

Times Literary Supplement for Holly Eley 29 June,2004

From Jonathan Mirsky

Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China Ian Johnson
Pantheon pp.324 \$ 24

The Great Wall of Confinement: The Chinese Prison Camp Through
Contemporary Fiction and Reportage Philip F. Williams and Yenna Wu
University of California Press, Berkeley, pp.248 np

Ian Johnson set himself a great task: to record the pressures for change in China that "come mostly from thousands of ordinary Chinese who in small ways demand more from their government than the current system can accommodate." [8] Related wonderfully, uniquely, in "Wild Grass," it is a tremendous struggle against a Beijing regime whose "message is clear: we are nervous, possibly even weak, but do not meddle; we can still crush you." [8]

One of the illuminating aspects of Ian Johnson's book and there is none better on what life is like for ordinary uppity Chinese is its almost offhand way of describing what it takes to elude Beijing's omnipresent security apparatus even at the village level: changing cars, not staying overnight in even the most miserable hotel, moving swiftly from one place to another. And that's for foreigners. For a Chinese to tell a foreigner, especially a journalist, about official bullying, persecution, arrest, torture, and murder, or if that Chinese ventures to a county, provincial capital, or Beijing to complain that officials are breaking the law, can mean detention, beating, and death.

Few reporters have taken the trouble to painstakingly investigate such matters. It requires very good spoken Chinese, determination, guts, imagination, and a desire to get not any story but the story. Editors tend not to let their reporters spend time and money pursuing stories that are not of that day; when the story is bigger than that most reporters rely on the wire services, chats with their colleagues, and briefings from diplomats who don't get out a lot either. The result is the blurred picture of China that appears in British papers most of the time. American papers focus more distinctly.

From the middle Nineties, Ian Johnson was the Wall Street Journal's bureau chief in Beijing. (He now represents his paper in Berlin.) What he did there was the journalistic equivalent of getting his hands dirty. It won him the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for his detailed series on the Falun Gong, the meditative cult that Beijing deemed a menace to the state. That bulk condemnation resulted in tens of thousands of arrests of believers, often far from young, who were non-violent, indeed hardly resistant, the torture of many of them, and the deaths in prison of some hundreds.

In "Wild Grass" Mr Johnson applies his microscope to three people. In each case, when the State had crossed their psychological red lines the outraged citizens decided they weren't going to take it anymore. These three cases, Mr Johnson says, represent the "key problems facing China: the crises in its villages, cities, and its soul." [9]

The first of his subjects, Ma Wenlin, is a small-town self-taught paralegal who helps thousands of peasants fight the illegal taxes that are bleeding them into destitution. Although venerated by his clients as their "champion," he is beaten by the security organs, loses thirteen teeth and is sentenced to five years in prison; he was RELEASED THIS YEAR (JONATHAN: I HAVE JUST HAD THIS CONFIRMED; IT WILL BE IN THE PAPERBACK VERSION OF THE BOOK), I hope, released this year. The second citizen, Fang Ke, who attempts to speak truth to power is a brilliant young architect who objects to the destruction of most of Beijing's stock of ancient buildings, largely so that local officials can make millions in real-estate deals. He fails but is respected by thousands of people whose houses he attempted to preserve from the bulldozer. Finally there is an elderly woman, Chen Zixiu, a convert to Falun Gong, who persists in publicly objecting, finally in Beijing, at the persecution of her fellow-believers. She is beaten to death in a local lock-up. A security officer laughingly told Mr Johnson that when it came to the Falun Gong "No measure is too excessive." [288]

Mr Johnson went to the town where the would-be lawyer's wife lives and in a long poignant conversation discovers from her, as he had from some of the peasants, just what kind a 'champion' Ma Wenlin had been. Mr Johnson is very good at interweaving history into his narrative, and he reminds us that despite what many Chinese intellectuals and some Western observers took to be Mao's fascination with peasants, from the beginning of Communist rule in 1949 they were seen merely as "food-making machines." During the great

famine of 1959-1961, for example, peasants "were forced to send their last kilos of grain to the cities." [38] Ma Wenlin's home county, a peasant told Mr Johnson, was the kind of place where, when his annual MIGHT WANT TO ADD THE WORD "CASH" HERE TO MODIFY INCOME. income dropped by 75% to \$12, his taxes quintupled to \$25. When he was short in his payment by \$5 the officials broke down his front door and took away his television.

