

Intelligence in Public Media

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

Ian Johnson (Oxford University Press, 2023), 381 pages, illustrations.

Reviewed by Emily Matson

“Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination,” states Hannah Arendt in her introduction to *Men in Dark Times* (1968). As a German Jew who observed the rise to power of Hitler and the Third Reich, Arendt herself knew well what the “darkest of times” meant. After she fled Germany in 1933 and emigrated to the United States in 1941, Arendt became one of the 20th century’s most esteemed philosophers and historians. To describe how a seemingly ordinary man like Adolf Eichmann could become so heavily implicated in the Nazi atrocities of the Holocaust, Arendt coined the now famous phrase “the banality of evil.” Yet alongside such men existed others who gave Arendt hope: “Whether their light was the light of a candle or that of a blazing sun.”

It may come as a surprise that Ian Johnson used Arendt’s quote to open a book not on early to mid-20th century Europe, but rather 20th and 21st century China. Furthermore, Johnson’s protagonists are not well-known dissidents such as Rosa Luxemburg or Karl Jaspers or others chronicled in Arendt’s book, but rather ordinary Chinese such as Ai Xiaoming and Jiang Xue who often remain inside the system to attempt to “correct the [Chinese Communist] Party’s misrepresentation of the past and change their country’s slide toward ever-stronger authoritarian control.”^(x) This, however, is precisely why Johnson chooses to open his latest book with Arendt. These ordinary Chinese, who Johnson calls “historians”—meaning “shorthand for a broad group of some of China’s brightest minds: university professors, independent filmmakers, underground magazine publishers, novelists, artists, and journalists.”^(x) To Johnson, these historians represent a “spark,” whether “flickering candles

or blazing suns,” that illuminates the past and challenges the Western misconception that China today is merely an authoritarian monolith. (xv)

Spark also was the name of a short-lived, 1960 student-run journal in the town of Tianshui (near Wuhan) that challenged official accounts of the Great Leap Forward (1958–62). While the CCP claimed it was a resounding success, it tragically became the greatest man-made famine in world history.^a The first issue of *Spark* draws on the theme of flickering light to illuminate the crimes of an oppressive regime through a poem written by one of its founders, Peking University student Lin Zhao. In “A Day in Prometheus’s Passion,” Lin details an encounter between the Olympian god Zeus and Prometheus, who is eternally damned for daring to give humans fire. Zeus explains it thus to Prometheus:

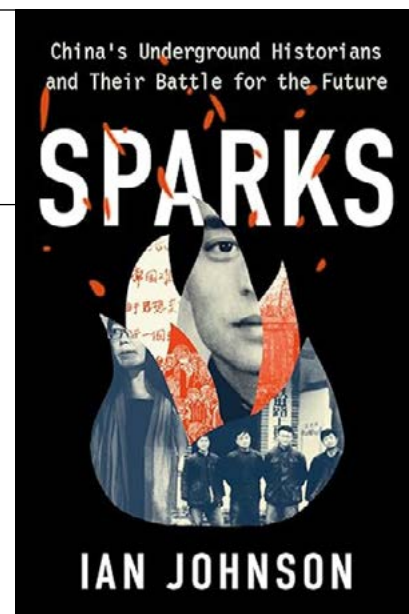
*But you ought to know, Prometheus,
for the mortals, we do not want to leave even a spark.
Fire is for the gods, for incense and sacrifice.
How can the plebeians have it for heating or lighting in
the dark?* (74)

Spark would challenge the presumption that “fire is for the gods” and provide at least a “spark” of truth to the “plebeians.”^b Although *Spark* was quickly snuffed out,

a. The Great Leap Forward was originally envisioned as a two-pronged campaign by Mao for rapid collectivization and industrialization. However, it failed on both counts – the intensive “backyard furnace” campaign meant that farmers were even “stripped of the tools they needed to farm.” Furthermore, efforts at collectivization within a system that brooked no opposition meant that statistics of grain yields were often inflated in order to placate higher-ups. This, in turn, led to the heavy taxation of the countryside for grain that did not, in fact, exist, meaning that people starved to death. (49–50) For one of the most complete works on this period, Johnson recommends Yang Jisheng’s *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962*, translated by Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013)

b. Perhaps ironically, the name of the journal *Spark* invoked a phrase popularized by Mao Zedong’s writings: “xinghuo liaoyuan,” or “a single spark can start a prairie fire” (75).

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its rediscovery decades later by underground historians such as Hu Jie and Cui Weiping unearthed the bravery of individuals such as Lin Zhao, Zhang Chunyuan, and Tan Chanyue, who were ultimately martyred for daring to speak out.

