

Jonathan Spence

Reith Lectures 2008: Chinese Vistas

Lecture 4: The Body Beautiful

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SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to Lord's Cricket Ground in London for the last in this year's series of BBC Reith Lectures. This is one of the world's most famous sports grounds, which in 2012 will play an important part in London's hosting of the Olympic Games. That's still four years away; but in only six weeks time, this year's Olympic Games will opening Beijing and it's that connection which brings us to the home of cricket today.

The subject of these lectures is Chinese Vistas. So far we've heard how the ancient Chinese philosopher *Confucius* still influences Chinese behaviour today. We've been to the oldest Chinese community in Europe in Liverpool to learn about Britain's relationship with China, and to New York to try to understand how America will come to terms with its new, powerful Asian rival.

Now we bring the lectures to a close by looking ahead to the eighth day of the eighth month in 2008 when the world will be focusing on China more closely than ever before. By hosting the Olympic Games in Beijing, China has opened itself up to international scrutiny. Like it or not, the games are forcing it to the centre of the world stage where everything about it is being judged and weighed minutely.

Our lecturer is one of the world's greatest authorities on China and in this, our final programme, he examines China's attitudes to sport and athleticism; what he's called 'The Body Beautiful'. Ladies and gentlemen, will you please welcome the BBC's 2008 Reith lecturer: Professor Jonathan Spence.

(APPLAUSE)

JONATHAN SPENCE: Thank you and thank you for coming. In this, the fourth of the Reith series, as Sue said I'll be exploring the theme the Body Beautiful. And my idea here was to somehow try and give a long range view into China's past, to link it with the upcoming Olympics. Now one thought I had as I began to think about this topic was if we scan the classics in Chinese early poetry texts and in philosophical texts and in the works of Confucius himself and some of his disciples, we in fact find that the idea of sports or athletics or exercise is surprisingly prominent. And it makes more complex one sort of pattern, which I had thought at first would be very neat; that we could look at the famous Terracotta Warriors, which many of you may have seen either in the British Museum exhibit or in China itself, with the idea of great massed troops - so the idea of fitness in the organisation of the mass and the body armour and

the strong, inflexible face of the Chinese soldier with, for instance, an idealised idea of the Greek athlete from early sculpture with the kind of perfect body and the dreamlike inter-connection with athletic prowess. But the Chinese side, I think, gets us away fairly rapidly from this idea of kind of the mass produced, formalistic warrior into something more complex, and linked I think much more to ideals of character. And so when we look at the intersection of personal character with the form of exercise, one gets a new kind of view of what China's charioteering was like; for instance the writings about the use of chariots in warfare linked to the idea of the way you control the horses who pull the chariot; the way you respond through the way you hold the reins, through the delicacy of your touch, your responsibility is part of the story.

And you can find many examples of that. In archery, (and that's fascinating that Lords will be the centre for archery in 2012) because in the early Chinese texts archery is immensely important as a physical and mental discipline, and as a discipline that depends on amazing precision of timing as you draw the bow back and then, as the texts tell you, the archer pauses for what can be an incredibly long time with the absolute maximum tension on the bow; and the disciples and those learning from the master sort of are watching and almost imitating this pause, this amazing pause when all the physical strength is concentrated, and then when the arrow flies it hits the target. This again is seen as a moral kind of world and a ritualistic one, not just as athletic.

Looking into this again a bit more, I was surprised that there were many references to both diving and to swimming, linking this again to the idea of how the body can cleave through the water almost effortlessly and how you can enter even the most turbulent rivers with a dive that is so perfect that it doesn't really interrupt the surface of the water; you become one as it were with the water and its own actions.

And many of these texts in discussing some of these aspects of the body and its operations, they point out that though these may look like competitions contention is not the point; that's not the centre of what we're trying to do here. And instead of contention, it is the ritual and the rhythm in sport, in athletics, in the actions of the body that we must be watching for.

