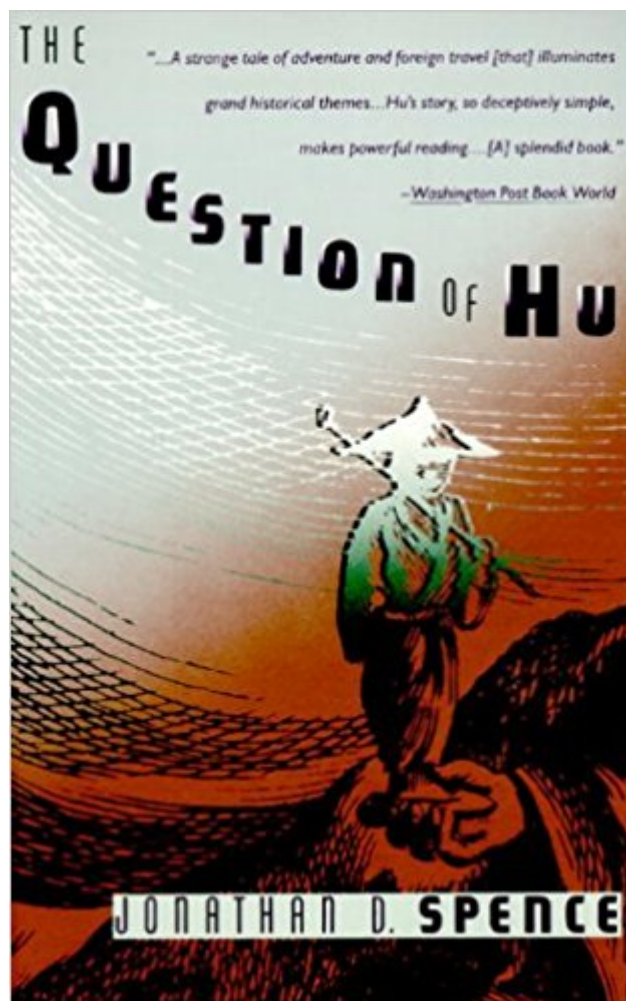


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The Question Of Hu



Synopsis

This lively and elegant book by the acclaimed historian Jonathan D. Spence reconstructs an extraordinary episode in the early intercourse between Europe and China. It is the story of John Hu, a lowly but devout Chinese Catholic, who in 1722 accompanied a Jesuit missionary on a journey to France--a journey that ended with Hu's confinement in a lunatic asylum. At once a triumph of historical detective work and a gripping narrative, *The Question of Hu* deftly probes the collision of two cultures, with their different definitions of faith, madness, and moral obligation.

Book Information

Paperback: 208 pages

Publisher: Vintage; 1st Vintage Books ed edition (October 23, 1989)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0679725806

ISBN-13: 978-0679725800

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.5 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars 11 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #90,771 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #40 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Chinese](#) #367 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Biographical](#) #396 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical > Biographical](#)

Customer Reviews

To French Jesuit Jean-Francois Foucquet, John Hua Chinese widower from Canton and a convert to Catholicism seemed like the perfect choice to serve as the missionary's translator and assistant. So Foucquet took Hu back to Paris with him in 1722, but Hu acted bizarrely on the overseas crossing and was confined for two years in the lunatic asylum of Charenton. In this slim travelogue, historian Spence (*The Gate of Heavenly Peace*) narrates their tragic tale in the form of an imaginary log, reconstructed from French, British and Vatican archives. Hu's behavior was clearly irrational: he wielded a knife, made strange proclamations, slept outdoors. But was he insane, and if so, did his journey to the West somehow trigger the reaction? Father Doucquet acted badly (he ditched Hu, who became an embarrassment to him), but to what extent was the Jesuit responsible for Hu's fate? The available evidence can't answer these questions, and we are left with a fragmentary puzzle. Reader's Subscription Book Club selection. Copyright 1988 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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.

