

*Ideas of Power: China's Empire in the  
Eighteenth Century and Today*

*JONATHAN D. SPENCE*

THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at

University of Utah  
October 15, 1997

JONATHAN D. SPENCE is Sterling Professor of History at Yale University. He studied at Clare Hall, Cambridge, and received a Mellon Fellowship to support his graduate studies at Yale, where he received his Ph.D. in 1965. In the spring of 1987 he was a visiting professor at the University of Peking, and in 1994 was named honorary professor at the University of Nanjing. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a member of the American Philosophical Society, and a corresponding fellow of the British Academy. In 1988 he was named one of the Council of Scholars at the Library of Congress. He specializes in the history of China since the sixteenth century and is the author of numerous publications, including *The Search for Modern China* (1990); *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (1984); and *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (1982). In 1996 he and his wife, Chin Annping, published *The Chinese Century: A Photographic History of the Last Hundred Years*. He is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship.

My current interest in exploring the ideas of power that were prevalent in China during the eighteenth century —and in comparing those ideas with the ones prevalent today —stems from a curious action taken by the emperor Qianlong on November 29, 1735. On the surface, the incident looks harsh, but completely routine under the then prevailing modes of justice: the emperor called for the rearrest of a formerly convicted man living in Hunan province named Zeng Jing and ordered him brought to Beijing for trial. After a hurried examination, Zeng was found guilty and executed by the most savage penalty allowed by the law, death by dismemberment.

The unusual nature of the incident stems from the fact that Zeng had been pardoned by Emperor Qianlong's own father, Yongzheng, seven years before. Not only that, but Zeng had been pardoned by Emperor Yongzheng in 1728 with an elaborate display of publicity perhaps unprecedented in the annals of imperial benevolence. For although Zeng had been charged with treason, and found guilty by the chief officials in the realm, Emperor Yongzheng ordered that he be forgiven completely. Zeng was even given an official position, along with government funds to purchase a house and land in his native province. To publicize this act of extraordinary benevolence even further, Emperor Yongzheng ordered the compilation of a special book in four chapters, summarizing his generosity to Zeng Jing and the reasons for it. The book was printed at court expense in 1730 and distributed to every one of China's close to fifteen hundred county magistrates. The magistrates in turn were ordered to see to it that every candidate for the state examinations in the whole of China read the book and digested its message.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a succinct summary of the case, see the biographies of Lu Liu-liang and Tseng Ching in Arthur Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, 2 vols.

How then could one emperor so completely reverse the policies and actions of another? Or, to rephrase the question, how could a son in a culture that so valued filial piety completely reverse the instructions and actions of his own father? The legal questions seem almost secondary: was Zeng Jing guilty or not, and if so, guilty of what? The attempt to answer these simple-looking questions takes us into the heart of the imperial power structure.

In the late 1720s and the 1730s, when all this was happening, the unified Chinese imperial system had been in place for close to two thousand years. Patterns of belief and practice had solidified over time into a form that gave extraordinary power to the central government. To be sure, that government never lacked critics, but it had grown adept at isolating or marginalising them. It had also become expert at coopting moralistic arguments from the past in order to ensure that its own mission was taken for granted. The greatest danger facing the state was that internal dissension at the highest levels might threaten the fabric of the whole or that questions about the incumbents' right to rule might receive wide acceptance. The nightmare facing the two emperors was that both these things seemed to be happening at once, and the two men adopted different strategies to deal with the dangers. Yongzheng chose to woo the public by a display of personal generosity and an appearance of absolute honesty. Qianlong chose to protect his position by a reassertion of imperial dignity and by reimposing a veil of secrecy over the disclosures that his father had made.

The first problem, that of internal dissension, sprang from the number of imperial princes who had been struggling to gain power earlier in the dynasty. China at this time was controlled by the descendants of the Manchu warriors who had conquered the

---

(Washington, D.C., 1943). There is a copy of a woodblock edition of the *Dayi juemi lu*, undated, in the Yale Sterling Memorial Library (some pages are missing). A reprint of the complete text was published in the Taiwan reprint *Jindai zhongguo shiliao congkan*, ed. Shen Yunlong, series 36 (1966). Some details of the original trial, and the retrial, are in the *Daging shilu* (Veritable Records) of the late Yongzheng and early Qianlong reigns.

