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REVIEW

The Bones Remember

Three new books grapple with the suppressed histories of modern China, from the Cultural Revolution to the Covid pandemic. But for every state effort to bury the past, there are those who seek to dig it up.

YANGYANG CHENG — NOVEMBER 30, 2023

HISTORY

POLITICS



This summer, a new [exhibit](#) opened at the National Museum of China in Beijing, on the eastern side of Tiananmen Square. Titled “Oriental Homeland: A Million-Year Journey through Human History in China,” the paleolithic fossils and artifacts on display are accompanied by an explicit, political message. The Chinese [introduction](#), conspicuously [missing](#) from the museum’s English website, devotes the first paragraph to a 2020 [speech](#) by Xi Jinping, in which he declares:

“

The latest archeological results prove that our country is the ancestral homeland of Oriental humans; it parallels Africa in being one of the earliest birthplaces of humans.

”

While debates around human origins remain unsettled, Xi’s statement contradicts scientific [consensus](#). Yet this attempt to claim million-year-old bones is part of Beijing’s effort to control history, and to construct an unbroken myth of the Chinese nation beginning in time immemorial. In this narrative, the Communist Party’s path to power was propelled by history; its victory was preordained.

The National Museum was established in 1959 to commemorate this victory, on the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It spent the next four decades more often closed than open out of political concerns; curating the past was a difficult and at times dangerous task. In 2012, the newly-renovated space served as the backdrop for Xi's grand [exhortation](#) to realize "the Chinese Dream" of the "great



The facade of China's National Museum (Gary Todd/CC)

rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." It was one of his first public acts since taking the helm and a defining moment of his early reign. The following year, the central government issued a [communiqué](#) known as "Document 9." It lists "historical nihilism" ("distorting the history of the party and that of New China") as one of the top ideological threats, along with neoliberalism, civil society and "universal values." Yet despite this tightening grip on ideology, history — like the evolution of our species — cannot be made uniform or contained by a single plot.

“ At a time when the battle over history rages in autocracies and democracies alike, how we remember the past is what makes us human ”

How the past is remembered in China is a theme at the heart of three books from this past year. Tania Branigan's [Red Memory: The Afterlives of China's Cultural Revolution](#), which [won](#) the Cundill history prize earlier this month, does not simply recount the events of the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, but rather examines their aftermath: the people and places left in the wake of devastation. Branigan's interviewees are notably unassuming; their reactions to trauma are instantly relatable and even more heartbreaking for it. A former China correspondent for *The Guardian*, Branigan brings empathy and humility to her inquisitive reporting, told in crystalline prose. "This is only partially a book about China and the extremes of its history," she writes, but is more about how to confront the extremes of human nature and "how we live with ourselves" after such knowledge.

