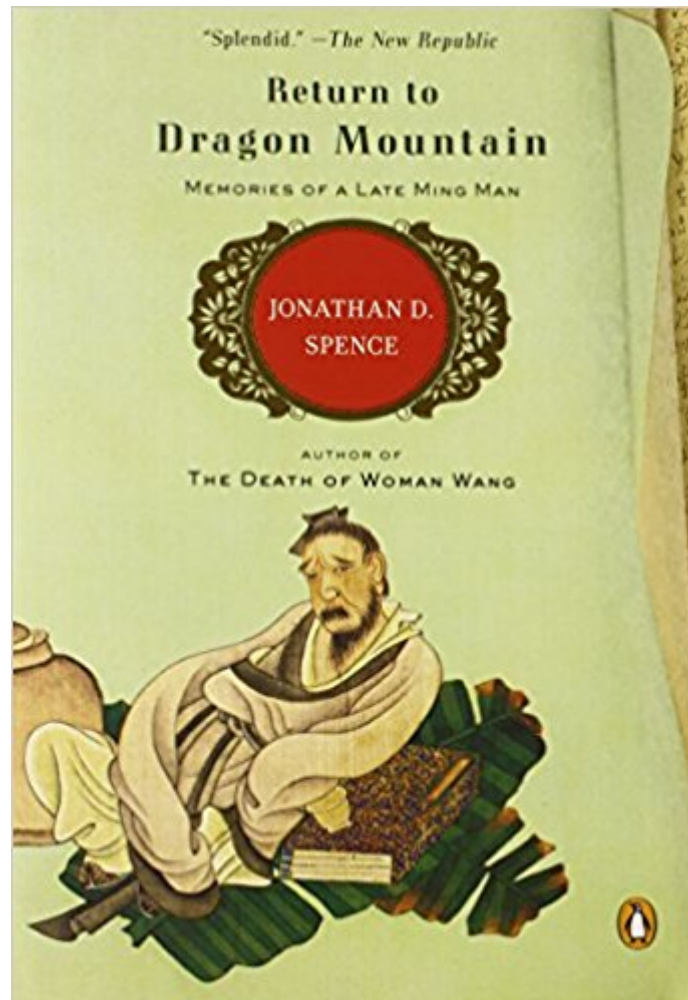




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# Return To Dragon Mountain: Memories Of A Late Ming Man



## Synopsis

“Splendid . . . One could not imagine a better subject than Zhan Dai for Spence. (The New Republic) Celebrated China scholar Jonathan Spence vividly brings to life seventeenth-century China through this biography of Zhang Dai, recognized as one of the finest historians and essayists of the Ming dynasty. Born in 1597, Zhang Dai was forty-seven when the Ming dynasty, after more than two hundred years of rule, was overthrown by the Manchu invasion of 1644. Having lost his fortune and way of life, Zhang Dai fled to the countryside and spent his final forty years recounting the time of creativity and renaissance during Ming rule before the violent upheaval of its collapse. This absorbing tale of Zhang Dai’s life illuminates the transformation of a culture and reveals how China’s history affects its place in the world today.

## Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (November 25, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 014311445X

ISBN-13: 978-0143114451

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.6 x 7.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 9 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #473,289 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #140 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Asia > China #935 in Books > History > Asia > China

## Customer Reviews

Zhang Dai (1597–1689), subject of this absorbing and evocative literary-biographical study, was a Chinese essayist and historian whose long life bridged the conquest of China by the Manchus and the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644. The upheaval inspired him to write a history of the Ming as well as personal recollections of his youth, which Spence (Mao Zedong), a MacArthur fellow and a leading historians of China, mines for insights into the culture of this period. Zhang’s reminiscences about his earlier life as a well-to-do scholar and aesthete are full of poetic reveries—a treasured blend of tea, evening lanterns in his hometown of Shaoxing, an exquisite courtesan, plum blossoms in the moonlight—which contrast with his later circumstances of poverty, coarse food and wizened, querulous concubines. The memoirs are