country in 1644 and formed the Qing dynasty. They had taken over the preexisting imperial structures and bureaucracy, the legal codes, the patterns of provincial government, traditional modes of taxation, along with the Confucian value system and the schools and examinations that institutionalized it. They had not, however, solved the problem of establishing an ordered and peaceful succession process to follow the decease of an incumbent emperor. Lacking a system of primogeniture, they sought to identify from among the competing sons the one considered most able to rule. Not surprisingly, different sons had different views on this matter. The process that led to the selection of Yongzheng as emperor after his father's death back in 1722 had been especially murky. It was rumors about Yongzheng's possible usurpation of power, spread by the disaffected eunuchs of other thwarted princes, that had first raised doubts in Zeng Jing's mind about the morality of the current imperial order. His testimony makes it clear that the inns and restaurants along China's busy highways were the focal points for the dissemination of news and rumor and that even in inland cities far from Beijing such as Changsha, visitors from the countryside could read scrolls publicly posted on the walls that spoke of national portents and other dangerous matters. Along such roads, too, passed the condemned criminals being taken to exile in China's southwest border regions, along with their accompanying jailers. Both groups spread their own stories as they paused for the night. However powerful the state's censorship apparatus might appear, it could never stop the swift spread of gossip. The fact that once he became emperor Yongzheng arrested many of his brothers, and that several of them subsequently died in prison in unexplained circumstances, did nothing to quell such tales.

The second problem, that of the right to rule, naturally emerged from this specific pattern of doubt about Yongzheng's own legitimacy. But this matter of personal legitimacy was only part of a larger process, that of the Manchus' own right to rule, and indeed

the nature of the Chinese state as a whole. What is unique about the text that Emperor Yongzheng issued in his own exoneration, and ordered every examination candidate in the country to read, is that in it he confronted this question head on. He called the four-chapter text itself the *Dayi juerni lu*, which can be translated as “Record of how Righteous Acts Awaken Us from Delusion.” In the first chapter the emperor tackled the question of the ways in which the Han Chinese identified the Manchus as being “barbarians” (*yi*). On a three-part scale of growth and intelligence, Chinese placed the inhabitants of their own ancestral land at the top, as being truly human; those on the peripheries, termed “barbarians,” blurred human with animal properties, and thus stood at the next level down. Third came the outermost tribes, who were almost entirely animal in nature. Yongzheng mocked this argument on historical and geographical grounds: China had been constantly expanding and changing, he wrote. China's greatest culture heroes such as the emperor Shun or King Wen came from the north and the east respectively, outside the inner core areas of their day. The provinces of Hunan and Hubei had once been considered barbarian territory, as had Shanxi, whereas now they were considered part of China's heartland.

In defense of his treasonous views, the emperor continued, Zeng Jing sought to reject the work of all those who had helped to construct a centralized state. In a tract called *Zhi xin lu* (Record of Achieving Renewal), Zeng had written that China should go back to its earlier period of coexisting princes, each with his own domain. Zeng's rationale was that under such a system men might rule according to their abilities, with the wiser controlling larger territories, and the less able controlling smaller areas. In such a system, at least each ruler could be in touch with his subjects, whereas in the huge current area of China one man could never hope to do so.

As a final act of obedience and contrition, accord to the emperor Yongzheng's account, after his trial Zeng Jing had com-

posed a personal apologia and confession, entitled the *Gui ren shuo*” (Record of a Return to Goodness). Yongzheng was delighted to share this essay with his subjects. It took centuries for wise people to first emerge in China, Zeng had written, and a millennium for the greatest of the sages to appear. Could it not be that this great period of creativity was now ending, that the inner lands of China were exhausted? Was it not almost inevitable that the sages of the present or the future would come from the peripheries? Was this not the case with the currently ruling Qing dynasty, which had shown such signal abilities to restore China to the greatness it had once possessed, and then lost, under the now defunct Ming dynasty? The balance of elements between heaven and earth, after all, constantly changes and circulates. Why should not the production of sagely persons follow some similar cyclical rhythms?

The specificity of these overlapping messages was too much for Yongzheng’s son Qianlong, as he showed by his arrest and execution of the luckless Zeng Jing. Qianlong underlined his determination by ordering that every copy of the *Dayi juemi lu* his father had circulated be destroyed. No more would the public record of China contain such a public confessional that seemed altogether too close to a confession of imperial guilt. (It is one of those chances of history, unpredictable yet invaluable, that a few isolated copies were preserved in China and in defiance of Qianlong’s wishes can be read by us today.)

