Jonathan Spence

Reith Lectures 2008: Chinese Vistas

Lecture 2: English Lessons

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SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to the Victorian splendour of St. George's Hall in Liverpool. Built as a concert hall and as a law court, it was possibly the only place in 19th century Britain where you could listen to Beethoven and be tried for murder under the same roof. Historically, the port of Liverpool was the hub of much of Britain's imperial expansion and has many links with China. Chinese merchant seamen, initially hired by Liverpool's Blue Funnel Line, supported Britain in two World Wars and some then settled here. Today it's twinned with one of China's biggest and most important cities, also a great port: Shanghai. So it's an appropriate place in which to hold one of this year's series of Reith Lectures, which is entitled 'Chinese Vistas'.

The lectures are focused on the history and the culture of China, an explanation of how the development of a country that's emerging as one of the world's great economic powers is inextricably bound up with its past. Last week, we heard about Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher, whose ideas still influence his country today. This week, our lecture is called 'English Lessons' and will explore what happens when Chinese and British ideas meet. The relationship between China and Britain has never been an easy one. Our lecturer is a man who's better placed than most to try to help us understand how that relationship will unfold as our future in the United Kingdom becomes increasingly dependent on what happens in China.

He's a historian whose books about China are regarded as the leading works in their field. It's his belief that the country's history holds the key to its present. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the BBC's Reith Lecturer 2008, Professor Jonathan Spence.

(APPLAUSE)

JONATHAN SPENCE: Thank you, Susan, for that wonderful introduction and welcome everybody. I'm delighted to be giving this second Reith Lecture in Liverpool. As Sue mentioned, not only because it's home to such a vibrant Chinese community - it was one of the earliest significant communities in Europe - and also because this year you are the European Capital of Culture. And so not only is this the 60th Reith Anniversary, which is a particularly happy event in Chinese customary

thinking, but we also now have this second perfect connection with a wider cultural world as well.

In my first lecture, as Sue said, I took a long view, trying to bring Confucius into the present era - a long scamper as it were of a lecture from the 5th century BC down to the year 2008; but in this lecture, I want to be not quite so bold, but to look at the interconnections between China and especially the West, which I'm interpreting here in terms of the United Kingdom and the United States. So I call this 'English Lessons', in some ways playfully, in some ways perhaps trying to remind us of the difficult side of these relations. Who is the pupil, who is the teacher in such lessons? What are you passing on and why? What kind of self-esteem do you feel that you think should be shared? When are you making perhaps serious mistakes in the way you try to project yourself in another country?

And I'll bring us up to the present just for a second to remind us how many Chinese students are now from China, studying in the United Kingdom; how many of our students, British students are studying Chinese language. I've been told that just over 2000 at this moment are preparing for their O Levels in Mandarin Chinese. This is a formidable venture and I salute those - I know some of them are in this room - I salute those of you who are making this leap.

So in the name of the Chinese visiting here and our students getting ready to go there, this lecture is kind of directed in a way to you.

So my feeling then is that these English lessons started round about the year 1620 - that's about where we'll start our story - when foreign contacts developed with China, initially through traders; partly government controlled traders through the East India Company, which had been given a monopoly by the Crown of some of the more adventurous essays into fortune building in the Far East, based in India itself and also increasingly in China. British ships - some of them from here - pushed their way through the South East Asian peninsulas and areas to land in Ningbo, in Macau (Macao), in Guangzhou, and other cities on China's East Coast itself.

Now these early trading ventures were in fact violent - full of clashes, full of misunderstandings - and I'm afraid there's no doubt that the British sailors on those ships and their commanders acted violently when they were not given the trading privileges that they sought. How they expected to be treated, I'm not sure. And yet they represented some other sort of mixture of values that we've seen at other times ever since that period. At the same time, they admired the Chinese. There was violence in the air, but there was also strong admiration. And there was admiration for what the British already saw was the size of China and the apparent sophistication of its administration over such an enormous territory and so many people. Though scholars still argue a lot about the nature of Chinese population and its size, I think most of the people who study population figures would feel that in the 1630s period China's population was probably over about a hundred and seventy, a hundred and eighty million people and was growing.

