Book Reviews

A New Diary of a Madman

The Crazed
By Ha Jin
Pantheon. 323pp. $24
Review by Wu Ningkun

Ha Jin, whose first novel, *Waiting*, won the 2000 National Book Prize, published another novel, *The Crazed*, last year. As with other short stories and novels by Ha Jin, *The Crazed* is rooted in the social fabric of contemporary China, and permeated with deep feelings of concern for his homeland and its people.

The story of *The Crazed* takes place at the provincial Shanning University on the Yellow River. In the spring of 1989, Professor Yang, director of the M.A. program in the Department of Chinese Literature, is hospitalized with a severe stroke. The department's party secretary, Peng Ying, assigns Wan Jian, one of Yang's graduate students, to look after the professor in his sickroom during the afternoons.

Professor Yang is an accomplished scholar of comparative literature as well as classical Chinese poetry. Wan, his star pupil and his daughter Meimei's fiancée, is studying for the Ph.D. entrance exams for the classical literature program at Beijing University under Yang's guidance. If Wan fulfills his dream of earning a doctorate from the great university, he can one day rise above politics and mundane pursuits to enjoy the life of an eminent literary scholar in the capital city, and build a home there with Meimei, who is already in Beijing cramming for exams for a medical graduate program. That is just what Professor Yang has been looking forward to.

The professor's stroke is quite unusual. Although diagnosed with cerebral thrombosis, Yang has not suffered loss of speech. On the contrary, not only is he still articulate, but he is at times peculiarly voluble. He is no longer his usual self, a refined and cultivated scholar, but given to violent outbursts of gibberish. "Sometimes he blabbers like an imbecile, and sometimes he speaks like a sage," Wan observes. Yang might recite passages from the *Divine Comedy* or Du Fu's poem "Song of My Straw Hut Shattered by the Autumn Wind" one minute, and at the next bellow nursery rhymes or Cultural Revolutionary anthems. Off and on he raves about the inhuman abuses he suffered at the hands of the crazed Red Guards, the flagrant bullying by his treacherous bosses, or the agonizing sorrows of his private life.

In the throes of his illness Professor Yang reveals that he has come to detest himself for his aspirations to the "plain living and high thinking" of a spiritual aristocrat. In reality, he declares, "All people in the humanities are clerks and all people in the sciences are technicians," all chattel of the state. He has suddenly seen the light: "As a scholar, you are just a piece of meat on a chopping board, whereas others are cleavers and axes that can hack you at will." He keeps crying that he will no longer be meat on the chopping board, but will fight for freedom and to save his soul. He urges his star pupil to go out and grow millet rather than wasting his life in so-called literary studies and using his pen to serve the bureaucracy.

Day in and day out, witnessing his mentor's body and soul suffering "in between hell and purgatory," Wan Jian is deeply grieved at Yang's recognition of the futility of his "clerical life," but at the same time is deeply touched by his despaired awakening.

The "crazed" Professor Yang ultimately clamors for an end to his meaningless existence, to be done with the endless worry and misery of everyday life, done with the nightmares in broad daylight. He imagines himself in a padded cell without doors or windows. "Confined in such a cell with rubber floor and rubber-covered walls, he faces the insurmountable difficulty of how to end his life," Wan observes of Yang's last days, as the dying professor moans, "Oh, how can I get out of this suffocating room, this indestructible cocoon, this absolute coffin? How can I liberate my soul? I don't want to die like a worm."

This suffocating room is the same as the house that Lu Xun depicted in his introduction to the first collection of his short stories, *The Outcry*, published 80 years ago: "An iron house, windowless and indestructible, in which many people are sound asleep and will be stifled to death before long." Thus, with his stories, Lu Xun raised an outcry in the desperate hope of "rousing the more or less clear-headed few among them."

Likewise the professor's outcry roused his favorite pupil:

> He' d better leave this iron house soon so that he won't end up a mere scribe here. In our country no scholars can live a different life. We' re all automatons without a soul.

As the patient's condition deteriorates rapidly, the department's party secretary and her cohorts come to Yang's bedside and heartlessly harass him with impudent demands to serve their shameless private schemes. Their blackmail and cajoling only succeed in hastening Yang's impending death. The professor's death quickens his pupil's own awakening. Wan Jian himself feels felt like an insect snarled in a spider web. "The harder I struggled, the tighter the strong, entwining filaments would enfold me, choking the life out of me little by little."

