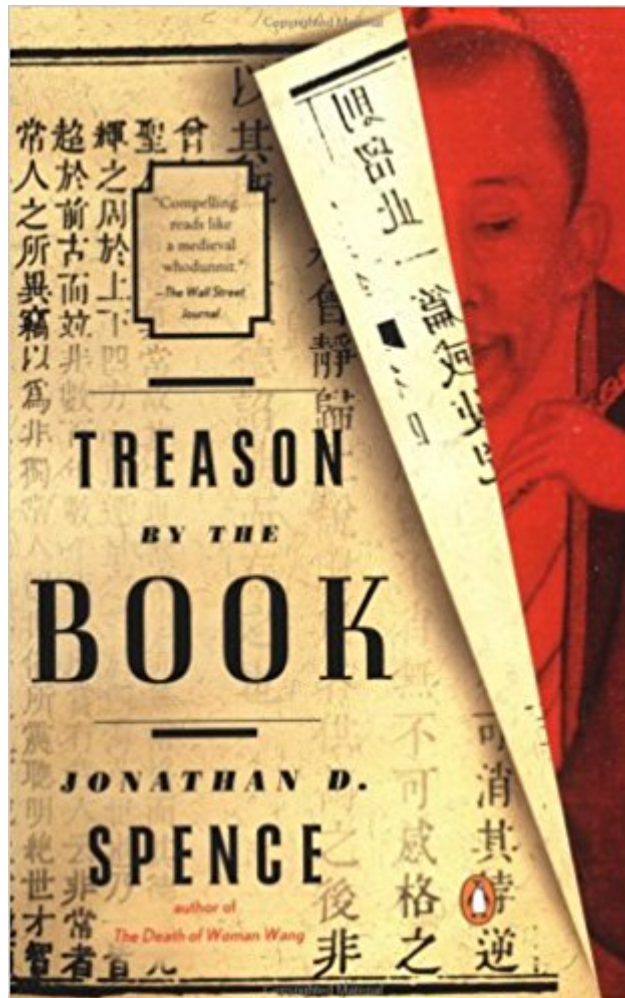




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# Treason By The Book



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## Synopsis

“A savory, fascinating story of absolute rule, one that not only reveals a great deal about China’s turbulent past but also suggests where some of the more durable reflexes of China’s current leaders have their roots. . . . A detective yarn and a picaresque tale.” (Richard Bernstein, *The New York Times*)

Shortly before noon on October 28, 1728, General Yue Zhongqi, the most powerful military and civilian official in northwest China, was en route to his headquarters. Suddenly, out of the crowd, a stranger ran toward Yue and passed him an envelope—an envelope containing details of a treasonous plot to overthrow the Manchu government.

This thrilling story of a conspiracy against the Qing dynasty in 1728 is a captivating tale of intrigue and a fascinating exploration of what it means to rule and be ruled. Once again, Jonathan Spence has created a vivid portrait of the rich culture that surrounds a most dramatic moment in Chinese history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1728, Emperor Yongzheng of China received a message from a distant subordinate advising that treason, in the form of a letter denouncing his regime, was abroad in the land. This new book by Yale scholar Spence (*The Death of Woman Wang*; *The Search for Modern China*; etc.) traces the intricate and surprising consequences of that disclosure. Partly a chronicle of historical events and partly an examination of a culture and a political system, this volume recounts how the emperor’s relentless investigation led to apprehension of the dissidents who had dared impugn the imperial system. One of the book’s surprises is the emperor’s next move. Instead of imposing an immediate

death sentence, he began an intensive, written conversation with the leader of the dissidents, a man named Zeng Jing. Ultimately convinced he had grievously wronged the emperor, Zeng Jing wrote an elaborate confession of error and received pardon for his crimes. Remarkably, the emperor ordered the entire chain of writings, including the original treasonous letter, published and distributed throughout all China as a civics lesson for his subjects. Spence draws on documents surviving from the Yongzheng era, and his telling of the emperor's story is anchored in a close reading of those primary sources. Accompanying the history is a sustained meditation on the power of the written word, including its uses for attack, for dialogue and for persuasion. Seen nearly 300 years later, Emperor Yongzheng's experiment with mass publication of ideas he found repugnant seems enlightened and commendable. Spence is a wonderfully accomplished writer, and in this rather slight tale he has found an intriguing character for his many readers to ponder. (Mar. 5)Forecast: While this may not have the weight of some of Spence's other works, as a miniature it offers easy access to readers unfamiliar with the Far East. Spence's reputation as one of our leading historians on China will guarantee wide coverage. History Book Club selection; six-city author tour.Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

To understand a remote time or unfamiliar place, we need to see it in action one story can be worth thousands of undressed facts and bare charts but Spence also admonishes us as he begins this tale that "one of history's uses is to remind us how unlikely things can be." The prosperous and stable Manchu regime in 18th-century Qing dynasty China rested uneasily on Chinese concurrence as much as on terror or law; emperors were understandably touchy on the subject of disloyalty, and officials serving under them were positively paranoid. So when, in 1728, the possibility of an anti-government conspiracy appeared, officials leaped into action, jumping around like dragons on a hot tile roof. Drawing on the wealth of documents and depositions generated by the emperor's meticulous bureaucracy, Spence's story of emperor, officials, and conspirators is both rousing and unlikely and highly informative. A great treat for fans of his earlier books.[A History Book Club selection.] Charles W. Hayford, Northwestern Univ., Evanston, IL Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is the way to break down history...into the small stories and details that follow particular lives. It's amazing to think of the written dialogue that transpires between Yongzheng and Zeng Jing.