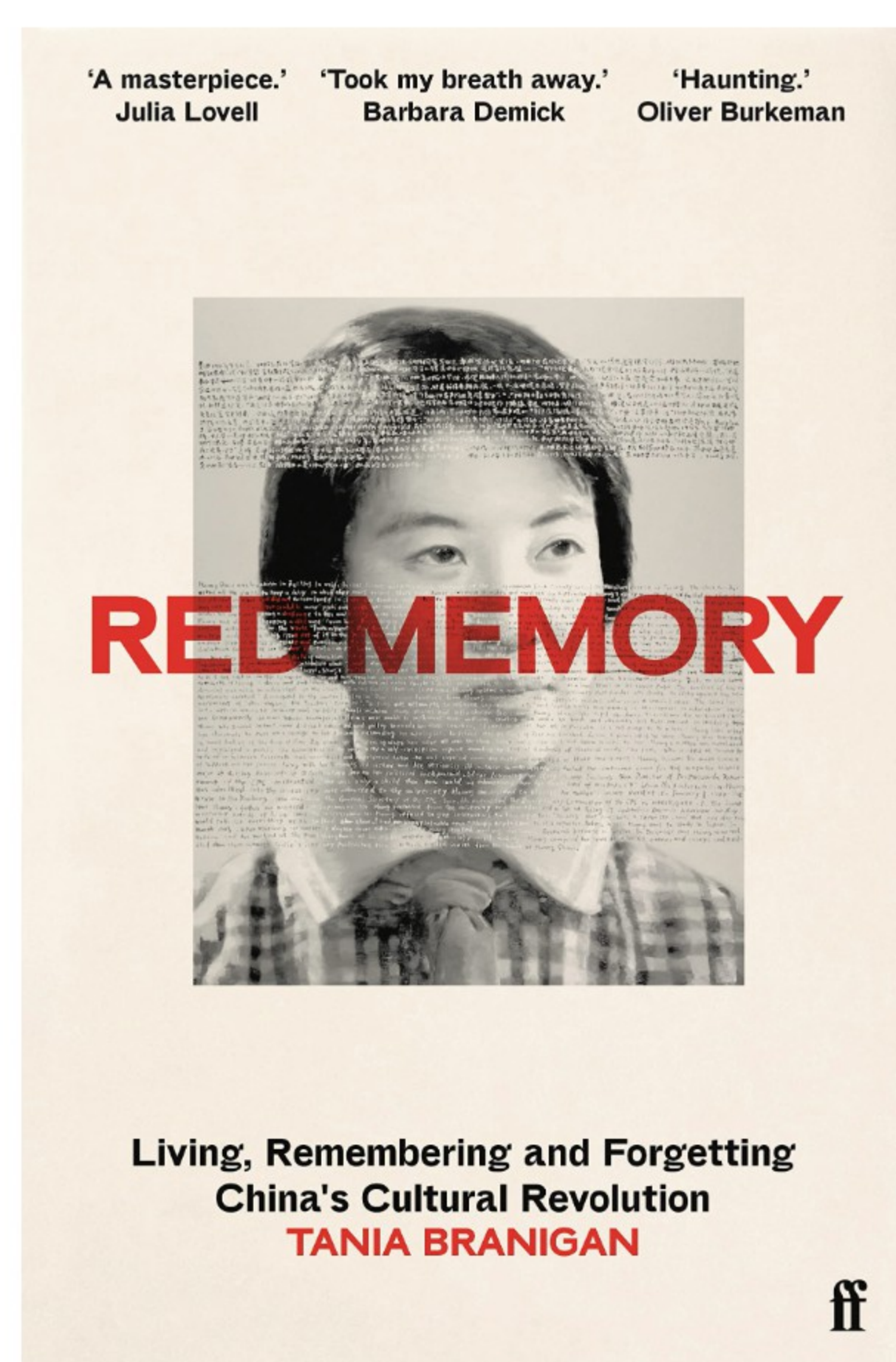
Ian Johnson's [Sparks: China's Underground Historians and their Battle for the Future](#), meanwhile, is a stunning portrayal of some of the most courageous individuals in China today, who probe the forbidden and voice the unspeakable. Johnson, a long-time China correspondent, most recently with *The New York Times*, and now senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, calls them "counter-historians" for resisting the state's monopoly on history. As he puts it, the narrative of the book "unfolds on three planes": across space, through time, and between the individuals' private lives and public works. The China that emerges from the pages is both real and magical. In a landscape pregnant with memory, the past echoes in the present, and the personal is always political.

As *Sparks* and *Red Memory* trace the recent past, Michael Berry's [Translation, Disinformation, and Wuhan Diary: Anatomy of a Transpacific Cyber Campaign](#) documents history in the making. More than a keen observer, Berry is also a direct participant in this story. A professor of Chinese studies at UCLA and the English translator of Chinese writer Fang Fang's [online journal](#) during the Covid-19 lockdown in Wuhan, Berry found himself a

collateral target of relentless online [attacks](#) against Fang Fang that accused her of painting China in a negative light for foreign audiences. Written with grit, lucidity and a good dose of humor, the volume is a timely account of what happened and why. As Berry describes it, this is “a tale of two viruses”: one infects the body, the other poisons the mind.

Distinct in approach but with overlapping themes, the questions raised in this trio of books do not merely concern a single country, political system or period. At a time when the battle over history rages in autocracies and democracies alike, and technologies open up new means of preservation and erasure, they raise fundamental questions about life, its meaning and responsibilities. How we remember the past is how we honor the dead; it is how we carry on living; it asks where we come from, where we are going, and what makes us human.

Monuments, like history, come in many shapes and serve different purposes. Tiananmen Square is a monument, anchored by the mausoleum of Mao Zedong at its center, and a giant portrait of him hanging over the entrance to the Imperial Palace at its northern end. Six meters tall and four and a half meters wide, the portrait [reportedly](#) weighs 1.5 tons. When Deng Xiaoping took the helm of the nation in 1978, how to handle Mao’s record was a tough balancing act. The calamities of the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution were too great to ignore, but if the Chinese Communist Party renounced the man who had founded the People’s Republic of China, the whole structure of the nation could crumble. In the end, for the Party’s second [resolution on history](#), issued in 1981 (the [first](#) was by Mao in 1945) Mao’s mistakes were acknowledged but deemed “secondary.” His mausoleum and portrait remain at Tiananmen Square.



