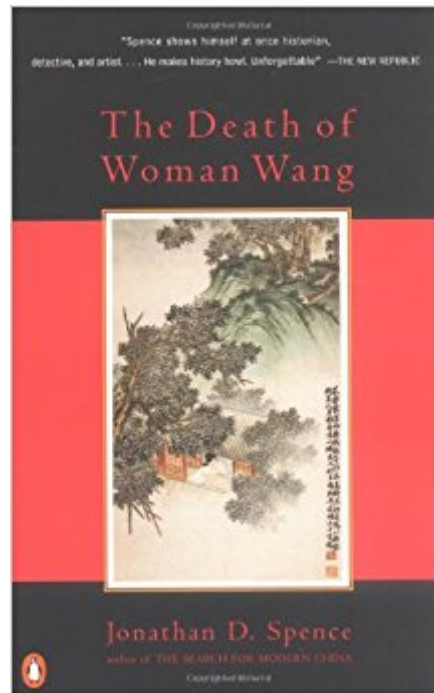




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The Death Of Woman Wang



Synopsis

“Spence shows himself at once historian, detective, and artist. . . . He makes history howl.” (The New Republic) An Award-winning author Jonathan D. Spence paints a vivid picture of an obscure place and time: provincial China in the seventeenth century. Life in the northeastern county of Tancheng emerges here as an endless cycle of floods, plagues, crop failures, banditry, and heavy taxation. Against this turbulent background a tenacious tax collector, an irascible farmer, and an unhappy wife act out a poignant drama at whose climax the wife, having run away from her husband, returns to him, only to die at his hands. Magnificently evoking the China of long ago, *The Death of Woman Wang* also deepens our understanding of the China we know today.

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Customer Reviews

Praise for *The Death of Woman Wang*: “Whether judged as fiction or as historical reconstruction, [this] is a masterpiece of style and narration.” —Harold Bloom “An unforgettable book of historical re-creation.” —The New Republic

Jonathan Spence’s eleven books on Chinese history include *The Gate of Heavenly Peace*, *Treason by the Book*, and *The Death of Woman Wang*. His awards include a Guggenheim and a MacArthur Fellowship. He teaches at Yale University.

This is an excellent book for learning about life for ordinary people in rural China. The author weaves together historical exposition and narrative storytelling to paint a vivid picture of life in China while helping us understand its legal and social customs. The names get confusing and the Wade-Giles rendering is outdated, but it's still a very engaging book. I was surprised by how developed Chinese legal society was, with complex tax systems and exact codes for all kinds of crimes in all kinds of circumstances. Less surprising was the corruption, cruelty, and poverty of villages like the one described. The central government provided little protection and citizens were constantly suffering from natural disasters, crop failure, banditry and invasions. Poverty made lawlessness common and conflicts often erupted. I was very interested in the plight of women during that time and Spence does a great job of conveying what life was like for them. Basically, women were property and men were allowed to sell their daughters or wives for profit or in order to be rid of them. Daughters were betrothed at an early age and had no say in the choice of a husband. After marriage she is expected to be consummately devoted to her husband and in-laws. Widows were discouraged from remarriage. A husband was allowed to divorce his wife for failing to have sons, for serious illness, for talking too much, for not respecting in-laws, and for lascivious behavior. Women who committed adultery or ran away from home were considered criminals and their crime was punishable by death. Husbands were justified in killing his wife and her lover if he caught them in the act of adultery. In the conclusion to the story of the death of Woman Wang, a husband murders his wife and falsely accuses his neighbor of the crime he committed. His actions would be punishable by death, except that he was exonerated because his wife had betrayed her husband by running away with her lover before eventually being caught and returned to her husband, so the law says she deserved to die. No wonder there were so many insane women in pre-modern China, their only vengeance was to become a hungry ghost after death by suicide in order to haunt the people who treated them so badly. Yes, 17th century China was a bad place for women.

Spoiler alert: woman Wang doesn't appear until page 101.

. This book is very enlightening in the life of women and Chinese people in general in ancient China. It explores different aspects of the country's development in people, religion etc. It captivates readers with the exotic depictions of China and its conditions. I, JenNA, will gladly recommend this book to anyone interested in ancient Chinese culture or just wants a collection of stories to read.

Very interesting and educational. Didn't expect for woman Wang to appear only in the last 30 pages

or so out of 140.

T'an-ch'eng county, in Shantung, was a hard place to live at the turn of the seventeenth century. Wracked by natural disasters, sometime home of robbers and bandits, T'an-ch'eng was about as poor as rural China ever was. At the end of the 1600s the Ming Dynasty fell to the invading Ch'ing, but such political considerations bear only in passing on the stories Johnathan Spence tells in "The Death of Woman Wang." Rather, he is intent on depicting the lives of those who lived in T'an-ch'eng county, for many of whom the status of the Mandate of Heaven could hardly have mattered less. For these people, most of them indigent peasant-farmers, what mattered were rather things like family honor, finding a wife, and protecting their few belongings from strongmen and thieves. For his account, Spence draws primarily on three sources, which he describes in his first chapter: a local history compiled by Feng K'o-tsan; a handbook written by one Huang Liu-hung, who cites examples from his time as magistrate of T'an-ch'eng; and stories by the essayist P'u Sung-ling, who hailed from roughly the same area of the country. After a chapter devoted to describing the socio-political situation in T'an-ch'eng, Spence goes on to tell three main stories: about a widow who tries to guard her possessions; about a village feud and the accompanying murder case; and about the eponymous woman Wang, who runs away from her husband with a lover. This focus on the personal--the attempt to evoke one particular slice of rural China--is admirable, but is somewhat undercut by Spence's style of presentation. He has clearly done a great deal of research and tends to cite primary sources to a fault, and often at length. Although this makes otherwise obscure sources available to English-speaking readers, it also badly impedes his trains of thought. Thus, for example, he repeatedly quotes long stories by P'u Sung-ling with only tangential connections to the topic at hand, and while the tales are delightful (indeed, more fun than Spence's unevocative prose), afterward I struggled to remember what point Spence had been making ten pages earlier when the story started. When Spence finally moves from preamble to narrative in each chapter, the book comes alive; his reconstructions of the travails of these peasants are fascinating, if all too brief. The book itself, too, comes and goes quickly, at less than 150 pages of text. That may in fact be one of its virtues: if Spence's presentation isn't perfect, at least he doesn't take up too much of our time. As Spence himself says, it's not clear how much, if anything, these vignettes of common lives from a tiny corner of the Ch'ing empire can tell us about rural China in the seventeenth century, the Ch'ing state as a whole, or anything other than these very lives. But sometimes that's enough. At its best, "Woman Wang" creates a connection between a modern reader and a Ch'ing-era peasant, reminding us that we share something that transcends not just space, but time.~

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