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Reading China

Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom

[Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China](#)

Ian Johnson

Pantheon, \$24 (cloth)

[China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition](#)

Wang Hui, edited by Theodore Huters

Harvard University Press, \$22.95 (cloth)

8 In the courses I teach on China, I often have a final-exam question that asks students to explain which recent books they would encourage the president to read before heading to Beijing. Setting aside well-founded concerns about the reading habits of the White House's present occupant, I continue to think this is a good question—and one China specialists should ponder. And now I think I have a good answer.

The journalist Ian Johnson's *Wild Grass* is an elegantly written collection of tales of a few of the "thousands of ordinary Chinese" pushing forward a "slow-motion revolution" by making increasingly insistent claims against the government for things that it is often unwilling—and sometimes simply unable—to give them. *China's New Order* comprises a pair of provocative and intellectually demanding essays by Wang Hui, a professor of Humanities at Beijing's Tsinghua University (sometimes called China's MIT) and the co-editor of *Dushu* (Reading). The first essay is an extended (nearly 100 pages long) multipart discussion of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and the intellectual trends of the 1990s; the second is a shorter survey of shifting Chinese understandings of modernity from late imperial through contemporary times. While these books are very different from one another in both style and substance, they are also complementary: each exposes a fundamental flaw in the American conventional wisdom about China. According to the standard story, China is undergoing dramatic economic and cultural change even as it remains politically and intellectually frozen. *Wild Grass* and *China's New Order* show that the truth about China is vastly more interesting—that profound political and intellectual changes have been taking place, though often under the surface.

* * *

American visions of China have long been distorted by three fantasies, which push in different directions and yet frequently reinforce one another: that China is impervious to change, stands outside of History, and is immune to progressive trends even when they sweep through the rest of the world; that China's people are poised to transform their country into one just like ours, politically and culturally, and will do so once the latest

ruling clique gets out of the way; and that a particular Chinese leader will, if given the chance, Americanize his country from the top down.

While they share a disturbing ethnocentrism, these views seem otherwise quite dissimilar: the first encourages a bleak view of the future of U.S.-China relations, whereas the second and third offer a rosier prognosis. But to see how they may be mutually reinforcing, we need only remember what happened exactly a decade and a half ago, when in quick succession the third, then the second, and finally the first fantasy took hold in the American imagination.

Early in 1989, many American observers still believed that China's best hope for democratization lay with Deng Xiaoping, twice named *Time* magazine's Man of the Year (as Chiang Kai-shek had been before him in an earlier period of hope for top-down Americanization). But when the Tiananmen Square protests were in full swing, and demonstrators called for the old guard leaders (including Deng) to "leave the stage," a bottom-up fantasy took hold. We were right, we told ourselves, about China being set to Americanize, just wrong about who would lead the way. Then, when the June 4 massacre occurred (on the very day that Solidarity won its first national election in Poland), new life was breathed into the view that China was incapable of anything more than illusory change. Harrison Salisbury's *The New Emperors: China in the Era of Mao and Deng* (1992) neatly summed up this new-old vision of despotic stasis.

Soon after June 4, some optimists renewed their search for the genuine reformer who would transform the PRC, while others looked forward to the day when a new student-led mass movement would do in Beijing what the Velvet Revolution had done in Prague. In short, the familiar trio of U.S. visions of China continued to dominate the discussion. And with the appearance of two influential articles on global politics—Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History?" and Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations?"—the optimists and pessimists had attractive new theoretical pegs on which to hang their views.

This is where the current conventional wisdom comes in: China's recent economic shifts have made it impossible to treat the country as a whole as changeless, yet the conventional wisdom pays homage to the first delusion by treating post-Tiananmen political and intellectual life as stagnant.¹ Pessimists can use this fact to support their negative assessment of China's future. Optimists, though, can insist that with privatization and a burgeoning middle class, it is only a matter of time until a new bottom-up mass movement or a Gorbachev-like figure brings a delayed "End of History" to the last Communist empire.²

* * *

Ian Johnson won a Pulitzer Prize for his *Wall Street Journal* coverage of the Falung Gong meditation sect. In *Wild Grass* he writes as a bottom-up optimist. He is confident that China will in due course experience a profound political change comparable to “the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe late last century” and that the key force behind the transition will be a vibrant civil society whose demands will become impossible for the regime to ignore or accommodate. But he departs from some optimists and from the conventional wisdom in his insistence that Chinese politics has not been static in recent years, owing largely to important changes in legal culture and a growing concern with rights among the population at large, which have had profound if uneven effects.

