

# THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

## FIFTIETH CONGREGATION

### Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*

#### *A Citation*

#### **Professor Jonathan Dermot Spence PH.D., LHD, LITT.D.**

There is an affinity between history and law, for both depend on scrupulous research into matters of fact and evidence. Good lawyers, though, uncover not only the letter but the spirit of the law. Similarly, good historians must present the evidence in a narrative that strikes us as significant and true, faithful to the life and spirit of the people and their times. Professor Spence is such an historian.

There is also an affinity between history and epic, because they both deal with leaders, even heroes, who have lived and died as agents and victims of the great events of their times. The early epic poets were also historians of war and warriors, of great lovers, of nationhood, of religion, of legend, and of myth. In the eighteenth century, some English writers, the novelist Fielding and the historian Gibbon are the great examples, began to publish epics in prose rather than verse. While every good epic, whether in verse or prose, is some kind of history, not every good history can be an epic. Jonathan Spence's *The Search for Modern China* is a history book that is also an epic in prose. It is history that sifts the past to find cultural as well as political change, history that sets the past to uncover the present, history raised through the brilliance of its writing to the condition of literature.

Born in Surrey, England in 1936, Jonathan Spence read History at Clare College, Cambridge from 1956-59, before going to Yale for his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. In 1965 he was appointed as an Assistant Professor of History at Yale, achieving the full Professor rank a mere six years later. In 1976 he was given the George Burton Adams Chair of History at Yale and in 1993 was made Sterling Professor of History there. His academic awards are many: in 1978 he won the William C. DeVane Medal, he has been both a Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellow, he was awarded the Los Angeles Times History Prize in 1982 and the Vursel Prize of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters the following year. In 1987 he was Visiting Professor at the Peking University. From American institutions, he holds three honorary degrees.

His teaching has not made him neglect research, his research has not absorbed him so much as to prevent his writing, his writing has not been such as to prevent its publication: on the contrary his publications have been very successful both with professional historians and the public at large. The simple but significant dedication of his epic *The Search for Modern China* is "For My Students", a dedication that suggests the author's real care for his students, demonstrating that teacher, researcher, and writer are at their best one

living being, who combines all three activities, so that they feed and enrich one another. Jonathan Spence embodies another truth, that those who write well care; they write, because they care.

His other publications include almost a dozen significant books, such as *Chinese Roundabout: Essays in History and Culture* (1992), some of his own favourites, *The Death of Woman Wang* (1978), *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (1981), *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (1984), *The Question of Hu* (1988), and then his studies of foreign attempts to influence China, *To Change China: Western Advisors in China Sixteen Twenty to Nineteen Sixty* (1969).

These publications and all the others I cannot mention here, Mr. Chancellor, have not prevented Professor Spence from shouldering the burden of administration: he has been Chairman of his Department and Director of the Division of Humanities at Yale. He has been a leader in the development of Graduate Studies in History and of East Asian Studies at Yale. On the national and international levels he has served as Director of the National Endowment for the Humanities Seminars and has vigorously promoted Sino-U.S. academic exchange. In 1993 he was named Honorary Professor at the University of Nanjing.

His association with the Chinese University of Hong Kong is very natural in a Yale alumnus and teacher, for our links with Yale are strong. It is also logical in one who values China and Chinese culture. Furthermore, in 1992 Professor Spence delivered a series of public lectures in our university as the Distinguished Visiting Scholar of United College. I remember them with pleasure and also a seminar he gave in the History Department on that occasion. He spoke in such a way as to awaken curiosity in his audience so that they wished to find out more. That is the essence of good teaching.

In *The Outline of History*, H.G. Wells pointed out that "Our true nationality is mankind." In taking modern Chinese history as his field, Professor Spence has chosen to tell the recent story of at least one quarter of mankind. That an Englishman who is also American has succeeded so triumphantly, in the opinion of many learned Chinese readers, in this epic task of understanding another country, another culture, the one with the deepest sediment of the past, is indeed remarkable. It suggests, too, he has obtained this Wellsian, truly human nationality, the one nationality that really matters.

Jonathan Spence is a writer who makes history not just an academic exercise but something enticingly readable. Like all the best historians, he is essential reading for those who wish to understand human beings and their actions. Histories, we are told, begin in the hearts of men and women. If we read them carefully, they can make us wise. I count it my special privilege, Mr. Chancellor, to present to you a man with many friends among us, Professor Jonathan Dermot Spence, for the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.

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