

Jonathan Spence

Reith Lectures 2008: Chinese Vistas

Lecture 1: Confucian Ways

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SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to the British Library in London. Sometimes called the "nation's memory", it houses millions of valuable items, including Magna Carta, Leonardo da Vinci's Notebook, and the National Sound Archive. It also houses the oldest book in the world, which was printed in 868 AD in China. This Chinese connection makes it an appropriate place in which to start this year's Reith Lectures. Our subject on this, their 60th anniversary, is China; and our lecturer, a man steeped in knowledge of this vast country, which of course in two months time plays host to the Olympic Games and is currently struggling to overcome the aftermath of a terrifying earthquake.

The title of the lectures is 'Chinese Vistas'. China's breathtaking economic growth over the last twenty-five years has transformed it into a great power. At the same time, for many people in the West its extraordinary past makes it an object of suspicion and mistrust. But there can be no doubt that it's a country which will have a significant influence over all of our lives in the years to come. In these lectures, we'll be exploring how it works and what makes it tick. Our guide is a man who knows China very well indeed. He's Sterling Professor of History at Yale University and is recognised as one of the foremost scholars of Chinese civilisation from the 16th century to the present day. "To understand China today", he says, "you have to understand its past."

In his first lecture, he's going back two and a half thousand years to Confucius, a man whose thoughts and ideas permeate the fabric of his country and make him still relevant to the China of today. The first lecture is called Confucian Ways. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the 60th anniversary BBC Reith lecturer: Jonathan Spence.

(APPLAUSE)

JONATHAN SPENCE: Well thank you for that warm welcome. It's a very special honour to be invited to give the Reith Lectures for me, especially in this year of 2008 when the series is celebrating its 60th birthday. To complete a cycle of sixty years is

considered especially joyful in China. Only one emperor is officially acknowledged in Chinese histories as having lived to see his reign enter a second cycle of sixty years. That was the ruler of China called K'ang-hsi (Kangxi) who reigned from 1661 to 1722, a sixty-one year span. So awesome was this achievement of K'ang-hsi (Kangxi) that his long-lived grandson decided to abdicate the throne in the sixtieth year of his reign so that he would not tarnish his grandfather's record. This act of abnegation was seen at the time as an admirable manifestation of the virtue of filial piety. It was of course noted at the time, though not publicly criticised, that the grandson who so nobly gave up his throne refused to give up any power (LAUGHTER) and reigned several years more - nameless, as it might be said. I can only hope that it is auspicious to entitle these 60th birthday Reith Lectures 'Chinese Vistas'. By using this phrase, I hope to direct our thoughts to the long view that China represents rather than focusing exclusively on the various problems and opportunities that China confronts at the present time. And where better to start such a venture than in the British Library with its immense holdings of Asian books and manuscripts?

In these four lectures, I will explore different aspects of China's long history, each of which has a different kind of tale to tell. The first lecture, today, we will be looking at Confucius in three guises: Confucius the man; and Confucius as the eternal teacher; and Confucius as an occasional villain. In the second lecture, we will focus on the intersections between China and Britain through trade and language across a span of three hundred years. In the third lecture, we will explore the many ways that the American Dream, as it is sometimes termed, was both boosted and undercut by different forces in China. And in the fourth and final lecture, we will prepare for the upcoming Olympics by exploring the Chinese changing perceptions of the body, from earliest times to the present.

As I was reflecting recently on the sixty years that have passed since the first Reith lecture in 1948, I was struck by the thought that it was especially apposite that the first Reith lecture was given by Bertrand Russell. Russell had lived for six months in China, from late 1920 into 1921, and he had the good fortune to be there at a time of cosmopolitan intellectual ferment that has rarely been replicated in China before or since.