Without going here into the details of Qianlong’s remarkable reign, which spanned the years 1735 to 1799, one can still see clearly how strongly these youthful experiences of felt humiliation colored his later actions. More than almost any other emperor, Qianlong was on the watch for slights to the imperial name and dignity. He became the self-professed defender of the Manchu heritage, ordering the compilation of extensive genealogies in which the Manchus’ ancestors would be assembled and tabulated, so that his contemporaries could relate their own lives to those

of their warrior predecessors. He had a careful history written of the original Manchu shamanic religion, spelling out the exact details and significance of every sacrifice and where possible defining the roles of the various spirits and deities invoked in the shamanic ceremonies. He closely supervised the management of the Manchu military organizations known as the Eight Banners and removed from the Banner rolls many soldiers of Chinese origin who had drifted into the ranks over the previous century. He insisted on the maintenance of both written and spoken Manchu language at the court and had special exams conducted to encourage Chinese scholars too to learn the language. He was insistent on the need to follow precise protocols of mourning and was swift to punish anyone —Manchu or Chinese —found guilty of laxity in that regard. And he commissioned a colossal manuscript compilation of the inherited wisdom of the Chinese past, which not only enabled accurate editions of earlier treasured texts to be collated, but also enabled him to expunge from China's literary heritage any books that he felt contained insulting references to barbarians in the Chinese past or contained information on national defense or military strategy that might somehow be useful to those challenging his regime.<sup>2</sup>

Such an imperial appropriation of China's past was equally clear in Qianlong's mania for collecting Chinese art. As a youth he received some training in traditional Chinese brush techniques from the court painters, and he was himself able to produce a competent landscape scroll. But had he not been emperor, nothing in his background would have given him the right to comment — and in such definitive-sounding terms —on his country's artistic heritage. Some of his attempts at connoisseurship were wide of the mark, and he personally insisted on the genuineness of several works that were later shown to be forgeries. But that does not detract from the fact that the vast Chinese Palace Museum Col-

<sup>2</sup>Scholars who have recently been exploring this field are Pamela Crossley, Mark Elliott, and Kent Guy.

lection (currently split between repositories in Taiwan and Beijing) took its definitive form in Qianlong's reign, as the emperor's agents scoured the country for fine examples of painting and calligraphy, bronzes, jade, and porcelain.

Once again, power was an asset. Some of the rarest pieces came to the court collection as "gifts," the coerced nature of which was barely disguised. Others were essentially bribes, offered to the court in thanks for, or expectation of, some favor. Rich merchants offered paintings to avoid being fined for alleged malfeasance. Some the emperor purloined, on the excuse that their current owners were unable to protect them from fire or theft. Informal gifts of money, or fines paid into private Imperial Household accounts, helped the emperor to have large amounts of surplus cash on hand when only direct purchase would work. And the emperor's favorite courtier, the former Manchu guards officer Heshen, was also a conduit for a steady stream of rare gifts during the last twenty-five years of the emperor's life.<sup>3</sup>

As we can see from confidential court documents that have been preserved from the year 1768, Qianlong's wariness concerning possible threats to his regime or to his person could lead him to condone shameful acts of injustice. In that year, Qianlong received several reports that wandering Chinese had been seeking to cast spells to conjure up spirit armies and had been stealing the souls of innocent victims—some of whom had first been drugged—by means of black magic methods that included the use of hair clippings and scraps of garments. Overreacting violently, Qianlong ordered the widespread arrest of monks, peddlers, and vagrants and their interrogation under the fullest rigors of the law. Only when many people had been permanently maimed by the judicial tortures that they suffered, several had been executed, and hundreds more had their lives massively disrupted did Qianlong

<sup>3</sup> See especially Wen C. Fong and James C. Y. Watt, eds., *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei* (New York and Taipei, 1996), especially the introductory essay by Chang Lin-sheng.

realize the whole affair had been based on a series of misunderstandings and quietly let the matter drop.<sup>4</sup>

In the central years of his reign, between 1740 and 1780, Emperor Qianlong also put into practice the theoretical arguments that his father had advanced concerning the past incorporation of Chinese peripheries into China itself. By so doing, he transformed the scope of Chinese emperorship, and with it the long-term fate of China. The incorporation of the gigantic territories of the west into the Qing domain —later to be named the province of Xinjiang —dates from this period. So does the tighter incorporation of Taiwan into the Chinese administration; the increase of a Qing military presence in Tibet; and the Qing invasion of Vietnam, though in that case —unlike the others— the Chinese invaders were successfully resisted by the local inhabitants themselves.

