

## OTHER TITLES

*History*

**CHINESE ROUNDABOUT:** Essays in History and Culture. By Jonathan D. Spence. Norton. 400 pp. \$24.95

With China's old guard dying off and the country seemingly poised on the eve of a new era, many observers are now searching the nation's past for possible clues to its future. They could not hope for a more congenial guide than Yale's Jonathan Spence.

The historian's breadth, wit, and subtlety are all on display as he ranges from the Ming Dynasty in the 17th century to the tragedy of Tiananmen Square, from a Chinese scholar in 18th-century Paris to the contemporary poet of protest Bei Dao. *Chinese Roundabout* is something of a smorgasbord, one that even offers an essay on "Food." Reading Chinese history through its menus, Spence tells how, during the famines in the late Qing dynasty, the poor fed on ground leaves, sawdust, and peanut hulls, while the boy emperor P'u-i (immortalized recently in the film *The Last Emperor*) still followed the 17th-century imperial protocols of dining. "Processions of eunuchs brought tables of lavish dishes to his presence on his command, each silver dish placed upon a porcelain dish of hot water to keep it warm . . ." In fact, P'u-i's stomach was too delicate for the 900 pounds of meat and 240 chickens and ducks prepared each month for his nightly ceremonial banquets. After the official repasts, the boy emperor would consume a modest meal in his consort's kitchen.

Spence warns the reader to expect only "a certain overenthusiastic or even harebrained eclecticism" from his book. But through this eclecticism runs Spence's major theme: Western notions cannot be applied to Chinese history or society. Spence also overturns many a long-held idea about China's past. For example, greedy, unscrupulous Westerners are usually blamed for spreading opium through Chinese society. But the Chinese, Spence shows, had their own reason for smoking the drug: It made the bruising lot of the poor, the laborers and

rickshaw drivers, bearable. As for the rich, Spence tells of one aristocrat who encouraged his son to smoke in order to dampen his reformist zeal. (But how representative is this example? That is often the question about Spence's work.) Spence likewise challenges the conventional wisdom that communism was like a bomb that obliterated the old Confucian social order. He shows (as Harvard's Tu Weiming does elsewhere) that the basic Confucian family structure and hierarchy have survived Mao's revolutionary fervor.

John King Fairbank was the dean of a pioneering generation of China specialists who dealt with the general, the overview, the large subject. Spence belongs to a younger generation who treat the particular, the local instance, and the foibles of the past. Before he died last September, Fairbank praised Spence's *Search for Modern China* for giving "us the sense of immediacy, of almost personal contact with the subject . . . of history." The doyen seemed to be naming his successor.

**DRIVEN PATRIOT:** The Life and Times of James Forrestal. By Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley. Knopf. 587 pp. \$30

Michael Forrestal once observed of his father that if he had been more balanced, he would have been less interesting. Forrestal and his elite peers—Dean Acheson, Robert Lovett, and John J. McCloy, among others—served in World War I, helped steer the Allied effort during World War II, and then created the mechanisms to wage the Cold War. But while those others may have had their personal failings and career setbacks, only Forrestal broke under the pressure of real and imagined disappointments. He committed suicide in 1949, one year after becoming America's first sec-