In terms of Chinese time, the sixty year span of the Reith Lectures' existence has encompassed the entire life of Maoist China. In 1948, the future of China's fate was still in doubt and only in 1949 were the last Nationalist troops of Chiang Kai-shek's armies routed and forced to retire to Taiwan as Mao, from a rostrum atop the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing, declared the founding of the People's Republic. Whereas now, in 2008, at the very end of this cycle, Maoist doctrine seems a fragmented and largely antiquated relic, still invoked to some extent by China's Communist leaders but in the public gaze almost eclipsed by visions from a distant past. While the Little Red Book of Mao's sayings was in every Chinese hand in the years of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, the mass bestseller in China of the last few years has been a contemporary rendering and commentary on the Analects of Confucius with sales at the present time which exceed six million copies. But in the sphere of outreach education, the trumpeted news is not Mao's Revolution, but rather the wave of Confucian institutes for teaching Chinese language and culture that China is now setting up in many foreign lands. A recent Chinese government handout has cited the establishment of one hundred and twenty Confucius institutes in fifty different

countries. In the UK, there are currently ten. And in just the last few months in the United States, I visited Confucius institutes in states of the union as different as North Carolina, Arkansas, Texas and Rhode Island. Many, many more are on the way.

The question that arises is an obvious one: why Confucius? Is Confucius in some sense a replacement for Mao? If so, what on earth does that mean? Just in the space of this sixty year cycle, has China leapfrogged back into its own past? What are the Confucian ways the Chinese now seem to be seeking? A historical reprise here, it seems to me, can offer us the first of our four vistas.

Confucius was a historically verifiable person, born in 551 BC, who died in 479 BC at the age of 72. He lived most of his life in the state of Lu in what today is known as Shandong Province. He was not an aristocrat, but rather a member of the scholar or professional class who managed to become a mid-level bureaucrat. He loved music and poetry, loved history and the practice of the rites, and he sought to define and practice the art of ruling. He spent fourteen of his years in wondering and only had a few fleeting years in which to practice what he preached. By most conventional standards, he might be considered a failure. Those who would have most vehemently denied that charge were a handful of young men with political aspirations who chose to study with him for varying lengths of time anywhere from a few months to several years. At various times and places, these student disciples - if we may call them that - recalled different conversations with Confucius, and either they or their own later students entered a mixture of his sayings into the fragmentary text, which is known as the Analects. These discussions on politics, morality, duty, deportment, ritual propriety and social and family responsibility are as close to Confucius's own words as we can come. Though he did not write them down himself, the words that comprise the Analects constitute a coherent view of the world as seen by especially acute eyes; and some two thousand four hundred years later, the Analects remain at the core of what we might call a Confucian canon.

Even from this brief discussion, we can see that Confucius is a most unlikely figure to be made the centre of veneration. He did not have conventional leadership qualities, and his resonance - to me at least - comes from his lack of grandstanding; his constant awareness of his own shortcomings; his rejection of dogmatism; and his flashes of dry wit. These qualities, mixed with an ongoing patience with the hasty questions of the young, and his determination to help them think rather than force their adherence to a particular point of view. Few other world figures, I think, could have phrased their life goals in the disarming yet proud way that Confucius did, as recorded in the Analects. And this celebrated passage, known widely in China, just goes as follows:

At fifteen, I set my heart on learning. At thirty, I found my balance through the rites. At forty, I was free from doubts about myself. At fifty, I understood what heaven intended me to do. At sixty, I was attuned to what I heard. At seventy, I followed with my heart what my heart desired without overstepping the line.

These six stages of life for Confucius were clearly moral stages in which the need to strive at different levels was confronted and conquered. And of course his six stages are worlds away from Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man where growth and the path to age and death are seen in terms of physical fluorescence and decay. Confucius is concerned with intellectual motion in his charting of our life's course. At fifteen, he

tells us, he sets his heart on learning because he has already learned and absorbed so much of the history and poetry from the past. At thirty, he finds his balance through the rites that bring order and meaning to people's relations with each other and with their rulers rather than the rights - R.I.G.H.T.S - as we now view them in terms of our freedom to act according to our own inclinations. At forty, Confucius felt free from doubts because he was beginning to understand the purpose of his enquiries into the moral world and the wellsprings of purposive social action. He was fifty when he came to sense what heaven intended him to do. This was not a judgement about religion for this was heaven as a compelling force beyond interpretation, a silent pointer to the past and the future. At sixty, Confucius felt attuned to what he heard, as striving diminished; and at seventy to achieve one's innermost goal without further pressures or insecurities. How rich that seemed. How good an end to a long life.