The incorporation of the Muslim regions to China's west into China proper was not only military and bureaucratic. It was also personal and sexual, as Qianlong took the sister of one of the Muslim nobles to be an imperial concubine in the year 1760, bestowing on her the title of Rongfei. Though she was permitted to follow her own religious and dietary practices, she became in all other respects a Qing court woman, bearing a daughter to the emperor and accompanying him on his tours to central China and to the ancestral home of Confucius in Shandong province. At Rongfei's death in 1788 her coffin, incised in Arabic with passages from the Koran, was buried in the imperial mausoleum north of Beijing.<sup>5</sup>

The body of Rongfei was living testimony to the new territorial worlds controlled by the Qing dynasty, but a full decade before her death Qianlong received news of a different kind of discovery that had been made in the far west of his new dominions. This was a block of pure green jade over six feet high, weighing

<sup>4</sup> These events are finely described in Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

<sup>5</sup> James A. Millward, "A Uyghur Muslim in Qianlong's Court: The Meanings of the Fragrant Concubine," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53, no. 2 (May 1994): 427–58.

almost five tons. When asked if he wished it cut into sections, which could be shipped to the imperial workshops in Beijing for carving, Qianlong said no. He wished, he said, for the entire block to be transported to his court, so that he could decide on the best use to make of it. This immense logistical task took more than a year and involved thousands of men and draft animals. After detailed inspection of the jade rock and the making of a full-scale clay model, so that various experiments could be tried without damaging the original stone, Qianlong determined on the perfect solution. The jade would be used to create an immense carving of the Chinese sage and culture hero Yu the Great, in the act of taming the waters.

The labors of Yu the Great (the successor emperor to Yao and Shun, whose reigns had preceded China's earliest dynasties) in diverting flood-prone rivers by tunneling through the mountains, clearing forests, and constructing irrigation canals were immortalized in China's early histories. By laying claim to this legacy as well, Qianlong could use his western jade to enshrine the cultural glories of his mythic precursor inside his own palace. Only the finest carvers in the land would be good enough for this task, and accordingly Qianlong had the jade shipped to the city of Yangzhou, on the Grand Canal just to the north of the Yangzi River, where the jade carvers were without peer. After many years, the labor was done, and the carved jade rock was returned to Beijing. There one can see it still, in the intimate palace complex on the eastern side of the Forbidden City that Qianlong had ordered built for his retirement years. Its intricate pattern of carving is the artists' hymn to the ingenuities of China's engineers: there are all the details we need to reconstruct the ancient scene, meticulously depicted, down to the straining muscles in the laborers' backs, the sledgehammers in their hands, the wedges they are driving into cracks in the rocks, the foremen beating out the time, the drilling equipment, the wheel-borne pile-drivers, and far up on the summit the emperor himself, supervising the transformation of his land.

Can any of this be related to the China of more recent times? I would have thought the answer was yes. Not, certainly, in the form of direct influence or of immediate cause and effect. But in the sense that certain aspects of the power of Chinese government over society have continued to manifest themselves under communism, especially those relating to five main areas: governmental secrecy; the public manifestation of authority; the silencing of opposition; the comprehensive scrutiny of people's lives; and the center's insistence on seizing the high moral ground. Let us explore these in turn.

For the eighteenth-century emperors, there were few areas of Chinese life and action that were not in some sense political, and they seem to have felt that constant wariness was the key to survival. At all times, they found able adjutants to reinforce them in that supposition. Once one's life had become entangled with that of the state, either by deliberation or by accident, extrication could be a protracted, costly, or even impossible. Nor was pardon, even from the emperor himself, an adequate guarantee of one's long-term survival.

Perhaps one of Emperor Yongzheng's greatest failings, in the eyes of his son Qianlong, was his abandonment of the rules of secrecy in the case of Zeng Jing. It would have been simple enough to interrogate Zeng Jing either in Hunan or in Beijing, with or without torture, and to dispose of him and his treasonous activities discreetly. His name would never have entered the historical record; he would have died unnoticed and unknown even to virtually all his own contemporaries. Indeed, Yongzheng circulated the news of Zeng Jing's charges to the entire country, not only Zeng's scurrilous remarks about the Manchus and his various comments on the unfavorable auguries that had accompanied the Manchus' seizure of power, but a startling array of personal details about Yongzheng himself, many of them most unimperial, such as Yongzheng's love of drinking, his lasciviousness, his financial manipulations, and his cruelty.