So there was admiration, there was violence. There was also difficulty learning the language because the Chinese government was unwilling to let Westerners learn Chinese. Language was seen in other words as a protection of your security, and we

know from some records that early Chinese who offered to tutor Westerners in Chinese language could be imprisoned or even executed. So Westerners wanting to learn Chinese in this period had to do so in secrecy if they were in the Chinese world or in one of these Chinese cities near the coast.

They were forbidden to travel inland, they were forbidden to move inside the gates of China's cities, so the Westerners had to camp outside - outside Guangzhou in the marshy area near the Pearl River, outside Shanghai in the marshy areas along the Huangpu - many of you may have seen.

It was an uneasy period. And the countries groped towards each other in terms of language by developing a curious hybrid mixture of language, which we now call Pidgin English. I don't know how many people know Pidgin English now, but it was a kind of newly coined language form in which, using Chinese grammatical sentences and a mixture of English and Portuguese and Indian and other words, a simplified trading language was developed that let the two countries communicate. And it had an extraordinary life as a language. It let people very rapidly deal in goods and tariff issues and a few basic legal issues and some problems of the exact nature of the trade items you were dealing with. It let you handle all these things with the vocabulary of only a few hundred words. I'm not saying we should add this to our curriculum in our overburdened schools, but still it is a fascinating linguistic structure.

One group I'm particularly drawn to were those among … particularly among early British traders in China and a few of the early missionaries who after learning Chinese for a few months decided that the Chinese language was a plot, an extraordinary plot to baffle Westerners and make it completely impossible for them to understand or do dealings with the Chinese. They decided that the Chinese were keeping an impeccable front and pretending to understand their own language (LAUGHTER) when strong and stalwart Englishmen knew of course that that was not the case and they, therefore, tried to crack the system that the Chinese were using. And using that word 'to crack', I was thinking particularly that perhaps the greatest crackpots, as we now call them, were those who sought a key to the Chinese language and offered increasingly short spans of learning that would give you the mastery of the language. My favourite is the man who in the 17th century suggested that China could be learned if you bought his key in less than three weeks. (LAUGHTER) So this in fact never happened, but some of these keys and the searches for them have been maintained. We can actually study some of them in libraries.

Now in this period, after that opening up the rather tentative difficult period between particularly British traders and the Chinese themselves, without going through dynastic dates and all this sort of thing, a series of sort of pulses can be seen coming into this relationship between China and the Western countries. One was the beginning of memoir writing. This was the world of early traders, early travellers, early missionaries who were in China anywhere from the 17th to the early 19th century and they became memoir writers. They were spellbound with what they saw in China and they tried to share this with us. So we begin to get … we might call it a foreign witness, foreigners bearing witness to the realities of Chinese life and politics and religion and everyday family affairs. There were births of a new kind of fiction, a fiction about China or fictions using Chinese characters, fictions telling us stories (in as much as we were able to understand them) of what Chinese life must be like. And,

again, those writers in the English language covered this with great skill, I think, and great subtlety.

One of my favourites is Oliver Goldsmith, and Goldsmith wrote an entire two-volume novel called 'Citizen of the World' - a beautiful title, 'Citizen of the World' - in which he wrote the entire novel through the eyes of a Chinese man visiting London. And so it was a kind of double joke in a way: he created a Chinese fictional visitor to a very real city and had him write home letters and had the responses coming from Chinese back home. He added one phrase - I'll just throw this into the lecture, it just came into my head - that may have resonance with those Chinese visiting us now from China. Goldsmith wrote in this novel, has a character say in this novel:

'You know, I think these British people are trying to reason me out of my own country. They're trying to push their pressure on me to get me to lose my sense of what it is to be Chinese.'

And I thought if I had more research time, I'd like to know if people in the 18th century read that sentence and saw that it had the power that I think it does now. How often do we try to reason people out of their own cultures because of our analytical stance or our feeling of superiority or our sense that we have a different kind of skill than they do.

So then okay memoirs are a aspect of this, fictions are a part of this, and the growing use of diplomacy is a part of it, and a new generation of diplomats began to experience the complexity of trying to deal with this very powerful nation as they began to understand its very restrictive ideas about trade and access and openness and its insistence that foreigners coming to China do the unbelievable thing of obeying Chinese law and thinking through Chinese reasons for limiting trade, limiting access, learning the certain cities who are out of bounds, learning that certain kinds of descriptions of territory had military significance and might be confiscated. I won't belabour that point, but diplomats began to study and learn. Religion began so spread as Protestant missionaries began to move ahead of the Catholic missionaries. From about 1805, 1806 onwards, we began to get a new generation of Western missionaries going to China, many of them British, having learned basic Chinese from Chinese in London and they were pretty well prepared when they got there. Some of them took their tutors with them on the boats because the boat journey was so long, so why waste that six months when you could be learning Chinese? And so the tutors came with them to the country and settled there with them.