Johnson builds his case around three stories: a small-town lawyer decides to sue the government on behalf of a group of unfairly taxed peasants; an architect struggles to help “dispossessed homeowners” in Beijing; and the daughter of a Falun Gong adherent seeks official acknowledgment that police brutality caused her mother’s death. These stories are poignant and worth reading for their own sakes. But Johnson wants to do more than introduce us to stories of ordinary heroism. He wants us to appreciate that, despite the stalling of political reforms that might lead to free elections, the Chinese public sphere has become steadily more open since the end of the Maoist era. Civil society—the world of associations independent from the state—has grown more robust, and ordinary Chinese citizens—not just the “daring thinkers” and “brave journalists” that outsiders often assume will lead the push for change—are asserting their rights and defending their interests against a state that still lacks transparency and is riddled with corruption but that is “no longer micromanaging their daily lives.”

To be sure, no nationwide multi-class mass movement has reappeared since 1989, and broad-based oppositional organizations face draconian suppression. But, Johnson claims, small-scale struggles for change have become commonplace, and (quoting an ancient Chinese philosopher) “Rulers and ruled wage one hundred battles a day,” grinding away steadily at regime legitimacy. This image conforms to the picture presented in the best recent social science on political conflict in China.³ Some of this work focuses on kinds of “battles” other than those Johnson discusses (e.g., demonstrations by laid-off workers), and much of it stresses that the fuzziness of the boundaries between state and society in China has produced dynamics of dissent quite different from what was observed in the Soviet bloc in the 1980s. Nonetheless, the picture of persistent bottom-up challenges to the state that Johnson presents in *Wild Grass* emerges with equal force in academic studies of unrest in post-Tiananmen China. These challenges are significant not only for the revolution they may foreshadow but for the altered political climate they have already created.

* * *

China's New Order also describes a complex political transition, but, more importantly, Wang Hui's essays complement Johnson's book by demolishing the image of intellectual stasis in the PRC. Indeed, Wang's very existence contradicts a common foreign misconception about contemporary China: that groupthink and conformity characterize all intellectuals other than a handful of famous dissidents whose writings are ruthlessly suppressed and whose freedom the state curtails. As *China's New Order* makes clear, Wang is neither a political stooge of the current regime nor a political exile whose writings are routinely banned.

He is, rather, as Theodore Hutters points out in a very useful editor's introduction, a complex, critical intellectual. He opposes some government policies but does not call for the party's overthrow. He is glad that Maoist campaigns and the excesses that went with them are a thing of the past, yet he worries about increasing social polarization and the economic hardship caused for many by China's embrace of late-capitalist market forms. He regularly travels abroad and is engaged with international debates yet is nationalistic and remains based in Beijing.

An intellectual like Wang had no place in the Soviet system—or in Mao's China. Nor was there any room under Stalin or Mao for such journals as *Dushu*, which is published through official channels but often stakes out positions that depart from party lines, and which serves as an important venue for vigorous debate over the relevance for China of the ideas of international thinkers ranging from Hayek to Habermas, Sen to Said.

Wang's background as an editor and independent thinker make him uniquely qualified to provide us with insight into the intense engagement with international currents (globalization, Fukuyama, Huntington, postcolonial theory, international debates about civil society)⁴ that—conventional wisdom notwithstanding—have come to define Chinese academic and artistic life.

The shorter of the book's two essays, "Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity," presents a sophisticated, though sometimes difficult to follow, account of intellectual trends in China from 1900 through the end of the 20th century. Wang advances the intriguing claim that Maoist thought should be treated as an ideology of "modernization" that nevertheless contained anti-modernist tendencies reminiscent of those found in the creeds of non-Marxist Chinese radicals of the late Qing era (1644–1911). Even more significant is his argument at the end of the essay that it "behooves Chinese intellectuals"—and presumably some intellectuals elsewhere as well—"to break their dependence on time-honored binary paradigms, such as China–West and tradition–modernity, to pay more attention to the factors that might contribute to institutional innovation within society" and "to attend to the capacity for

renewal within civil society.”