From a current political perspective, the route chosen by Yongzheng was not entirely outlandish. Secrecy is an aspect of power that can be handled in many different ways. One can conduct secret trials based on secret charges, condemn people to a life in secret prisons, dismiss powerful figures for secret reasons, mobilize masses of one's people for reasons that must be kept secret. As the director of the Public Security Bureau puts it, in the poet Bei Dao's dark and powerful story about government's secret layerings, "13 Happiness Street": "Whatever no one knows is a secret."<sup>6</sup> And of course one can be condemned for divulging state secrets in a secret trial even when everyone knows that the matter of the charge was not really secret at all. That is not unlike what happened in the case of Wei Jingsheng in 1979, with the charges levelled by the state prosecutor that Wei divulged secrets about China's invasion of Vietnam to foreign journalists. (This was, incidentally, the first such Chinese attack on Vietnam since Emperor Qianlong's two hundred years before, and equally unsuccessful.) Wei's protest that he had no access to any secret information on the Chinese military or on Vietnam was dismissed out of hand.

But at quite another level, the government can force former secrets out into the public domain, quite willing to endure the public's bewilderment at the sudden fall from grace of some former heroes. It can do this in order to ensure its own reputation for thoroughness, or merely to reemphasize the point that the world is full of enemies, that amidst any garden of flowers snakes are lurking. Such was the case with the purges of Gao Gang and Rao Shushi by Mao Zedong in 1954–55, although they were among the handful of most powerful officials in the country and had long been his close revolutionary associates; also with charges hurled against Liu Shaoqi in 1966 at the start of the Cultural Revolution, though Liu had been Mao's key ideological lieutenant during the Communist guerilla days of Yanan, and the first decade of the

<sup>6</sup> Bei Dao, trans. Bonnie McDougall and S. T. Cooke, in *Waves* (New York, 1990), p. 70.

People's Republic, and was head of state at the time; with the news of the treachery and death of Defense Minister Lin Biao in 1971, though Lin had been heralded for years as Mao's "closest comrade in arms"; and with Mao's own wife and the other members of the so-called Cultural Revolution Gang of Four in 1976.

One can perhaps detect yet another change in more recent years, a growing reticence about airing such charges too widely as the Communist Party is perceived to be growing weaker. Spectacular purges have indeed continued: the party general secretary Hu Yaobang after the still-born democracy protests of 1985–86; his successor as party general secretary at the time of the massive Tiananmen upheavels of 1989, Zhao Ziyang; and, just three weeks ago, the sudden removal of Qiao Shi from all his key party rankings, despite the fact that he was the head of China's security apparatus and was considered number three on the roster of China's topmost leaders. But in these cases, tortuous explanations were not offered; the country was left to make what it wished of the vague charges and assignments of ideological blame.

In the second area, that of the public manifestations of authority, the Chinese emperors had always been masters. The overlays of ritual and protocol that surrounded their actions, their words, and their living and travel arrangements were all designed to convey awe through distancing the ruler from the subject. Everything seemed to conspire to reinforce this impression. There was the huge scale of the Forbidden City, especially in terms of its axis of approach to the emperor. There was the hierarchization of everyone, from palace maids and eunuchs to senior consorts, from junior bodyguards to the senior ministers of state. And, most vividly, there was the practice of the kowtow itself, the ninefold self-prostration that took place not only at each audience with the emperor, but at each reciting of the emperor's words. The converse of this, of course, was that a minute unbending of the rules was seen as cosmically significant to the individual receiving it: a gesture to come nearer so that the ruler could whisper some private

words, the gift of a piece of fruit or a vial of medicine from the imperial store, permission to ride a horse in palace precincts, a scrawled notation —no matter how routine or banal —from the imperial hand: everyone receiving such benedictions felt transported by gratitude.

Just as the Communists' leaders were sequestered for so many years behind the high and closely guarded wall of Zhongnanhai, and conducted their affairs in the closest secrecy, so were they masters at the art of manipulating signs of their authority. In the early days of the People's Republic it was the gradations in dress, deportment, and title, as well as more obvious things like living accommodations or access to an automobile or private telephone, that signalled one's status. Nobody surpassed Mao Zedong in these arts. The photographs, prints, tapestries, and paintings of himself in handsome youth and in allegedly virile yet compassionate old age were iconic in their precision. Mao too bestowed gifts of calligraphy and small presents with a careful eye to their effect. He almost never spoke to the country as a whole, but only to confidants, or in an informal style to a somewhat wider circle of party figures, for whom the studied informality appeared as genuine generosity of spirit.