The period in which Confucius lived was called the Spring and Autumn Period, and it was alive with intellectual ferment. At the same time, it was a harsh world in which a shrinking number of states competed viciously among themselves for hegemony. Most of his life, Confucius had been what we might now call a student of politics and he had few illusions about being able to curb humans of their obsessions. Indeed, many passages in the Analects show him struggling with the question of when to put one's own lifetime of hard won experience in the service of a ruler whom you know to be immoral or a ruler who is too lazy or stupid to think through the consequences of his actions. In the centuries after Confucius's death, many other schools of thought grew and flourished for varying periods of time. Some directly disagreed with him while others created arguments from completely different perspectives. The protracted period of warfare came to a temporary end in 221 BC with the unification of China under the harsh rule of the Qin (Ch'in) Dynasty. The Qin (Ch'in) founder believed in the equalising power of coercion and of legal codification, and under his severe rule the moral arguments of the Confucian thinkers seemed thin and irrelevant. Yet after the Qin (Ch'in) Emperor's death, the Analects of Confucius, along with other works by Confucius' intellectual precursors and descendents, now gradually came to constitute a kind of canon, constantly expanded by learned commentary. And with the increasing standardisation of China's written language and the growth of a class of trained bureaucrats, these works were constantly copied and circulated and gave a kind of undergirding to the shape of China's governance across time. From this sprang the practice of using the accumulated texts from the past as the basis for a standard examination curriculum that could be used as a filtering device for checking the intellectual skills of candidates for bureaucratic or military appointment.

By the 12th century AD, something approximating a state Confucianism was in place and over time this came to encapsulate certain general truths that had not figured prominently in the original Analects. For example, now included under this broad definition of Confucian thought were hostility to or the demeaning of women, a rigid and inflexible system of family hierarchies, contempt for trade and capital accumulation, support of extraordinarily harsh punishments, a slavish dedication to outmoded rituals of obedience and deference, and a pattern of sycophantic response to the demands of central imperial power.

It was not until the late 16th century that a concept of a Confucian mode of thought began to percolate into the West. The initial source of this information were the Jesuit Catholic missionaries who first entered China in the 1580s and managed to learn the

Chinese language and to make both friends and converts among the Chinese intellectual elite. They soon discovered the complexity of the Chinese admiration for Confucius and were forced to confront the knotty problem of whether the so-called worship of Confucius conducted in the state schools that prepared students for the advanced examinations constituted worship in a theological sense or were merely an expression of homage to an outstanding individual from China's remote past. They faced parallel problems in determining the nature of the ancestor worship that was conducted in shrines to be found even in modest Chinese homes and in redefining the exact nature of sacrifices to heaven and earth that were conducted at the correct ritual moments by China's rulers.

It was in the 1680s that a new kind of Chinese appeared on the intellectual scene in Europe. That was young Chinese who were very often well trained in Latin by Jesuit teachers and brought their knowledge of Latin and their native language back to Europe, usually in conjunction with the visit of one of the Jesuit fathers. One of these I'm most interested in is called Shen Fo-Tsung. And Shen arrived in fact in London in 1687, bringing with him a copy of a very precious document at that time: a copy of Confucius' Analects translated completely (this time) into Latin. And once that book circulated and the Latin edition was reviewed in various learned journals of the time, we in Europe had a chance to really now get a kind of fix on what this belief was all about.

This version of the Analects, read and digested by many, included among the readers Leibniz and, later, Voltaire; and, thus, the importance of this on later Western philosophical thinking was immense. And some of this burden of translation and scattering of the word came from the 19th century onwards through Protestant missionaries who then began a major translation exercise, the largest ever attempted, into the whole Confucian canon as it was included in the first four major books and then the five longer commentarial books from the Confucian era. And these themselves tumbled over into the state ideology of China and were finally rejected in China itself by 1911 when the last dynasty came to an end. Though not, I should mention, until there had been a fairly strong attempt to incorporate Confucianism as China's state religion. And it was in the turmoil of events that took place following the collapse of the last dynasty - the foundation of a republic, the attack on the Confucian belief system and the search for new Western meaning to curb onto China's own structure - it was that world that Russell moved into in the 1920s. It was an extraordinary time and was the inheritance, if you like, of a vast period of history. And it is to these stories that I'll be returning in the future lectures, including some discussion of the way that the state persecution of Confucius was carried over into the People's Republic of China after 1949; was sharpened intensely in the period of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 76; and then, in this strange transmigration as it were, has re-entered the discourse in China as these Confucius institutes and the resurrection of classical studies of difficult Confucian texts have once more taken a stronghold in the People's Republic in the period after the death of Deng Xiaoping as Mao's successor. Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY: Professor Spence, thank you very much indeed. I'd now like to bring in the audience for questions and comments. And I'd ask you to keep them pretty

concise, if you would, and resist giving lectures of your own in the interest of reflecting as many different views as possible. I'm going to start by calling in Zhang Lifan who's a Chinese journalist based in London and is Editor of the Financial Times Chinese language website. Zhang Lifan?

