

Wild Grass: Three Portraits of Change in Modern China

BY IAN JOHNSON

New York: Vintage Books, 2004

As the *Wall Street Journal's* Beijing correspondent during the 1990s, Ian Johnson offers a first-hand account of the tensions that pit China's effort to emerge as a key player in the global marketplace against the authoritarian character of its government. In *Wild Grass*, he presents three narrative sketches relating to various aspects of economic and social change in China as they affect individual citizens. Each sketch provides a vivid account of harsh governmental actions that underscore the ethical disconnect between governmental ambitions to construct a more harmonious society and the reality of authoritarian power left unchecked in the absence of rule of law, independent courts, and a free press.

Although perhaps not standard fare for readers concerned with public integrity, journalistic accounts like Johnson's of abusive governmental action in the midst of great causes can heighten awareness of the discrepancies between espoused (ethical) values and enacted values. Brief synopses of Johnson's narratives are presented below, followed by a discussion of some selected ethical issues.

The first narrative, "The Peasant Champion," follows Johnson's journey onto the Loess Plateau, a remote rural area northwest of Beijing, in search of Ma Wenlin, a self-made lawyer who represented farmers in tax disputes with local officials. Farmers bear far more than their share of the burden for financing the modernization of China.

Ma's advocacy for farmers' rights placed him under continual government scrutiny as one who threatened stability by "whipping up the masses." Johnson visited Ma's wife, Cao Pingfen, who explained how her husband took on the role of farmers' advocate.

Cao conveyed the sequence of events that led lawyer Ma to specialize in cases seeking tax relief for peasant farmers, first focusing upon individual claims but then moving to larger class actions involving thousands of farmers. His reputation spread after he won a judgment for 12,688 farmers in Peijiawan in 1999. Four years earlier, drought conditions had severely reduced crops, but taxes based on the yields were increased substantially. She confided that the Peijiawan case had made her husband cynical about the government when his success prompted district officials to order the courts to reject subsequent class actions on behalf of farmers.

This backlash of a visibly corrupt government led Ma from technical work as a legal petitioner to outright political mobilization on behalf of peasant farmers—"normal channels" no longer seemed viable. Orchestrating tractor brigades in villages, Ma kept the message simple: Local government must abide by central government law requiring fairness in the collection of agricultural taxes. Yet mobilization fueled more aggressive collective action in response to abusive governmental action against Ma's farmers. In April

1999, a county government sent one of its revenue officials to a village that was a center of farmer activism, supposedly to inspect the village's tax books. At first, farmers assumed that the visit was in response to their earlier complaints about the village officials, but they later became suspicious of the odd timing of the meeting. On the hunch that county and village officials were conspiring to falsify revenue documents against the farmers, seven of the activists barged into the village office to seize the books and take the county official hostage. Ma arrived on the scene after the incident and eventually brokered an amnesty agreement that set the county official free.

Despite its pledge not to recriminate as part of the amnesty deal, the government snared Ma in a setup arranged through the State Council's Petitions and Appeals Office in Beijing. Johnson made many efforts, all unsuccessful, to meet with Ma, who (it turned out) was serving a five-year sentence in a labor camp.

The second narrative, "Dream of a Vanished Capital," focuses on Beijing's central city and its historic residences—once inhabited by Communist Party elites. Since adoption of a 1990 city law allowing for the razing of dilapidated buildings, these historic homes have become the targets of governmental expropriation. This story centers on the plight of several property owners in their unsuccessful efforts to litigate against the city's taking of their properties and to seek just compensation for their losses under a 1999 law that provides for such an entitlement. The home of one of them, a man named Feng, "was sold to a developer for \$2,500 a square meter, or \$125,000. His only compensation was a small apartment on the tenth floor of a housing silo with dank elevators

and cracking cement walls that probably cost one-tenth of the \$125,000 to build" (p. 93).

Many of the expropriated properties stood on Beijing's *hutongs*—alleyways of well-kept homes owned by members of the same families over generations. In essence, city government created subsidiary real estate development corporations that sold the confiscated properties to the China Development Bank, an appendage of the central government. The experiences of the homeowners suggest that litigating against the expropriation practices was risky business that led to episodic police harassment and (brief) detainment. In essence, Beijing's city government issued orders to demolish "dilapidated" property to pursue development opportunities arising from unparalleled economic growth. Several urban planning agencies are charged with the protection of historic properties, but in fact these bureaucracies advocate for modernization. When asked (by Johnson) to explain why hutong residences are not spared, a planner in the Beijing Municipal Institute of City Planning and Design replied that these homes—wooden structures in alleyways too narrow for automobile traffic and utility (gas and sewer) lines—"were not really made for the modern world."