If the account of his doctor Li Zhisui may be believed, within Zhongnanhai Mao cultivated an aura of total casualness, disregarding conventional notions of dress and time, so that the most senior figures might be summoned at three in the morning to discuss some complex issue with Mao, as he sprawled beside his swimming pool in a worn bathrobe, belly bare. His occasional trips out into the country, as recounted by Dr. Li, also sound imperial in style and effectiveness: the closely guarded private train, the isolated villas, the swims in the rivers, the carefully spaced consultations with peasant farmers or local cadres: all had their special cadence, and their specific goal.<sup>7</sup> To see how foreigners themselves

<sup>7</sup> Li Zhisui, trans. Tai Hung-chao, in *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (New York, 1994).

were affected by all this, even those whom one would have thought were inured to such showmanship, one need look no further than the passages in the memoirs of President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger where they discuss their meetings and conversations with Mao in 1972.

The images that Western observers picked up of Deng Xiaoping, especially from his 1979 visit to the United States, composed as they were of smiling vignettes from the concerts at the Kennedy center and of Deng in his Stetson hat at a Texas rodeo, gave an impression of him as informal and outgoing. But one can hazard, with hindsight, that this was only an exception to a picture that in general was more closely tied to the earlier imperial and Maoist styles than to the media-conscious and publicity-seeking present that we take so for granted. The Deng Xiaoping of the 1979 Vietnam War and suppression of the Democracy Wall movement, of the mid-1980s purges, of the 1989 Tiananmen suppression, was a very different person, invoking different trappings of authority, distance, isolation, and thus (it was hoped) of quiet determination and political will. Only perhaps with his 1992 tour of South China, designed to give a personally orchestrated jolt of support to what he saw as the possibly jeopardized moves to modernize China's economy through the market forces, did Deng gamble at a more complex level with the intersections of power and the media.

These reflections on some former rulers or leaders lead us to see the predicament facing current leaders such as President Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and Zhu Rongji. Jiang, in particular, has tried to combine elements of the imperial and Maoist styles with the demands of contemporary populist imagery. His calligraphy is displayed at numerous visible sites and—in the cases I saw in his hometown of Yangzhou—even carved on stone tablets in the most beautiful gardens and parks; it is hard here not to see an implicit consonance with Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong, who both visited that city frequently in the eighteenth century, when it was in its rich and prosperous prime, and left their marks in simi-

lar ways. More surprising visually, though certainly logical in our current world, was the sight this summer of Jiang's calligraphy on immense billboards at one of the busiest junctions near the Forbidden City in Beijing, endorsing a party-sponsored movie on the benevolent results of the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese. But in Jiang's case, his physical presence and appearance makes it hard for him to convey an aura of grandeur, something that never seemed hard for the diminutive Deng Xiaoping. The premier Li Peng seems resigned to his own unpopularity and uninterested in attempting to create any sense of the charisma that he knows he lacks. Zhu Rongji, as befits someone on the rise, perhaps to the very top of the tree, is content at present to hold to a quiet image of one so concerned for the nation's future that it is hard to worry about other, more personal, matters. Symbolic gestures can come later.

Both the emperors Yongzheng and his son Qianlong were focused, as we saw above, on the third area of our current discussion, the need to silence the opposition. However, they differed profoundly as to method. Yongzheng chose disclosure and reason to make his points, first highlighting his own vulnerability by itemizing the charges made against him, but then rebutting them one by one in what he clearly believed was a rational and convincing manner. Each of these rebuttals was followed, in the printed text, by a lengthy confessional statement by Zeng Jing, endorsing the strength of the emperor's arguments. In ordering that Zeng Jing be executed as one of the first acts of his new reign, Qianlong chose the somewhat risky course of invoking his sense of filial piety to justify his abandonment of it. He was clearly reversing his father's expressed intentions. But he claimed that his father had been carried away by his own compassionate nature, and that a higher level of justice —involving exemplary equity —needed to be invoked in this particular case. The subsequent withdrawal and destruction of his father's text was a corollary to the trial and execution. The emperor's words should, traditionally, always be preserved. But what if the words were mistaken?

In our common current parlance, Qianlong was silencing the opposition in body and in word so as to reinforce his version of an imperial master narrative. Such a narrative did not allow for waverings such as those of Yongzheng on this matter, nor did they allow the inclusion of such lengthy presentations of the opposition's views. The historiography of twentieth-century China, as many scholars are now beginning to observe, has itself been dominated by two master narratives, both of which have been maintained and propagated by the silencing of opposing views. One is that of the Guomindang nationalist party, its revolutionary late Qing heritage, and its development under Sun Yat-sen. The central theme of this narrative is the achievement of Chinese national unity in a period of dynastic oppression, foreign imperialism, and internal warlord dissension. Sun's strength lay in correctly perceiving the problems and the solution. The northern expedition to unify China was the triumphant conclusion to this phase of the narrative, which was then inherited by Sun's Guomindang successors, most prominently Chiang Kai-shek.

