

Books

Voices from the Chinese Century, edited by Timothy Cheek, David Ownby and Joshua Fogel

A translation of the political opinions shaping China's public discourse



A bust of Mao Zedong. A 'period of a hundred flowers blooming is about to pass,' write the authors © Qilai Shen/Bloomberg

Review by **Tom Hancock** YESTERDAY

The [Chinese Communist party](#) needs to make way for a Confucian revival. The logical outcome of President Xi Jinping's political thought is competitive elections. Mao Zedong was not a Marxist. These are just some of the striking and controversial arguments presented in mainstream Chinese political journals and online outlets in recent years, now translated in a single volume that gives a taste of the range of intellectual life in China.

That alone is a useful corrective to a common presentation of Chinese intellectuals as either mindless party hacks or dissidents who fearlessly confront the party-state.

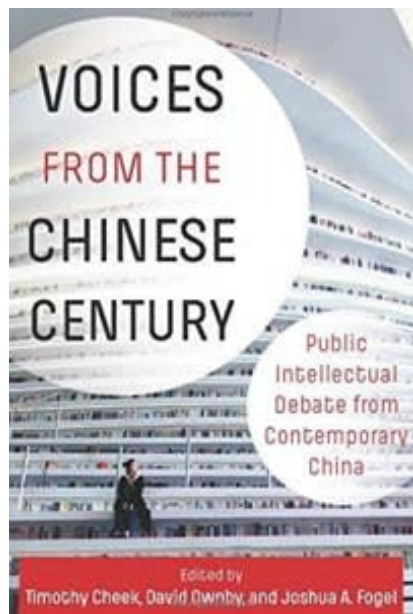
More valuable in this collection is how the division of Chinese thinkers into three camps (liberals, new-leftists and neo-Confucians) brings out surprising parallels with debates between the centre, left and right familiar in the west. Chinese liberals, arguing for the protection of civil liberties and

market economics, were “relatively ascendant in the early 2000s”, write the translators, three Canada-based academics. Back then, China experienced rapid growth and increasing integration into the western-dominated world order. Restrictions on publication, though still tight, loosened over the period.

China’s liberals appealed to universal values. “As long as we are part of humanity, we aren’t that distinctive. We must recognise humanity’s basic values,” argues Guo Yuhua, a professor at Beijing’s Tsinghua University. The central value of their principal antagonists, the new-left, is material equality, seen as communism’s positive ideological aspiration. Neo-Confucians argue that liberals and new-leftists both neglect centuries of Chinese thought prior to contact with the west.

All three traditions are critical of China’s current political system. Liberals lament the ruling party’s authoritarianism; the new-left bemoans soaring inequality; while new-Confucians disdain the party’s disregard for Chinese tradition.

Parallels with western debates are obvious. The neo-Confucian appeal to history echoes calls by the right in Europe and the US to defend tradition and “indigenous” culture against the onslaught of markets and liberal values. As in the west, Chinese liberals are accused by the left of ignoring material inequality between and within states for a purely “formal” conception of equal rights.



The most audacious view presented in the volume comes from Cai Xia, a retired professor at a Communist party college, who argues that the party’s own pronouncements, if taken seriously, place it “squarely within the meaning of modern democratic politics”. But it also sees the Chinese left accused of providing a justification for authoritarianism. Neo-Confucians respond to criticism of their traditional views on women’s rights.

Women make up only three of the 18 thinkers presented, something the authors say is a reflection of China’s male-dominated intellectual climate. “We may deplore this limitation, but at present it appears to be a sociological fact,” they write. But arguably they could have done more to redress the balance, perhaps by including more from young

writers.

While most of the articles translated are from journals aimed at elites, the views of each camp reflect trends in Chinese public opinion. The space for debate has dramatically narrowed since Mr Xi came to power in 2012. Leading journals have been shuttered, online censorship has increased, and universities ordered to express loyalty to the party. A “period of a hundred flowers blooming is about to pass,” the authors write.

But while the Communist party tries to keep its own theories dominant, they are in reality a mish-mash from all three camps — appealing to Chinese nationalism, authoritarian socialism and elements of liberalism whenever most expedient. That reflects how, despite its political system, China is grappling with the same tensions — between markets and equality, elite and popular rule, tradition and modernity — seen in other countries.

Despite censorship, these issues, and the differing ways of resolving them represented by the three traditions presented in this volume, endure. Some of the ideas will probably shape China's future. As for which, that may only become clear by the end of the Chinese century.

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