

Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China

IAN JOHNSON. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004. 324 pages. ISBN 0-375-42186-6. US\$24.00, CDN\$36.00 hardcover.

When scholars call a research publication “journalistic,” they usually mean: superficial, shallow, lacking in methodological rigor, not to be taken seriously. And indeed there is enough bad journalism out there to lend some justification to this derogatory use of the term in academia. However, ultimately it unfairly tars a whole profession and way of writing with the same brush and does supreme injustice to excellent reporting such as that presented in Pulitzer Prize winner Ian Johnson’s *Wild Grass*. During his seven years as a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent in Beijing, Johnson chronicled the stirrings of a Chinese civil society as he tracked various grassroots movements of protest. He believes that one-party rule will become increasingly more difficult to maintain as economic freedoms spill over into the political sphere. A budding legal system, spreading corruption, and widening spaces for the expression of dissent together foster a new political consciousness that does not just critically evaluate the government’s shortcomings, but is also becoming aware of the opportunities to effect change. Three grassroots movements embodying and exemplifying this trend are presented in his book: peasants protesting against tax squeezes, resistance against the destructive “development” of the old quarters of Beijing, and Falun Gong 法輪功 as a resilient and innovative movement filling the empty spaces created by the collapse of the state’s ideological legitimacy. For the readers of the *Journal of Chinese Religions* the chapter on the Falun Gong phenomenon, which runs to more than one hundred pages, will be the most interesting. In this outstanding example of investigative journalism the reader is introduced to the history of this new religion and its increasingly troubled relationship with the authorities. With the crackdown in July 1999, the reporter focuses on the intertwining stories of individual Falun Gong activists continuing to protest the ill treatment of their group. The protagonists are forty-three-year old Brother Li [Li Ge] who looks after protesters arriving in Beijing from the provinces, and fifty-nine-year-old Ms. Chen Zixiu from Weifang in Shandong who ends up being tortured to death for her insistent protests. After her death, her daughter Zhang Xueling goes on a campaign demanding justice for her mother’s wrongful death. As her challenge of the local authorities ultimately results in her own imprisonment, the book ends on a chilly note, but Ms. Zhang’s example still holds out that hope for change that she herself never abandoned. Johnson writes in a lively manner that empathizes with these people who dare to go against the corrupt apparatus, but he never sacrifices his basic neutrality as a journalist. The result is a riveting and highly informative work that should be required reading for anyone interested in understanding the social, religious, and political dynamics of modern China.

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