ZHANG LIFAN: In the past three decades, China has been embarking upon perhaps the greatest wealth creation movement in human history. What does Confucius say about making money and wealth (LAUGHTER) and what might he say today about the growing wealth gap and the social disparities in China today? Thank you.

JONATHAN SPENCE: Thank you. Well that's the first time I've been asked to speak for the sage. (LAUGHTER) So let's try. I think the central answer would be that Confucius was not against the making of money. He was interested in the rules that should go with the making of money and he felt that the pursuit of profit itself could never be ultimately as important morally and internally as the pursuit of virtue and integrity. And we also know that one of Confucius' favourite - I call them student disciples - one of his favourites, Zi Gong was from a commercial family and was himself a merchant trader. And Confucius praised this young disciple as saying that the making of money and the commercial world was a good way of sharpening the wits and getting you to understand other points of view.

SUE LAWLEY: But I thought, Jonathan, you mentioned during the course of your lecture that there was... Confucians anyway had a contempt for trade and the accumulation...

JONATHAN SPENCE: (*over*) Yes. I said that when they slowly began to be revised, as our thinking about Confucius got simplified and speeded up - which was in fact after really the 12th century, the period of Zhou Xi for the Chinese here - then these new aspects of Confucianism took on these traits. But in fact Confucius himself, to answer the question, going back to those original documents, we do not find a contempt of trade.

SUE LAWLEY: Quite convenient that Confucians today don't frown on conspicuous wealth, I think. Let me call in Rana Mitter. He's a lecturer in modern Chinese history and politics at Oxford and the author of several books on 20th century China. Dr Mitter?

RANA MITTER: It seems to those of us who look at China today that it's fuelled by two or three systems of thought that seem at first glance mutually contradictory. I mean the reappearance of Confucianism reminds us that Confucianism looks back to a golden age in the past; whereas also modern China is fuelled by both the remnants of Communism, a progressive looking system of thought, and of course this new marketised, privatised economy, which also derives very much from modern assumptions. What's the compatibility of these seemingly contradictory systems of thought that underpin China today?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I'm not sure that they can be reconciled. It seems to me a highly complicated mix. Of the three, the Confucian side is more on the aesthetic and the intellectual side, and this learning is really something that I think many people thought would have vanished in the People's Republic. What does the leadership

really think of this, who are the Confucian experts in the leadership itself is opaque to me. I don't know who knows these texts.

SUE LAWLEY: (*over*) And why are they encouraging ... why are they encouraging I think is really the point...

JONATHAN SPENCE: Well why are they encouraging?

SUE LAWLEY: ...a belief in Confucianism?

JONATHAN SPENCE: Yes. It seems to me that there has been now a realisation in China of how much of China's precious past the Chinese destroyed themselves. I think Confucius means pride in your own past, an attempt to reassess past burdens and promise of the country. And the Chinese Communist government gets credit now for re-establishing these particular values.

SUE LAWLEY: Let me call back in Rana Mitter because I think what I sense behind your question was a suggestion that maybe the Chinese government, we cynics or sceptics might say, are using it as a means of control because you know Communism has failed, they don't want capitalism. Perhaps Confucianism fills a gap.

RANA MITTER: I mean certainly the fact that the current leadership under President Hu Jintao talks about "a harmonious society" brings to mind a Confucian rhetoric. I guess the direct question I'd want to put back though is is it meaningful for us in the West to say China is a Confucian society?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I would not say this was a Confucian society. I would say it's a society where many more people are reading difficult Confucian texts than were a few years ago. What is the government doing about this? Is it sort of hypocritical or artificial in some way? Maybe it is, maybe it has some connections with a harmonious society. But Confucius lived in a really riven society with extraordinary levels of violence and difficulty in everyday life, so to read the Analects and have them ... you know read them aloud at a Cabinet meeting or something would have an extraordinary effect. (LAUGHTER) I don't know how they would be ultimately handled. I think it's a grand question and I think it hasn't been solved yet.