Now the image of the dark, rubber-surfaced room described by his professor comes to his mind. He, too, feels trapped, but he hasn't yet despaired of escape. In order not to fall into the trap that ruined his mentor's life, Wan Jian decides to abandon the Ph.D. entrance exams and seek a new future. As a result, his fiancée breaks up with him and immediately throws herself into the arms of another young man, which is just what the department bosses had worked toward all along. With nothing left to hold him back, Wan Jian embarks on a new journey:

> I wanted to puncture a hole in this indestructible cocoon that caged me; somehow I felt that the right place to plunge a knife in was Beijing-the sick heart of this country. I was crazed and possessed by an intense desire to prove that I was a man capable of action and choice.

While Professor Yang lay ill in the hospital, college students in Beijing had begun taking to the streets in a pro-democracy movement, which rapidly swept across the country. The students at Shanning University had responded warmly, but Wan Jian, absorbed in literary studies and his love affair, had never bothered himself with political activities. With the daily care of his

mentor added to his agenda, he had taken no part in the student demonstrations of his university. Now his new awakening impels him to join other students on a train to Beijing to support the demonstrators there. They arrive at Tiananmen Square late in the evening on June 3, and a baptism of blood in the early hours of June 4 awakens Wan Jian to a new understanding of his country:

> I saw China in the form of an old hag so decrepit and brainsick that she would devour her children to sustain herself. Insatiable, she had eaten many tender lives before, was gobbling new flesh and blood now, and would surely swallow more.

The image harks back to that of China as a cannibal in the mind of the madman in Lu Xun's first short story, *Diary of a Madman*:

> I take a look at history: it is not a record of time but on each page are confusedly written the characters "benevolence, righteousness and morality." Desperately unsleeping, I carefully look over it again and again for half the night, and at last find between the lines that it is full of the same word - “cannibalism"!

Facing imminent arrest for his support of the protesters in Beijing on his return to the university, Wan Jian resolves to fly far and high, seeking a new heaven and a new earth.

The course of suffering, disillusion and awakening of Professor Yang and his pupil is by no means an isolated case, but a portrayal of the fate of two generations of intellectuals in Communist China. And Professor Yang's deterioration into a "crazed" state is no accident either, but an explosion resulting from years of mental and emotional repression. This tragedy is also an epitome of the age. In an abnormal and sick society where evil runs rampant, madness of all sorts naturally erupts. With the madness of the Cultural Revolution still fresh in human memory, another horrendous explosion of madness at Tiananmen Square shocked the whole world.

Ha Jin's new novel *The Crazed* is nothing less than a *Diary of a Madman* for a new age, a resounding cry to rouse the deaf and awaken the unhearing.

A Silent Revolution

Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power
By David Aikman
Regnery Publishing, 2003
Review by Stacy Mosher

"In the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful." David Aikman quotes an anonymous scholar from Beijing's Chinese Academy of Social Sciences saying this while addressing a group of visiting American Christian clergy in 2002. The remark illustrates the increasingly complex relationship between Christianity and Chinese mainstream culture as China gradually seeks alternatives to Marxism that could facilitate social and economic progress, but with the risk of challenge to the existing power structure.

Aikman presents archaelogical evidence suggesting that Christianity made inroads into various levels of Chinese society as far back as the year 635. But China's current ideological vacuum may finally present just the opportunity for Christianity to become a dominant force in China, Aikman suggests, quoting underground house church patriarch Allen Yuan Xiangchen, "We have a saying in Beijing. If you dare to preach, people will believe. In Hong Kong and Taiwan they have everything, but here they have nothing. It is just like the Apostles' time."

A former Beijing bureau chief for *Time* magazine, Aikman has been following Christianity in China since the 1970s, and in spite of (or maybe because of) his clear sympathies, *Jesus in Beijing* provides an invaluable portrait of the historical and social contexts of Christianity in China today. Aikman has personally interviewed the key players in China's modern Christian movement, and has even played a role in events such as publication of the United Appeal of the Various Branches of the Chinese House Church in 1998.

