

BOOKS, VIDEOS AND FILM

Liniang, on the other hand, choose her own destiny and found true love as a result, becoming the first female character in all of Chinese literature to do so. Her real-life readers thought, "If I catch a case of lovesickness and die, maybe in death—perhaps *only* in death—will I experience love," the one emotion we all long for even today.

"Peony in Love" is about those emotions that are so strong that they transcend borders, time, and perhaps even the veil between life and death. It's about the link we have from grandmother to mother to daughter. It's about the power of words and whether they have the strength to hurt, maim, or kill. Ultimately though, "Peony in Love" is about what women and girls will go through to be heard. I like to think that with my writing I'm going back into Chinese history to find those lost women's projects, creations, and voices, and bringing them out so we can learn from them, experience them, and finally *hear* those women and girls for who they were and what

they did.

My hope is that "Peony in Love" inspires readers—as writing about these women has inspired me—to think about the ways we're heard (or not heard) in our lives today, to embrace our worth and value, and to experience what those lovesick maidens so longed for—love. ■

Lisa See is the author of the novel "Peony in Love." Her 2005 book, "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan," became an international bestseller. As she writes in her online biography, She "has always been intrigued by stories that have been lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up, whether in the past or happening right now in the world today." More information about her books can be found at www.lisasee.com.

Closely Observing People's Lives in China

'I wanted to show how people were getting a consciousness of their rights—standing up for themselves against sometimes arbitrary government power.'

By Ian Johnson

As China races forward economically, many people wonder how the country will turn out politically. Will it democratize? When? Will the Communist Party continue to rule indefinitely?

If I have learned one thing in my 20-odd years involved with China, it's that predictions can be fatal. I remember right after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 how pundits predicted that the party was finished, kaput. Any party that turned its guns on its own students—especially the children of its elite—was doomed to collapse. But it's kept right on trucking, regaining authority and riding China's remarkable economic boom to increase its control over the country.

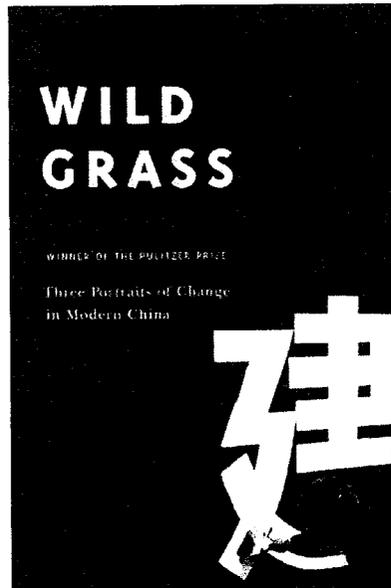
But I think it's fair to say that things are changing in China and that some predictions are worth hazarding. Unlike around the Tiananmen era, however, these changes are not taking place at the top—among leaders or the students at Peking University. Instead, change is happening at China's grass roots. What's afoot is a quiet but crucial raising of people's consciousness, a growing awareness that

they have rights—and that they can stand up for these rights.

I wrote my book, "Wild Grass: Three Portraits of Change in China," to describe these changes. I did so by portraying three people who were, in some way, representative of the changes going on in China right now. They represent the changes in its cities, the countryside and the spiritual realm.

Unlike a lot of books on China, mine is light on policy wonk implications. Except for a short introduction, I don't theorize too much about China's future or potential scenarios. Instead, I let the people tell their stories, hoping that readers will realize that no group of people can truly be "representative" of 1.3 billion people.

This sort of technique — anthropological, really — is quite common in countries like the United States. We're quite used to books that take one specific case and by digging in deeply, illuminate a bigger picture. Think of "In Cold Blood" by Truman Capote, for example; by describing one family's murder he gets to the heart of violence in America, a book that



remains as vital today as when it was written 40 years ago.

In China, however, such books have been difficult to do, at least for outsiders. Government control has made it hard to spend time with ordinary Chinese. In the past, if you visited a peasant for more than a few hours you could expect a visit from the local Public Security Bureau asking what business you had leaving Beijing. Ditto a factory worker or any other "ordinary person." In short, you couldn't really spend much time with people.

Now, more relaxed political control means that it's possible to spend quality time with people. In researching my book, I was able to spend days with people—and to visit them again and again over a period of months and years. That sort of access allowed me to create rich portraits of people instead of typical journalistic drive-by interviews.

But how much of a story can you tell even if you do spend a few days or even months with a person? If you spent a month with me, for example, you'd probably be bored silly. I'm being facetious but only just a little. I come from a middle-class family and am middle class myself. I've held the same job for 10 years and might hold it for another 10 years. Follow me around on and off for a year or two and you're going to get the same pattern, the same routine.

Consider, however, a Chinese peasant. If you follow a farmer around for a year, that person might within that year go from being a farmer to a taxi driver or a factory worker. Add another year and that person might have taken night courses and be learning a

white-collar profession. Thus within the course of a year or two you've watched someone go from the age-old Chinese occupation of farming a small plot of land to being a modern urbanite. Now *that* is a story!

Add in the changes going on in this person's head and you've got a dynamite tale to tell. In the case of my book, I wanted to show how people were getting a consciousness of their rights—standing up for themselves against sometimes arbitrary government power. It comes, I think, from better education and a better standard of living. This is what underlies all the protests we hear about in China. I don't try to predict where this will lead or what it all means. Democracy? Maybe, but the main thing I wanted to convey was that this important change is going on.

If you want a few generalization and predictions, I'll say this: the more people stand up for their rights, the harder it is for the party to exercise arbitrary power and the more likely it is that people will want a say in their government. It may take years—in fact it will take years, even decades. But I do think that this is a historic change in China, one that will still be shaping the country years from now when our children have grown up. ■

Ian Johnson won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of China. He just completed a Nieman fellowship at Harvard University and is a reporter/editor with the Wall Street Journal, based in Berlin, Germany.

Finding Ting's Story So I Could Tell It

'Here she was, a child born into one culture who was being removed from all she knew and transported to one wholly different.'

By Elizabeth Cooke

Our five families, including my son, my new daughter, Ting, and me, were starting our long journey home to the United States after traveling to China with a common mission: to adopt a child and bring her into my family. For four long hours we waited in Hong Kong before finally boarding the first of the planes that would carry us home. We were not assigned seats together so our communication occurred through the waving of hands and sharing of smiles, indicative of the relief we felt to be headed back to familiar places with our children.

Ting was not happy. At two, she knew what had happened to her. She had been taken from all she knew, her beloved Ayi and all the people at the orphanage who constituted her life in Tongling. She cried, and as the plane took off she cried harder. I waited for the seatbelt sign to go off so I could walk up and down the aisle, cradling her, singing to her, calming her, but the red light stayed on.



Some 20 minutes later our pilot's voice let us know that one of our engines was on fire and we were heading back to Hong Kong. "We will be circling and dumping our fuel, then returning to Hong Kong for a replacement plane," he told us. Once in Hong Kong, we were told we'd be there for eight hours. We were exhausted and eager to get home and our children were restless; some crawled, and Ting, as the oldest, was walking. Getting through eight hours would be tough.

A few of our families went in search of food or strolled up and down the long corridors with their children. I laid back against my carry-on bag with Ting on top of me until my son began playing peek-a-boo with her. Then he took her to a long flat

people-moving walker, where they rode back and forth for half and hour or so.

I pulled out my notebook and a pencil, but at first I didn't even open the notebook. I was just waiting for words to hit me so