It's a period of translation and of the key backing to the idea of translation, the first composition of a good Chinese English dictionary in which the languages were shared and pulled together by, actually, missionary scholars at the same time as they compiled their dictionary to translate the whole of the Bible into Chinese. And this feat was finished with the first draft version around about 1830.

And then there was the problem of trade imbalances as the West tried to find trade goods that the Chinese wanted, so that they could pay for their export goods in terms of porcelain and silk and other precious manufactures from China. And the story of the 18th century and the early 19th century in this term of lessons learned from other countries was that the British were spectacularly unsuccessful in finding trade goods

that the Chinese wanted or needed. They couldn't find either. And it is this melancholy failure of the balance of trade that leads to the under girding, as it were, of the opium business in China. Opium started to be sold by British traders and later by American traders to the Chinese because the West simply could not find enough products to attract the Chinese in a sort of barter exchange at the time.

Opium trade led to war, as many of you will know. The first, and properly called, I think, Opium War was between 1839 and 1842, what I think we could call a sorry war, which the Chinese lost to successful British firepower. And it led to the first of bitterly unfair exchange treaties between China and foreign powers, what was called the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, after which the Chinese were forced to yield major concessions financially to the West and major areas of territory. Such treaties rarely succeed because you do not get what you want - that's what happened to the British - and so you fight another war to get a better treaty, by which of course for the Chinese is a worse treaty. And the British did that in turn between 1856 and 1860. Then the French did the same later in the 19th century and the Germans did the same at the very end of the century. So you get a series of unfair wars linked to unfair treaties, all in the name of the expansion of trade and all covered with a delicate veneer of diplomatic language and treaty obligations and agreements. And as part of those treaties, the Westerners won the right - as they called it - they won the right to live in Chinese cities of their choosing under foreign treaty protection and to be allowed to use their own law in China instead of Chinese law. This is obviously still a very vexed and complicated area, but the tension in the discussions of this particular problem can be dated very much to about the 1840s, 1850s, that kind of period.

And then there was migration. The beginning of large scale migration comes from Eastern China, particularly from Guangdong and Fujian Provinces. Probably the first wave of major immigration was in fact to South East Asia and then there was also fairly steady movement to Latin America and the Caribbean, which has been much less studied. But by the 1850s, large numbers of Chinese were going from Eastern China to California, as we know, in the gold rush, but many more were going to Washington State and to Oregon and to the Deep South in fact: Mississippi and Alabama in the United States. And by the 1870s, as we know from Liverpool's history, larger numbers were beginning to move to this country as well. And Sue referred to the Blue Funnel Line, the famous shipping line based in Liverpool, that increasingly crewed its ships with Chinese skilled engineers and mechanics as the Blue Funnel became famous for the technological advances of its own ships' engines, as I understand it, bringing new levels of efficiency and profitability to the shipping lines between Liverpool and the Far East.

And it was these Chinese with their technical knowledge who were able to work on the ships, often settling in Liverpool in the first versions of Chinatowns I think anywhere in the United Kingdom, so they would be conveniently near the harbours when new Blue Funnel fleets were getting ready and were trying to get their engine room staffs together. And so it became customary for the agents for the Blue Funnel Line to scour the little areas I've been trying to look at today, around Pitt Street and Nelson Street, and so on, where the Chinese had their boarding houses and their hostels, and where they also began sometimes to marry or live with Western women from the same areas and to start small Chinese families or communities of their own.

And so Liverpool became a kind of high tech migratory base in a sense for a very new series of ventures.

