

BOOK REVIEW

## Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future

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Ian Johnson has tapped into the wealth of interviews and reports from his 20-year stint as a journalist in China to compile his book on “China’s underground historians and their battle for the future.” The title, *Sparks*, refers to the optimistic prediction made by Mao Zedong in 1930 that, in the political situation of the time, “a single spark could start a prairie fire.” That prophecy, borrowed from a traditional expression, did not materialize, but was used again in 1960 by a group of intellectuals who hoped to change the political situation by revealing in an underground journal titled *Spark (Xinghuo)* the truth about the famine caused by Mao’s Great Leap Forward. Their daring action was unsuccessful and was severely punished by the regime. But the existence of this improbable spark in one of the darkest periods of Maoist China brought some solace to the intellectuals who discovered it decades later, thanks to an equally improbable combination of circumstances: the change of political orientation after Mao’s death, the rehabilitation of political victims and the possibility for their surviving families to receive the related files kept by the authorities. Drawing on these primary materials, some people wrote their memoirs and others began to conduct interviews of survivors or make documentaries to excavate a past that the authorities had tried to bury. In the case of *Spark*, an artist turned film maker, Hu Jie, was instrumental in the salvation of the histories of the journal and of one of its contributors, Lin Zhao, who was executed in 1968. Supported only by his wife’s salary, Hu spent years producing two remarkable documentaries which were never shown officially in China but were seen by many people in private projections and, together with a few other films he made on other suppressed historical events, won him several prizes in festivals abroad.

Johnson introduces other remarkable figures who have been part of what he rightly calls a “movement,” which had no real organization (this would not be tolerated by the regime) but was a collective endeavour to save a truthful history of contemporary China. Johnson skilfully presents a gallery of portraits that includes historians like Gao Hua and Wu Di, film makers, writers and journalists. In the latter group are people who posted testimonies on social media during the COVID-19 lockdown. At the time, their topic was certainly not history, but of course, all testimonies end up becoming history. And, in fact, the three people – Fang Fang, Ai Xiaoming and Jiang Xue, all women – who were able to attract a large audience had all taken part in the earlier history salvation movement. Fang Fang is an established writer, famous for her diary of the COVID crisis in Wuhan, which led to fierce attacks against her that reminded her of the Cultural Revolution. She had earlier published a historical novel revealing the extreme violence of the land reform in the first years of the regime. Ai Xiaoming is a retired professor who worked mainly on feminism but is now also famous for her documentary films (made after learning the use of digital cameras from Hu Jie), which deal with social and historical “hot topics” and cannot be shown officially in China. Jiang Xue is a journalist of a younger generation whose family history is linked to Mao’s Great Famine. After having been forced to become independent, she also

made and published interviews about *Spark*. Later, she documented the COVID crisis in Xi'an and wrote about the White Paper protests.

Johnson should certainly be praised for introducing to a Western audience a diverse group of admirable people taking risks to save the contemporary history of their country. But, since this book's ambition goes beyond the gathering of brilliant pieces of journalism and aims to present and reflect on a little-known historical phenomenon, it should also be judged on another level. From an academic point of view, the evaluation is more mixed. The book contains a wealth of thoughtful remarks about the Chinese regime and the dilemmas experienced by intellectuals with a conscience who are confronted by it. But there are also a few weaknesses.

Not mentioning a few minor errors, it is rather surprising to read that Xi Jinping was "banished" to the countryside in 1966 (pp. 107, 204), when Xi himself has written that he was happy when he was rusticated in 1969 (along with millions of other urban youth), because he feared a worse treatment had he stayed in Beijing.

This points to a general lack of interest in the Rustication Movement in the book, despite the significance of this experience for most of the protagonists presented here. This void has two unfortunate consequences. First, it overlooks a major part of the fight for an authentic history, since the former rusticated youth have for decades been the most active group in organizing memorial activities and historical debates, including efforts to save the real history of the end of the movement against rosy official versions. Second, it prevents Johnson from noticing an important feature of the informal counter-history movement: its generational aspect. Most of the members involved belong to the Red Guards and educated youth generation and are now reaching old age. Will there be members of a new generation to constitute a group around people like Jiang Xue? Since this resistance movement has been facing increasingly severe restrictions in recent years, the two factors could moderate the relative optimism shown by Johnson about the movement's future.

Another problem is the fuzziness of some concepts. Johnson speaks of "underground historians," when some of the protagonists are participants in a movement to save history without being "historians" in the common sense of the term. More importantly, as Johnson himself acknowledges, "most have one foot inside the system" and do not work "underground." This term was perfectly appropriate for the counterculture during Mao's time but not for later periods. This bias might explain the absence of someone like Ding Dong, whose great contribution has been to help some underground (hidden) historical materials to appear in legally published books such as those about Yu Luoke, Gu Zhun, Wang Shenyou, Wei Junyi, etc. Ding is only presented in passing in *Sparks* as a publisher of samizdat magazines, which is incorrect since *Old Photos* was published legally and *Yanhuang Chunqiu* was also a duly registered monthly when Ding had the courage to work as its editor-in-chief, just before the forced eviction of the entire editorial board.

Intellectual history in China shows that maximum efficiency in the development of unorthodox ideas always results from a collaboration between people and organizations inside and outside the system. What is important is the common goal of resistance against official distortions and obfuscation of history. The best description would be the French term *résistants*, which has no equivalent in English. "Resisting historians" could be used, provided one accepts the term "historian" to refer to all those who use different methods to save elements of history.

Finally, a reflection on the limits of unofficial history would have been useful, for example when Johnson mentions the dispute about who was responsible for the death of Bian Zhongyun, a secondary school principal killed by her students. When no access to archives is possible, it is very difficult to overcome the discrepancies between testimonies, especially when there is no public sphere in which all opinions and arguments can be exchanged freely.

Some shortcomings mentioned above might have been avoided if Johnson had read the existing literature about the role of unofficial memory and history in contemporary China, which is by no means *terra incognita* among scholars.

In conclusion, *Sparks* is highly recommended for its vividness, and wealth of information. It could serve as a useful element for further reflection on the role of unofficial history in China. Ian Johnson himself has already made a significant contribution to further research by co-founding the website China Unofficial Archive ([minjian-danganguan.org](http://minjian-danganguan.org)), which collects hundreds of materials on this topic.