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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Viewing China From the West and From Within

By BRUCE GILLEY

CHINA HANDS

Nine Decades of Adventure, Espionage and Diplomacy in Asia

By James Lilley with Jeffrey Lilley

Illustrated. 417 pages. PublicAffairs. \$30.

WILD GRASS

Three Stories of Change in Modern China

By Ian Johnson

324 pages. Pantheon Books. \$24.

Popular Western writing on China has long followed two major routes. One harks back to the influence of Western ideas and commerce from the 19th century onward and traces the country's response to these challenges: China as a rising power, a threat, a partner, a rival. The other focuses on the less visible but more pervasive array of internal challenges, the peasants and the agitators whose millions of small acts offer an alternative explanation of China's lurch toward modernity.

Two books, "Wild Grass" and "China Hands," are the latest contributions to these two traditions. In "China Hands" James Lilley, a former United States ambassador to China, recalls a life of derring-do as a diplomat there, giving a real-life boys' adventure story that will have many grown-ups staying up past their bedtimes. Ian Johnson's "Wild Grass" is a beautifully spare recollection of three ordinary people in the 1990's who challenged the power of the Communist state in their own Lilliputian way. Taken together these books raise the perennial question: Is it the foreign experts or the common people who will change China more?

Mr. Lilley, now 76, chronicles his career as a spy and diplomat in Asia to a boyhood spent in 1930's China, where his father was a Standard Oil executive. His memoir, written with his son Jeffrey, a journalist, has the distinct air of a time past. The elder Mr. Lilley makes covert contacts with Chinese intelligence in Taiwan while his wife joins the Women's Garden and Art Club of Taipei; he ponders the "sweet and sour" of this situation and the "yin and yang" of that one; the British ambassador comes from "England."

Yet his memoir is filled with gripping anecdotes skillfully rendered. It shows how loyalties shifted endlessly in China's tumultuous 20th century. Mr. Lilley plays catch with a young Japanese soldier in occupied China in the 1930's before world tensions end their play; he sneaks an agent into colonial Hong Kong in the 1950's past jittery British border officials who are a bigger obstacle to American spies than officials in China; and two of Mr. Lilley's military attachés are scolded by Tiananmen protesters for taking pictures of a blockaded People's Liberation Army train in 1989.

Chinese civilians, he writes, "however much they might have resented the current government, strongly identified with their motherland and would defend its interests against foreign intrusion."

Like many whose fondness for China predated the Communist victory, Mr. Lilley finds himself drawn back to the country between postings elsewhere in Asia despite his unwavering anti-Communist sentiments. He knows China too well to be

lulled by siren calls of accommodation or concessions to Beijing.

Unlike the generation of Chinese-American-relations experts now in positions of influence, Mr. Lilley is a straight-talking and morally clearheaded analyst who does not live in fear of being declared "anti-Chinese" by the manipulative emperors of Beijing. He ends with a bracing appeal to engage China and protect American allies in Asia in the belief that this will guide China into the modern world as a responsible great power.

Ultimately Mr. Lilley's memoir is soaked in the conceit of its tradition: China as a challenge successfully managed by important Westerners. Mr. Johnson, by contrast, is more concerned with the local heroes of China. Now a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, he covered China from 1994 to 2001. He tells the stories of a peasant lawyer fighting corrupt local officials, a young architecture student raising consciousness about the costs of urban redevelopment, and the justice-seeking daughter of a woman murdered by the police for belonging to the Falun Gong sect. The only cocktails in sight in these stories are chipped cups of grain alcohol enjoyed in a cave house with peasant rebels.

In their own ways these blades of "wild grass," plain yet stubborn, are recasting state-society relations in China, Mr. Johnson writes: "The push for change comes mostly from people we rarely hear of." The stories are compelling, and he envelops them in keen description that seems at every turn to pierce through several layers of irony.

In the company of the architecture student, Mr. Johnson notes that the cheap aluminum siding haphazardly used to modernize crumbling stone and wood buildings in old Beijing could inadvertently preserve those structures for future restoration. Yet doing so depends on finding craftsmen from rural areas who are increasingly employed in building modern skyscrapers or working in export factories.

Mr. Johnson is to be commended for his sensitive rendering of his subjects, and his welcome relegation of his own role to the background of the tapestries he weaves. In the past journalists posted to China wrote books that placed themselves front and center; Edgar Snow was only the first in a long line. Those days are gone, despite some continued exceptions. The more recent breed of books portend a new sensitivity in the Western news media to the contours of difference in foreign reportage, something to be welcomed.

Inevitably the differing approaches of Mr. Lilley and Mr. Johnson lead to different conclusions about many of the whirlwind changes shaping China. Mr. Lilley, for example, welcomes the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, saying the games will provide incentives to the government to be more cooperative with foreign powers and more moderate with its citizens.

Mr. Johnson is less sure. His blades of wild grass sense a new tool of state power that will accelerate the already wanton destruction of the architectural heritage of old Beijing. The Olympic Games will also, they say, give Beijing an excuse to lock up more political dissidents, labor activists and little old ladies who don't want to move house. If what has happened in the three years since the games were awarded is any indication, the wild grass is right.

There is an acute paradox here: the well-meaning China hands award the Olympics to Beijing; that empowers the government to deracinate the wild grass growing around its feet. These books provide fine insights into these two sides of the China issue, the external and the internal. Where that leaves the people of China remains to be seen.

Photos: James Lilley; Ian Johnson (Photo by Helga Simon)