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Small signs of political reform in China

Three stories of ordinary Chinese citizens inspired to take up local activism demonstrate the challenges of reforming the world's largest country

By [Laura W. Geller](#) / June 29, 2004

While debates over the big picture in China rage on, a slow transformation is unfolding on a much smaller scale. In villages and cities across the country, dissatisfaction and disbelief have provoked widespread protests and have also encouraged the emergence of an increasingly vibrant civil society, offering citizens new opportunities for social action.

Ian Johnson, the former Beijing bureau chief of The Wall Street Journal, witnessed these civic stirrings firsthand. As he writes in his introduction to "Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China," "Try as it might, the party can't put a lid on the demands that people are making for change."

"Chinese people have begun forming independent centers of power outside government control.... Now, these groups are eroding the power of China's Communist Party."

This activism is the common thread that joins the three separate narratives of "Wild Grass" together. The protagonists of his book are ordinary Chinese facing extraordinary obstacles as they engage in bitter struggles against corruption and oppression.

A peasant lawyer, an urban homeowner, and a victim's daughter, each has a unique story to tell, but together they embody the increasingly universal desire for justice in China.

While tracing the development of China's nascent civil society and legal system, Johnson also brings to light the grave challenges that continue to impede progress. Indeed, though a framework for seeking legal redress has been established, it is often rendered obsolete by lack of the rule of law, by rapid development, and by local corruption.

When Ma Wenlin brings a lawsuit against the local government for levying illegal taxes and fees on his peasant neighbors, he believes that the law is on his side. He uses all of the available means of civil action: He organizes the peasants, leads protests, and - when these efforts fail - he travels to Beijing to file a written appeal with the central government.

However, Mr. Ma's trust in the system is apparently misguided and lands him in a labor camp.

The legal channels for addressing grievances exist in China, but without the rule of law to support them, citizens are often left at the mercy of self-serving officials.

We won't go

In China's cities, development has been pursued at a blinding pace. Pressure to modernize and to support a growing population has resulted in large-scale real estate development, necessitating mass evictions.

As a result, in Beijing, the old city is disappearing. Angry citizens are organizing themselves, and have brought lawsuits against the government to protest the destruction of their homes and their lack of fair compensation.

But as in the case of Zhao Jingxin's Ming-era residence, the government's push to develop - and to siphon off repair funds - often takes precedence over the law. After her mother, a Falun Gong practitioner, is arrested and beaten to death by her local neighborhood committee, Zhang Xueling sets out determined to find justice.

She studies the law, and then takes her case to Beijing. Ms. Zhang manages to obtain a signed order that she be given her mother's death certificate. But local authorities refuse her, confident that no one from the capital will bother to check up on them.

Johnson suggests that this attitude has become all too common. Local officials often feel such a significant disconnect with Beijing that they ignore edicts passed down from the center. This system overshadows the law and encourages local corruption.

The limitations of China's civil society and legal system are made disturbingly clear in "Wild Grass." Johnson's three stories are most often characterized by desperation, violence, frustration, and loss.

Despite their inherently tragic nature, these stories are not entirely devoid of hope. The potential for political reform in China remains. Johnson crafts a positive and even uplifting conclusion for each of these subjects, and in so doing, he captures the resilient spirit of many Chinese people.

This enables him to justify his early claim that the efforts of ordinary citizens to organize themselves are, in fact, eroding the CCP's power. Perhaps the best example of this device comes at the end of the Falun Gong story. Johnson reports that Ms. Zhang had still not received her mother's death certificate. Instead, she'd been arrested and placed under constant police surveillance.

However, when Johnson asks if her experience has caused her to lose faith in the government and in China, she points to the last line of an essay she has written, which reads, "China is still trustworthy, we're still waiting."

On the ground

Johnson is a wonderful storyteller whose narrative style permits readers to join his adventures. When he spends the night in a dark cave, the stale air is pervasive. When he crouches low in the backseat of a car, the intensity is palpable.

His book is filled with evocative passages in which he describes the Loess Plateau and the hutongs of Beijing in vivid detail. He also includes small history lessons throughout to provide a sociocultural framework that's enjoyable for those with an understanding of Chinese culture and helpful to those with little prior knowledge.

Regardless of one's background, "Wild Grass" is a captivating and an important study of what is happening on the ground in China today. By weaving together these three stories, Johnson has written a book that reflects the patchwork of defeats and victories that characterize this changing country.

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