Now I don't want to spend too much time on the intermediate period except to say that if you look at China from a history of sports perspective, you do find many, many complexities, just as you would in the philosophical traditions or the political traditions or the artistic traditions, and you can see different sports as they come into China and the way that the Chinese themselves practise them. Most famous from paintings, I would guess, would be the polo, horseback polo in China, played at a furious pace, apparently, with great tenacity. And there may well be Central Asian roots in some of these sports, particularly the ones involving cavalry or militaristic action on horseback. We know that women played polo as well on horseback and this again is shown in texts and paintings from about the 8th or the 9th century. There are other paintings that show women playing what looks somewhere between golf and croquet. I don't mean to show my absurdity. I mean they're holding sort of sticks and there's obviously a ball, but exactly what is the level here between kind of a golf swing and a croquet swing, the painter doesn't seem to make quite clear. But that is one of the sports and so, certainly by the 10th, 11th century, were various kinds of

kickball; kickball, not I think here accurately translated as soccer or football, but kickball as gymnastics. And one has often seen youngsters playing with a soccer ball. Nowadays they run the ball across their bodies and over their hands and through their arms, and the idea of the game is to keep the ball from *touching* the ground and then to pass it onto another partner and so on; maybe like a Chinese version of what in the States has become absolute Frisbee, if anybody plays that, where incredible levels of exercise are designed to keep the Frisbee disc from ever touching the ground. So kickball, gymnastics, and even commoners being invited by the Emperor to play kickball with them, according to one text that's recently been studied.

The martial arts were in many different forms; and, again, the martial arts of China introduced ideas of internal harmony, of discipline, of mental concentration and of use of the imagination in the way that you posed kind of the problem that you set yourself and the way you challenged a contender.

In the last Chinese dynasty, which is where I've spent a lot of my own scholarly life - from the 17th century through to about 1911 - this was a cavalry dynasty. We think often of China as maybe rather sedentary at the Imperial levels, but this was a tough cavalry series of tribes that had conquered China in the 17th century, and thus we find the idea of cavalry and dexterity and courage in the saddle and the idea of hunting, big game hunting as a very major part of these themes.

And perhaps getting a bit nearer to a cliché about China, but it was certainly true, in this last dynasty military examinations became incredibly important as that was the way you recruited people from the upper levels of the martial bureaucracy. And here, mounted archery was the specialty most tested in these exams. Every person trying to pass the exams had to gallop their horse down a kind of groove in the ground. It looks quite dangerous and tricky. You dig about six inches down and there's a long trench, and the examinee had to gallop down this and then had three chances to hit static targets on the left hand side as he drove firing the bow like that. And then they tell you in the text how many points you should get for near misses, and if you hit the target and the arrow bounces off, that is no good and so on. But there were also tests in swordsmanship and also in weightlifting and from some particularly beautiful 18th century paintings, we can see not only how popular wrestling was - very, very intense wrestling, often on sort of mats laid out in front of the Imperial tent - but also, again to my great delight, skating - figure skating by the warrior troops as you can see them gliding down the most amazing kind of rink-like tracks and firing as they go with archery but skating archery. I don't know if anybody has done that here (LAUGHTER) but it seems to have been a volatile and exciting form of exercise.

But in all this, something is lacking again from the Greek warrior tradition. The people are very thoroughly dressed. They are either in martial uniforms or (in the cases of women athletes) they're wearing long robes or long clothes. Again there's nothing to do in that sense of the *Body Beautiful* with glowing reports of pectoral muscles and so on. The men are strong and sturdy, but often quite tubby and also round shouldered, nothing to do with some of these clichés; and the women also are very thin, almost attenuated, and it doesn't seem that they again were admired for robust body technique.

