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The Kids Are Alright

Chinese youths are taught to be skeptical of foreign powers, but the Internet has linked them more closely to global culture.

By JEFFREY WASSERSTROM

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Mao Zedong still casts a giant shadow over the country he led from 1949 until 1976, but it's worth remembering that for a great number of China's citizens, he has always been dead. The Chinese born during the decade following Deng Xiaoping's famous 1979 visit to the U.S. belong to what is called the *balinghou* (post-1980s) generation. Those born during the decade following the protests and massacres of 1989 belong to the *jiulinghou* (post-1990s) cohort. Some journalistic accounts caricature the quarter-billion Chinese in these two groups as "little emperors," spoiled only children cut from the same conformist cloth. But two new books reveal a more complex reality.

Eric Fish's "China's Millennials" takes a sociological and kaleidoscopic approach, presenting a series of profiles of individuals grouped together on the basis of their occupations or concerns. These are people he got to know as a young teacher of English, and they seem to open up to him. (One, for example, shared with him the diary she kept while undergoing compulsory military training as a college freshman.) Mr. Fish's subjects include recent college graduates eager to find a job, a mate, or both; muckraking investigative journalists worried by the moves of China's current president, Xi Jinping, to rein in the press; and one of the "angry youth" for whom Western criticism of China's human-rights record during the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics was a galvanizing phenomenon.

We also meet one of five feminists detained by the Chinese authorities in March: Li Tingting (also known as Li Maizi), who first gained widespread attention by leading the 2012 “Occupy Men’s Room” movement that involved temporary takeovers of male toilets by female activists in an effort to draw attention to the lack of a sufficient number of women’s public bathrooms, which they saw as symbolic of widespread gender-based inequities in today’s China.

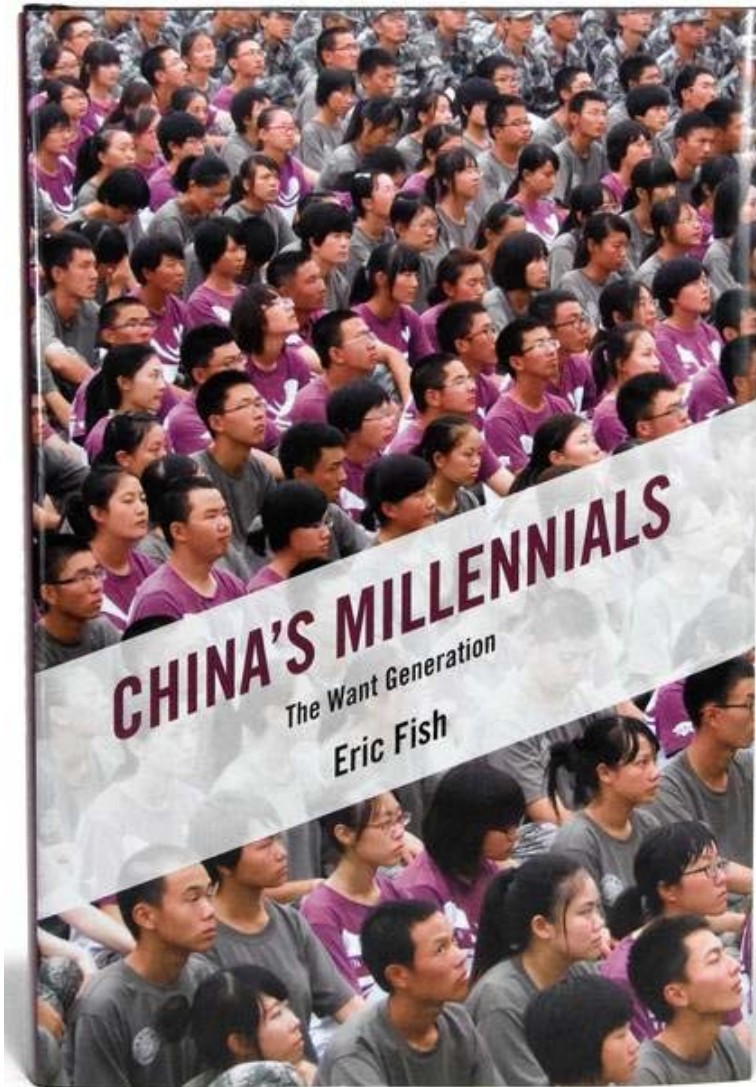


PHOTO: WSJ

communication, and since the great majority of those who go online regularly belong to the post-'80s or post-'90s cohorts, her book offers another valuable window onto these groups. She has a lot to say about the crucial role that cyberspace plays in China as the closest thing there is to a public sphere for debate. For just this reason the state takes great efforts to stifle or control political uses of social media.