The book includes profiles of Christian leaders, both Catholic and Protestant, and movingly relates the oppression and indignity they have suffered for their faith. At the same time, Aikman offers a balanced depiction of the officially sanctioned "patriotic church," (both Catholic and Protestant) which sometimes suffers from the image of a government lapdog in comparison to the plucky underground churches. In Aikman's portrait, the official churches likewise meet a deep-seated spiritual need among the Chinese, and his profile of Bishop Ding Guangxun (also known as K.H. Ting) illustrates the intellectual and spiritual struggle of a man trying to serve the spiritual welfare of the people of China under conflicting pressures from diverse sources.

If anyone comes across as an unmitigated villain, it is Ye Xiaowen, the Director General of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, which reports to the Communist Party's United Front Work Department on how religion is administered and controlled. Described by Aikman as reminiscent of a "recently crowned regional tire salesman" or a "precinct lieutenant in *The Sopranos*," and by an unnamed U.S. government official as "the biggest thug of all," Ye tells foreign audiences that Chinese Christianity has become "a religion that eulogizes love and traditional culture." But as Aikman depicts him, he is a militant atheist vigorously opposed to the expansion of Christianity, and overseer of the cruel oppression of Christians who reject official limitations on religious expression.

Some local officials, however, disregard the official controls on religion, and display a surprising degree of tolerance even for underground house churches. In many localities Christianity is associated with a law-abiding, prosperous populace that local officials feel inclined to welcome rather than discourage. Aikman visits unofficial seminaries and churches that operated unmolested, although with a prudent degree of discretion. Chinese Christians, including those in house churches, have actually found themselves working together with the authorities in dealing with Eastern Lightning, a cult whose members have kidnapped and tortured Christians in an apparent attempt to infiltrate and destroy various Christian communities. In spite of this cooperation, Eastern Lightning seems to have successfully evaded any effective official action up to the present.

Also of considerable interest is Aikman's descriptions of "cultural

Christians," members of the intelligencia who have embraced Christianity in varying degrees. It is these people who are in a position to make Christianity part of an influential cultural mainstream, and thereby move China into what Aikman refers to as a "Christian view of the world" that could have profound implications for China's foreign relations. In particular, Aikman anticipates, such a worldview would generally hold an "Augustinian sense of international responsibility," and more specifically might well be sympathetic to Israel in Middle East issues and pose an important challenge to the Muslim world.

At the same time, Aikman allows for the possibility of history repeating itself through a backlash in China against all aspects of Westernization, including Christianity. And he sees Chinese Christians maintaining a "patriotic and cautious" attitude toward political reform. Even among the oppressed house churches there is a desire for religious and political freedom to come to China through an "evolutionary, reformist process, not through political violence against the authorities."

Not surprisingly for a book published by the right-wing Regnery Publishing house, Aikman appeals to particular political interests in his analysis of the possible political implications of Christianity in China, in particular regarding Middle East affairs. But the real value of Aikman's book is in showing that whatever the potential political utility of Chinese Christians, their courage and strength in the face of oppression is admirable and worth defending by all persons of whatever religious or political persuasion who believe in basic human rights.

The Great Firewall Does Not Crumble So Easily

Books reviewed in this essay:
China and the Internet: Politics of the Digital Leap Forward
Christopher Hughes and Gudrun Wacker (eds.)
London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003

Chinese Media, Global Context
Chin-Chuan Lee (ed.)
London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003
Review by Ronald J. Deibert

For those who study and are interested in the relationship between new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and global politics, security and development, the case of China looms large. Like many countries around the world, China has aggressively adopted a strategy of promoting ICTs as a keystone to development. Over the last decade, it has made remarkable strides in laying the foundations for a vast ICT infrastructure, although most of it has understandably been concentrated in urban areas up to now. Entire cities, Shanghai for example, have been transformed by ICT developments, and Internet use in China has exploded, with most urban centers having hundreds of Internet cafes. A good portion of this development has been connected to the steady increase in foreign direct investment that China has experienced. China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) guarantees the continuation of this investment, which in turn will almost certainly accelerate the need for and continuing investment in ICTs.

What will be the implications for China of all of this rapid expansion of new ICTs? That is a question that goes far beyond China itself. For many years, new ICTs have carried with them a mythical association with freedom and democracy. Many see new ICTs, and particularly the Internet, as carrying with them an intrinsic bias in favor of freedom of speech and communication. Once connected to the Internet, so the story has traditionally gone, individuals will have a greater opportunity to express themselves, to access information and to sidestep controls put in place by cumbersome state bureaucracies. Hundreds of television and radio broadcasts, beamed by satellites and encouraged by liberal competition in media, will further increase communication choices. From this perspective, new ICTs invariably favor democracy and freedom of speech while simultaneously disadvantaging authoritarian forms of rule, such as China's.