SUE LAWLEY: But if Confucianism weren't there for the encouraging on the part of the Chinese government, then the need for the Chinese people to have something to fill that moral vacuum...

JONATHAN SPENCE: Yes.

SUE LAWLEY: ... might be filled by perhaps less desirable ideologies like Western ideologies. Not least Christianity, for example. And we have on the front row here Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Cormac Murphy-O'Connor. Your question, Cardinal?

CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR: Professor Spence, when Pope Benedict wrote last year to Catholics in China, he called on the state to respect authentic religious freedom. I'd like to know how you would describe a Confucian

understanding of authentic religious freedom and, in the context of your lecture, what interpretation might be placed on that by the current leadership in China?

JONATHAN SPENCE: That's difficult. (LAUGHTER) I think the government finds this an opportunity. It wants to reach out, I think, to those who are practising Catholics in China, but it still wants to keep a strong bureaucratic hold. And it might from that build a kind of institutional control that's even stronger than in the present, so I think the Pope is going to have a hard time convincing the Chinese to change their attitude about this kind of religious belief.

SUE LAWLEY: The Pope is rather intent on doing that, isn't he, Cardinal?

CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR: Yes.

SUE LAWLEY: But how many millions of *unofficial* Catholics do you think there are worshipping in China?

CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR: Oh well, I think there are a huge number and I think they're going to increase in years to come.

JONATHAN SPENCE: There are meant to be many millions, many millions.

CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR: But I think what Pope Benedict is trying to encourage is a sense where there is a space within the great China for religious liberty, especially for Christians, who have an authority. I think the trouble is that there's an authority outside China which they don't really like.

JONATHAN SPENCE: They don't like at all. (CARDINAL LAUGHS)

SUE LAWLEY: Called the Vatican?

CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR: Well you've said it. You're right. (LAUGHTER) So I think we'll just have to wait and see. But I do think that in a way Christianity and Christians in China, whether Catholic or other Christian denominations, there's an opportunity for them now which they didn't have before.

JONATHAN SPENCE: Yes, practice of different forms of worship is much more widely spread. But at the same time, there are maybe tens of millions of Catholics who are practising in so to speak an unofficial way, an underground way. But your point is absolutely well taken that this government in China, as all the previous ones, have been extraordinarily alert to the problem of underground religious groupings and their dangers to the state.

SUE LAWLEY: Can I just take time out to ask the Cardinal. The Pope did say back in 2006 that he might go to the Beijing Olympics. Do you think he will?

CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR: Well I think he very much wants to go to China, just as his predecessor Pope John Paul. It was one of his great ambitions.

SUE LAWLEY: But is he *going* to?

CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR: Is he going to? Well, again, that depends on the government in China. They have to say you will be welcome. If he is welcome, I think Pope Benedict will go.

JONATHAN SPENCE: I think it could be said by the government, as it was said to President Nixon in a difficult period of time, (LAUGHTER) and it opened up things quite remarkably. It's possible sometimes to say something fresh and invigorating and there could be an extraordinary effect. There could also be a complicated backlash from elements of the church that the party's not sure how to control.

CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR: Well I shall encourage Pope Benedict to go. (LAUGHTER)

JONATHAN SPENCE: Yes, I would certainly, absolutely.

SUE LAWLEY: Let me... I see Lord Ashdown, Paddy Ashdown, a fluent Mandarin speaker, as we know, sitting on the front row there.

LORD ASHDOWN: (greeting in Mandarin)

SUE LAWLEY: A quick point?

LORD ASHDOWN: Professor Spence, I wonder if I could tempt you into contemporary comment and even a little bit of prediction. As China now faces the challenge - and it was referred to earlier - of how do they socially democratise after having economically liberalised, what is it that will fill that unifying space, that culture (and later I suppose Maoism as a form of that culture) fill to unify the nation?

JONATHAN SPENCE: The debate is so focused now on how on earth can this generation of leaders pass on peacefully to the next succession of leaders the power they hold at the moment in China without gaining some other source of legitimacy. They've got to do this. But the vacuum has mainly been a move away from rigorous Maoist tenets to much looser kind of free market tenets and a more overt reliance on the law as generated from the Communist Party centre and a very weak constitution. How can this endure?

