictions of the later nineteenth century blended insensibly into the world of Fu-Manchu.

The French, at the same time, had been distilling the experiences and collective China sightings of two centuries into a fairly coherent type of vision which I term a “new exotic,” one compounded of violence, allure, and nostalgia. The three writers Loti, Claudel, and Segalen all lived in China for periods of time between 1895 and 1915, and believed they had caught its true sights, sounds, and smells. As writers of considerable power, they enlarged Western literary vocabulary even as they restricted the full play of Chinese personality in their own imaginative renderings.

Having identified—perhaps overconfidently—what seems to be a French exotic, I move to the question of whether some kind of American China exotic was also in formation, replacing the crudities of Chinatown characterizations with something at least partly rooted within China and Chinese culture. A film like D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* perpetuated a view of China that blended threat with vulnerability, but at the same time sought for some universal values at the culture’s heart. Ezra Pound’s protracted explorations into Chinese poetics and history, or Pearl Buck’s detailed attempt at a reconstruction of the values of Chinese rural life, in almost inconceivably different ways pursued similar themes. Harsher were the views of Eugene O’Neill in his retelling of Polo’s relationship with Kublai Khan as an anti-capitalist parable, or John Steinbeck’s tale of the destruction wrought by Chinese passions in a small western American town. But still, one could argue, they gave a universal dimension to what they depicted as a localized Chinese reality.

Polemics find a natural home in politics, and there was certainly a residue of Western rhetoric that could be applied to what were seen as new political forces emanating from China after the

Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The Chinese Communist Party was formed in 1921, the first great purges of the party by the Nationalist forces took place in 1927, to be followed by the period of rural guerrilla socialism, and the anti-Japanese war. The radicalization of China sightings crossed many national and perceptual boundaries. André Malraux moved from a stance steeped in the French exotic perception of China to a passionate fictional involvement with China's revolution as representative of man's fate. Bertolt Brecht saw within Chinese experience a way to grasp the levels of revolutionary ruthlessness and the paradoxes of compassion in such a context. American anti-authoritarians like Edgar Snow could find in China's guerrilla socialism and Mao's rustic ways a potential promise of salvation for the people as a whole. Graham Peck could fasten on the enigmatic smile of Chinese as the flickering point of focus for his own experiences.

The mystique of the rulers' power in China had dominated many Western sightings, ever since Polo's depiction of the mighty Kublai in the 1270s. During the late nineteenth-century period of China's weakness, and the forty years that followed the collapse of China's last dynasty in 1911, such a vision of centralized power had yielded place to one of localized violence and implicit threat. The re-establishment of Chinese central power under the Communists, and especially the nature of that regime and the violence of the Korean War, drew some observers' minds back to the earlier mystiques. But these views were tinged now with other dark experiences, those of Stalinism and Nazism, which between them seemed to have fostered new levels of totalitarian organization that could be blended into new forms of total tyranny and total power. Such a dark vision was spelled out by Karl Wittfogel in an analysis that deliberately recalled the great system-building attempts of the past two centuries, but also drew on historical records of China's emperors' past excesses. Though softer, the view of Mao's presence as in some ways close to imperial was shared by both Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger

when they made their celebrated 1972 visits to China in a bid to reopen relations between China and the United States. The mystique of the abuse and inner hollowness of allegedly absolute power was restated in fictional form by the French novelist Jean Lévi, whose own depictions of the imperial character circled back into the French exotic of a century before.

The book ends with the China sightings made by three twentieth-century writers of acknowledged genius, even though they never set foot in the country at all. But to close with them is to reemphasize a thought that runs through this book, that one of the proofs of China's strength is its capacity to stimulate and to focus creative energies at specific moments in time. In these three cases, we see how China for Franz Kafka served to channel his ideas on authority and individual endeavor, how for Borges it drew together the flow of time and the apparently endless permutations of human consciousness, and how for Calvino it allowed the intersecting of cross-cultural contact with the varying layers of memory and experience.

One can see that this is a book about cultural stimulus and response as much as it is in any way a book about China. As such, it is not in the business of assigning blame or praise to those who made the sightings. Often the stimulus was viewed as a negative one, and the response was correspondingly harsh. But at other times the stimulus was sweet, and those making the sightings remained in a state of blissful self-denial, regardless of other levels of reality that swirled around them. More often, as one might expect, the responses were mixed, and overlapped in space and time in ways that make tight categorizations virtually impossible.²

It can be objected that many of these sightings reified or in other ways denigrated China, and that is certainly true. Assessments of China and the Chinese people were often coarse-grained or inaccurate; they drew on imagination and stereotype as much as on any kind of informed application of intellect. By using the terms "Western" and "the West," I am similarly reify-

ing the culture in which I was born and raised, and one could argue—as so many have—that there is simply no such thing as the West. So be it. But those making the sightings we examine here felt that they shared in certain traditions that were different from those they encountered in China, or thought that they encountered, or imagined that they might have encountered.