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This verdict was a deft maneuver. It allowed some space for reflection, without yielding control. As Branigan notes in *Red Memory*, the Cultural Revolution is not entirely taboo to discuss inside of China. The scale of the turmoil — that spared no one from the margins of society to the highest levels of the government — has meant that what took place cannot be completely censored. The blurred lines between what is forbidden and what is permissible are also deliberate, as Branigan points out. “While some were adept at exploiting grey areas,” she writes, “many shrank back further.” Silence is a form of self-preservation, not just from political repercussions but also from psychological trauma. The Cultural Revolution was “a time of impossible moral choices,” continues Branigan. Its victims were often also perpetrators. At the time,

many felt “there was no right thing to do.” And, in its long aftermath, there was no right way to remember.

When the 17-year-old Song Binbin climbed up the stairs of Tiananmen gate to tie a red armband on Mao on August 18, 1966, to the deafening cheer of one million Red Guards, she became a symbol of the fevered promise between the Great Helmsman and the country’s youth. Two weeks earlier, the vice principal of her school had been beaten to death by students. Teacher Bian was one of the first casualties of this fanatic decade in China’s history. After half a century of silence, Song published an [essay](#) in 2012 recounting her experience in

the final days of Teacher Bian's life and her immediate reactions to the tragedy, and gave a public [apology](#) two years later. She denied participating in the violence, but acknowledged that she had failed to stop those who did. She had been too afraid. She asked for forgiveness.

Song's essay took courage, but it "read more like a plea bargain than a confession," comments Branigan. A group of Song's schoolmates, who met with Branigan, reportedly spent eight years investigating the death of Teacher Bian, but no assailant had been named. The sentence remains in the passive: she "was beaten to death." Song's friends emphasized in interviews with Branigan that the killers were just children. But who raised them? Who incited them? Adults appropriated young people as vessels for their own worst impulses, then used the same children as shields to protect against taking responsibility for their mistakes.



Mao Zedong launches the Cultural Revolution in 1966 (CC)

