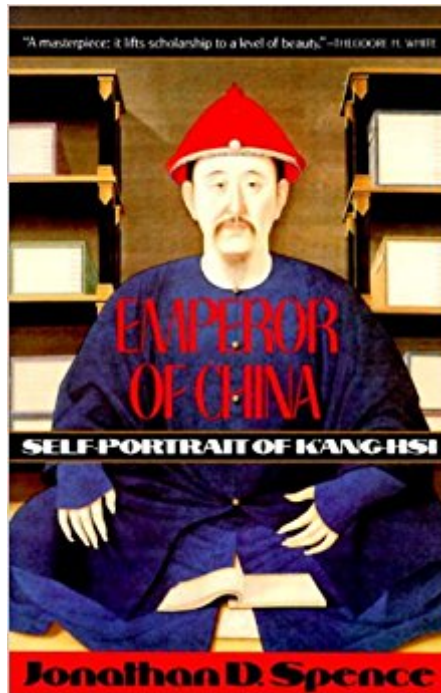




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Emperor Of China: Self-Portrait Of K'ang-Hsi



Synopsis

A remarkable re-creation of the life of K'ang-hsi, emperor of the Manchu dynasty from 1661-1722, assembled from documents that survived his reign. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a very interesting book by the distinguished Yale scholar Jonathan Spence. Spence's approach is often unconventional. He has written several books in which an important theme of Chinese history is examined by close analysis of a single episode of Chinese history. In this case, Spence's goal is to depict the center of the Chinese political system, the Emperor. Spence accomplishes this goal by editing the writings of an important Qing Emperor, K'ang Hsi, into an autobiographical work. This is daring and surprisingly successful. Spence is careful to show both private and public aspects of K'ang Hsi. A good deal of the success of this book must be attributable to K'ang Hsi himself. Through Spence's careful editing, K'ang Hsi emerges as a vigorous and articulate individual who seems to have had an attractive personality. This book is simultaneously edifying and entertaining.

In this book, Jonathan Spence has assembled a narrative montage from the fragmentary surviving writings of the ruler of a great nation who lived three hundred years ago and half a world away. In so doing, Spence has crafted a work that reads seamlessly as if it were Emperor K'ang Hsi's own memoirs. Knowing as we do that even democracies frequently fail to produce leaders equal to the task of governance, one is pleasantly amazed when a hereditary ruler proves more than able wisely

to govern in an enlightened fashion. In fact, in some ways the emperor comes across as very modern, so that the chapter entitled "Sons", with its strong supernatural component, strikes one as all the more disturbing -- like finding a skull while perusing beloved family heirlooms. I say this without intended condescension, because the events described in that chapter would be accepted matter-of-factly in many American Christian churches, particularly those with fundamentalist or charismatic leanings. I don't pretend to bring any deep historical/philosophical erudition to my consideration of this book, but I think that any book that illuminates the life of a great man is worth reading, and if he has qualities of wisdom and humility, so much the better, and if he lived in a time and place that I had little fore-knowledge of, the book is twice worthy. I highly recommend "Emperor of China".

When I picked up my copy of Jonathan Spence's book "Emperor Of China" I imagined it would be a book I SHOULD read and might struggle to keep going about a third in. I was pleasantly surprised! The way Spence has put together the material (16th and 17th century traditional Chinese scholarship) in a colloquial and easy to read manner is almost astonishing. It is more than readable, you can't put it down. The style, Spence says it is "an autobiographical memoir", draws you into the book and also into the mind of the Emperor. I think I've learnt more about the Emperor Kangxi in these 175 pages than I would if I had read a more detailed historical account. The Emperor's wisdom is deep; buy, read, enjoy and re-read!

Jonathan D. Spence has accomplished a lot in this remarkable biography of the second emperor of the last Chinese imperial dynasty Qing, K'ang-Hsi, for the general audience. Based on the writing of the emperor, court records and later secondary sources, book follows the emperor through his struggles with opposition, Manchurian and Han nobility, his troubled relationships with his numerous sons, his old age, and his legacy. Remarkable in its vividness is last few chapters, where the emperor legacy is laid out based on the official court-issued papers, and the informal drafts of the will. I would like to see more description of court ceremony; and perhaps a more thorough reflection on the Manchu / Han opposition; but those subjects are well covered in the other book by the same author (e.g. "The Search for Modern China"). Great starting point for anybody interested in Chinese history.

This well written book is about the character who patronized my Kangxi Dictionary. (And enough about insider jokes.) But seriously I recommend more books: Vincent Cronin's 1955 The Wise Man

from the West - Mateo Ricci; John M Rosenfield's 1973 The Courtly Tradition in Japanese Art and Literature - Japanese Script; Jonathan D Spence's 1974 Emperor of China - Kangxi; S Robert Ramsey's 1987 The Languages of China; Ray Huang's 1988 China a Macro History; RWL Guisgo's 1989 The First Emperor of China; Cecilia Lindqvist's 1991 China Empire of Living Symbols - Chinese Script (in Joan Tate's English translation); Jonathan D Spence 1996 God's Chinese Son; Kevin Bishop's 1997 China's Imperial Way; Richard Bernstein 2001 Ultimate Journey Retracing the Path of an Ancient Buddhist Monk - Xuanzang (with David Lindroth's maps); Jack Weatherford's 2004 Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World; Peter Hessler's 2006 Oracle Bones - Chinese Script; Christopher Beckworth's 2009 Empires of the Silk Road; Jack Weatherford's 2010 The Secret History of the Mongol Queens. Have a good read!

This is an excellent book of absorbing interest. Not only does it open a window on Chinese history as told in the first person by one of its greatest emperors, it sheds light on the nature of power and the way absolute monarchs exert their power. It is a unique book, touching at times and terrifying at others. Being an absolute monarch wasn't easy, even for an enlightened emperor. The book is essentially a collection of the writings of a Mogul emperor describing in detail his life and the way he exercised power, including the decisions he had to make about his use of capital punishment. This book has something for everyone who is interested in the world about them.

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