Now these are sort of background factors to what I find an intriguing kind of history and there are two elements that I feel we have to try and tackle, at least briefly. We know, or at least many of you may know, that for a long time, probably a millennium, Chinese women had bound their feet. And this is a topic that is extraordinarily difficult to research; it's intimate and it's private to the women's chambers in China. But from maybe the 11th or 12th century, the mothers would bind the feet very tightly of their children, their daughters, men didn't have to go through this except in sardonic novels, by the way, when men were made to go through foot binding to try and find a female spouse. But the mainline practice was to break the toes under the foot, so that the foot itself was only about two and a half to three inches and the woman had to walk on this bound foot. And the historical question and the aesthetic question is why on earth did this start, what exactly was the purpose of it? Was it erotic or aesthetic or practical in some way? Was it to keep the women at home, as some observers claim; make it very hard to get out and about, in other words, and compete in a man's world? There are many different pseudo explanations, but we don't know. We just know that women by the 18th, 19th century of a certain social class upwards would almost have to bind their feet and would have done so, which made them ... really inhibited very seriously any walking or motor actions. And at the same time, the men (because this was a conquest dynasty by Manchu warriors from the North) the men of China had been made to braid their hair into a thick and glossy pigtail, which would hang down the back and they would shave the front of their forehead. And this idea of the pigtailed Chinese male was one of the ways that the clichés were built up about the nature of Chinese maleness, but in fact it was a compulsory habit adopted by Chinese males at the orders of their conquering tribes from the North who had done their hair that way. So the men were made to take this kind of custom; the women were there binding their feet. And then into this world, we begin to burst in the later 19th century by that of athletic competition and the idea of the body freeing itself from its trammels.

And so in the 19th century, particularly, as China moved towards a new era athletically, both the cue of hair, the pigtail of hair, and the bound feet came under intense and fierce social pressure. Men were forbidden by the state to cut their hair, but for instance male students going to Japan to study, which became very common in the later 19th century, or coming to the United States to study or to Britain, which became moderately common after about 1860 to 1870, such Chinese men found it extraordinarily hard to walk through Edinburgh or to walk through New York with a glossy four foot pigtail of hair hanging down their head and they slowly, often surreptitiously began to cut the cue (as it was called) to free themselves bodily, hirsutely to free themselves. Going back home, I wondered what they did. I found, to my great delight recently, they often rented pigtails and fastened them back on when they went home. (LAUGHTER) People like me had to buy the pigtail and sort of sew it on the back, and there isn't really much study of what you did if you couldn't grow a pigtail at all. But this double need of the women and the men to adjust was really coming a part of life by the turn of the last century, by 1890 to 1900.

And then the idea of linking schools in athletic combat, so to speak, became part of the new education in China at the time, much of it sponsored by missionaries. But the idea of competitive athletics was very much geared to the missionary school system, initially mainly for boys, but from about 1905/1906 onwards girls and/or women would be able to compete. And I should say here that girls probably of a poorer social

background, financial background, hadn't usually bound their feet because they had to work on the farm or they had to engage in trade in shops and carry heavy loads and so on, and certain Chinese secret societies forbade the women from binding their feet as well. So you had elements within the populous who were more likely than others to be able to enter this new world as it were. And the idea of meets, of schools coming together or communities coming together, was first established definitely round about 1904 or 1905. And the first mixed athletic meet, which had a very complex relationship to the Chinese social structure of the time, the first women meet athletically, I think, was 1911 just before the last dynasty fell; and within a year or two, you were getting joint athletic competitions in which boys and girls or men and women, were able to compete, though of course in gender separate ways.

None of this though prepared one for a second hurdle, which was particularly strong in China, certainly until the 1930s, which was the sheer shock of the sight in the society (for those who were not sympathetic to this change) of bare legs on women athletes or bare shoulders, bared arms, of the kind of singlets and shorts. The whole idea of a society that had been very much a robe wearing society even in cavalry exercises - the shock. As you look at early pictorial magazines and so on, you get a fascinating view of what this must have seemed like to older contemporaries who of course often tried to shut down such competitions.