In “Let 100
Voices Speak,”
Liz Carter
writes mostly
about digital

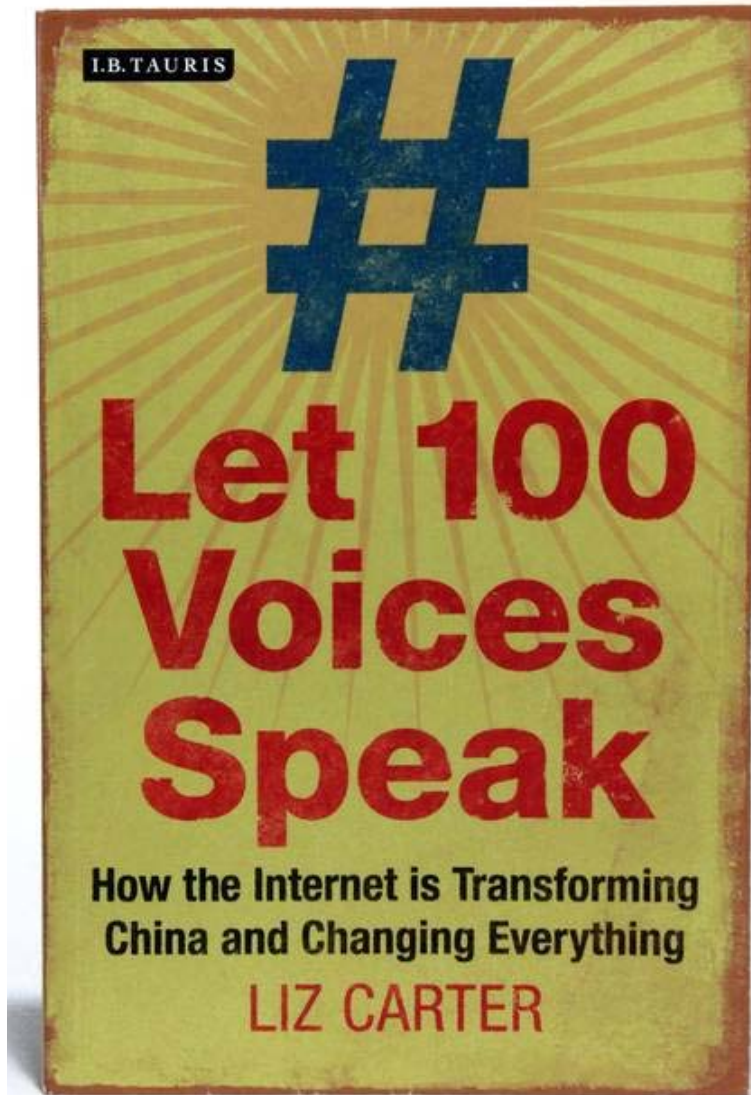


PHOTO: WSJ

CHINA'S MILLENNIALS

By Eric Fish

Rowman & Littlefield, 255 pages, \$36

LET 100 VOICES SPEAK

By Liz Carter

I.B. Tauris, 212 pages, \$20

Yet Ms. Carter knows that in China, as elsewhere, people also go online to seek diversion, soul mates and products. So she looks at how Chinese born in the 1980s and 1990s use digital means to keep up with what their other Millennials around the world are listening to, reading, watching, eating, drinking and wearing. In all these cases, the

author writes with the easy familiarity of someone who routinely watches the same programs, hangs out at the same social-media sites and uses the same digital devices as the young Chinese she is describing.

The China-obsessed will benefit from reading both of these lively and informative books, but the simply China-curious will likely want to pick just one, due partly to the overlap between them. The authors treat some of the same events, from the Beijing Olympics to a 2011 train crash that triggered a government cover up, and they touch on some of the same individuals, such as Bo Xilai, the imprisoned former rival of Xi Jinping.

Both books work against the assumption that young Chinese, as a group, are apolitical except for being ready to join jingoistic groupthink demonstrations. Both authors recognize that exposure to post-Tiananmen patriotic education has made many youths more likely than they would have otherwise been to take part in protests targeting foreign powers. Yet Mr. Fish and Ms. Carter resist treating the periodic anti-Japanese marches of the past decade as simple cases of an authoritarian government making easy use of young puppets.

The authorities may be glad to see youths take to the streets to shout slogans denouncing Japan and sometimes even encourage them to do just that, but they may also be relieved to see eruptions of patriotic fervor wind down. They're highly aware of how Chinese youth in the past have segued from complaining about how other nations are treating China to calling for the country they love to be run by better people. The authorities also note the prevalence of youthful faces and voices advocating for various causes other than nationalism online and in the streets, such as the environment and women's rights.

The authors of both these books admit that no major youth-driven challenge to the government has come since 1989; neither thinks there will necessarily be one in the near future. Nor do I. But reading their books brought to mind something I was told at the start of my first trip to China, in mid-1986, which was before most of the people discussed in these books were born. Hearing that youth movements were a particular interest of mine, some older graduate students and professors said it was too bad that I had arrived during what was bound to be a dull time for that topic. For the current crop of undergraduates, they had concluded, were too focused on frivolous things and concerned with getting ahead to engage in any sort of idealist collective action.

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