

FT Books Essay **Non-Fiction**

Are we right to fear China?

Despite dire warnings about autocracy and human rights, expert voices urge greater understanding of this ever-more powerful player



A man walks past a portrait of President Xi Jinping at the Museum of the Communist Party of China in Beijing. The slogan reads: 'I will be selfless and will not fail the people' © AFP / Getty Images

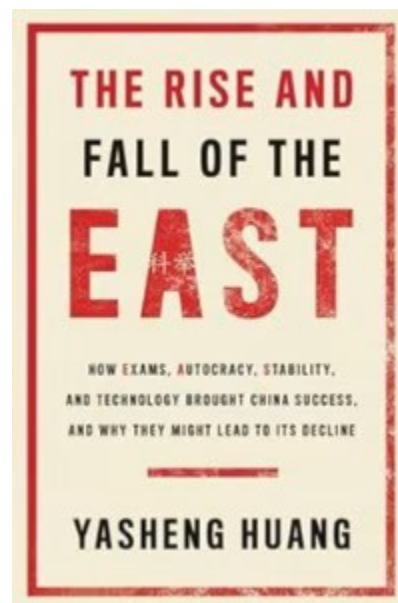
James Crabtree 12 HOURS AGO

Later this month, Joe Biden and Xi Jinping are due to travel to San Francisco for what is expected to be a rare in-person meeting. Despite turmoil elsewhere in the world, relations between Beijing and Washington have recently been calmer. Yet important questions remain about the trajectory of China's political system, and how this will shape the country's outlook as a global economic and political power. Are there reasons to think the Chinese leader might slow moves to set his country on a more closed and autocratic path, or even reverse them?

Three new books examine China's trajectory, in the process offering deeper yet differing perspectives on its history and current internal tensions. In *The Rise and Fall of the EAST*, Chinese-born academic Yasheng Huang looks at the underpinnings of China's political and social structure (here, "east" stands for "Exams, Autocracy, Stability and Technology"). This system has served China well, he suggests, producing decades of extraordinary growth, but may prove less successful in future.

In *Sparks*, Canadian-American journalist Ian Johnson takes a different tack, probing Xi's recent attempts to rewrite history, largely viewed through the eyes of those few dissidents brave enough to resist. Last comes Kerry Brown, a respected British analyst, who pushes back against a spate of China-bashing in western capitals. His *China Incorporated* argues for a less Manichean view of Chinese Communist party (CCP) rule — and a less alarmist view of Xi's intentions.

Of the trio, Huang is the most comprehensive and scholarly, as one might expect from an economics professor at MIT. Now a US citizen, he takes a broadly critical view of Chinese governance. His wry dedication — “to the autocrats of the world. They give us so much to write about” — says it all.



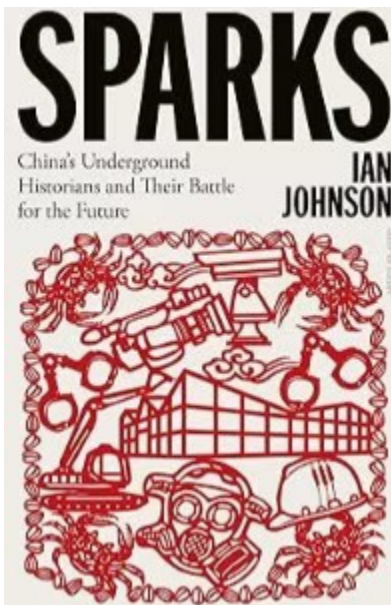
Huang dates China's strongly centralised political system not from Mao Zedong's creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, but to the Sui dynasty in 587AD and the start of the country's *Keju* examinations, which provided merit-based access to the imperial civil service for candidates knowledgeable on topics ranging from written Chinese to classic literature. Successive administrations used such tests to homogenise their otherwise disparate territories, setting up a centralised exam system that has endured, in one form or another, virtually ever since.

Today, the CCP bristles with selective party schools and leadership academies. Meanwhile, the country's notoriously taxing *gaokao* college entrance exams act as a gateway to its most elite universities, and in turn to Beijing's prized central bureaucracy. Over the past year, a record 13mn students signed up to participate in what often seems like a national ritual marked by rote memorisation and intense stress.

Shaped by such systems, China has grown into an ever stronger and more unified

state. But Huang also lays out a grand theory of national development, which he dubs “scale and scope” — a tension between size on the one hand and social and political diversity on the other. He notes that democracies in antiquity tended to be city states, which allowed rights and freedoms at the cost of remaining tiny. Modern democracies manage this tension better by having basic ground rules, such as free elections and the rule of law, which then allow for political disagreements.

The only way that China’s rulers could find to manage the world’s most populous autocracy, Huang argues, is through a near-constant curbing of diversity: “Its absolute insistence on convergence, conformity and uniformity is reinforced by the Communist ideology, but it is also deeply embedded in its history.”



CCP efforts to rewrite this history lie at the heart of Ian Johnson’s *Sparks*. For millennia, Chinese leaders have “been obsessed with the interplay of past, present, and future”, he notes. “History legitimizes their hold on power: history chose the Communist Party to save China; history has determined that it has succeeded; and history blesses its continued hold on power.”