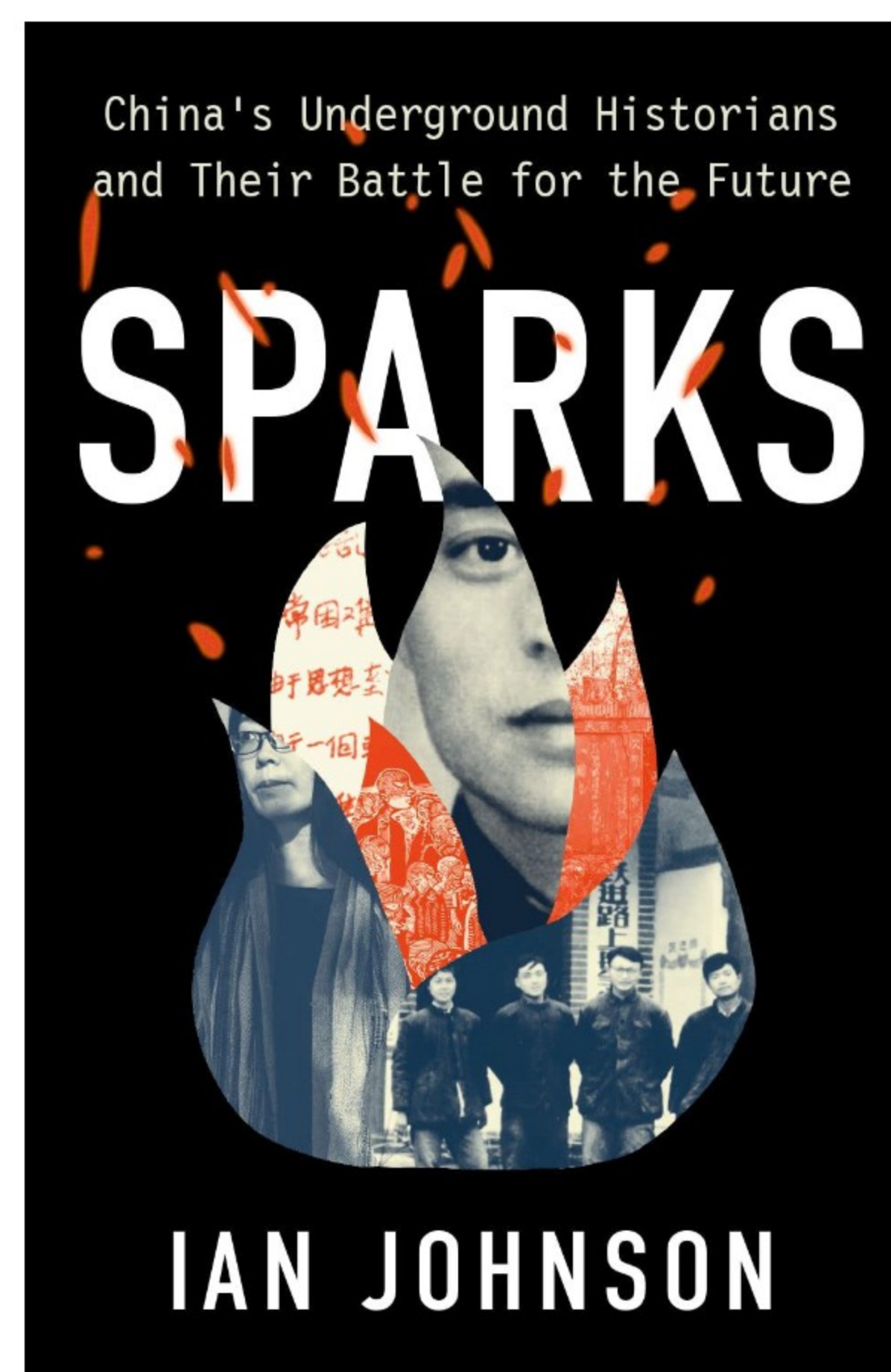
In 1968, after two years of mayhem, Mao became disturbed by the excesses of the Red Guards' violence and called in the military to restore order. With school suspended and employment scant, the Party ordered 17 million educated urban youths to "go up to the mountains and down to the countryside." Lofty slogan aside, these years of living in the villages were harsh for both the urban youths and their rural hosts. The extreme political pressure, material scarcity and gender disparity made life rife with abuse. Branigan relates how, in the last decades, former sent-down youths have found each other online and bonded over this shared experience. Their recollections of hardship were tinted with nostalgia. As one of them said: "it *was* time wasted," but it was also "like a treasury for me in some ways."

In China's capitalist present, nostalgia is an industry. Even memories of the Cultural Revolution have become a source for profit. "Groups organised sentimental returns to villages. Tourist agencies cashed in," Branigan reports. She met a man who makes a living impersonating Lin Biao, Mao's heir-apparent-turned-traitor. He performed at a restaurant where servers wore Red Guard uniforms. As Branigan writes, "what was not permissible as history in China was allowed as entertainment." For young Chinese consumers with no memory of those times, the past, in cheap simulacra, has become a foreign country and a tourist destination.

“ Silence is a form of self-preservation, not just from political repercussions but also from psychological trauma

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A specter haunts the Chinese Communist Party. Once a revolutionary group, after gaining control in 1949 it became a dictatorial power, and has taken extreme measures to ensure that no other political organizations in China can replicate its success. This insecurity is encapsulated in the title of Ian Johnson's book, *Sparks*. In a 1930 [essay](#), when the Communists were still a fledgling group undertrodden by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government, Mao Zedong soberly assessed the setbacks that his Red Army had faced, but expressed a hope that, "as the old Chinese saying goes, 'a single spark can light a prairie fire.'"



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A decade later, from the Communist's base in the northwest, Mao launched a campaign known as the Yan'an Rectification Movement to remove rivals and instill doctrine, culminating in the 1945 resolution on Party history that enshrined Mao Zedong Thought as a guiding principle. As Johnson points out, the "histrionic, personal mode of attack" pioneered in Yan'an became the template for Mao and "the model for Party purges" still used to this day.

When the Communists seized power in 1949, Lin Zhao and Zhang Chunyuan were teenagers who believed in the promise of revolution. The new government's brutal tactics in crushing landlords and purging dissent soon shattered their innocent faith. As punishment for criticizing poor school conditions, Zhang was sent off to the remote Western town of Tianshui with his classmates. The students saw the famine caused by the Great Leap Forward worsen in the countryside, and looked for ways to alert central authorities. So in 1960 they [started a journal](#), titled "Spark," which called out the horrors of the famine and other ills in the Party's policies, and advocated for freedom and democratic governance.