LORD ASHDOWN: If I may, I mean you accept there is then a vacuum...

JONATHAN SPENCE: I would...

LORD ASHDOWN: ... which previously things like Confucianism might have filled and yet we don't have it... ??

JONATHAN SPENCE: (*over*) It might have done. And for some Chinese, for some Chinese I think it probably is not a vacuum in a Communist sense. I mean people still have some elements of faith or belief and hold onto some of the things that might have been too simply dismissed as just Maoisms.

SUE LAWLEY: I can take a quick comment here.

CORINNA-BARBARA FRANCIS: Corinna-Barbara Francis. I'm from Amnesty International. I research on China. If we can talk about an international, global system, one of the bases of that is the idea of universality - of universality of rights, of universality of obligations as well.

JONATHAN SPENCE: Right.

CORINNA-BARBARA FRANCIS: Do you have any sense whether this revival of Confucianism in China will have any impact on China's acceptance of this international idea of universality of human rights, for instance?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I would assume that some of this is going to come through market structures and credit structures and shared economic growth goals. It might even be shared like they were talking about the earthquake: shared humanitarian values and China's willingness not only to receive but to give as well.

SUE LAWLEY: But implicit in the question, I think, was that you know it's an autocracy; there is a top down way of governing going on. I think that's probably the question, isn't it: how far should we compromise what we believe should happen in terms of religious freedom or human rights and social freedoms in order to accommodate China as it moves into taking its place in the modern world?

JONATHAN SPENCE: This is such an incredibly ... (LAUGHTER) No, it's an unbelievably difficult ... difficult problem.

SUE LAWLEY: No, I know...

JONATHAN SPENCE: And I'm trying to think about you know problems of shared or mutuality among human rights, deciding what rights we have to interfere with other countries. I mean I find this a hard problem. And it's not just that individual Western countries do have you know a complete monopoly over certain forms of virtue. (LAUGHTER) It depends how you ... it depends how you assess the courage. I mean there's unbelievable courage among many young Chinese ... well Chinese of all ages, trying to use the law in China and use the constitution that there is in China to stop these particularistic abuses, but certainly to use the law at present to redress wrongs against the local party structure is very definitely to risk imprisonment and worse. But there is a kind of battle being joined, I think, here - a legal battle about rights, human rights and possibilities at least of acting as a sort of ratified defender of people when you truly believe they've been wronged very, very seriously.

SUE LAWLEY: I see a few more questions here, but I would...

JONATHAN SPENCE: Yes. If they're going to stay this difficult, we can take... (LAUGHTER) ... we can maybe have an extension.

SUE LAWLEY: I'd love to hear if there are any Chinese voices out there anywhere. If you'd like to put up your hand just to make a quick comment. But in the meantime, I'd like to go to the Archbishop of Canterbury no less who's sitting on the front row, Dr Rowan Williams, who went on an official visit to China a couple of years ago, didn't you?

DR ROWAN WILLIAMS: That's right and the contacts I've kept up since then. But one of the things which struck me there was that we were not talking just about a moral vacuum in general, but a vacuum in what was once before the Cultural Revolution essentially something which guaranteed everyone's welfare. In the absence of that is quite a development of small local NGO's, a volunteer ethos beginning to grow, civil society beginning to spring up. But my question really is how all of that volunteer ethos with its inevitably pluralist assumptions, how that sits with a Confucian approach to society?

JONATHAN SPENCE: We find traces of it very early in China, strong traces of most people being left free to do entirely you know their own work on their own land. This is a rural vision in the early Chinese text. But there is an important caveat; that a certain amount of the shared productive capacity among farmers, for instance, has to go to the state in order to make this freedom possible. The NGO's, to leap forward some twenty-five hundred years - I know for instance those who've been active in AIDS research and prevention, of those who've given all kinds of pro bono legal assistance, and these are really among the heroes I think of contemporary China. The courage you need to do this is considerable and the damage to your family can be remediable. That's a powerful vision. The key fact that in China the extraordinary disequilibrium of income goes with enormous freedom in terms of startup companies and so on, but again - as the headlines keep reminding us - the conditions in such sort of startup environments can be much worse for workers than they would be in an old-fashioned state run Maoist steel plant. So from this might come a kind of vision of economic activity that would let more room you know for individual conscience, change in curriculum in the schools. All of these would be part. They make me more positive, I must say, when I think about the range of things being attempted.