Then commerce reared its head very early on in this saga, as we might expect. Business people saw the advertising possibilities of the *Body Beautiful*; they began to explore how far they could go in their advertisements. Certain sides of Chinese industry got more involved than others, but particularly for cigarette ads - China was becoming a cigarette society from about 1890 - cigarette advertisements; tonics - tonic drinks, tonic pills, powders; toothpaste - these were early big sponsors. Milk - the milk industry was a major one as China was covered with advertisements for milk as a healthy endurance kind of drink for a healthy nation. And this whole concept of a healthy modernity for China, being linked to this sort of liberating influence and the commercial sphere and the body itself, its freeing of the body channels, this became very much part of the world in China by I'd say about 1913 to 1950.

And so it is from somewhere around there that the linkage between sports and nationalism becomes particularly important in China; something I suppose we all take for granted to some level now. But we find it sort of infiltrating itself in all kinds of political pamphlets and writings from the turn of the century, 1900 to 1910. We find it, for those of you interested in Communist China, we find it in Mao. Mao's very early writings were on physical exercise, including some of the sports that I've mentioned, particularly swimming, hiking, covering long distances, taking some kind of risks in order to strengthen the body; and by strengthening the body, you strengthened the nation; and you strengthened the female body to strengthen the male body and so between them lead to a new kind of strengthened and energetic citizen, Chinese person, both men and women. So it had very, very complex elements to this.

To be fit citizens of the new state of course put terrific weight, I think, on the athletes and on the schools that were training them. It also began to introduce complex ideas of who would be allowed to represent China when. And this isn't just a problem of Taiwan identity versus Chinese identity in the later 20th century, though this is a little bit of the story, but it was partly the idea of pure blood Chinese, whether they could

have inter-marriage in some way, whether they would still be eligible athletically. And we know that China reached out as early as about 1914 or 15 in Asian games to sometimes draw entire teams of pure blooded Chinese back to compete in China, if you see what I mean. I'd never known anything about this until I realised that the Chinese had for instance reached out to get an entire baseball team from Honolulu to play in China - entirely a Chinese team but nevertheless based in Hawaii. And, similarly, a little later, bringing in the whole Hong Kong soccer team, which was also entirely Chinese, to increase the love of soccer in China itself.

Some of those would only be curiosities, but by the 1930s they became deadly serious. And this idea of identity became deadly serious because of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, starting in the 1930/31 period; and as Japanese increased their hold on Manchuria, which was of course largely populated by Chinese, they began to wonder whether they might not use the puppet state of Japanese Manchuria to incorporate Chinese athletes as it were unto the Japanese flag. This got very difficult when the Japanese occupying government of Manchuria in 1932 decided to take China's leading sprinter, who happened to be in Manchuria at the time, and have this sprinter represent Manchukuo, the puppet regime in the 1932 Olympics. And this aroused enormous passions in China and led to a successful attempt to get this athlete to come south of the border with Manchuria and to be enrolled as a Chinese athlete representing China and then to go to the Los Angeles Olympics of 1932. And so the first ever Chinese Olympic involvement is deeply enmeshed with problems of nationalism and identity. China's team in 1932 in Los Angeles was one, and I think this was a brave athlete who went and competed I think in both the hundred and the four hundred metres distances. He was given an enormous welcome when he arrived in Los Angeles because, as papers realised with surprise, he was saluted by all the Chinese migrants who were already in the American West Coast and so he had a kind of triumphal tour, to people's surprise, to the venue where the races were being held and so he got this enormous send off. He didn't qualify, but he did well and showed certainly that Chinese short distance runners were able to compete at a very serious level with the best athletes from other nations.