The authorities exacted a heavy price for this defiance. Dozens involved with the journal, which only ran a single issue with 30 copies, were arrested. Lin and Zhang were executed. In her final years, from a jail cell, Lin penned hundreds of pages of poems and prose denouncing the Communist Party and Mao himself, at times using her own blood as ink. As Johnson notes, the guards "methodically" kept Lin's writings as "valuable evidence against this enemy of the state." After Mao died in 1976, and the Party sought to address some of his errors, a judge ordered Lin's prison papers to be returned to her family.



A promotional image from Hu Jie's 2004 film (薇羽看世間)

In the early 2000s, Lin's friends photographed these [blood letters](#) and posted them online. They went viral. For filmmaker Hu Jie, the encounter with Lin Zhao's story changed his life. As he told Johnson, "I realized that everything I knew about history had been covered up." The former soldier and state media worker released a documentary in 2004, [Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul](#), and a sequel nine years later, [Spark](#), telling the story of the fiery publication that burned too

bright and was extinguished too quickly.

By becoming a counter-historian, Hu has joined a time-honored Chinese tradition: for as long as the imperial court employed official scribes, untamed voices had whispered in the shadows, recording what's known as *yesbi*, "wild history." However, as Johnson highlights, the advent of digital technologies over the past two decades has shifted the landscape. Emails, PDFs and other tools have made forbidden records much easier to share. The Internet helps lonely rebels find their audience, and each other. China's "underground historians," writes Johnson, "have melded into a nation-wide network that has survived repeated crackdowns."

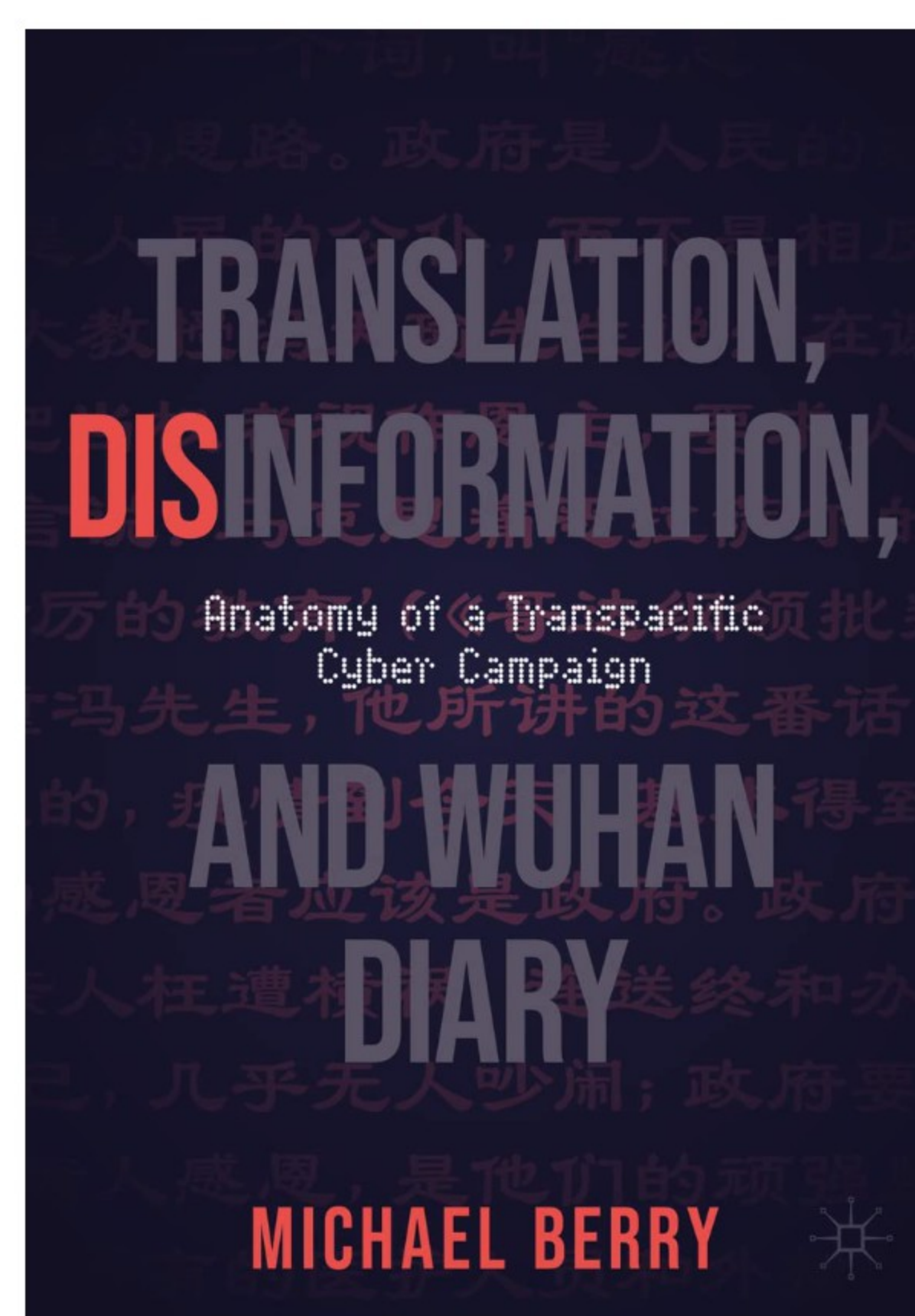
One of the other rebellious souls Hu has connected with is Ai Xiaoming. The first woman to earn a PhD in literature after the Cultural Revolution, Ai is a retired academic and prolific filmmaker. In 2014, she trained her lens on the most notorious labor camp in the country: Jiabiangou. In the late 1950s, thousands of political prisoners were sent to this desolate spot on the edge of the Gobi desert. Only a few hundred survived. The government closed the site in 1961 and tried to cover up the deaths. When Ai and her crew arrived decades later, guards denied them entry. This exchange became the [opening scene](#) in Ai's six-hour-long documentary, *Jiabiangou Elegy*, which revolves around efforts to erect a memorial for the dead. A small tombstone had been put up in 2013 with official approval, but it was smashed within days. "My film starts from the present, not the past," Ai tells Johnson.