Throughout this book we are dealing with individuals reaching out in their various ways toward another world, which each of them saw differently, but which they gave the same name, that of China. They did not necessarily understand it, or seek to do so. Most of them knew, as most of us know, that bigotry, gullibility, and ignorance are closely entwined. Most of them knew, too, that words can be violent and wound deeply. Certainly amongst them we find many examples of a language of dominance or dismissal; at the same time, we find many examples of a language of respect, affection, and awe. One can find cultural and historical roots for both sets of reactions.

As a historian, I am interested in the ways that levels of reality intersect and overlap. It is my implicit belief that bold generalizations are usually wide of the mark, and that the individual experience rarely matches the allegedly universal trend. It is in that spirit that I offer these sightings of a great but distant culture. We must imagine our pilots and navigators—and perhaps also our cheats, and those with broken hearts—holding rather simple instruments in their hands as they make those sightings. Furthermore, the hands that hold the instruments are often chapped with cold or sleek with sweat. Our guides are standing on sloping decks that shift angle without warning, and are often blinded by a burst of spray or dazzled by an unexpected dart from the previously beclouded sun. And the target of their curiosity remains distant and often somber—“the color of mourning,” as Loti wrote. And then, too, they cannot even be sure that they have come to the right place. But that, after all, is a risk that all of us must take.

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CHAPTER 1

The Worlds of Marco Polo

IT IS ENTIRELY APPROPRIATE TO THE COURSE OF OUR own exploration that the first Western work devoted mainly to China should be evasive and problematic. As far as we know, Marco Polo's book *The Description of the World*, usually known as the *Travels*, was dictated to a man named Rusticello in the year 1298, while Polo was in jail or under house arrest. Purporting to describe the travels that Marco Polo took through Asia between 1271 and 1295, and concentrating especially on the period from 1275 to 1292 when Polo lived and worked in China as an agent for the Mongol ruler of China, Kublai Khan, the book is a combination of verifiable fact, random information posing as statistics, exaggeration, make-believe, gullible acceptance of unsubstantiated stories, and a certain amount of outright fabrication. The same is true of other works written before and afterwards, but what matters to us about Polo's text is that it was the first such work by a Westerner to claim to look at China from the inside, and the force of the narrative description was strong enough to imprint itself in Western minds down to our own time.

Polo's is not the first account in a European language to discuss Chinese people with some specificity. That distinction goes to the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck, who in 1253 was dispatched to the Mongol capital of Karakorum, northwest of the Chinese border, by King Louis IX of France, in an attempt to win the Khan Möngke to the Christian cause against Islam. Though William did not get to China itself, while he was in Karakorum he noted down whatever information he obtained

from the Chinese living there. Rubruck realized that the “Cataians” he was meeting in the Mongol base area were the same people who had been known to the Romans as “Seres” or “Silk People” because the finest silk came from their domains. After noting that he was “reliably informed” that in Cataia could be found a city with “walls of silver and battlements of gold,” Rubruck gave a thumbnail sketch of the Chinese:

The Cataians are a small race, who when speaking breathe heavily through the nose; and it is a general rule that all orientals have a small opening for the eyes. They are excellent craftsmen in whatever skill, and their physicians are very well versed in the efficacy of herbs and can diagnose very shrewdly from the pulse. But they do not employ urine samples [*urinalibus non utuntur*], not knowing anything about urine: this I saw [for myself], since there are a number of them at Caracorum. Their custom has always been that whatever the father's craft all his sons are obliged to follow it.¹

Rubruck followed this observation with two equally precise sentences on Chinese calligraphy and paper money: “The everyday currency of Cataia is of paper, the breadth and length of a palm, on which lines are stamped as on Mangu's seal. They write with a brush of the sort painters use, and in a single character make several letters that comprise one word.”²

In other parts of his narrative, Rubruck showed a blunt skepticism about some of the Chinese information he was given. After recounting a story of how in eastern Cataia, among “soaring crags” there were little hairy creatures whose legs would not bend, and who were hunted down by means of traps baited with wine so that they could be pricked for the drops of blood that yielded a rare purple dye, Rubruck twice mentions that he was “told this” by a priest of Cataia but had not seen it himself. And as to the country bordering Cataia where people remain forever the same age once they enter, Rubruck comments that though this was “told for a fact,” he himself “[did] not believe it.”³ Despite its many values, Rubruck's report on Asia in which