And it was partly in response to these incentives and other urgencies that China sent its first major contingent to an Olympics, apart from this one lone runner, which was to the German Olympics of 1936. And the team there not only ... it didn't win medals, but it did compete well in a number of sports - including, to my surprise, bicycle racing, which turned out that China's Champion cyclist was I think living in Belgium and so they got him instead of cycling for Belgium to cycle for China. And so once again we get this idea of how does nationality mix with sport and then national identity and so on. There were no great triumphs there, but one of the great friendships was formed apparently when Jesse Owens became a kind of private coach to one of China's leading sprinters and gave them tips and tried to help them move up in the hierarchy, in the rankings.

And also it raised a question, which I won't deal with here because some of you may want to comment on this, the idea of is... this Body Beautiful that's been geared to the Olympics for so many years now, since the 1890s, is it really geared to a Western concept of the body and the internal structure and the physique and the natural balances of the body or are those older Chinese traditions worth exploring in terms of international goals and aesthetics of skill, of physical strength? And here, particularly,

the Chinese gave Wu Shu martial arts and body motion demonstrations in Germany as part of the Olympics, which I gather were very well received. But they didn't lead the Olympic communities to change the rules of the game so that more sports suitable to what we might call the Chinese body or even the Japanese body or an Asian body. These were not given a major prominence at the time.

And then of course 1948 was the next... the second I guess of the Olympic Games in London. And in 1948, this I think marked probably the low point for Chinese morale. It was the last year of the old Nationalist government against Mao's Communist; the last year of the Nationalist Party under Chiang Kai-Shek. Some of you may still remember those days. And apparently, according to the anecdotal literature at the time, we know that the Chinese government was desperately short of funds by 1948 and inflation was a nightmare. The currency had essentially disintegrated like the German currency had disintegrated in the early 1930s. And the team, the Chinese team that got to London in 48, was not apparently even able to afford to rent space in the Olympic village housing that was available. They had to go to local Chinese run hostels. They could not afford to pay the going price for meals at the Olympic canteens. And when they had finished and failed to win any medals, but they did have an interesting team, they apparently had to borrow the money to get flights home. And by early 49, the regime had been destroyed and the Communists had begun to take over.

Really from the early 50s, when relations with of course so many countries were soured by the Korean War, which raised many, many difficult problems of relationship with China, especially in the United States, but we began the beginning of a tussle, if you like, between who represented China and how between the Taiwan regime and now the National Chinese regime on the mainland. But slowly Taiwan got pushed on the defensive more and more, though it was still occasionally allowed to compete or some athletes might compete if they took on an identity that more fitted the identity given to them by the mainland regime of the Communist government. And it seems to me that by 19.. There were many ups and downs, but by 1984 the Chinese really rocketed into sort of a very prominent position, I think. That was the second of the LA games. Remember they'd only had one runner in 1932. In 1984, they sent major teams in a huge range of sports and those games were boycotted by the Russians, the Russian athletes, and so that gave the Chinese a chance to star, as far as I can see, in several sports where the Russians had been dominant before. And I was wondering if some of this might have been because of coaching from Russian athletes for Chinese athletes who were then left without Russians to compete against. There are some of you here, I know, who know this story much better than me.

But it was in 1984, according to a quick scan I made, that the Chinese began to get gold medals. I think they were in high diving, women's diving and women's fencing, male gymnastics. And other medals, though not gold, were won by the Chinese team in precision shooting with pistol and with rifle, in volley ball, weight lifting and various other sports.

Now the last thoughts would bring us to the present. Are the Olympics major ideological tools for something else and, if so, what do we mean by that? A key argument here is often put on the 1988 games, which were held in South Korea, and the impact of those games are stated by many scholars and historians and others to

have drastically changed the nature of the South Korean government and made it much more accessible to outside pressures of various kinds and made its people much more confident of criticising their government. And one point then might be that the Olympic promise as it were is one of freedom and new and open developments.