If there is one theme that unites the contributions to the two collected volumes under review, it is a serious questioning of those mythic associations of new ICTs. With different nuances, the various chapters present strong evidence that the relationship between ICTs and democracy is much more complex than the myths suggest. At the very least, ICTs are not inherently democratic, but neither are they neutral. As ICTs penetrate Chinese society they are indeed having massive consequences, but consequences that go well beyond any simple correlation with freedom of speech and communication. They are indeed challenging the one-party Chinese state and its traditional tools of ideological and political controls, but it's a challenge that is being taken up aggressively by Chinese authorities. In some respects, new ICTs are actually enabling a new form of surveillance and control to emerge in China. While the research presented here provides no clear insight into the long-run implications of new media and ICTs for China, they do present a compelling case that these technologies will matter a great deal. And they go a significant way towards laying a serious analytical framework through which future research on technology and Chinese politics can proceed.

China and the Internet: Politics of the Digital Leap Forward is a fine collection of research focusing on what is arguably the most important ICT in relation to Chinese security and development - the Internet. Serious social science research on the Internet is hampered by the fast-moving target that is the focus of the analysis, and with respect to China the target is moving at light speed indeed, with an explosive growth in both connectivity and accompanying state controls. Each day, it seems, brings some new wrinkle to the Chinese Internet story. And yet the chapters included in this volume tackle the issues commendably without falling victim to fast-moving current events that overtake whatever conclusions might be drawn from them. Following a clearly laid-out introductory chapter by editors Christopher Hughes and Gudrun Wacker, the volume's contributors each tackle a unique piece of the Internet puzzle in China. Among the standouts are Junhua Zhang's chapter examining the bureaucratic turf wars within China that have been set off by the high stakes surrounding the Internet and its associated markets, and Christopher Hughes' chapter on the national security challenges facing China and its development of information warfare practices.

One of the strongest chapters in this volume is Gudron Wacker's "The Internet

and Censorship in China." Drawing from the constitutional scholar Lawrence Lessig, Wacker points out the many different components of China's censorship strategies, from technical to normative, that work to reign in the liberalizing, democratizing potential of the Internet. Wacker also spends some time examining the subterranean struggles in which human rights and other activists are engaged, including developing technologies to allow Chinese citizens to circumvent those controls and filters - with varying degrees of success. Certainly it is unrealistic to assume that the Internet will undermine Chinese content controls as a matter of course; it may even be unrealistic to assume that it will do so with the concerted efforts of hundreds of hacktivists backed by private corporations and the United States government. The Great Firewall of China does not crumble so easily.

Chinese Media, Global Contexts (edited by Chin-Chuan Lee) is much broader in scope, both theoretically and empirically, than *China and the Internet*. Although there is one chapter in *China and the Internet* that draws significantly from the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, *Chinese Media, Global Context* is replete with theoretical references to a wide range of political economists and philosophers, from Foucault to Gramsci to Chomsky and beyond. Consequently, the chapters have a much different feel and focus than those in *China and the Internet*, with greater attention paid to the cultural and discursive implications of ICTs. For examples, there are chapters dealing with the clashing press discourses surrounding China's entry into the WTO (Yuezhi Zhao), and symbolic representations of the significance of China hosting the 2008 Olympic Games (Judy Polumbaum). Additionally, several contributors to the volume make a point of engaging in a comparative analysis of the different signs, symbols and discourses that frame interpretations of the U.S.-China relationship from within each country's mainstream media. The chapters put forward rich analyses of the way in which China's public sphere is undergoing transformation as a consequence of the changing media landscape, from films to television to the Internet. Indeed, by taking on its subject with a deeper theoretical perspective and wider empirical scope, *Chinese Media, Global Context* provides a nice complement to *China and the Internet.*

It is now safe to say that social science analyses of ICTs are reaching a point of maturation, moving beyond hypothetical and at times unrestrained prognostications to much more rigorous and refined scholarship. The contributions to both of these volumes are evidence of this maturation. Although China stands at the center of both books, the topics dealt with should be of interest to all media and communication scholars.

