The Emperor of China: Self Portrait of K’ang-hsi. By Jonathan D. Spence

Jonathan Spence’s work stands in a genre apart from that of historical fiction, biography, or historiography. Drawing on memoirs and letters written by the Emperor K’ang-hsi himself, Spence (current president of the American Historical Association) uses these primary sources to synthesize a sort of posthumous autobiography, a “collected works” that reads like a story. While strict fidelity to the Emperor’s own arrangements is not maintained, the resulting work perhaps gives us more insight than would a standard autobiography written contemporaneously. The Emperor of China is useful both as a literary view of the inner sanctum of eighteenth-century Chinese politics, and as a glimpse into the mind of the most powerful man of his era. Spence divides the book into themes that frequently materialize throughout K’ang-hsi’s writings: “In Motion”—a section on action associated with governing, “Ruling,” “Thinking,” “Growing Old,” “Sons,” and a final section on K’ang-hsi’s valedictory. Taken as a whole, analysis of these themes forms a picture of the Emperor as a ruler, a father, and as a man.

“In Motion,” the first section, is primarily concerned with K’ang-hsi’s exploits as a warrior, hunter, and a general. He describes his prowess as a hunter, saying, “Most ordinary people don’t kill in a lifetime what I have killed in one day (9).” He is proud of his talent in using the bow, owing his skill to tutelage received as a boy. He notes that had his teacher not corrected him despite his status, had he been satisfied with “good enough,” he would not possess the skills he had cultivated. This became a common theme with K’ang-hsi—the value placed on diligence and high standards, and an unwillingness to settle for mediocre.

One of the most interesting sections of the book, “Growing Old,” details K’ang-hsi’s musings on aging, and the deterioration of the body and mind. This aspect of the emperor is often minimized in Chinese history in order to preserve the dignity of the office. However, in his valediction, K’ang-hsi openly discusses his weaknesses and physical degeneration. This version was not read publicly, and the image of the emperor as omnipotent force stayed intact, but the words we read in the future are a valuable insight. Medicine is discussed extensively, especially which types of medicine or practitioners are to be trusted.

“Sons” is the most painful part of K’ang-hsi’s memoirs, as it chronicles the slow but steady disintegration of the K’ang household. The heir-apparent, K’ang-hsi’s son by an Empress, falls into behavior patterns completely antithetical to his fathers’ teaching. This illustrates the problems with dynastic progression in China, and further explains the political intrigue involved as sides are taken and alliances made. The Emperor is notably
anguished that he must spend the latter part of his life agonizing over the exploits of his son and heir. His frustration is clarified in the final section, the valediction.

Spence presents the original version of K’ang-hsi’s edict, which was written in 1717 as the Emperor was nearing the end of his life. It contains reflections on the major successes and minor failures of his rule, but also trepidation about the age to come. In it he does not name a successor, and expresses deep exhaustion with his position. He is resigned to his fate, and that of his country. This version was not read, however, to the court upon K’ang-hsi’s death. The “final” edited version does name a successor, and conveys a tone of confidence and invulnerability rather than the musings of an old man. This rewrite is evidence of a bureaucracy eager to maintain its power through the fabricated words of a popular ruler. It is interesting historiographically to compare the two valedictions, as Spence does at the end of the “final.” He notes that it is more or less a cut-and-paste job of the original, which is interesting in light of his construction of the book itself. However, Spence, it seems, is truer to the source than the editors of the valediction. Characteristically, Spence introduces subject matter that begs to be studied from more than one angle.

_Empress of China_ is scholarly prose, leaving the historically-minded reader satisfied, provoked, and thoroughly impressed.

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