But certainly the Chinese had seen that the Japanese had held the games successfully, the South Koreans had held the games successfully; why not China and when was China's turn going to come? And many of you may remember the Chinese fought passionately to get the 2000 Olympics. There was nothing more exciting for them than the idea of a new millenarian Olympics being in China's soil; and a complex battle, which again some of you may have been involved in here - I know some of you were - to make sure that the Chinese got the seat or did not get it, this occupied a lot of the Olympic skilful operators at the time. But China failed and there was a real sense - I remember being in China when the vote went against them - there was a mixture of shock and I thought genuine sadness and humiliation that they hadn't been allowed to get the games. And so this led to a passionate re-attempt to get the 2008 games, which of course is what we are now going to be viewing soon.

Now I want to end with a quote from Bertrand Russell in fact. Russell was the first of the Reith lecturers and they were wonderful lectures, enormously ambitious and mischievous and so on, as Russell often was. But in the third of those lectures, I noticed a rather startling sentence from Bertrand Russell. It was in his third lecture. It was in the year 1948 when the games of course were in London. And Russell wrote in the third of his lectures - and I quote very briefly: '*Poetry, painting and music used to be a vital part of the daily life of ordinary men as only sport can be now*'. And I thought about that. I wondered is there any real message here? Would we agree with that or not? Have we lost one group of common denominators and only left ourselves one other? Has sport now become so all embracing, so all enduring, of such absorption to all of us that it can compensate for other things in life?

And my last thought would be we may not agree totally with what Russell was trying to say, but sports certainly I think offer a possible way to link global cultures and to think through the meanings of three very different kinds of word: competition, cooperation and tolerance. And those have been among the themes that I've tried to explore in the Reith Lectures. Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY: Jonathan Spence, thank you very much indeed for that fascinating outline of Chinese athleticism. Now I'd like to invite the audience here at Lord's Cricket Ground to discuss Chinese attitudes to sport, to the body and to the staging of the Olympics. I'm going to begin with Sir Craig Reedie who's on the front row here, who was a Scottish badminton player. He's a member of the International Olympic Committee and he played a key role in winning the 2012 Games for London, I know. Sir Craig, your question if you will?

SIR CRAIG REEDIE: Professor, thank you very much for that splendid lecture. Can I ask you a question about current times? Would you share the view that the awarding of the 2008 games to Beijing and to China has been a catalyst for increased media freedom and a number of other social and legal improvements in Chinese life?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I think it's very hard to find absolutely tight correlation, but many, many people have been to China who wouldn't have been. Tens ... Hundreds of thousands are going, indeed millions maybe are going who would never have gone before. There's certainly been a lot of freeing up or partial freeing up of many areas, but China remains a profoundly closed society in other areas and it may well take more than these particular games to change all those patterns; they're central to the life of the country. But there has been shifts. How much we can you know use the Olympics, I'm not sure.

SUE LAWLEY: Gentleman here ... yes?

BRAD ADAMS: I'm Brad Adams with Human Rights Watch. I think the question I'd like to ask you is you know I think the Communist Party leadership thought that this would be their coming out party, that everything would look pretty; they thought they could airbrush dissent out of the picture. And it's turned out, as in the last six months they've cracked down on dissent, that they've jailed activists, that they've put other people under house arrest, they've threatened many lawyers and writers and journalists. I wonder what you think the party leadership will take away from this when it's all said and done? Will they think well this was really bad for us because so much stuck to us and we wish we hadn't done it and we'll have to open up? Or will they think well we got through this, this wasn't so painful after all, and you know we can be tight and be on the world stage?

SUE LAWLEY: Jonathan?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I think perhaps you're right on the track when you say that they hoped this would make things easier, you know it would look more favourable. There might be a period of partial loosening up and then a period of harshening right after the games. I never thought it would solve everything. It obviously could not solve many of the human rights problems... I would say it's more favourable than not for those who are seeking broader rights and broader criticism of their own government.

