

Social struggles of the little people sowing seeds of change.

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Pulitzer Prize winner **Ian Johnson** today launches what is set to be a contentious book on China at the FCC. He tells Paul Mooney what inspired him. When American journalist **Ian Johnson** arrived in Beijing in 1994, he vowed not to write another formulaic China book that attempted to cover every topic under the sun. But as he approached his seventh and final year in the country, Johnson found himself working on the book he never thought he'd write.

Sitting in the lobby of a Beijing hotel, Johnson, who worked first for the Baltimore Sun and then for The Wall Street Journal in China, explains the reasons for his change of heart. He says most coverage of China tends to focus on either the economic miracle or political repression. "But I began to see there was something deeper going on that would be interesting to describe," he says.

"It seemed precisely because of rising prosperity, the demand for political change was growing. But instead of it coming from the dissidents and the intellectual elite, it was percolating from the grass roots. That seemed to me a fascinating source of tension and a way of looking at China that would remain relevant for years to come."

Johnson won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001 for his stories about the victims of the central government's suppression of the Falun Gong movement.

He recalls reading Norma Field's *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor* several years ago, a book that describes Japan at the time of Emperor Hirohito's death. "Despite all the very real and laudable material progress in China over the past decades, this is how I see China," explains Johnson. "People all recognise that something is dying and that change will happen. Only no one can quite work out when or how it will happen."

Around the same time, Johnson also began to read narrative non-fiction writers such as John McPhee and Jane Kramer. "I hadn't read a non-fiction book like this about China, telling a bigger story through the lives of a handful of people in stories that, like novels or short stories, have a beginning, middle and an end," he says. Johnson says McPhee does this brilliantly in his books on nature, while Kramer has also focused her coverage out of Europe on strong characters. "But I hadn't seen this in China, primarily because for so long the country had been under totalitarian rule," he says, adding that for the first 15 to

20 years after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, it was hard to spend time with ordinary people, because of the party's restrictions on interacting with foreigners. "But during the 1990s, this began to change and now it's possible to spend weeks on end with people and get inside their heads," he says.

Johnson felt that by applying narrative non-fiction techniques to China, he would be better able to tell the story of a few people as well as the story of the nation. "I'm trying to give a broader sweep of where today's China stands and where it's heading," he says. "I think you're going to find more books out of China like this - books that focus on strong, interesting yet representative characters, instead of snapshots."

Johnson launches his book *Wild Grass - Three Stories of Change in Modern China*, released by Pantheon Books this month, at Hong Kong's Foreign Correspondents' Club today at 12.30pm as part of the Man Hong Kong International Literary Festival. He believes that change in China is coming from the "little people" featured in his book, who are pushing for change on a local level, mostly outside the cities.

"I wanted to pick a topic that would be timeless, and not one that was just 1994-2001. I was interested in grass-roots civil society percolating up and meeting this ossified political system, a theme that would be around for years."

However, he is not predicting the imminent collapse of the Communist Party. "Political rigidity and economic liberalism can go on - this is the classic Deng Xiaoping formula. They can loosen things up a bit and lighten up on censorship, and this will give it more life."

But he says the party, which is attempting to win legitimacy by meeting growing demands, is actually strangling itself in the process. "I'm long-term optimistic," says Johnson. "The fact that people are active is a good sign. Over time, rising prosperity and all the reform the party is selling will be its undoing. The Chinese Communist Party has set in motion a process that is undermining itself."

He likens China to the Austro-Hungarian empire in the early 20th century: "A place of incredible change and progress but run by an ossified political system that is out of step with the country's vibrant, diverse society."

Amazingly, the characters all show faith in the legal system, despite the party's ability to subvert the law. Johnson attributes this phenomenon to what he calls the "If only the emperor knew" syndrome, which assumes that if those higher up were aware of what was going on, things would be put right.

Johnson concedes this is generally how people view things in China, but adds: "I don't know if it's accurate." This is proven by the fact the subjects of his book all meet with similar failures when they petition the central government.

In the first story, the system jails someone for opposing it; in the second, it destroys something; and in the third it kills a person. Johnson says "all the stories end with a sense of patience, or waiting, that I think characterises modern-day China".

As Falun Gong member Zhang Xueling says to him before she is thrown into jail for attempting to redress her mother's death: "Now is a time for waiting. China isn't ready for change."

Johnson is not disillusioned by these failures. "If you look at my book, all three people fail. But I do think they're successful in sowing the seeds of change," he says. "I hope readers see things are changing because these people are struggling, that there is a legal system and that people have expectations. It shows that Chinese think the legal system is worth taking seriously. What I hope will come across in this book is the Chinese are dynamic and pushing for more."

Johnson's optimism - and what the party is up against - is best illustrated in a simple conversation he has with the young architect Fang Ke, who attempted to protect houses in an old part of Beijing.

Johnson hooks up with Mr Fang in Cambridge, where he is studying at MIT. As they are about to part, Johnson suddenly remembers a samizdat book that some homeowner activists back in Beijing asked him to pass on to the architect.

The men had lost the battle to save their homes, but they had not given up the war to save other threatened structures. As Mr Fang takes the book, his face breaks into a characteristic grin. "They're still at it," he says with obvious relish.