Now another aspect of this would be if we jump forward again with this idea of lessons and experiences, we find by the later 19th century - let's say by the 1880s or 1890s - that English is now beginning to be taught formally as it were in Chinese schools at two levels. One is in the first version of an imperial university in China founded after in fact one of these unfair wars when the Chinese were essentially forced to alter their educational system to suit aspects from the West. But you began to get English lessons at the formal level from the Manchu government, and at the same time you began to get missionary teaching of the English language from people coming from this country or from the United States. And with the mission education, the mission schools in China opened up education for girls and young women and moved the idea of a concerted education across the gender gap, and a new generation of young Chinese women became able to learn Chinese side by side with the men. Western literature increasingly was now being translated into Chinese, matching those other versions of translating Chinese classics into English, which was completed in the 1870s and 1880s when the famous books of Confucius and the back up classics that went with them had all been translated by remarkable scholars from Chinese into English and published in British publishing houses. At the same time the Chinese began to be able to read Western political theory, Western novels, Western poetry in Chinese and to try and psych out what exactly it was that made our society tick.

The aspects of trade and growing numbers of immigrants led to tension and hostility, particularly in the turn of the last century, round about 1904 to 1910. I was struck by some of the really difficult racial slurs and the complexity of treatment of Chinese in Liverpool during that early period. But we find it matched in the United States very, very clearly with discriminatory legislation across the United States and we find it matched by a Chinese response which has been very little studied, but as early as 1906 the Chinese began to boycott the goods of those countries that had treated them particularly badly. So an economic boycott is a sophisticated weapon and the British merchants were not used to being boycotted with the few goods that they had to sell and such boycotts also spread against Japanese goods and also United States as well as British objects of trade. And this was difficult for the government to handle. They were beginning to understand how to handle it when in 1911 the last Chinese dynasty fell - the only date I'll force upon you today. 1911, ending the huge imperial system and leaving in fact what was a very weak Chinese Republic to try and deal with these pressures from the Western powers.

And in the period following this boycott and the collapse of the actual empire, we got more and more Chinese beginning to go overseas in search of education. We got many coming to English schools and universities and we had another kind of exchange, which again has not been very much studied, which is the fact that about 170 000 Chinese workers came to Europe during World War I and there they worked in fact in an non-combatant role for the British or the French - worked in the trenches, worked digging trenches, worked cleaning up the battlefields, if you can imagine what that was like, removing the corpses and trying to help with unloading ships, stacking munitions, running prisoner of war camps. There was a huge range of Chinese activity. And, again, I know just from something I was reading a few days ago that in

I believe it's your Anfield cemetery one can find a few Chinese grave markers from those at that time.

And I think probably the last example I'll dwell on here a little bit would be World War II in the mix of all this. There was such a lot now of exchange, language was no longer quite the same sort of problem but the relationships between the powers involved here were very central.

But World War II, as it was seen in the Far East, was a shock, especially the collapse of the British in Hong Kong and the British Forces in Singapore at the end of 1941 as the Japanese began the war in earnest. And this shock, I think this blow is something from which the sort of classic form of British power in the Far East never actually recovered. And so World War II became a very riven kind of area for these relationships between China and the English speaking world. The war ended in another series of actions, which I only learnt recently about from a scholar in this room herself. That is the problem of the repatriation of Chinese seamen, especially I gather from Liverpool, at the end of World War II because throughout these dark years of the war the Chinese had continued to volunteer for convoy duty on the extremely dangerous run between the Northern United States and Canada and foreign harbours, but especially Liverpool, facing many U-boats and threats from the Germans. And so the large number of Chinese casualties and then the difficulty and danger of that life made it all the more regrettable and all the more resented, I think, that many of these Chinese were repatriated without any kind of legal procedure at all from the summer of 1945 onwards; indeed from homes and houses very near where we are now. And without going into making the present too negative because there are people here working so hard and succeeding so wonderfully in so many lines of business, I think we still have to acknowledge that there are difficult tensions for Chinese communities in this country. The idea of illegal immigration is now another burden I think that has been placed around some of the Chinese who are legitimately here working at their own agendas.

So with that, I'd just like to say that the next lecture will deal with what I'd call the search of identity and roots among the Chinese as they try and make their way through both British society and the society in the United States. I'm calling this 'American Dreams' because some of these dreams came true but an awful lot of them vanished when people woke up. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

SUE LAWLEY: Professor Spence, thank you very much indeed. I'd now like to invite the audience here in Liverpool to discuss some of those English lessons with our lecturer. We have some questioners here towards the front, but I'd very much like to have some opinions and comments from others of you, so do put up your hands as we begin to open up the question areas that interest you if you feel you have something to add. Our first questioner is one of the two thousand, Jonathan that you were talking about. He's a student who's studying Mandarin in this country. He's Tom Fraser who is in First Year Sixth at the Merseyside Calday Grange School. Tom, you're studying Mandarin at A level, I think?

