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A light that never goes out

The 'counter-historians' battling the Party's version of events

By Stephen Platt

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Museum of the Communist Party of China, Beijing | © NOEL CELIS/AFP via Getty Images

IN THIS REVIEW

SPARKS

China's underground historians and their battle for the future
400pp. Allen Lane. £25.

Ian Johnson

"You might be interested in politics", the retired scholar Wu Di tells Ian Johnson, an American journalist, "but I am not. I am just a historian." Wu Di's claim should be taken with a grain of salt, for in China today there is no such thing as history without politics. The country, as Johnson writes, "has been obsessed with the interplay of past, present, and future for millennia". History legitimizes its rulers, and by controlling it they justify their continued reign. Xi Jinping is the latest leader of

China to internalize this lesson, and he has done so with a vengeance since coming to power in 2012. Believing that the Soviet Union collapsed because its leaders "allowed alternative versions of history to creep in", he has treated the state's control over history as a central matter of national security.

Today tens of thousands of people in China work in positions related to the writing of official history, exhorted by Xi to demonstrate the "historical inevitability" of Communist rule. "Red" tourism to educate the public in the glories of the Party's past has exploded in recent years – in the region of the Communists' Second World War capital, Yan'an, there are 445 memorial sites and thirty museums, which attracted more than 40 million visitors in 2019. By saturating the nation's schools, media and public spaces with its own version of history, the Party seeks to establish it as the only true version of events.

Enter the subjects of Johnson's book. They are what he calls "counter-historians" – independent writers, journalists, film-makers and researchers who work to uncover truths of the recent past, including episodes of state-directed mass violence, that the Party wants to erase. In the more liberal early 2000s some of these critics found huge audiences in China, but their range and reach have been sharply curtailed under Xi. "These are dark times", writes Johnson, though the state has not won yet.

It is no simple matter to suppress independent thought. The government shuts down publications, arrests bookstore operators, fires academics from their jobs. It constantly watches, investigates, tracks. Johnson relays an estimate that China now spends as much on domestic security as on national defence. One elderly historian in the book calculates that the state spends as much as $150,000 a year just paying for the eight men who take shifts following him wherever he goes.

Yet new digital technologies have allowed these writers and film-makers to disseminate their work in spite of the government's attempts to silence them. In contrast to the mimeographed newsletters of the 1960s and 1970s, the works of underground historians today can be posted on YouTube or shared as digital files on email. And even though electronic communications are censored in real time, sometimes there are gaps: a sharply critical essay by the independent journalist Jiang Xue in the midst of the Shanghai Covid lockdown stayed up online for five days, which was enough time for it to be read by 200,000 people.

A veteran of the *New York Times* and *New York Review of Books*, Johnson is doing here what he does best: patient long-form journalism based on years of first-hand research and interviews. The result is a book that is bold, necessary and morally urgent. In the face of profound personal risk his courageous subjects continue trying to record the truth about their country's past, fully aware that their work may have no measurable effect in their own lifetimes; that they may simply be, in the author's words, "messages in a bottle to be read in a future, more open China".

Johnson argues that these individuals should be better known in the West – the recipients of fellowships and grants, the stars of film festivals – but with China always there is the barrier of language and the impression of distance. The Party likes to blame dissent on western influence, but these are not, on the whole, foreign-influenced writers. Their educations were primarily in China and most of them do not speak English. Their underground films lack the polish and style that festivals seek. Foreigners are not their intended audience and they work consciously in a Chinese tradition. Nevertheless, Johnson writes, they are "part of our intellectual world" and he invites us, rightly, to think of them in the same way we do about the dissident writers of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century.

Sparks is a rare artefact for 2023: a hopeful book about China. For all the apparent triumph of state power under Xi Jinping, Ian Johnson takes heart from the cracks in the edifice that even now allow for a few counter-historians to continue their work. At the time of writing several of his subjects were still finding ways to compose their essays and make their films, in spite of crackdowns that have ensnared their colleagues. It is in their endurance that the author finds hope. They are the sparks of his resonant title – perhaps just flickering for a moment in a time of darkness, but, as this book reminds us, under the right conditions a spark can light a candle, it can start a wildfire, it can ignite an inextinguishable blaze.

***Stephen Platt**'s most recent book is* Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the end of China's last golden age*, 2018*

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