Candid Comrade

I Spoke the Truth to the Prime Minister (*Wo xiang zongli shuo shihua*)
By Li Changping
Guangming Daily Publishing House, Beijing, 2001
Review by Tom Kellogg

Most of the commentators on Li Changping's *I Spoke the Truth to the Prime Minister* have focused on the devastating picture that he paints of the plight of China's peasantry. Poor beyond the imaginings of most urban-dwellers, forced to bear an ever-greater tax burden and often unable to afford such basics as school fees and medical care, China's peasants are in desperate need of help. Li's book gives an amazingly detailed account of the struggles of China's rural underclass, and goes a long way toward explaining why many endure so much hardship, discrimination and abuse in order to migrate to China's cities in search of work; the backbreaking labor in the factories of the southern coast is still preferable to what the village has to offer.

Faced with the impossible task of actually earning money off the land as the tax burden grows, China's peasantry is fleeing the countryside in droves. Li tells of back roads clogged with trucks packed beyond capacity with men sick of fighting a losing battle with the government over the long list of fees, levies and taxes that peasants are expected to pay. Although many of them have never left their home village before, and virtually none of them has a job awaiting him in the city, still they leave, some of them cursing the local bureaucracy as they go. One young migrant, responding to Li's queries about his future plans, says simply, "You officials all have black hearts; if we don't leave, we won't be able to make a living."

As Li points out, this mass exodus creates problems for the local government: with the peasants gone, who's going to tend the land, and more importantly, who will pay the taxes and fees necessary to keep the bloated and often debt-ridden local government afloat? In Qipan, where Li himself worked, the local government grew from 15 cadres in 1986 to more than 2,000 just fifteen years later, including teachers and local cadres working outside of Qipan. During roughly the same period, between 1992 and 2000, taxes on one *mu* (roughly one acre) of farmland in Qipan rose from from 30 *yuan* to over 200, and the township's books were still woefully in the red.

But *I Spoke the Truth* is more than an account of the hardships of the rural masses - as the title suggests, the book also provides a fascinating and rare account of the day-to-day workings of the local-level Chinese bureaucracy. An economist by training, Li Changping worked in China's rural administration for nearly two decades. He was serving as a township-level party secretary when the misery and poverty he witnessed in rural Hubei led him to write a four-page letter to Prime Minister Zhu Rongji on March 2, 2000.

Li interweaves his story of China's peasantry with a glimpse of the various meetings, files and papers that take up the life of the low-level Chinese bureaucrat. Once Li writes his extraordinary letter to Premier Zhu, we gain an insight into the vicious infighting and extreme pettiness of the local bureaucracy, which, rather than dealing with the issues that Li has raised, fights to get Li out. Straightforward in tone and mercifully almost jargon-free, Li's four-page letter succinctly lays out problems such as massive peasant flight, a ballooning public payroll, corruption, and a whitewashing of all of these problems by local officials in their reporting to the center. He also offers some concrete solutions, including increasing peasant incomes by lowering central government taxes and local government levies, allowing peasants to create their own interest-group organizations that could stand up to local govern-

ments, and finding ways for the central government to become better informed on local conditions.

Recognizing that lack of good governance and honest reporting are central to the problem of rural poverty and decline, Li also urged Premier Zhu to write a letter to the entire bureaucracy calling on officials to "seek truth from facts" and to stop filing reports filled with self-interested exaggerations and half-truths. By voicing such direct criticism of the bureaucracy of which he was a part, Li was making an implicit call for the broader values of transparency, openness and accountability, values which, despite the changes of the reform era, are still largely lacking at both the local and national levels.

One suspects that Zhu and his crowd learned nothing particularly new from Li's letter, but may have seen it as an opportunity to push the rest of the government to deal with rural reform. Because the letter was written by a local official rather than a central government expert, and because it was written as an urgent appeal rather than an academic report, the letter was less likely to be swallowed up and forgotten by the Beijing bureaucracy. Li's letter presented a compelling and familiar story, that of the competent local official attempting to warn his superiors in Beijing of impending disaster, and it stirred the government to take action.

The central government responded as governments do: they sent a team from the provincial government to investigate. Li's comrades in the local government likewise responded in character: they tried to kill the messenger. After the provincial investigation team left Qipan, the local government formed its own investigation group with a slightly different goal in mind. "I realized that the goal of the [local] investigation team was not to look into the problems that my letter raised, or to come up with ways to research solutions to the series of problems I had raised," Li writes. "Rather, their goal was to find ways to deny what I had written."