studded with biographical sketches of his vast extended family, a gallery of eccentrics whose lives furnish handy illustrations of moral precepts. They also open a window on the social world of the late Ming scholarly caste, whose lives revolved around eternal cramming for the examinations that controlled entrance into the imperial bureaucracy; Zhang's father was 53 when he finally passed and was able to get his first job. Through Zhang's Proustian sensibility, Spence retrieves a portrait of a civilization imbued with esoteric obsessions as well as sensuality. (Sept. 24) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Spence's dozen-plus histories have inducted readers into intricate corners of imperial Chinese history, and he continues in that vein with this beguiling biographical portrait of scholar Zhang Dai (1597-1680?). He had a parabolic life: ascending through familial connections to the Ming bureaucracy; descending after the dynasty's 1644 disintegration before Manchurian invaders. There is a sensible affinity between author and subject in Spence's presentation of the analytical Zhang, whose writings comprise biographical sketches of his family and ancestors, a Ming dynastic history, poetry, and commentary on classical Chinese texts. Zhang's thematic rather than chronological approach to the world is reflected in Spence's narrative structure, which initially touches on Zhang's ruminations about the aesthetics of lantern displays, sacred sites and their draw of pilgrims, or character traits of relatives revealed through their tribulations with the state. This induces moods evocative of Zhang's increasingly disturbed times, especially when Spence describes the dynastic crisis that pitched Zhang into poverty. Spence only enhances his fine reputation with seasoned perceptions of the accessible, multifaceted Zhang Dai. Taylor, Gilbert --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I understand the concerns of reviewers who expected an historical analysis of the Ming dynasty or of the context and milieu of 16th and 17th century China. I came to this book with no such expectations. I found a small work of art evoking sites and sounds of a place far off in time and space as seen through the eyes of one man. There is just enough analysis to give context without breaking the stream of images, just enough history to bring it together. I enjoyed it very much. It made me wish that all of the Chinese writings of Zhang Dai (the Ming Man of the title) were available in translation.

This book is very well written and well worth reading. It depicts the life and the world of Zheng Dai, a

well-educated bureaucrat (who did not go very high in the hierarchy but still managed to write the history of the Ming dynasty till its overthrow by the Manchus), but also many other interesting characters. An extract will show how much this book, though supposed to happen in the 17th century, is still very relevant today. "Within five years (...) this tea that Zhang and his uncle had named Snow Orchid had ousted its rivals from the connoisseurs' circles. But it was not long before unscrupulous businessmen began to market inferior teas under the Snow Orchid brand name, and those who drank it seemed not to know they were being gulled. A short time later, even the water source itself was lost. First, entrepreneurs from Shaoxing tried to use the water for wine making or else opened tea shops right by the spring itself. Next, a greedy local official tried to monopolize the spring's water for his own use and sealed it off for a while. But that increased the spring's reputation to such an extent that rowdy crowds began to gather at the shrine, demanding food, firewood and other handouts from the monks there and then brawling when they were refused. At last, to regain their earlier tranquility, the monks polluted their spring by filling it with manure, rotting bamboo and the overflow from their own drains." Professor Spence is a great historian and we are all in his debt.

As usual, *Memories* is a well researched Spence book. However, this reads more like a compilation of graduate student papers that were edited by Spence. It could also serve as a very long preface to the actual works. There are very few translated/paraphrased passages and a lot of interpretation and overview. We are told that the works themselves are huge and highly nuanced with important references to (for most western readers) obscure literary figures. The translated passages are evocative. The analysis is dry. I kept wishing for more first person memories.

If you are a fan of the quite learned professor Jonathan Spence or deeply interested in China's late Ming era, this is a book to buy and read. Having said this, I think most readers will find Dr. Spence's story about a 17th century historian's life journey fairly obscure. Without my knowing anything prior to this book about its central figure (Zhang Dai), it was hard to get excited about this long dead scholar's scattered thoughts on his various relatives (uncles abound) and political situations of the times.

According to the review by the Washington Post, "historian Zhang Dai's long life, which began in 1597 and ended around 1680, spanned the Ming Dynasty's final, turbulent decades and its overthrow by the invading Manchus. His writings were an attempt to record a lost way of life. They include a Ming dynastic history, profiles of public figures and dreamlike sketches of scenes from his

youth. Spence draws on these documents, additional research by other scholars and his deep knowledge of Ming culture to portray the inner universe of a remarkably versatile and sympathetic figure."I have read many books by Jonathan Spence.His historical works on China in particular "Treason by the Book" are excellent.Spence said he took several years to research and write this latest work of his. Unfortunately he appears to have only scratched the surface. This is not a full biography.I finished this book knowing only sketches of Zhang Dai.In that respect i was disappointed with this book which i had earlier bought with great expectations.

This book is an evocative depiction of Ming society in China through the eyes of contemporary historian Zhang Dai. It's not a history book or a biography, but rather a snapshot of life in the late Ming dynasty. Particularly fascinating are the details of everyday gentry life, particularly in its varied and colorful amusements and hobbies, such as staging plays, tea connoisseurship, how people celebrated holidays, music, boating, antique collecting, poetry, etc., and in the duties expected of gentry, such as studying for and passing the bureaucratic exams to hold office. Also very interesting were the descriptions of Zhang's various relations (grandfathers, uncles and cousins) who varied to extremes in character and revealed much about different expressions of human nature within the social norms of the times. I felt this book truly brought ancient China alive for the reader and that alone makes this book a worthwhile read.

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