Though that section of the book has much to offer specialists, the longer essay, “The 1989 Social Movement and the Historical Roots of China’s Neoliberalism,” will probably be of greater interest to and contain more surprises for readers with only a passing familiarity with Chinese affairs. Here Wang stresses the multi-class nature of the Tiananmen protests, which are often misremembered outside of China as having been a purely student affair, and argues that economic (and not merely political) anxieties played a considerable role in fueling that year’s unrest.

* * *

Both *Wild Grass* and *China’s New Order* have much to offer, but only Johnson—in part because of his accessible prose—is likely find a broad readership here. Therefore, it is worth ending with some comments on three significant limitations of Johnson’s insightful, well-crafted work of reportage.

First, Johnson is quick to see China’s future in terms of Eastern Europe’s past. But the very existence of such critical intellectuals as Wang calls this analogy into question, as do studies that point to distinctive features of Chinese civil society, such as the unusually important role of what are sometimes called, quasi-oxymoronicly, GONGOs (government-organized nongovernmental organizations) and other entities that suggest an unusually blurry line between the realms of state and society. Moreover, many Chinese know something about the recent economic travails of countries like Russia. Fear of having to endure the hardships that have gone along with post-communism there—along with the bitter fate of the former Yugoslavia—may not be enough to keep China’s Communist Party in power, but it is certainly one novel factor working in its favor.

Second, Johnson tends to see China’s Maoist past as something that the people now wish simply to put behind them. But some Chinese view the Maoist era more ambivalently as a time when terrible mistakes were made but a sense of social justice flourished. It is telling that some protesters (often unemployed workers) still carry pictures of Mao during demonstrations, to express their frustration with China’s current leaders and nostalgia for an era of guaranteed employment.

Finally, Johnson dismisses nationalism as a mere device used by officials to distract attention from a flawed political system. But while the party does often use nationalism in opportunistic ways, national pride is not merely a product of the official manipulation of popular sentiments. Expressions of nationalist outrage are sometimes spontaneous and not state-directed, and in fact the Chinese government worries at times that this outrage could lead to protests that would undermine its authority. It is telling, for example, that just after the May 1999 destruction by NATO bombs of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the party did not so much

create the student protests that erupted as try to channel them into manageable directions. Some official support was provided for the demonstrations of five years ago, but soon the party was working hard to get students off the streets and back into their classrooms.

One reason the party was so aware in 1999 of the potentially threatening dimensions of nationalist sentiments is that patriotic symbols, patriotic slogans, and patriotic anthems, such as Hou Dejian's "Children of the Dragon," figured prominently in the Tiananmen protests. Why? Because a key conviction that brought first students and then Chinese of different social classes to the streets in 1989 was that party leaders had become so corrupt and nepotistic that they could not do what needed to be done to make China great. It is no accident that a central demand of the families of the students and workers slain in the June 4 massacre continues to be that the regime acknowledge not just the innocence of the victims but their patriotism. <

Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom is a professor of history and the director of the East Asian Studies Center at Indiana University. His most recent book, as editor, is *Twentieth-Century China: New Approaches*.

Notes

¹ See, for example, *The Tiananmen Papers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), a collection of documents compiled by Zhang Liang and edited by Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link, which gained a great deal of attention upon publication. In his introduction to the volume, Nathan, a prominent China specialist who contributes regularly to influential general-interest periodicals, describes one legacy of the June 4 massacre as "more than a decade of political stasis" (p. xviii).

² The latest high-profile book by an optimist—who makes an approving nod toward Fukuyama—is Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

³ An excellent introduction to the relevant scholarly literature is Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 2003).

⁴ There are two other very fine recent works to pick up if one is interested in such topics: Gloria Davies, ed., *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), and Wang Chaohua, ed., *One China, Many Paths* (London: Verso, 2003).

Originally published in the [summer 2004](#) issue of *Boston Review*.

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