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Can Communism and KFC Coexist?

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I remember slipping into the backseat of a black Audi, one of the first personal cars to hit the Chinese market. I remember going with my pre-school class on a field trip to the first Kentucky Fried Chicken that opened in Shanghai. I remember putting on my best dress to take my first airplane ride on the new jets of the fledgling domestic airline industry.

I left at the age of six. I left China to come to America, a place where Audis, fast food, and airplane rides were ordinary. From here, I observed my homeland through the eyes of my family and the pages of the newspapers, watching a people discover and adjust to globalization, commercialization, and liberalization.

As I tracked developments from afar, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Ian Johnson had a much closer seat as the Wall Street Journal's Beijing correspondent. In "Wild Grass: Three Portraits of Change in Modern China," Johnson tells the stories of three Chinese citizens who have challenged the government. Ma Wenlin, a law clerk, helped overtaxed farmers file a class-action suit against the government. Fang Ke, an architecture student, wrote an influential underground book detailing the destruction of old Beijing. Chen Zixiu, a retiree and a member of the Falun Gong sect, refused to give up her religious practices in the face of government condemnation.

Johnson pens these portraits in clean, spare prose, allowing the poignant stories to shine. One has the sense of being transported bodily to China; Johnson's evocative descriptions of various Chinese locales are reminiscent of such fiction writers as Ha Jin and Yu Hua.

Johnson meanders between personal narrative and historical analysis, departing from the matter-of-fact style of his Journal articles.

But while his news writing is straight to the point, his book is—in a way—more honest.

"Newspaper articles have this authoritative tone where everything is presented as fact, but you don't get how the story is gathered," Johnson says, speaking in a phone interview last week. For instance, Johnson constantly kept an eye out for Communist Party informants, bicycling alongside a source through the busy streets of Beijing to avoid being overheard. Slowly, Johnson managed to step into the lives of his subjects.

In short, Johnson wrote a new kind of book on China.

"In the past, I think journalists wrote about China in a formulaic way," Johnson says. "The books tended to be a chapter on the economy, a chapter on politics, a chapter on agriculture, a chapter on food. But now, you can spend time with people and get inside their lives."

Through it all, Johnson's thesis is clear: lonely, brave commonfolk increasingly assert their principles in the face of an uncompromising, over-bureaucratic, callous Communist government.

Yet I wonder whether Johnson's portrait is too simplistic. He seems to be seduced by the one-dimensional

David-and-Goliath characterization of change in China. But it is not clear that the Communist Party is so uniformly bad. Despite their record of corruption, human rights violations, and excess bureaucracy, the Communists have also doubled life expectancy, educated more people than ever before, and dramatically raised living standards. My family in China, like countless others, can now expect what has heretofore been unthinkable in Chinese history: a life of economic prosperity, social stability, and modern technology—a life filled with every hope that the future will be even better.

Granted, there have certainly been growing pains, but the pains should not blind us to the growth. In addition to corrupting and jading China, the Communists have also modernized and industrialized the country. Johnson rightly points out that the tax system and the village democratizations are terribly botched, but we have to keep the discussion in context: these reforms are all of 11 and 23 years old, respectively. Compared to other Communist countries from Cuba to North Korea, China's record does not look nearly so bleak.

Since Mao Zedong's death, China has been a country searching for a new path that combines Communism and capitalism. It has been trying to find its own balance between the need for stability and the need for freedom. Like all pioneers, China has often stumbled, but it has also made remarkable progress.

However, just as the growing pains should not blind us to the growth, the progress should not blind us to the problems. Johnson is right in pointing out that in order for the Communist government to survive in the long term, change must come in some form or another. Johnson believes that ultimate political change will come from below, from the sorts of commoners that he portrays in "Wild Grass," rather than from within the Party. "I think [change] will come from ordinary people, not from some enlightened Gorbachev figure," Johnson says.

But I don't quite buy it. From reading Johnson's book, it is depressingly unclear that the efforts he describes have amounted to anything. Of the three people he portrayed, Mr. Ma was imprisoned and subsequently blacklisted from the legal profession, Mr. Fang left the country altogether for MIT and the World Bank, and Ms. Chen died at the hands of Communists. None of the three accomplished their objectives.

Only time can prove or disprove Johnson's prediction that change will come from below. Until then, for those observing the country from thousands of miles away, Johnson's work offers a rare close-up snapshot of life in China.

Johnson encountered some of the most problematic aspects of modern China, and he did not look away. The result is worth reading.

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