Mr Ma, 55 when he began filing lawsuits to defend the peasants, was a Party member, an ex-Red Guard, a fanatical Maoist who together with millions of other young people had "roamed the countryside, destroying temples and humiliating people they didn't like." [41] He came from a dirt-poor village, but left to become a teacher and legal worker. In 1997 the villagers from his hometown told him they were being impoverished by illegal taxes and asked him to help them sue the government. At first he refused but soon agreed to help them with what seemed like a straightforward case. He drew up documents showing that many thousands of small farmers had been taxed many times the legal amount. Enraged at official stonewalling, Ma participated in a few local demonstrations demanding redress. These escalated and finally, in 1999, he was arrested, charged with having told the peasants to 'speak artfully' with officials. On 7 July 1999, Ma and five peasants arrived outside the office in Beijing where one could petition the central government. He was beaten, lost thirteen teeth, and went to a labour camp for five years. Eventually Mr Johnson was given a copy of a petition signed by 30, 166 farmers from the place where Mr Ma had campaigned. One of the peasants who found Ian Johnson and gave him the 21-page petition told him, " Just tell people we're responsible, not Lawyer Ma He was just our lawyer." [85]

I've concentrated on the story of Lawyer Ma because it shows how heroic he was and how scrupulous is Mr Johnson's account. The other two stories, of the architect and the Falun Gong believer, also show local heroes who tried and failed, and are equally well told. Ian Johnson has not only lifted a corner of the curtain covering China's reality away from its glittering eastern cities; he has yanked it back.

Two of Ian Johnson's subjects went to prison, where one died. Both of these prisons were not far from home. Neither went to the extensive and usually remote Chinese gulag where thousands still languish. There is as yet no Alexandr Solzhenytsin to tell the story of the Chinese gulag from the inside

or an Anne Applebaum to lay it out in detail with a foreign scholar's meticulous care. There are a few good pieces of fiction. Perhaps most famous abroad are Zhang Xianlang's "Half of Man is Woman," Harry Wu and Carolyn Wakeman's autobiographical account of Mr Wu's long detention, "Bitter Winds," and James Seymour and Richard Anderson's study, "New Ghosts, Old Ghosts: Prisons and Labour Reform Camps in China." In "The Great Wall of Confinement" Philip Williams, Professor of Chinese at Arizona State and Yenna Wu, Professor of Chinese at the University of California at Riverside, explore a sordid fact: "China the only major world power to have entered the twenty-first century with a thriving concentration camp system "[2] They are careful scholars with a deft touch: "The capriciousness of the forced labour system, " they write, " derives in large part from the retarded development of the [Chinese] legal system." [3 Nor do the Chinese permit the system to be called by its right name: "The term 'concentration' camp cannot be used in ...publications with reference to the regime's prison camps.." although the term, they show, is applied to a similar kind of place in the Chiang Kai-shek period.

The authors describe how the system works, how in some ways it derives from very ancient forms of punishment through labour, in some ways from lessons learned directly from the Soviets, but most of all from Mao and the Party's intention to 'remould" people through labour and to treat many of those with legitimate complaints as enemies of the State. This last, of course, is shown, and rather better, by Ian Johnson, but it is the merit of Professors Williams and Wu that they expose many of the details of the Chinese gulag and offer some flavour, but not enough, of what Chinese writers have said about it in novels and short stories. Some extensive quoting would have been valuable and a bit less lit-crit. But one must not cavil too much: how the prisoners lived and died, adapted or failed to adapt, what they ate and how - as in the Soviet gulag, food was used as a weapon - how filthy they were, how bad their medical treatment, and how some prisoners exploited and persecuted others, are all well-shown here. As with Anne Applebaum's "Gulag," one can only wonder that so many survived and how one's self would have endured.

There is a deadly observation near the end: large-scale exonerations in China have been limited to those inmates framed during the Mao years. In the Deng Xiaoping-Jiang Zemin era, that is since about 1979, in what is known as the Reform period, those whose sentences have been reduced have mostly been deported into foreign, usually US, exile supposedly for medical

treatment. They "risk immediate arrest or deportation if they dare to return
"[192] Foreign criticism of this political imprisonment, the authors state, is
condemned by Beijing as "imperialist meddling" or "anti-China
conspiracy." [194] Many Chinese know this is rubbish. A kite-maker said to
Ian Johnson, " No one can talk about these things But a lot of people know."
[290] ENDIT