With the glare of publicity fading and Beijing's attention focused elsewhere, the local government managed to get what it wanted: although the official investigation largely confirmed Li's analysis, Li was nonetheless forced out. Roughly six months after he sent his letter, Li followed in the footsteps of Hubei's peasants and migrated to the coast to take a job in Shenzhen. Soon after that he moved to Beijing to continue his work on behalf of China's rural population, not as a government official, but as a journalist and researcher on local governance.

One of the strengths of Li's book beyond its candid discussion of a rural China in crisis is its description of relations between the center and the periphery. Although he is less critical of Beijing than of the local government in Qipan, he still offers much insight into what Beijing is doing wrong. He is critical of Beijing's top-down approach to rural policy, urging the central government to draw its approach "from the masses, and deliver it down to the masses." Beijing is only intermittently attentive, paying attention when crises arise in a particular area, but then losing interest once the moment of danger passes.

Li's book has been hailed as a clarion call, and he has been honored as a Person of the Year by the newsweekly *Southern Weekend* for his efforts on behalf of China's rural poor. Although pushed out of his job in Qipan, he has nevertheless become a leading voice on the problems of China's peasants, and it it is likely that he will have an even greater influence outside government than he did as a local party secretary.

Li's success points to important changes in China - more openness, greater freedom of speech, a greater willingness of the government to allow its policy to be influenced by outside experts - even as it serves as a warning to cadres across China. Few government officials who risk speaking out critically against local abuse, corruption and waste will have a ticket to the coast awaiting them. That may be why, in the near term, most Chinese officials are likely to remain silent, and leave their candid letters to Beijing unmailed.

The Importance of Being Stubborn

Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing
By Ian Buruma
Weidenfeld and Nicholson, £20; Random House $27.95
Review by Salil Tripathi

China's past has not been kind to its people. Regimes have claimed mandates from heaven, not from people, and mass upheavals are typical when regimes change. The incumbent Communist Party has argued that without authoritarian rule China would descend into chaos and instability. Many Chinese, and many Western experts on China, nod vigorously. Chinese students are taught early that their ancient unity must never be threatened by bad elements fomenting chaos. Western-style democracy could disintegrate China – just look at what happened to poor Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union!

This unidimensional view, of course, is ahistorical. As Ian Buruma notes in his book, *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing*, it ignores "thousands of years of disorder." Yet questioning the Party's wisdom is deemed antinational. Fearing a break-up of China, apologists argue that China is not ready for democracy. It is possible that a regime change in China will not be peaceful. But the stability is illusory; when it falls apart, as it must, the result could be much worse.

Instead of nurturing dissenting voices who could provide leadership to a pluralistic China in the future, Beijing prefers to snuff them out. That's not surprising; what is surprising is the tenacity with which such rebels continue to sprout from that fertile soil like bamboo shoots after the year's first rain. The State responds brutally, uprooting them; they emerge again, each season growing taller.

In this inspiring study of human spirit, Mr. Buruma brings his exceptional gifts of observation, perspicacity and analysis to create a haunting, tragic portrait of the Chinese who think differently, who defy authority; who go to the Democracy Wall and compare Deng with Mao and spend 18 years in jail; who refuse to bend even after years of solitary confinement in the most inhumane conditions; who use the Internet to send subversive e-mail to hundreds of thousands of users across China and beyond, creating the freest Chinese society, alas only in cyberspace; who stand before the tank at Tiananmen Square and plead with the soldiers to withdraw.

So far, the regime has responded in character. The repression continues, the tanks have rained bullets on the unarmed, and whenever a Western leader is about to

visit China, one or two of the rebels are released, ostensibly to get medical treatment overseas, never to return. A stubborn few manage to get past immigration officials and return to continue their heroic battle against the Chinese State. Pitilessly, the State hunts them down and returns them to their distant exile, where in Western laboratories and universities they dream of a free China while rendered largely unable to contribute to it.

Freedom is gained, but influence is lost. As Mr. Buruma cogently describes it: "If they remain in China, the absence of freedom forces writers and scientists to lie, and once they lie, their work is worthless. If they choose silence, there is no work at all. Or they risk the silence of prison." Exile, however, makes them irrelevant. "Now I am finally free to talk, but there is no one for me to talk to," Li Shuxian says poignantly.