SUE LAWLEY: I'm going to bring in Sir Philip Craven who's President of the International Paralympic Committee, who's also a member of the IOC and is a five times Paralympian in wheelchair basketball and in swimming. Sir Philip, your question please?

SIR PHILIP CRAVEN: Thank you. Thanks, Professor Spence, for a really interesting lecture. But you know when one pursues an ideal, and in this case the body beautiful, there's always the danger of discarding certain groupings that didn't make the theoretical grade. So my question to you is do you think that with the Paralympic Games coming to China that the Chinese people can change to an embracing culture where persons with a perceived disability can be the decision makers about their own lives?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I do know that from recent competitions at the paralympic level, the Chinese have been extraordinarily active and indeed very, very giving in that level to their own athletes in international competition in the paralympic world,

though I think it would still be true that, for instance, in access to historical sites and in old buildings and so on in China, you know access is very difficult.

SUE LAWLEY: The gentleman here... ?

GEOFF ADAMS-SPINK: Geoff Adams-Spink, Age and Disability Correspondent for BBC News. I was last in Beijing in November 2007 and trained a whole group of blind journalists in the principles of disability equality, and the reality for them is of systematic exclusion. I was shocked, for example, that it was their common experience to be thrown off public transport simply for being blind, and the so-called China Federation of People with Disabilities is almost entirely run by non-disabled people. Now Dame Tanni Grey-Thompson says that the Paralympics will do more for disability in China than ten thousand years of history so far. I wonder wouldn't it be more honest of disabled sports men and women to refuse to take part in what is really a sham in terms of inclusion for disabled people in China?

SUE LAWLEY: What, a boycott of the Paralympics?

GEOFF ADAMS-SPINK: Yes.

SUE LAWLEY: Which of course we should point out that China actually came top of the medals list last time round in the Paralympics... But I wonder, Jonathan, if there is any historical explanation for the attitude of the Chinese towards all the things we've been talking about, you know disabilities of various kinds? You know I'm thinking again, there's a recent news story, isn't there... there's a handbook been issued for Olympic guides that they should treat - let me quote to you - they should treat disabled athletes carefully because they're likely to be "isolated, unsocial and introspective; they're likely to be stubborn and controlling; they're likely to have a strong sense of inferiority".

JONATHAN SPENCE: I think on the whole that was an attempt to write a pamphlet guiding people. It's meant to be for general guides to the groups of foreigners. And an enormous amount there is the nature of the translation. I think the words and the way they were used and the translation that was picked up by the press - in some cases I would say with a kind of glee, a kind of anti-Chinese glee - I think was a complete ... you might say was just very, very clumsy translation by not very well trained Chinese translators who now will make the language much more sympathetic. And I mean it doesn't mean that they are hiding some dark secret. They're learning how emotionally charged these issues are, how words really do matter. We've all learnt this through what is loosely called political correctness. But there's much more to it than that. As you learn a vocabulary of what wounds other people, you change the way that the ideas go with the vocabulary. As you alter your approaches to another culture, you know you can gain from it. So I think ... I don't see deep historical boundaries you know against the disabled in the Chinese family structure. If anything, I think the family structure would be encouraged to look after those with disabilities at the family level.

SUE LAWLEY: There's a comment over here. Lady there.

WENDY WU: Thank you. My name is Wendy, Wendy Wu. I want to correct the gentleman at the front because he said actually Federation of China Disability actually run by non-disabled people, which is not correct, because I did disability you know research for a professor in Beijing University last year, Professor Chun who is also the mentor of our Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. And actually he really wants to push this agenda forward and I think China are just getting started on this direction now. It just needs time you know to move forward, put more infrastructure and resources in place and to push this agenda. Thank you.

SUE LAWLEY: Thank you very much for that point. I'm going to take a couple of comments from the floor. Gentleman there.