One theme that links Johnson's book with Branigan's is China's shrinking space for remembrance and resistance. Branigan writes in her closing chapter: "this book could not have been written if I were to begin today." As the political climate in China becomes increasingly reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, it's also more difficult to openly discuss that era. Her statement echoes an anecdote in *Sparks*. In the late 1980s, after the journalist Tan Hecheng investigated a mass killing in Mao's home province of Hunan during the Cultural Revolution, where over 9,000 were murdered in one county, he could not publish his [report](#) in China. One editor "suggested he wait 20 or 30 years," Johnson writes, "never imagining that things would be even tougher later on." It's comforting to assume that history bends toward justice, that time will liberate and heal. But the future makes no promises to the present. The path is contingent on the choices we make. No one can choose the time they live in, but they can decide how to live it.

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In the spring of 2020, Michael Berry felt he was living in three different timelines at once. From his home in Los Angeles, he had started translating Fang Fang's widely read online lockdown [diary](#) in late February, exactly one month after the novelist and Wuhan native began writing it. The task of translation meant revisiting the past, but as Covid cases began to rise in the US, he wrote: "Fang Fang's words increasingly felt like they were dispatches from the future."

Fang Fang was not alone in using digital platforms to document firsthand experiences during the early

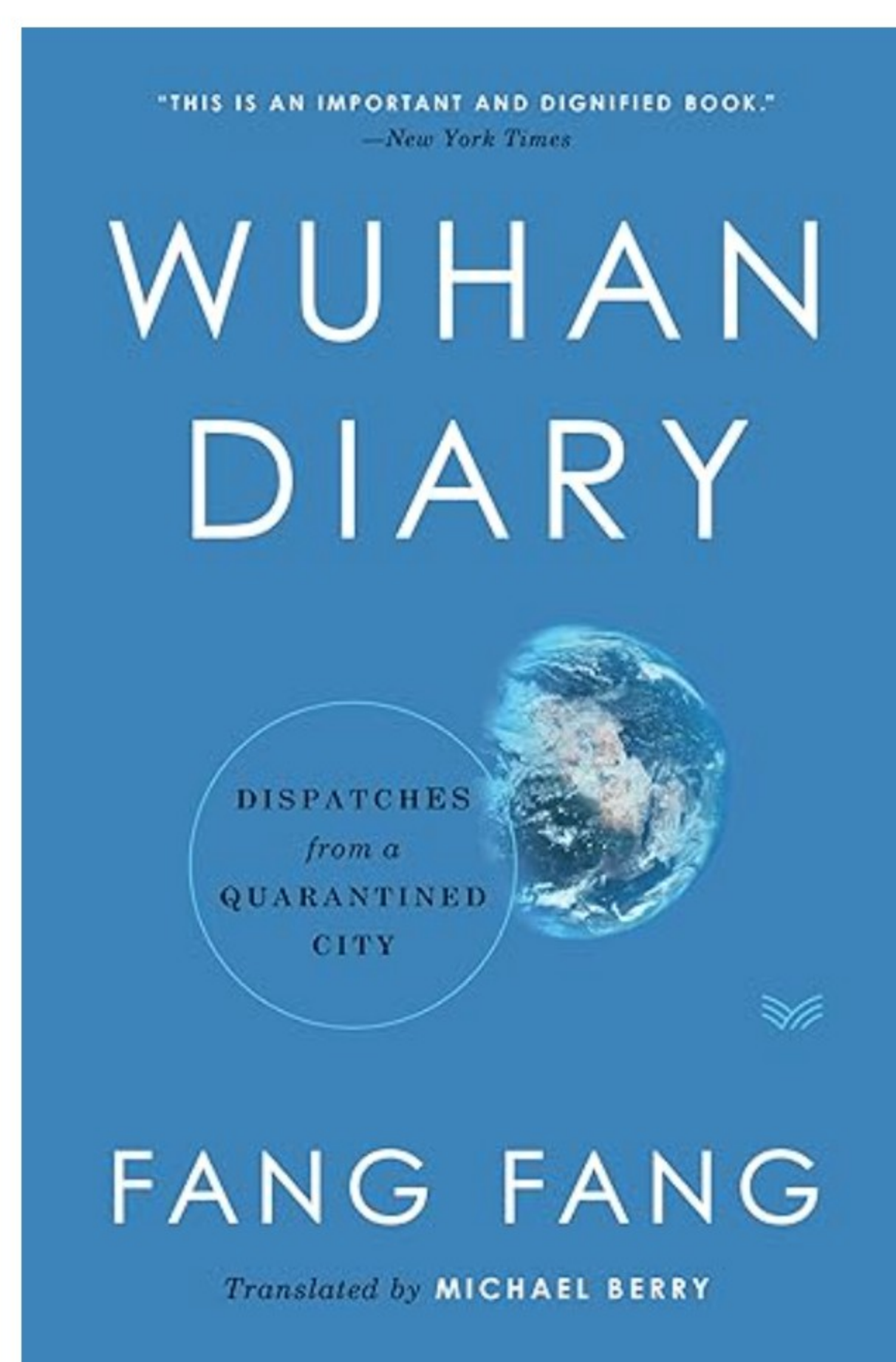