By expelling bad elements, Beijing has undermined their effectiveness. The dissidents, for their part, have failed to unite against this tactic. They question each other's *zige*, or qualifications, heap abuse on one another ("spies," "sexual perverts" and "thieves" are some of the milder epithets), and behave boorishly. They are unpleasant and difficult. But if they were "reasonable" men and women, they would have been obedient *apparatniks* getting rich in Shenzhen or Suzhou. It is precisely because they are stubborn that they are able to live by their ideals and remain perpetual thorns in the flesh of Chinese officialdom. However unpleasant they might be, "they deserve respect," Mr. Buruma writes, "not just because of their suffering, but because they chose to face the consequences of speaking out in circumstances that are hard for us even to imagine." We must remember that people like Wei Jingsheng have had the courage to opt for prison or torture rather than submitting themselves to daily indignities and the life of lies millions of Chinese are forced to lead. "I know that many of these people were flawed, wrongheaded, and perhaps intolerant in their own ways, but I admired their sheer cussedness," Mr. Buruma says.

When the stories of these dissidents are recounted individually, they appear to be just that: individual acts of heroism, like that student facing the tank at Tiananmen. It is by accumulating the experiences of dozens of individuals that Mr. Buruma succeeds in showing us the harrowing reality of it all: the whole is greater, and worse, than the sum of the parts. What of the thousands whose stories we will never know? If these are the tips of an iceberg, then China is the Titanic.

And if dissidents are tips of icebergs, Beijing-bound businessmen are ostriches, burying their heads in sand and becoming inviting targets for corruption, intimidation and abduction. Yet such is the presumed importance of China as an investment destination – some 80 percent of investments earmarked for emerging markets end up in China – that most Western political leaders turn a blind eye to the abuses of the regime. No matter that few companies active in China have made profits; no matter that few businessmen in China can say that their time and money are well-spent in the piracy capital of the world. In John Lanchester's novel, *Fragrant Harbor* (Faber, London, £16.99) we come face to face with the corrupt underbelly of Chinese capitalism as experienced by one of the narrators, Matthew Ho. Yet we are asked to accept the assertion that integration with the world economy will inevitably make China more democratic. Mr. Buruma's book is a landmark precisely because it refutes that assertion; it makes us realize that there's nothing in China's record to demonstrate that a market-driven China will be a fairer China.

Mr. Buruma comes to the center from the periphery. He begins his journey in the West, meeting the Tiananmen alumni, some of whom have moved on to become venture capitalists and investment bankers, before moving on to Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, and then finally entering mainland China itself. The journeys through China's "near abroad" – Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore – add genuine value to the book. The chapter on Taiwan demonstrates that it is possible for a real democracy to take root on "Chinese" soil. Likewise, in an astute portrait of Singapore, Mr. Buruma says: "Singapore can feel like a boarding school run by a terrifying headmaster, who is constantly drawing up arbitrary rules while warning of the dire consequences of infringement. You never know when, or even why, you might be punished." It is the kind of society China would like to be, as *New York Times* correspondents Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryll WuDunn argued in their book, *China Wakes*. But replicating Singapore in China is impossible: Singapore itself tried to do so in Suzhou, and got shanghaied.

In Hong Kong, Mr. Buruma meets not only Martin Lee and Emily Lau, but also businessmen who parrot the Beijing mantra that China is not ready for democracy. Earlier in the book Mr. Buruma has revealed moving instances of ordinary Chinese – taxi drivers and hawker stall attendants – who sneak up to a known dissident and salute him, offering him money, a pat, some encouragement.

During my eight years as a reporter in East Asia, I remember several heads of investment banks in Hong Kong telling me that dissidents had "lost the plot" by being so stubborn about freedom. Mr. Buruma is too elegant a writer to put it crudely, but the issue must be raised: why is the dissident accused of being stubborn, not the State? What makes the government's stubbornness acceptable, and what makes Western governments kowtow to the little emperors of the Middle Kingdom? It is the promise of 1.2 billion consumers, which brings fortune seekers, like Dawn Stone in John Lanchester's novel, to China.

But as Chris Patten demonstrated during his brief tenure as Hong Kong's last Viceroy, if China glares at you, it is possible to stare back and to treat China as a normal country. By interpreting China as it is, by looking at it through the eyes of dissidents who show us what it could be, Mr. Buruma reveals that China can indeed be a normal country, if only the rest of us learn to treat it as such.