The Communist master narrative, by contrast, centers around the fledgling Communist Party's roots in the intellectual turmoil of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the incorporation of the positive sides of that movement and its leadership into the Communist Party, and the emergence from within this tradition of the young Mao Zedong. By creatively blending his knowledge of the rural China from which he sprang with the new intellectual currents and with Marxism-Leninism, this narrative runs, Mao was able to chart a course for the party that led from the peasant guerilla socialism of the Jiangxi Soviet, the military triumphs of the Long March, and the anti-Japanese united front strategies of Yanan, to the eventual Communist victory in 1949. The subsequent Maoist upheavals from the Hundred Flowers movement and antirightist campaigns of 1957 to the Great Leap Forward of 1958–60, and the Cultural Revolution of 1966–72, are more problematic in the narrative's terms, but they share a common theme

with the earlier historical periods. Mao was consistently able to think through and past the opposition by the strength of his revolutionary will. The opposition, being wrong, was silenced. Their protest voices would only be heard, if at all, in carefully modulated versions scrutinized by the party itself, whether these were in the form of self-criticisms, trial confessions, or selective passages circulated to the party in order to be dismantled.

The fascination with dismantling these two master narratives is now widespread and is not only an academic matter. It will affect how the party thinks of itself in China, just as it has already affected how the Guomindang party thinks and acts in Taiwan. But in the meantime, the opposition continues to be silenced within China itself, especially if it tries to make its views known through any kind of public forum — whether that be in verse or prose, paint or film, drama or music cassette. The battle for maintaining silence is certainly a losing one, though the rear-guard action is intense. The weakening supervisory powers of the party, the explosion of economic resources and spread of new market mechanisms, and a host of new technologies from the satellite dish to the fax, the video, and the internet all are insuring that Qianlong's route to silence will no longer be viable. Yongzheng's mode of selective public disclosure and attempted explanation is more likely to be the way of the future.

In such a world, too, the fourth area, which I call the intense scrutiny of individual private lives, grows harder for the state. Yongzheng and Qianlong would not have acknowledged limitations to their rights to probe, as many surviving imperial documents demonstrate. The justifications for intrusion were law and order, and the moral life of the realm as a whole. These emperors believed that they knew the fundamental rhythms of social harmony, and that accordingly their role was correct interpretation of past definitions and constant watchfulness over contemporary aberrations. Communist leaders, I feel, would have agreed. They claimed, at least, that the norms of social cohesion under socialism

were predictable and definable, and they showed astonishing skills in persuading the population that they were right. The Cultural Revolution was perhaps the apogee and the turning-point of this mindset, though not without incalculable damage to millions of lives and individual psyches. The intoxication of power felt by the young as they imposed what they believed to be Mao's will for the collective good, and the sense of nagging guilt that some began to feel after the euphoria passed and they grew older, has been captured as well as I have ever seen it by Rae Yang in her new book *Eating Spiders*. As a Red Guard from a cadre family, Rae Yang describes her infatuation with Mao as a disconcerting blend of the sensual and the political. This manner of self-definition is shown at intervals in her account through flashes that draw all the themes together: a middle-aged man who suddenly, shockingly, exposes himself in the midst of being beaten by the Red Guards; or the frenzied squealing of the piglets held in Rae Yang's inept hands, as she tremblingly tries to de-sex them in the communal farm to which she has chosen to banish herself in answer to Chairman Mao's call.<sup>8</sup> Herein lie the possibilities of new narratives, and the reexamination of power and its intrusions into our innermost zones.

As to our fifth area, reading both Yongzheng's defensive account and Qianlong's angry denunciations in the Zeng Jing case, along with many other documents from their reigns, one is constantly struck by their moral confidence. The sense of doubt, even though apparent in Yongzheng, seems to be speedily and successfully suppressed. It rarely if ever appears in the pronouncements of Qianlong. The belief that the high moral ground belonged to the country's leaders was surely axiomatic too in the main years of Communist dominance in China. Part of the extraordinary frustration of living through that period must have been the difficulty of cutting through that veneer of official self-confidence. Again, the poet Bei Dao tried to do this with his own sense of moral urgency,

<sup>8</sup> Rae Yang, *Spider Eaters* (Berkeley, Cal., 1997).