Fu bai is the term Feng used to describe the governmental corruption that had victimized him and perhaps millions of Chinese urban dwellers driven from their homes by governmental expropriation. The narrative elaborates upon two complementary areas of alleged corruption, the first focusing upon the judicial system and the second upon censorship policies that suppress efforts to publicize the litigants' claims—in essence, no free bench or free press. In brief, the charge Johnson makes against government is that "a system in which

the government is judge and jury, buyer and seller, can't be fair."

The final narrative, "Turning the [Dharma] Wheel," leads 300 miles southeast of Beijing to the small town of Weifang, the home of Chen Zixiu, a retired grandmother who enjoyed exercising outdoors in public parks. Mrs. Chen's exercise regimen—an expression of Falun Gong, the religious belief of many of the protesters who precipitated the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre—led her into conflict with government officials. They exerted increasing pressure on Chen's daughter—Zhang Xueling, a busy mother and small business entrepreneur—to keep her mother under control so as not to further embarrass the town.

Trouble began when Mrs. Zhang received a call from Beijing instructing her to travel to the capital with money for the fine to release her mother, who had been apprehended for engaging in a public protest there. Zhang drove to the capital city with officials of her neighborhood street committee (the lowest rung of the Communist Party), who impressed upon her the embarrassment her mother had posed for the town. The committee decided that Chen had to serve a two-week detainment in the local party office prior to her return home. After that, she remained under committee surveillance. On one occasion, the committee secretary appealed to her civic duty, warning: "It was embarrassing to us and cost us a good deal of money, but all that happened after you went to Beijing is that you were detained and sent home. Nothing more. You made your point and let's leave it at that, okay? . . . Please don't embarrass your hometown. Be a good citizen. No one likes what's happening, but don't make a scene. You know how things are" (pp. 198–199).

In some respects, it would have been

better to serve as a committee secretary in a town located 900 (rather than 300) miles from the national capital (since it would be less likely that your citizens—regarded as "country bumpkins" by central government officials—would find their way to protest in Beijing). After the Tiananmen debacle, the central government adopted a tough stance toward protesters, reaching back centuries to use the *bao jia* (central government) method of social control. This means that the central government issued performance contracts for local officials as the mechanism for implementing social control policies—in this case, the policy preventing citizens from protesting in Beijing. From this performance perspective, the committee secretary's references (above) to the costs of Chen's behavior suggest that he was required to pay a fine to the central government—either from his own pocket or from funds collected somewhere else (through the "resourceful" use of governmental power).

The story proceeds to tell how Chen's refusals to refrain from protests on behalf of Falun Gong led to more arrests and increasingly brutal treatment; she eventually died of injuries from beatings in jail. Prison officials informed Mrs. Zhang that her mother had succumbed to "natural causes" but refused to issue a death certificate confirming this claim. The account concludes by tracing the daughter's unsuccessful efforts to obtain that document through the appropriate bureaucracies and the courts.

In each of Johnson's narratives, the exercise of rule *by* law, as contrasted with rule *of* law, largely accounts for citizen abuse at the hands of a government intent on creating a more harmonious, less rule-bound society. The Chinese dilemma poses a particularly sensitive question for readers

interested in global ethics: How can rule of law take root in a traditionally authoritarian culture? Can it be grafted from existing democracies by the diffusion of standards and codes through global and regional ethics organizations (and spurred on by the mandates of international lenders)? Or should rule of law be understood primarily as an internal choice, evolving only if a government is willing to take (in the words of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer) “the institutional gamble” to let go of power, instead trusting its courts and bureaucracies with the tasks of governing a market-oriented society?

Johnson’s cases also heighten the reader’s awareness of the universal tenacity of professional values that in some circumstances marginalize citizens for the “broader societal interest.” Although lacking an effective revenue system, local taxation bureaucrats (in “The Peasant Champion”) show determination in pursuit of their collection duties, as do Weifang officials (in “Turning the Wheel”) in efforts to prevent citizens from protesting in Beijing. Performance-management systems—operating in China centuries before they were ever mentioned in public administration textbooks—motivate of-

ficial behavior in both of these stories. Yet professional values speak loudest among urban planners (in “Dream of a Vanished Capital”) poised to benefit from the development opportunities afforded by China’s economic transformation. Readers might relate this account of urban development in Beijing to similar scenarios in the United States. And they will find other facets of Johnson’s work to be ethically pertinent beyond those mentioned here.

In summary, *Wild Grass* leads us through the nooks and crevices of cultural nuance in depicting a society undergoing momentous economic and social change. In doing so, it challenges those concerned about public integrity to approach the ethical character of government from the bottom up—as a puzzle in which few of the pieces (aspirations, traditions, resources, and technology, among others) lock together well. Thus, *Wild Grass* and the efforts of other journalists posted in international assignments can contribute significantly to the study of global ethics as testing grounds for principle-oriented prescriptions advocating the diffusion of democratic norms and standards.

—Richard K. Ghere
University of Dayton

Copyright of Public Integrity is the property of M.E. Sharpe Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.