RANA MITTER: Rana Mitter. I teach modern Chinese history. Professor Spence, in your account of the historical development of sports in China, there was one term you mentioned not really in detail, which is the term Social Darwinism - the pseudo scientific idea very common in the late 19th, early 20th century, that nations and races could compete with each other in the same way that species did, a sort of version of survival of the fittest. What was the importance of that idea in the shaping of Chinese idea of Olympic sports?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I steered clear of the term itself, Social Darwinism, though it does have great importance in late 19th century China onwards. This was a very major influence on Chinese thinking. We know that in the Cultural Revolution again people began to look at ways of not exactly pre-selecting but in some cases of actually encouraging marriages people with certain athletic backgrounds. There is a recent book called 'Mao's Last Dancer' that looked at the training given to children who were selected for perfect dancer's body type at the age of about eight and then this young Chinese talks about the excitement in the school when the measurers came by. The measurers were those with tapes and calipers who came from various national dance studios and so on who wanted to train these children to work for the Cultural Revolution. So there are many ways in which modification you know has come along because of either Social Darwinist or different kinds of geneticist theories at the time.

SUE LAWLEY: Jonathan, I'm going to move this on because we're running out of time. I'm going to take a point here.

ANNA CHEN: Thank you, Professor Spence. My name's Anna Chen. I'm a BBC, I'm tall, robust, not at all attenuated, sadly, and my feet are...

SUE LAWLEY: A BBC as in British Born Chinese?

ANNA CHEN: As in British Born Chinese. (LAUGHTER) And my feet are size seven. I couldn't help noticing that the Chinese security smurfs who were guarding the Olympic flame recently were tall, healthy and handsome and very good looking while the bobbies, the British bobbies accompanying them on the bicycles were sadly not.

SUE LAWLEY: This is a subjective judgement.

ANNA CHEN: Totally, totally. I admit that, Sue. There seems to be a clear reversal of the stereotype; that the small Chinese physique was due to some sort of genetic deficiency rather than other factors such as diet and confidence.

SUE LAWLEY: A quick point...!

ANNA CHEN: I was wondering if this reaction was part of a wider fear of the Chinese becoming physically stronger as a metaphor for economic strength?

JONATHAN SPENCE: It would fit with the earlier discussion about some of the implications of Social Darwinist thinking. Certainly it also raises the problem that a huge amount of the change may be dietary, as you mentioned yourself; that with altered diets and better food, more planned eating habits in general, the Chinese - and more exercise, more *mandatory* exercise in school - the Chinese are indeed taller. I mean just look at parents visiting their children at any school in China and you will see many of the youngsters, both men and women, towering over their parents. You know so there is certainly a change in body types. There's now a childhood obesity problem, which is now much more widely discussed in China, and that is another side of the shift.

SUE LAWLEY: Jonathan, I can see Matthew Pinsent ... Sir Matthew Pinsent, Olympic oarsman who is now wanting to ask a question.

SIR MATTEW PINSENT: No longer oarsman and certainly never attenuated. (LAUGHTER) From the outside now, China is seen as a sporting super power; they certainly will win the medal table for the first time in Beijing. I wonder if you could comment how they see *themselves* in sporting terms?

JONATHAN SPENCE: Well I think they would like to hear you say that. I mean they would say it's now, as part of the changes globally and so on, China is now ready to meet you know one on one, or team or team, and ready to play a strong part in global athletics. I think they feel this strongly and I think we can expect some stunning competitive results from this....

I mean I'm going to be there and I've never been to the Olympics before, but I want to go to this one.

SUE LAWLEY: Jonathan Spence, that brings the curtain down on this year's Reith Lectures. In six weeks time when the eyes of the world will be on China and the Beijing Olympics, we shall see how some of the things that Jonathan has been talking about are put in practice. But that's it from Lord's. Our thanks to the MCC for hosting us here, to all of you for coming, and of course to our BBC Reith Lecturer 2008: Professor Jonathan Spence. From the world's most famous cricket ground, goodbye.

(APPLAUSE)