pandemic. The sociologist Guobin Yang [collected](#) over 6,000 online diary entries by authors around the world from late January to November of 2020. Fang Fang also encouraged her readers to pen their own stories. As Berry puts it, this “appeal to collective witnessing” was also a way to foster diverse voices and offset the state’s hegemonic view on history. Ai Xiaoming, the “counter-historian” featured in *Sparks* and a fellow Wuhan native, was also a pandemic diarist. In her [blog](#), Ai expounded on the private nature of diaries and the [risks](#) of having the contents made public. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, intimate letters were often cited as evidence of being “reactionary.” As she bluntly put it, “keeping a diary can prove fatal.”

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Fang Fang did not court controversy. In *Wuhan Diary*, Berry’s translation of her online posts, she describes the quotidian struggles of lockdown, dispenses public health information, and offers occasional social commentary. She credits the government for rightful interventions. Her critiques are always measured — in Berry’s words, they’re “expressed from the perspective of a loyal and well-meaning citizen.”

That such a careful approach would ignite a firestorm is revelatory of the perils of public discourse in China today. Social media’s broad reach is a double-edged sword. Fang Fang logged the last entry in her lockdown journal on March 24, 2020. By mid-April, a maelstrom of online [attacks](#) against her and Berry was in full force. [Posts](#) from troll accounts and [official media](#) fed each other, forming a vicious cycle. Berry was variously labeled a Nazi (despite being Jewish) and accused of being a CIA agent. He found himself the subject of conspiracy theories and, as he describes in his account, his inbox brimmed with death threats. But he knew that he faced only a fraction of what Fang Fang had been weathering.