When reading this it became clear to me that not a lot has changed in China, despite the massive development of the economy and opening up to the West. Gossip still reigns supreme and will catch the eye even of the highest ruler.

Fairly scholarly writing, but still fascinating since it all really happened and well documented. Not a thriller beach read.

Fast shipping and product was exactly as described. Would definitely buy from this seller again!  
Two thumbs up!

Treason by the Book by Jonathon Spence...slogging through the first fifty or so pages I was prepared to write a scathing two star review, but then something weird and cool happened it sucked me in. The fear of treason consumes the leadership throughout 1600's China having just recently overthrown a previously corrupted impure leadership. But who has committed this treason and how? Treason is a sickness gripping society where words, actions, the people you associate with, even the books you read fall under the scrutiny of the authorities often consuming many innocents. Book also provides interesting insights into the power of words and ideas to influence a population and the war of propaganda waged between the "evil books" and counter propaganda created by the state. Overall, its not an easy book to read through, its' a book that requires an exercise of free thought because there are surface ideas like what happens to persons accused of treason? And then broader ideas like what happens when a culture of fear is created amid a culture of ever shifting propaganda and counter propaganda?

Rumours as a source of evil has always bedevilled mankind. As early as the 18 th-century China , 14 Dec 1728 to be precise, General Yue Zhongqi concluding his report on an interrogation of a prisoner to Emperor Yongzheng reflected on the way rumours spread in general :One person said something ,someone else misheard it and repeated it, someone heard the new version for the first time and believed it to be true.A good recent example , Yue observed, was the rumours swirling around that the current emperor was a heavy drinker, ... an initial statement by a senior official ...that the emperor now found wine bad for his health, had been transformed by the rumour mill into the fact that the emperor drink immoderately.-extract from `Treason by the book' by Jonathan Spence 2001 Penguin edition page 79. An interesting read on the astonishing true story of a plot to overthrow the Manchurian Emperor in 1728. A lot of fascinating insight into the mind of a Confucian

ruler. The book is a revelation. It shows :-a) how hardworking was Emperor Yongzheng, b) how even in early 18th century the Chinese officials can trace a rumour to a group of prisoners in a chain gang seen on a certain road at a certain time several years earlier, and then check the files to locate and interrogate every single suspect, c) how Emperor Yongzheng struggled with the critical questions, "What is a good ruler?" "What is the law?" Yongzheng has always been overlooked by historians who highlighted the achievements of his father and his son. A book that to a certain degree redeems Yongzheng's reputation is this book. Jonathan Spence has written an outstanding history book.

While books about political intrigue have become common place in our time, the lack of means of rapid printing and distribution, freedom of the press and the well reasoned fear of retribution, inter alia, hindered their appearance in 1728 in China. That has been remedied by Professor Spence in *Treason by the Book*. It rivals *The Best and the Brightest* in the description of the interior workings of government and *All the Kings Men* in describing the motives and intrigue of the people doing the work. Treason was constantly on the mind of the Manchu emperor of China in the early eighteenth century. He was regarded as a foreigner, a barbarian, his dynasty having come to rule China by the force of arms. His concern was understandable, as conquering emperors and kings often have not expired of natural causes. The Qing emperor, Yongzheng, had a brief and stormy reign from 1723 to 1735. He succeeded his father emperor Kangxi, who had ruled from 1662 to 1722 and had consolidated the Qing Empire. In turn he was succeeded by his fourth son, Emperor Qianlong, who ruled from 1736 to 1799, the longest in the history of China. The means by which Yongzheng ruled is summarized by Professor Spence: "He gives enormous power to his favorite officials, both Chinese and Manchu, but watches them with endless care and infiltrates their staffs with spies who report back to him on his favorites' words and conduct. He strikes them down mercilessly if he feels they are wavering in their loyalty." ... "He feels the morals of the nation are lax and must be corrected with a mixture of Confucian teachings and legal restraints." One caveat, this is a historical narrative. What Spence has constructed comes from historical sources. Indeed, the Chinese appear to have saved everything, at least in the Qing. Evidence of the emperor's thoughts can be seen as notations on the memorials that have been sent to him by high officials. They are insightful and instructive in conveying the concerns of Yongzheng and are indicative of his defensiveness. However, the downside of being true to the written record is that the characters in this story are flat. To the extent that emotions are displayed, they are cursory and summary, especially with regard to subordinate government officials. We may be impressed with the patience and consideration of the

