

Book Guide

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

Sparks tells the story of how underground writers, filmmakers, and journalists are challenging one of the pillars of Communist Party rule: its control of history. In underground documentary films, samizdat magazines, and guerilla journalism, they document famines and political campaigns of years past and write about ethnic clashes and virus outbreaks of the present. Based on years of on-the-ground reporting, *Sparks* challenges the idea that independent thought in China has been crushed, revealing one of the world's great battles of memory against forgetting—a struggle that will shape the China that emerges in the coming decades.

Summary

The past is a battleground in many countries, but in China it is crucial to political power. In traditional China, dynasties rewrote history to justify their rule by proving that their predecessors were unworthy of holding power. Marxism gave this a modern gloss, describing history as an unstoppable force heading toward Communism's triumph. The Chinese Communist Party builds on these ideas to whitewash its misdeeds and glorify its rule. Indeed, one of Xi Jinping's signature policies is the control of history, which he equates with the party's survival.

However, in recent years, a movement of independent journalists, novelists, artists, and filmmakers have begun challenging this state-led disremembering. Using digital technologies to bypass China's legendary surveillance state, their samizdat journals, guerilla media posts, historical novels, political artwork, and underground films document a regular pattern of disasters: from famines and purges of years past to ethnic clashes and virus outbreaks of the present—works that have underpinned recent protests in China against Xi Jinping's strongman rule.

Sparks introduces us to these “underground historians” as they go about documenting chapters of Chinese history neglected by the Communist Party. We follow them as they work in the field and see how they bypass censors to spread their message. The book introduces us to many key figures from the past few decades but focuses on two remarkable women: the feminist scholar and documentary filmmaker Ai Xiaoming, and the independent journalist Jiang Xue. Their stories link the people and stories, from the earliest days of Communist Party rules to the 2019–2022 COVID outbreak.

Based on years of first-hand research in Xi Jinping's China, *Sparks* challenges stereotypes of China as a “perfect dictatorship” where an omnipresent surveillance state and amnesia have won. Instead, we see creative use of basic digital tools (email, PDFs, memory drives, VPN technology) that has allowed a small but vibrant movement of counter-historians to rise up in the 2000s and survive into the second decade of Xi Jinping's rule.

This book is suitable for the following types of undergraduate and graduate courses:

- Contemporary Chinese History
- Contemporary Chinese Politics
- Intellectuals and Activists
- Memory Studies
- Historiography
- Counter-History Movements
- Authoritarian Politics

Discussion Questions

Undergraduate courses on Chinese history:

1. What is the function of the “memory” vignettes between the main chapters?
2. Is the book mainly focused on past problems in China or on current events?
3. Why does the author believe that the government cannot simply eliminate underground historians by cracking down harder?
4. Why does the government believe that amnesia has “failed” and the past has not been forgotten? How convincing is this argument?

Graduate courses on Chinese history:

1. The author makes the claim that Chinese producers of unsanctioned history have over the past quarter century formed a collective memory of dissent that is far wider spread than previous collectives of memory. How is this argument constructed?
2. The author argues that state-led disremembering has failed to stop the rise of a counter-history movement in China. Assess the argument and prospects in the second decade of Xi Jinping’s rule.
3. The case studies in this book say they are producing history primary for current and future generations. How does this echo the role of history in imperial China?

Undergraduate and graduate courses on memory studies:

1. The author makes use of Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural versus communicative memory. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this paradigm when used to explain memory in a modern nation state?
2. The author makes the claim that Chinese producers of unsanctioned history have over the past quarter century formed a collective memory of dissent that is far wider spread than previous collectives of memory. How is this argument constructed?
3. The author compares novelists such as Fang Fang and her description of the destruction of China’s landed gentry with Saidiya Hartman’s use of “critical fabulations” to recreate the enslaved Black person’s experiences. What are the similarities and differences in their approaches? How compelling is this comparison?

Essay Questions

Undergraduate courses in Chinese history:

1. How does Jiang Xue draw on writers such as Hannah Arendt and Vaclav Havel to explain contemporary China? (The teacher might provide the quotes in question.)
2. What does the author mean by the landscape of memory? Besides Red Cliff, what are some other examples he gives?

Graduate courses in Chinese history:

1. Discuss the role of overseas intellectuals in China’s contemporary counter-history movement with activists, such as Liang Qichao, in the late Qing.
2. How do contemporary Chinese counter-historians contrast with the *yeshi* historians of the imperial era (choose one dynasty or era, for example, the Ming-Qing transition)?

Undergraduate and graduate courses in memory studies:

1. Use the case studies provided by the author (for example, Ai Xiaoming's Jiabiangou documentary film) and the memory studies arguments in chapter 7 on amnesia to come to a different conclusion from the author—for example, that amnesia largely has in fact triumphed.
2. How does Ian Johnson's *Sparks* contrast with Louisa Lim's *The People's Republic of Amnesia*? What are the key reasons they come to such different conclusions?

Supplementary Materials

The website www.minjian-danganguan.org was established by the author to make available many key books and samizdat publications. Most material is in Chinese, so it will be primarily of use to graduate students with a Chinese-language background.

Many of the films, such as those by Ai Xiaoming and Hu Jie can be seen on YouTube (see suggested readings section at the back of the book) and would make good supplementary material.

The essays of Jiang Xue (see book index) have been partially translated into English.

The website Reading the China Dream (www.readingthechinadream.com) has English-language translations of many of China's best-known establishment intellectuals. Their writings could be contrasted with those of Jiang Xue and others in the book.

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