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Judging from the content of her diary, Fang Fang’s worst offense in the eyes of the Chinese state was her repeated calls for accountability. Yet, as Berry points out, “the real perceived threat was with her readership.” At the height of its popularity, Fang Fang’s diary garnered tens of millions of views per post. An independent voice like hers, with a formidable following, could splinter the official narrative. As the viral outbreak spilled across borders, exacerbating an already-spiraling US-China relationship, geopolitics complicated the debate. Her honest observations were seen, by nationalistic commenters, as “handing knives” to those who wished China ill. To have the diary translated and published abroad was tantamount to treason.

Berry notes that, in the short term, it seemed the story of Covid evolved in favor of the Chinese nationalist trolls. Tough measures had kept the case count low in China, while the figures soared in the US. But the course of history is as unpredictable as the mutations of a virus. Both Fang Fang’s words and the abuse she faced would prove prophetic. For much of 2021, Fang Fang’s diary had retreated from public focus, replaced by state-sanctioned narratives of shared sacrifice and undeniable triumph. Yet in 2022, as the Chinese government doubled-down on its Zero Covid policy with increasingly draconian methods, residents in confinement, such as in the two-month-long Shanghai lockdown in spring 2020, called for their own Fang Fang. Berry notes that the legacy of the Cultural Revolution was evident in

the social media posts that denounced Fang Fang, using “Maoist rhetoric and tactics.” But just two years later, the pandemic-prevention workers who placed iron bars across doors, or broke into homes to drag people to centralized quarantine facilities, were likened to modern-day Red Guards in hazmat suits.

Despite all efforts to control the narrative, the laws of nature proved more powerful, and the Chinese state finally lost the plot. In November 2023, after a [fire](#) in a locked-down building in Urumqi claimed at least ten lives and [protests](#) against pandemic restrictions erupted across China, the government [abandoned](#) the Zero Covid policy. The dam was broken. Let the water come. By now, the flood of infections have receded, and both the authorities and the public appear eager to move on. In another uncanny parallel to the Cultural Revolution, activists who seek the truth about Covid casualties risk [imprisonment](#), but discussing the pandemic is not entirely forbidden. Few in China, however, seem willing to revisit the fresh trauma that spared no one. As was the case fifty years ago, it’s easier to bury the pain in silence.

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When Berry began rendering Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary* into English, he had been working on translating an earlier work of hers, [Soft Burial](#). Also featured in Johnson’s book, this 2016 novel follows an old woman as she slowly descends the ladder of memory to revisit the land reforms of 65 years ago. In the name of liberating the peasantry, the Communist Party obliterated social bonds and enacted totalitarian terror. The woman survived the murder of her family and buried them with her own hands — “a hasty ‘soft’ burial where the bodies are tossed in a pit without a coffin and covered in soil,” Johnson writes.

The novel, then, is an allegory. To uncover the past is a search for bones, sometimes literally. In Ai’s documentary on the Jiabiangou labor camp, a widow finds her husband in the mass graves by identifying the shapes of his teeth and toes. Branigan met a woman whose father had escaped imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution and, like countless others who could no longer bear the persecution, threw himself in front of a train. Decades later, the family tried to recover his body from the tracks, but “(t)oo many bones from those days lay jumbled in the soil.” Despite the official [figures](#) on Covid deaths in China (just over 120,000 for a country of 1.4 billion people), the long lines outside crematoriums and rows of fresh tombstones whisper a different story, and academic analyses [estimate](#) the real death count to be over one million.

For the underground historians in *Sparks*, recording the forbidden past in today’s China was (and still is) like putting messages in a bottle to be opened in the future. Bones are time capsules, too. After the soft exterior has melted with the ages, or even as cinders and ash, bones hold the hard truth. As the Haitian-American scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot articulates in his landmark volume, [Silencing the Past](#), history is the fruit of power: “The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.” To seek out hidden bones is to excavate the roots of injustice, and to reclaim power.

With steps so light they can take flight, the living learn to walk underground. The bones of their ancestors speak to the transience of state authority, and are a buried record of oppression and resistance. In their presence, future generations find their genealogy of hope and survival. ■

Header: A woman decorates a grave during the Qing Ming festival, also known as Tomb Sweeping Day, at a cemetery in Shanghai, 2018.



Yangyang Cheng is a Research Scholar at Yale Law School's Paul Tsai China Center, where her work focuses on the development of science and technology in China, and U.S.-China relations. Her essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Los Angeles Review of Books* and elsewhere. Born and raised in China, Cheng received her PhD in physics from the University of Chicago.

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