emperor, but he is portrayed as a two dimensional figure. That was perhaps unavoidable. This book only has the historical record as its source. Contemporary investigative reporting, which this book clearly resembles, is a Western invention and has not been practiced to any great extent in China. The incident that Spence has researched extensively, and as to which there appears to be a considerable amount of extant recorded detail, is an abortive, sophomoric Chinese conspiracy to start an uprising against the Manchu emperor. Zhang Xi, a peripatetic student, in a naïve effort to garner support, casts a letter at General Yue Zhongqi, the accomplished governor-general of two provinces. Yue is riding in his chair in Xian at the time. In the letter the conspirators proposed that Yue join with a group to overthrow the Manchu emperor Yongzheng and return China to the rule of a Chinese. The general, although a Chinese, is loyal to the Manchu emperor. He immediately informs the emperor of the possible treasonous activities of some of his subjects as disclosed in the letter. The emperor thereafter orders the identification and arrest of all the conspirators, including Zeng Jing, the leader and master of Zhang Xi. The minor players turn out not to be conspirators at all. They are mostly just acquaintances, although some are elderly students, an occupation evidently supported by the government for years on end. Their involvement with the prime conspirators seems to be serendipitous. The putative traitor, Zeng Jing, who is Chinese, had set forth in the letter to General Yue his numerous complaints about the emperor's character, rule and Manchu barbarism. The emperor, in what is a remarkable example of compulsive defensiveness, personally writes an 83 page rebuttal document, and has it read aloud to his senior officials. It is rather impressive in that, given his extensive arbitrary power and the customs of the time, he takes the time to justify his actions. Indeed, he is generally persuasive. Moreover, he displays great political intuition in knowing that since he has had Zeng's letter copied, its contents will undoubtedly leak out to the court and probably beyond. Therefore his rebuttal is both timely and, in the emperor's view, necessary. As a result of interrogations of the arrested conspirators it is determined, that all of the complaints about the emperor are second hand or more. Indeed, many are rumors that Zeng Jing has heard about the emperor having killed his brothers to obtain and keep the throne. The emperor decides that the source of the rumors should be found. As must be true of all political rumors, the sources of many were close to the court and the emperor's brothers. Once stated a rumor has a life of its own, being embellished and elaborated upon with each telling. An emperor who, it is said, complains about the wine becomes an alcoholic with the endless repeating of the complaint. Such is the nature of rumors, especially political ones. While the emperor may have believed himself to be falsely accused, some of the accusations of Zeng were founded upon the writings of Liuliang and his followers. Liuliang, a scholar, was born in 1629 and died in 1683,

long before Yongzheng came to power. He believed the Ming were ordained by heaven and wrote letters and poems with scorn for the Manchus. He revered the old Ming emperor and mocked the customs and administration of the barbarians. The emperor not only requested that he be given Lǎozi's writings and those of his disciple, Yan Hongkui, it appears he read them in their entirety. Once the conspirators and their families and associates had been brought to Beijing and, in some cases released, the paranoia in the countryside had subsided. The emperor began a dialogue with Zeng Jing, the acknowledged traitor. He let Zeng read the various memorials and his endorsed comments which are associated with matters related to Zeng's accusations. At the emperor's request Zeng prepared responsive comments, mostly recognizing his own errors of thought. The emperor, in turn read those comments. In time, Zeng drafted a sincere confession praising the emperor and expressing regret for repeating the rumors and basing his treasonous thoughts upon them. As a result of Zeng's contrition, he is pardoned by the emperor, as are others. Remarkably however, Yongzheng directed that his writings, along with Zeng's accusations be assembled and published in a 509 page book entitled *A Record of How True Virtue Led to an Awakening from Delusion*. He further directed that it be distributed to officials and read to the people. Copies still exist and inspired Spence's research. However, in 1735, when Qianlong succeeds his father, Yongzheng, Zeng and Zhang are rearrested, brought to Beijing, in secrecy, and sentenced to death by slicing along with some members of their families. Qianlong and some of his advisors took an entirely different view of transparency in governance. The publication of Yongzheng's writings and Zeng's accusations, was suppressed, collected and to a great extent destroyed. Spence can be compared to Bob Woodward in his investigative reporting, digging out the facts and constructing the narrative. He follows the various individuals involved and their fates. He examines the rumors and how the emperor dealt with them. He also gives some insight into Yongzheng's views on governance. This may be an obscure and inconsequential tale, but it should be a lesson for all societies. The Yongzheng emperor opted for transparency, exposure and examination. Would that every political leader found the will to emulate him. The Qianlong emperor, in this instance, represented a resurgence of paranoia. What does this mean for us? Has Jonathan Spence written this in order to convey a lesson? He says no. He asserts that "...it can be said that both emperors got it wrong." Yongzheng thought exposing the rumors and explaining them was wise. But the people just remembered the rumors. Qianlong thought that by burning the book he could hide the rumors. But the people believed it was to hide the truth. Therefore, perhaps Professor Spence intended to let the reader decide. However, the correctness of one decision is clear. Western countries with a free press have exposed the internal confidential discussions of government as a

matter of course. Once he had written his 83 page response, Yongzheng's decision to expose Zeng's letter and his writing appears to have been prescient.

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