TOM FRASER: For AS level, yeah.

SUE LAWLEY: Right, what's your question?

TOM FRASER: My question is that the 19th century was considered a humiliation for the Chinese after the Opium Wars in 1840 and it proved disastrous with the Chinese at the hands of the British. Do you still feel that that's a historical legacy felt today?

JONATHAN SPENCE: You might think that that would be a sort of rather forgotten memory by now, but this Opium War has been used in countless Chinese publications has been used to define the beginning of modern Chinese. And I find that very self-defeating to choose to study your own modern history based on this period of humiliation and failure, and it was hard to break away from that and get more sense of reality about what the Chinese were achieving in the 19th century.

SUE LAWLEY: Do you want to come back on this, Tom?

TOM FRASER: Yes. Do you feel that, if it is so publicly studied, do you think that that would affect any relationships we still have with China today in that if we're doing so much business with China; do you think that they'd still consider that as something that we've done to them?

JONATHAN SPENCE: The issue I think is now no longer a real one in any important sense and to harp on it now is not something the Chinese have to do. It's something they can do if they wish to keep an old pain alive.

SUE LAWLEY: I'm going to call in Yvonne Foley who's sitting here. She was born here in Liverpool, weren't you Yvonne, of Chinese and British parentage; one of the offspring of the arrival of Chinese settlers here that Jonathan was telling us about?

YVONNE FOLEY: Yes, my father was actually a seaman from Shanghai and my mother was an English woman. After World War II, my father and the father of many here today were actually forced to leave the UK. People like us were very much the product of Anglo-Chinese trade. I'd be interested in your view, Professor Spence, of why the real history of Chinese in this country remains virtually unknown?

JONATHAN SPENCE: Well I have to speak for all the historians who've said nothing. I think it's just … it's slowly emerging as a topic. It's taken time. I can remember when I found a book came out about all the Chinese in World War I by Summerskill, if I remember, which is now a standard in the field by the way. I saw this in a tiny ad, privately published, and I sent my little cheque and the book arrived about four days later and I was completely fascinated by it. But it started because he was on holiday in France, this middle-aged man on his own who loved travelling, and he was zipping along the back roads in France near the Belgian border when he saw a little sign, wooden sign. It said, 'A le Cimetiere Chinois' - to the Chinese cemetery.

For a second he didn't do anything. He just registered it, the way you do when you're driving along. And then he yanked on the brakes on his car and said, "What? What do you mean to the Chinese cemetery?" It became a quest, a personal fascination with a strange moment of the past. And this I think is partly in answer to your story - you need a trigger to get going. And the same thing is now happening with the Chinese in Britain in many, many different levels. People are looking at their own fathers or

grandfathers. They are getting in touch through email and so on with other relatives who may be in Singapore or Adelaide or the United States and including your work on this.

SUE LAWLEY: But this is a particularly shocking story, isn't it...

JONATHAN SPENCE: Yes.

SUE LAWLEY: … because I think I'm right in saying that your father was press-ganged out of Liverpool; was shipped home without a by-your-leave.

YVONNE FOLEY: They were forced out. The men were actually forced out. They were forced out in a very unpleasant way. They had got themselves into a situation of debt because they had no money. They weren't allowed to have work. Government didn't allow them to have work and so they were offered a one way passage back. And a group of us are here today, a lot of our mothers went to the grave believing that they'd been deserted.

SUE LAWLEY: But the question is that why is this only emerging some fifty-five years on?

JONATHAN SPENCE: Sixty years on.

SUE LAWLEY: It's only just in the past few years this story's come to light.

JONATHAN SPENCE: And there are other examples. In the United States, for instance, a surprising amount of Chinese fought in the American Civil War on both the Union side and the Confederate side, and it's taken a century for people to even think that was a meaningful and now absolutely fascinating area. And I think if you and your group can get this story told, you have an absolutely remarkable historical topic.

SUE LAWLEY: We've got David Yip here who … He'll forgive me for saying this because it's a handle you have to live with. You made your name in this country as *The Chinese Detective* on the telly in the 1980s. Anyway, David Yip, you are also the product of such a family, aren't you?