SUE LAWLEY: Jonathan, we're getting a little pressed for time, so I've got a couple of questioners who have been having their hands up for some time. Jo Glanville back there. Jo Glanville is Editor of Index on Censorship. That's the magazine, as we know, which champions the cause of free expression across the world.

GLANVILLE: Thank you. Professor Spence, I'd just like to bring the subject back to human rights and to ask whether there's likely to be any more space for free expression in a Confucian China or whether it would just be exchanging one form of authoritarianism for another?

JONATHAN SPENCE: My point I think I was trying to make is that there is no absolutely clear sort of practical, structured way that Confucian belief need or indeed can be used you know to completely control a state and control all expression. But Confucius was very, very conscious of the dangers of speaking out and that to me is very interesting and is maybe a kind of presentist echo. There's a huge backlog, if history's any use to us here, there is a very strong potential backlog in China of deeply intelligent questioners and very courageous questioners and we needn't worry that that's going to stop.

SUE LAWLEY: I'm going to call in for a last question now. I see him sitting out there. John Simpson, the BBC's World Affairs Editor.

JOHN SIMPSON: I've noticed in talking to some quite senior Chinese officials that people are increasingly now talking about the state as the servant of the people instead of the people as the servant of the state. And yet in the last couple of months, we've seen things which for a Western country would be pretty minor actually - demonstrations about Tibet, for instance - yet we've seen how nervous the Chinese authorities have become in the last couple of months as the Olympics get closer. How do we relate these kind of things - the idea that people should be looked after properly and the state should serve them, and at the same time the state should get really upset if the system is shaken?

JONATHAN SPENCE: Well I think again this is as hard as all the other questions have been. (LAUGHTER) How do we deal with this? How do we think this through? I think for the current leadership at least, this is kind of one thing at a time. Our moods change rapidly, so that for instance the Tibetan mood that we were in, many of us, you know the outrageous behaviour and so on, was softened in a sense by the earthquake and human compassion.

SUE LAWLEY: You mentioned to me in a conversation we had earlier that the earthquake could be interpreted as a kind of nature being out of kilter and somehow a judgement on the Chinese government itself. How deep would that...

JONATHAN SPENCE: Well that takes us back to the worries long ago at the Tangshan earthquake where we do know that the government did try and stop a spreading of the news of the Tangshan earthquake in 76. I haven't checked the government's use of other earthquakes since, but I...

SUE LAWLEY: (*over*) But do you genuinely believe that that would be a feeling that's running...??

JONATHAN SPENCE: (*over*) Well the kind of thing that could lead to turmoil ... If a great many things are going wrong in conjunction with a really serious natural catastrophe, that is a dangerous moment in any society. I do think that it's strongly dangerous in China and I was very, very struck at the New Year's holidays in China with over a hundred million people on the move when these huge blizzards brought a standstill to the train service and people were in a kind of desperation with their children, they were freezing, they had no food, there was no trace of a toilet, people were sick, had no trace of a hospital. The government seemed to be totally incompetent. And I as a historian, my mind was racing back to moments in 1813, 1797, 1642, 1585 and so on when some kind of conjunction of extraordinary incompetence by an autocratic regime linked to manifestation of nature as a force being really angry and out of kilter. These had been catastrophic for tens of thousands of people and in at least three cases had nearly brought down the government. This earthquake didn't happen to do that and it seems to me the authorities have tried to respond swiftly to a nightmarish situation. But the only truth I think to my remark there might be that given the scale of both the natural phenomenon and the governmental incompetence and the human suffering, that would be now, as in the past, an extraordinarily volatile and difficult moment for the Chinese to handle. Thank you.

SUE LAWLEY: And there we must leave it. Thank you all. Thank you very much to our hosts here in the British Library. Next week we'll be in Liverpool, home of Europe's oldest Chinese settlement, and there Professor Spence will be outlining the history of the relationships between Britain and China in his second lecture which he's called 'English Lessons'. But that's it for this week. For now, I'd like to thank Jonathan Spence very much for the Confucian way, dare I say, in which he dealt - here's your quote from your lecture - with great patience with our hasty questions. Jonathan Spence, thank you very much indeed. (APPLAUSE)