Between 2008 and 2020, Johnson visited many underground historians in their homes and as they worked in the fields to uncover the truth about China's recent history in the vein of the *jianghu*—a term that literally means “rivers and lakes,” connoting an untamed wilderness and a place of escape for bandits who lived outside of the law. Yet these *jianghu* bandits in traditional Chinese culture often lived by their own strict code of moral conduct, acting as Robin Hood figures who stole from the rich and corrupt and championed the poor and downtrodden. *Jianghu* historians, as Johnson calls them, have existed since the beginning years of the People's Republic of China but, he asserts, more recently have “melded into a nation-wide network that has survived repeated crack-downs,”(xi) in part thanks to new digital technologies and other techniques that more successfully bypass the CCP's sophisticated censorship apparatus.

In chronicling these historians and their work, *Sparks* is divided not only chronologically (past, present, and future), but also geographically (the book takes us from the northwest Hexi Corridor in a roughly clockwise direction to the north, east, and south, until we end up on the Tibetan Plateau to the southwest) and by a dozen evocative vignettes that Johnson labels as “memories.” Here, Johnson borrows from Pierre Nora's early 20th century concept of “places of memory,” or *lieux de mémoire*. Johnson defines these “places of memory” as “physical locations where history resonates – battlefields, museums, or execution grounds” (xiii).

However, I prefer to use the English translation “sites of memory” rather than “places of memory” to emphasize that while many of these “sites” are indeed physical locations, Nora's original definition is actually more all-encompassing. According to Nora, a “site of memory” includes “any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element in any community.”^a Thus, while a concrete physical site such as the notorious Ditch (Jiabianguo)—at the edge of the Gobi Desert in Gansu Province^b—or a museum such as the National Museum of China^c can be “sites of memory,” so, too, could the journal *Sparks* or even the concept of the *jianghu* that informs so much of the zeitgeist of underground historians in China today. While the dozen vignettes that Johnson includes were indeed powerful, I do wish that each “site of memory” was a bit more distinctly defined.

This quibble aside, I highly recommend *Sparks* to anyone who wants to understand China better today. In Johnson's in-depth coverage of so many inspiring individuals and their important work, *Sparks* challenges the notion that the CCP has succeeded in thoroughly whitewashing history to adhere to its perspective.^d The books chronological span, from the Yan'an era of the 1930s to the Covid-19 pandemic, is impressive, as is the diversity of its subjects. Moreover, I particularly appreciated Johnson's conclusion, which challenges us to “retire certain cliched ways of seeing China” (298). We must engage with China's “counter-historians” and their important contributions to global conversations about the past, present, and future. Furthermore, we must avoid making the mistake, which the CCP is all too keen to promote, that the party *is* China and the sole representative of 1.4 billion people. With increased authoritarian rule under Xi Jinping in China and threats to democracy

a. Pierre Nora, ‘Preface to English Language Edition: From Lieux de Mémoire to Realms of Memory,’ in Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past* (Vol. 1: Conflicts and Divisions) (Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii.

b. This was the “most notorious labor camp in China, a place where thousands were worked and starved to death in the late 1950 and early 1960s” (16). For a detailed description, see Richard Brody, *Dead Souls*, Reviewed: A Powerful New Documentary About Political Persecution in China” in *New Yorker*, December 19, 2018.

c. Xi Jinping made his famous visit here in 2012 to visit the exhibit “The Road to Rejuvenation” (fuxing zhilu), which summarizes the CCP's legitimizing narrative – after the Century of Humiliation by Western powers and Japan, the CCP saved the Chinese people from disgrace and destruction after coming to power in 1949. The Great Leap Forward and the equally tragic Cultural Revolution, however, are all but skipped over. (130)

d. According to the CCP, its armies did the majority of the fighting against Japan; the party's campaign of land reform was just; Lei Feng did indeed write the patriotic diary entries published by the People's Liberation Army as a model of loyalty and selflessness; and China entered the Korean War in self-defense. Although Johnson admits that “some of these issues might seem trivial,” he effectively argues that “allowing a discussion on these topics would challenge key tenets of why the Chinese Communist Party ruled China” (123).

on a global scale, Johnson has reminded intelligence and national security professionals to nevertheless remain on the lookout for the “sparks” that might ignite the passion

for positive change, even in places as tightly controlled as China.



The reviewer: Emily Matson is assistant teaching professor of Modern Chinese History at Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service and Georgetown College of Arts & Science, Department of History.