in his poems from the seventies such as “The Answer” or “Notes from the City of the Sun.” Others tried in different ways, only to be jailed indefinitely, like Wei Jingsheng, or pushed out of China, like Liu Binyan and Fang Lizhi. But now the state’s certainty is eroding, and Tiananmen may take some of the credit. The flimsy reasons for the lengthy prison sentence handed down to the thoughtful Tiananmen history student Wang Dan —though their flimsiness may be of scant solace to him —are so widely perceived that one feels the alleged system of justice that imposed them will be pushed into change. The moral ground claimed by the party will not be indefinitely enforceable in the courts of law, and here perhaps lies China’s greatest hope for an ending to the patterns of power that have endured for so long.

Let us close with a rather different linking of past and present. As his reign was edging to a close Qianlong drew, as we saw, on the great jade as a means to celebrate and justify the extensions of Chinese power into central Asia and to reassert his own centrality in the cosmic order of things. With considerable symbolic skill, we might now say, he chose the imagery of Yu the Great, rendered in finely executed detail in the hardest of all materials to carve. Money and time were no object in such a quest. Today’s Communist regime has no such jade at its behest, but like Qianlong it has chosen the taming of the waters to be its grandest literal and symbolic act. According to Chinese myth, Yu’s control of the rivers and carving up of the mountains not only eased the passage of the waters to the sea, but had immeasurably beneficial effects on agriculture and communications as a whole. According to the Communist Party, that is just what will be achieved by the Three Gorges Dam project. The feasibility of somehow damming the Yangzi River has been under debate by Chinese planners and politicians since early in this century, but it was only when Mao revived the idea after a riverine tour in the mid 1950s that it edged onto the Communists’ agenda. The more the question was studied, the more dramatic the claims for its beneficial effects became, and

the more doom-laden became the counter pronouncements of the dam's critics. The project was shelved again and again; it seems to have been the forces of the Yangzi River development bureaucracy in conjunction with premier Li Peng —trained as an engineer in his youth (as was President Jiang Zemin) and raised on the grandiloquent visions and promises of Stalinist hydraulic rhetoric—that in 1992 pushed it through to final acceptance by the People's Congress.

The Three Gorges Dam, almost two kilometers across, will transform the natural channel of the famous Yangai Gorges into a lake the size of Lake Superior. It will generate millions of kilowatts of electricity and via a series of locks and sluiceways, allow deep draft cargo ships to sail all the way to Chongqing city in the heart of Sichwan. By regulating the storage levels within this immense reservoir, the dam proponents claim, they will permanently end the flooding that for so many centuries has plagued the lower reaches of the stream.

Their opponents claim that this is all grandiosity that has passed the bounds of reason. Millions of people will lose their homes and have to be relocated. Untold natural beauties and treasured historical sites will be permanently buried beneath the waters. No plans having been made for any of the drainage systems from Chongqing itself or the other cities along the shores of the new reservoir, the artificial lake will become the world's largest cesspool. The Yangzi waters also are laden with more silt than almost any of the world's other great rivers, and thus the lake bed will, in short order, fill up and the sluiceways and catchment areas become blocked. Natural catastrophes, or human design and faulty construction errors, might well lead to the dam's collapse, as has already happened to over a dozen dams in China built under the Communists; even if such catastrophes were avoided, the dangers from attack in wartime could never be altogether guarded against. Finally, the financial cost is simply unknowable: preliminary estimates of sixteen to twenty billion dollars are probably far

too low and do not allow for any readjustments, improvements, or later corrective action that might be needed.<sup>9</sup>

The voices of power claim to find these arguments unconvincing, but on the whole they have chosen like Qianlong to suppress the dissenters with censorship or prison, rather than like Yongzheng to broadcast their warnings and to answer them point by point. It may well be that no answer can be given to the criticisms; cancellation of the project will not prove the critics right. Only completion of the project and its subsequent failure could do that. That is so often the paradox of apparently absolute power. By not allowing adequate exploration of an issue early enough, either enforced acquiescence or sullen silence becomes the dominant mode of response. China is now once again becoming as large a force on the world stage as it was believed to be by its foreign admirers and its own rulers in the eighteenth century. The country's future course, and much of the world's along with it, may well depend on how the current leaders and their successors come to grips with the opportunities for both good and evil that the presence of power bestows.

<sup>9</sup> A full analysis is that compiled by Dai Qing, trans. Ming Yi, in *The River Dragon Has Come, The Three Gorges Dam and the Fate of China's Yangtze River* (Armonk, N.Y., 1997).