ABSTRACT

Jonathan D. Spence takes a narrative approach to history writing. In Treason by the Book, he delves into the minds of his protagonists in order to comprehend the Zeng Jing case more clearly. Spence claims that the story “unfolded” the way it did because of who Zeng Jing and Yongzheng were. While Spence's attempts at psychologizing his subjects suggest that he may have tampered with his sources, a close study reveals otherwise. Through a comparison of Treason by the Book and the works cited, we realize that Spence's probing of Zeng Jing and Yongzheng's minds is characterized by two different strategies. Although the third person narrative is neatly sustained throughout the book, the imaginative depictions of Zeng Jing and Yongzheng's mental workings are represented from two different perspectives, that of the narrator and of the protagonist respectively.

The narrator's speculations on the thought processes of Yongzheng and Zeng Jing reinforce Yongzheng's eagerness for control, and inject into Zeng Jing's character a sense of foreordination. On the other hand, the protagonist's point of view illuminates Yongzheng in a positive light, but the narrator's perspective offers instead a disquieting picture of Yongzheng's ambition. Meanwhile, Zeng Jing is denied a chance of speaking for himself and is relegated to the narrator's interpretations.

Such divergence in approach towards the two men whom Spence specifies as his key subjects illustrates the power imbalance between the two. While Spence is sympathetic towards neither party, he nonetheless maps the book predominantly on Yongzheng's mind. Spence issues curious challenges to his own attempt at destabilizing hierarchical
categorizations of Yongzheng and Zeng Jing, showing how difficult it is to resolve the tension between the constraints of faithfulness to the source, and the freewill of imagination in history writing.