DAVID YIP: Yes, that's right; I'm a son of a Chinese seaman and a local girl. But following on from what Yvonne said, what you're saying, I mean history is only given for those who are visible, those who stand up. What has continuously frustrated me is the fact, is the invisibility of the community I belong to. We are incredible overachievers in the fields of education and business; but in the world of politics, media, my own profession of the arts, if we *are* seen it's the usual stereotypical image. I'd just like your thought on the fact why the British Chinese community still on the whole remains invisible.

JONATHAN SPENCE: That's getting me to double guess across all kinds of borders that I may not have the mental power to transcend. When does one choose to achieve visibility? When is it some random act that can lead to this? When does a group coalesce or flow together in some particular way? When would British-Chinese want

to be more active in national politics, for instance, is there any strong barrier to this? Is it more that South Asians have been coming from a background in India, perhaps, where they had parliamentary experience of some kind? These are very hard to calculate.

DAVID YIP: But my feeling is that actually in a funny sort of way the West is too much in love with the East and actually the people who were left behind with the Diaspora, when they left China, in fact get in the way slightly between the East and the West because scholars would normally or people would normally go straight to the source and actually are not too interested in what was left behind in the trail.

JONATHAN SPENCE: Right. Could it be that the Chinese communities here actually come from a pretty disparate range of backgrounds, from Hong Kong Chinese to Guangzhou Chinese, you know to Fujian and so on, and so they've been particularly concerned with slightly smaller groupings when they get to a country like this. I think it'll come and I think you'll get the coverage you want and you can use academic societies to help you.

SUE LAWLEY: Comment over here. Tell us who you are first.

BILLY HUI: Billy Hui from BBC Radio Merseyside's Orient Express. Just on a subject that's connected to that but slightly wider - with your looking at the history of Liverpool and also the Chinese community and the integration of Chinese communities here, what are your viewpoints on the Chinese community in Liverpool, compared with others that you've seen around the world?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I think that's a hard one because I've only been here for about three hours. (LAUGHTER) And though I'm a bit of a globetrotter, I haven't really been as thorough as I should. I would say it's obviously a small community here and it's been relocated I guess in other ways. I gather there was a large scale demolition of large Chinatown areas I think in the 1930s and then the German bombers did a good job after that in the middle of World War II, so it's been a hard hit community. But it's also been a rather fragmented community in Liverpool because of people moving from Liverpool out to Manchester or Birmingham or wherever it might be without leaving a really strong inner nucleus, and I think probably the more powerful Chinatown associations would be found in cities where there's been a strong inspiration to stay together, to hold on to some common bond as it were. Sometimes a Chinatown split along ideological or regional lines and that's now true in New York with the Fujian against the Guangzhou. It's a very, very difficult and tense battle and difficult for the police to know how to handle this, how much to get involved.

SUE LAWLEY: I'm going to take a question over here.

DERMOT FINCH: Thank you. I'm Dermot Finch. I run the Centre for Cities. Jonathan, you mentioned earlier that Liverpool in the 19th century was a high-tech migratory base. You could argue that in this century that cities like Shanghai are the high-tech migratory bases sucking in talent from the rest of the world. How optimistic are you that cities like Liverpool and other UK cities can sort of learn those English lessons in reverse now and tap into the growth and the high-tech opportunities that China now offers?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I think that's a wonderful question. The expansion of that city is so astonishing; I'm not sure Liverpool wants to or can keep up. But the Chinese themselves have to try and double guess where the profits are going to go, what their next step is going to be. I'm not a businessperson, I hasten to add. I'm just … I'm just a person (LAUGHTER) and I've never made any money by investing in anything. They always seem to go the other way round: the second I buy them, they go right down, and so even my little postal savings book hasn't got much in it. But so how do you gauge where … It's not going to be enough to go right now. You've got to work out where we're going to be in a few years time, I think China is finding itself now outsourced to Vietnam and outsourced to the Philippines. There are very big changes going on right now. So I'd say don't be alarmed out of it, but I wouldn't put all your money into it.

SUE LAWLEY: (LAUGHS) And you won't be putting any of your money into it by the sound of it. But we're talking about Britain and China understanding each other. I'd like to bring in Tian Du Yang and he was one of the organisers of what's called the 419 Committee who actually demonstrated against what they saw as biased reporting in the Western media recently over the Olympic torch relay. Tian Du Yang.