Reversing a brief period of relative relaxation during the 2000s, the party has of late been much more aggressive. History journals have been shut down, independent film festivals closed and freethinking writers harassed. In 2021, Xi issued a rare resolution on the correct way to understand the CCP’s history, only the third such rewriting since Mao, focusing on issues like the importance of curbing corruption, a signature focus of Xi’s rule. Mao’s rule has also been rehabilitated, regardless of the political chaos, famine and perhaps more than 50mn deaths it produced between 1949 and his death in 1976.

In his own way, Johnson has been a victim of this clampdown. A foreign correspondent he

‘China’s leaders . . . tell myth-like stories. A popular uprising brought the CCP to power . . . Hong Kong’s struggle for democracy is the work of foreign forces’

THIS CHAMPION. A foreign correspondent, he lived in China off and on for more than two decades. But in 2020 he was turfed out, the victim of a series of tit-for-tat expulsions, and now works for a think-tank in the US. Even from a distance, however, he remains one of the country’s most perceptive and talented foreign chroniclers. In *The Souls of China* (2017), he provided richly revealing portraits of its religious minorities. In *Spark*, he turns to “underground historians” — writers and filmmakers holding out against Xi’s

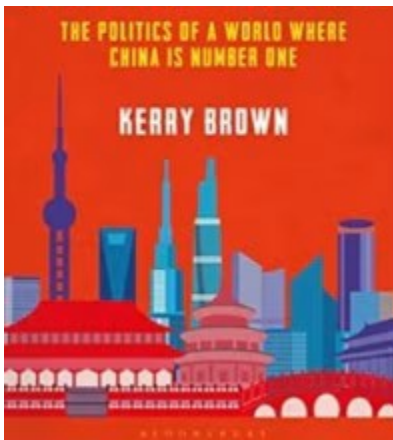
reappraisals.

Johnson’s title refers to the name of a shortlived, freethinking student journal founded in 1960, whose staff were packed off to labour camps after just two issues. Despite the state’s best efforts, however, the journal has not been entirely erased. Free-minded types have put both of its editions online and an independent filmmaker also made a documentary about it, which was distributed in secret, via memory sticks and foreign internet streaming services.

“China’s contemporary leaders try to keep history on their side by telling myth-like stories,” Johnson writes. “A popular uprising brought the Communist Party to power; famines were caused by natural disasters; minority areas like Xinjiang and Tibet have always been part of the country; Hong Kong’s struggle for democracy is the work of foreign forces.” He continues, “The not-so-subtle subtext is that only the Communist Party can save China from chaos and disintegration.”

With some 100mn members, the CCP remains a formidable tool for social organisation. The numbers of people who dare to criticise it publicly are tiny by comparison. Even so, the party views their activity as a significant threat. Historical sensitivity can thus reach ridiculous levels. Last week, [the FT reported that a book about the last emperor of the Ming era](#), which ran from 1368 to 1644, had recently been removed from bookshelves and libraries. The emperor in question made blunders that eventually brought his regime to an end — an analysis that could, at a considerable stretch, be used to draw parallels with Xi and the modern-day CCP.





Understanding the CCP forms one theme in Kerry Brown's *China Incorporated*, a carefully argued rebuke to the west's negative reaction to Xi's push to make his country less open at home and more assertive abroad. Brown's often sympathetic views towards China were honed during a career variously as a British diplomat in Beijing, and Asia head at the Chatham House think-tank. While Ian Johnson was ejected from China itself, Brown instead found himself intellectually adrift in a western establishment that once saw Beijing as a partner and now tends to view China as "a malevolent disrupter come to bring us all down".

Brown sees less cause for panic than many. He predicts a future "multilevel" world order, in which both the US and China remain important, but where Beijing does not seek to replace Washington as global hegemon. "This will not be an easy world . . . But it will, at very least, be a possible world," he suggests.

Johnson strives for slivers of optimism in a different sense. "China's surveillance state is real, but it is not able to completely crush independent activists," he writes, just as was true of those who passed *samizdat* publications around communist eastern Europe. It is at least plausible that Xi's rule will come to an end over the next decade, and the CCP might in turn decide to begin a new era of relative reopening.

Although it would be risky to plan on this outcome, to say the least, there are good theoretical reasons to hope this might happen. South Korea and Taiwan were both firmly autocratic at roughly China's stage of economic development, before both transformed into thriving multi-party democracies. But it is a mistake to think democracy necessarily follows economic development, Huang argues, especially at a time when China's own growth rates are slowing. "The sobering reality is that as its per capita GDP trends towards that of South Korea, its political system is inching closer to that of North Korea," he writes.

Modest goals, such as the gradual reversal of Xi-era crackdowns, might be the best that can be hoped for, he adds: "Change will come when unanticipated contingencies,

such as a financial crisis, a meltdown in the social order, or an abrupt and disorderly change in politics, occur.”

The CCP regime, obsessed with stability, would probably see that the best way to ward off such possibilities is to double down on its current policies. As Biden prepares to meet Xi, Huang’s prediction suggests China’s future is likely to be just as tumultuous as its past.

The Rise and Fall of the EAST: How Exams, Autocracy, Stability and Technology Brought China Success, and Why They Might Lead to Its Decline, by Yasheng Huang, *Yale* £25/\$35, 440 pages

Sparks: China’s Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future, by Ian Johnson, *Allen Lane* £25 400 pages

China Incorporated: The Politics of a World Where China Is Number One, by Kerry Brown, *Bloomsbury* £20, 208 pages

James Crabtree is author of ‘The Billionaire Raj’

Join our online book group on Facebook at [FT Books Café](#)

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.
