



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*Treason by the Book* by Jonathan D. Spence  
Benjamin A. Elman

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helpful the annotated bibliographic guide to further reading for each chapter. This volume is the first of its kind, to my knowledge, that addresses some of the historical silences that have shrouded the role of women as soldiers. From the United States to Argentina and France, many Western nations have suspended or soon will suspend obligatory military draft lotteries for men. Thus, it seems a fitting moment to ponder what this transition could mean for the myth of the male citizen as soldier and protector, and this volume should stimulate critical and historically grounded reassessments.

PETER M. BEATTIE  
Michigan State University

#### ASIA

JONATHAN D. SPENCE. *Treason by the Book*. New York: Viking. 2001. Pp. xvi, 300. \$24.95.

This well-crafted book is about a famous incident that began in 1728 during the Yongzheng emperor's reign when a local teacher from Hunan named Zeng Jing relayed a secret letter via his disciple to the governor general of Shanxi province in Xi'an. Zeng alleged that, to gain the throne, the emperor had ruthlessly murdered his father and several of his brothers in power struggles in Beijing. Time was ripe for overthrow of the dynasty, Zeng thought. He appealed to Yue Zhongqi in Xi'an to lead a revolt against the Manchus and thus add honor to his ancestor Yue Fei, who in the twelfth century had fought against Jurchen invaders, the forebears of the current rulers.

Spreading a wide net, the emperor's officials captured the motley crew involved and tracked down every possible rumor and bit of classical scholarship that might have been the source of Zeng Jing's charges. The Yongzheng emperor publicly used the incident to overawe Zeng with his moral legitimacy and to put the rumors concerning his succession to rest. Zeng in turn gained his life, for a time, and returned to Hunan to live comfortably and thereby provide proof of the emperor's clemency. When the Qianlong emperor took power in 1735, however, he immediately set in motion proceedings to have Zeng executed for the licentious charges against his father.

Jonathan D. Spence presents his meticulous account as a "story about words" created by an emperor trying to clear his name and a local teacher trying to live up to the teachings of the sages. Between the lines of the thousands of "words" that were constructed to ameliorate this political dance between a struggling local examination failure and an emperor concerned about his public image, Spence ingeniously works in the vast investigative procedures that the Qing bureaucracy brought to bear on this single incident. From Hunan and Shanxi to Zhejiang province, thousands of local scholars, teachers, and officials became embroiled in the emperor's unrelenting quest for the living and textual sources surrounding rumors about him. The

power of an autocratic ruler to mobilize all his political resources to root out the fundamental traces and causes of the incident are for Spence both alarming and instructive.

Spence graciously acknowledges earlier work on the Zeng Jing case, particularly Fang Chao-ying's 1943 biography in *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644-1912)*, edited by Arthur W. Hummel, and Thomas Fisher's 1974 dissertation on the role of Lü Liuliang's classical scholarship, which inspired Zeng Jing's classical visions. In addition, Spence and his research aides have combed through a vast amount of new documentary sources in the Palace Museum in Taiwan and from the Beijing Imperial Palace Museum to ascertain the exact chronology of the emperor's actions during the incident. These new sources contain the complete, original memorials, reports, and edicts that were later "cut and pasted" into the summary documents used in the past to reconstruct the events. Spence thus refines the chilling details that make this "story of words" read like a mystery story.

Along the way, Spence provides us with a unique window on the lesser intellectual lights of late imperial China, local teachers and civil examination candidates who rarely advanced beyond the lowest level county tests. Growing from half a million licentiates circa 1650, such local men increased to about one million licentiates and some two million hapless candidates by 1800. Their travail "as failures within elite literary and official circles" provided breeding grounds for the political rumors, classical visions, and social discontent that the Zeng Jing incident represented. Although they both tried, neither the Yongzheng nor the Qianlong emperor could solve the problems of corruption, degree purchasing, or declining moral standards that overtook the local examination marketplace in the eighteenth century.

We specialists should thank Spence for bringing this unsettling incident to a more popular, English-speaking audience. Historians will learn more than they knew before about the incident, such as the merciless and ultimately counter-productive self-promotions that saturated the Yongzheng emperor's bizarre efforts to purify his name. Fang Chao-ying read the emperor's response as a sign of his "guilty conscience." Pamela Kyle Crossley contrasts the Yongzheng emperor's ideal of cultural transformation for both Manchus and Han Chinese with the Qianlong emperor's appeal to a vision of emperorship unique to the Manchus. For Qianlong, Zeng Jing was not an opportunity for turning the emperor into a classical sage-king but an affront to Manchu imperial dignity. Through this single incident, Spence has vividly presented how a Manchu emperor directed his full bureaucratic ensemble to a single purpose, in vain.

BENJAMIN A. ELMAN  
Princeton University