TIAN DU YANG: Hi Professor. Well my question's actually quite related to the invisibility of the Chinese community in Britain. I think there is a theory which suggests that there's part of Chinese culture to stay low key in a community rather than being you know politically active, to you know get out there - what my elders have taught me when I was young, you know to sort of stay low key. But I think that has changed. I think you know the protestors have been better understood of how to properly use their right to protest. I think that's quite a milestone in the democracy progress of China, people's you know ability how to properly use these rights. I think it's quite a global consensus among the Chinese people that the Western media is misrepresenting of China and also its government. You know the sort of impression that the media is getting is evil Communist block sort of thing. I don't know how much you would agree with me on that?

JONATHAN SPENCE: I guess at it's heart what you're asking really - at what level is political activism a new kind of freedom of expression and how that is then covered by the media makes it like a double problem, you know. What is it that makes the media respond to what it is that you or others are trying to do in terms of protest? I think that there was not much sympathy expressed for the Chinese government in this current predicament. It was sharp in its bias in many cases. So in that sense you have a point, I believe.

SUE LAWLEY: You've got your answer. There you are. I'm going to have a quick comment from the woman in red there.

DR RED CHAN: I am from Warwick University. My name is Red Chan. 2008 for China is a big year because of the Olympic Games, but unfortunately we've seen a chain of natural disasters starting in the Spring Festival with the snow storm disasters and then now we have the earthquake. So amidst all those very complex media representations is there a chance this crisis could actually be turned into an opportunity for better understanding?

JONATHAN SPENCE: What can be seen here is Western feelings about China are very emotional and are very volatile and they change with great speed; and the building up of sympathy here didn't have to be created on any political grounds at all, it was natural. And this agonising situation I think almost forced people to realise that there's more going on in this country than you know some kind of political repression. And I think in some cases it might make China seem more vulnerable all over again or more incompetent all over again. That doesn't seem to be the point at all. It's just it should make us a bit more maybe generous about the future, a bit more sensible about how we see China's attempts to handle these colossal problems that it faces.

SUE LAWLEY: One last question -- a very, very brief one, a comment if you would.

KEGANG WU: Just a brief comment. Kegang Wu, Chief China Advisor for British Chambers of Commerce; just a comment about the Chinese representation in the UK. I don't believe Chinese committee as a group collectively is not visible; in fact it has a very high profile in things like media coverage. But individually in political influence, in the Law Society, in the mainstream society, it's a voiceless community. It doesn't get around the table to talk about the issues, that is of interest to the Chinese community.

SUE LAWLEY: And why doesn't it?

KEGANG WU: The culture has been perceived in this country as self-sufficient, enclosed community, they don't need help. And I have a view. I think Chinese community in certain parts of these countries, including in Liverpool, is actually struggling. Because they have to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week to earn their economic status, to educate their sons and daughters. They hardly have any time to actually get engaged in other activities.

SUE LAWLEY: Why are you suggesting they have to work harder than Asians, Africans, any other ethnic minority?

KEGANG WU: Because most of the Chinese community in this country, 75% of them are engaged in catering related business and there's very, very low margin in their business. They compensate that low margin by working harder, long hours, and they hardly have any social opportunity to engage with mainstream society.

SUE LAWLEY: Jonathan, I wonder if you want to comment on that at all.

JONATHAN SPENCE: It's an interesting comment, and the point here is I think this has been experienced by many other immigrant communities and in a sense this work is being done for the children; the most important thing to work for, which is a better chance for your own children, more opportunities for them, more ways they can search for niches within the society to express themselves, and it's an ongoing process.

SUE LAWLEY: There are lots more comments. I can hear this is going to go on after we finish...

JONATHAN SPENCE: I know.

SUE LAWLEY: ...but we're going to end. We hope to be shining more light on the uneasy relationship between China and the West next week when we'll be in New York and Professor Spence will be delivering his third lecture, which is called 'American Dreams'. And we've heard here tonight from BBC's - from British Born Chinese - there we're going to be learning from ABC's - American Born Chinese.

For now, my thanks to you, our audience, here in Liverpool, and to our lecturer - our 60th Anniversary Reith lecturer - Professor Jonathan Spence, thank you very much indeed.