The Question of Hu, written beautifully by Jonathan Spence, should be considered an important contribution to the broad field of humanities. However, the question remains if Spence's research fits within the strict confines of historical literature, or whether its narrative-driven style is more characteristic of a historical novel. Spence's tale about the travels of Jean-Francois Foucquet, a Jesuit priest, and his culture-shocked Chinese copyist, John Hu, blurs the line that arbitrarily divides the various fields that constitute the humanities. While *The Question of Hu* seemingly lacks the detached analysis that most historians infuse into their works, Spence's tale, nonetheless, has to be considered an imaginative and exciting contribution to historical literature, which in its own subtle style, provides a platform for criticizing European cultural chauvinism during the 18th century. Throughout his work, Spence efficiently uses proven literary devices to speed along the story and provide a sense of suspense for the reader. Spence begins in medias res with Hu - a Chinese copyist - being visited by a concerned Jesuit clergyman. The two years that Hu had spent within a French insane asylum, after being abandoned by his own employer, proved harsh; even leaving one clergyman to comment that Hu looked like an "exhumed corpse" (Spence, 6). From this literary hook, Spence expertly details how Hu, who faithfully traveled with his employer on a ship from China to France, had met this unfortunate end. Unlike most histories, where the author's thesis is clearly stated and the sequence of events is laid out completely within the introductory pages of a book, Spence merely explains that he didn't, "think Foucquet [Hu's French employer] was right in the way he treated Hu," (Spence, XX). In this, Spence's analysis seems weak and undeveloped. But this is misleading. Spence's slight touch allows the audience's to read further into the seemingly truthful narrative that Foucquet has set aside, and for which Spence has neatly organized into an excellent historical narrative. The argument against *The Question of Hu* being considered a truly historical work lies in the belief that Spence avoids providing a detailed analysis about the themes that could be gleaned from Hu's experiences. Of these themes, the perception that European Christian practices were superior to Chinese traditions, can be seen throughout the text. Spence, while not obnoxiously moralistic in his criticism, does open the door for judgments against the actions of Foucquet. With a close examination of Spence's narrative it can be understood that Foucquet's racially demeaning relationship with Hu serves as an example of cultural arrogance that

pervaded European Christian thought during the 18th century . Was Hu's eccentric behavior in France, in which he stole a horse, ran away on several occasions, and led an outwardly misogynistic parade through Paris, proof of his insanity? Or merely the frustrated reactions of pious albeit eccentric man completely overwhelmed by his experiences within cosmopolitan France; detached from his conservative Chinese heritage; and all the while, handicapped by his inability to speak French. To attribute Hu's behavior to sudden bout of insanity detaches Foucquet of any responsibility of handling complex cultural relations between his Chinese employee and his own European culture, thus leaving his self-serving theological systems untouched by the sting of reality. Foucquet's believes that "the Chinese lack the key to their own classical writings," and that Christianity is the only way for them to truly understand their own cultural traditions. Even the intensely pious Hu, who attempted to attain Christian salvation by denouncing his wealth and possessions, was characterized by Foucquet as being a lunatic, because his expressions of Christian faith were considered primitive and ritualistic. It is not historically responsible to attribute the actions of one man as an example of a whole society, as can be seen with the few Jesuit clergymen who were concerned with plight of Hu. However, to deny that Foucquet's actions were not a function of broad European historical mechanisms that influenced his belief systems, and thus predicted his egregious decision to abandon Hu, would be just as irresponsible intellectually. Spence's concise but brilliant history subtly examines the complex relationship between European Christian ideology and Chinese cultural practices. At only 134 pages, *The Question of Hu*, does not contain a preaching condemnation of European cultural chauvinism, but quiet judgment can be gleaned from Spence's tactful source analysis.

I bought this for a history class uninterested in anything but getting a good grade on the paper I had to write about this. I ended up being absorbed by the book and wandering into deep thought about issues such as culture clashes and what mental illness is. The book is short, engaging, and well-written. I'm glad I read it.

Chinese history has always fascinated me! Even though this book was assigned to me in college I enjoyed every minute!

Arrived right on time and great quality for a good price. Will come back again for more books. Thanks alot.

I have a couple of other books by Mr. Spence. I don't think this book is up to the standard of the others. It is somehow hindered by not-so-excited nature of the subject matter. First, Foucquet needed a Chinese for his bragging rights to Rome. Then, he lost his original candidate. So, he filled up with Hu, a recently convert peasant whom, I doubt, hardly know much about Chinese classics and hardly capable to understand/accept a new concept because of insufficient scholastic training. Foucquet abandoned Hu latter because of the awkward situation of losing his bragging rights. Now, as a analogy, if you bring Tarzan, out of jungle and abandon him latter without teaching him any language understood by the citizen of the city where he dwells, what will Tarzan turn to be? Most probably an insane. This is much worse than a Kafkasque situation in which the protagonist still can communicate with the other. So, the story is simple. The only reason that Hu was locked up was because an irresponsible Father, Foucquet, whom needed a Chinese to show off to Rome lost his bragging treasure because of incapability of Hu and was trying to escape his responsibility to host Hu by ignoring him. Don't forget Foucquet hand-picked Hu himself. The vain of showing off to Rome ate someone's integrity, even Foucquet, a well-educated Jesuit. So, a not-so-excited story turned up to be a dull book. If you know Mr. Spence, skip this one and try the other, e.g., The Emperor of China.

I'm sure for the avid reader, this book is good. But we used it in a History 15000 report. I could've found 50 books to choose for a college History paper to write on.

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