

The Washington Post
March 8, 2015

Book Review

“The Barefoot Lawyer” ‘A Blind Man’s Fight for Justice and Freedom in China,
by Chen Guangcheng, Henry Holt, \$30, 330 pp.

A lone voice for rights, at war with China

by David E. Hoffman

A sign was posted outside a jail cell in Yinan County, China, in 2006. Inside the cell, Chen Guangcheng could not read the sign because he was blind, but another inmate told him it was a list of prison regulations, printed on a poster. Peering through a small window in the cell door, the other prisoner read the rules aloud: “According to the Official Detention Center Regulations, the following types of people may not be detained: (1) Blind people; (2) Pregnant women.”

Absurd but very real, this brief moment goes to the heart of Chen’s riveting new memoir about his experience fighting for human rights in China. What Chen wants is nothing more than for China to obey its own rules and laws, not only for himself but for others who suffer injustice and brutality. The price for demanding that China do this is an unending series of beatings, house arrests and imprisonment. Over and over again, Chen finds that authorities in China don’t respect their own laws. What matters more is the arbitrary rule of the party and the thousands of people who carry out its wishes. In a very powerful way, he indicts the Chinese system not for its historical blunders or its socialist ideology, but rather for a very practical thing: not following its own rules.

In “The Barefoot Lawyer,” Chen faces off against people in power, from town bureaucrats to school administrators to party pooh-bahs, who are enraged by his rigid insistence that the law is the law. One particularly nasty party official, Zhang Jian, repeatedly led squads of goons into Chen’s home for ransacking searches and beatings in 2011, while Chen was under house arrest. When Zhang stormed in one day to demand that Chen surrender a cellphone that he used to contact friends outside, Chen asked him how this action could be legally justifiable.

“We don’t care about the law — we can do whatever we want,” Zhang said. “What are you going to do about it?” Zhang brutally assaulted Chen’s wife, leaving her “twitching uncontrollably on the ground, crying out weakly,” with a fractured bone above her eye socket and fractured ribs, lying in the dirt of their yard. Zhang walked over and kicked her again. “This wasn’t our idea — the orders came from way up,” he said.

Chen was granted asylum in the United States in 2012, after escaping from house arrest in his village and making his way to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. In his memoir he tells the vivid story of his struggle and why he fled. One might have expected to read such harrowing accounts of brutality in a book about the Cultural Revolution; what's important about this story is that it is all so recent.

China's leaders project an image of stability and great accomplishment, and the nation has, without doubt, become an economic superpower. But it is remarkable how Chen's lone voice was able to shake the state to its foundations. At one point, Chen and his family were held virtually hostage in their home by dozens of guards who monitored them 24 hours a day, set up surveillance cameras and phone-jamming equipment around the village, hired young peasant boys to stand watch, erected security lights along the walls of the family compound, blocked off his windows with metal sheeting, cut off power to the house and then physically invaded it. Chen was refused permission to see a dying brother or visit his grave. The authorities tried to intimidate a blind man who could not even see whether a guard who entered his home was wearing a uniform. "What we're doing is pushing you against a wall," one of them told Chen. "We want you and your whole family to be miserable, to have no way to go forward, no way to live, no way to go on. That's what we're doing."

Born in 1971, the youngest of five sons in a family that had lived for generations in Dongshigu village in Shandong province, Chen became ill when he was only 5 months old, and blindness set in. He offers a poignant yet inspiring account of growing up sightless in the Chinese countryside. His disability sharpened his senses of hearing and touch. He built kites, climbed trees, captured birds and swam in the river. As a teenager at an out-of-town school for the blind, Chen knew that China's Protection Law provides free city bus travel for the blind. One day, he was shocked to be forced to pay to ride the bus. Thus began a long series of struggles against lawless and arbitrary decisions by the authorities. Chen worked on behalf of villagers, workers, the disabled and, most momentously, victims of China's violent enforcement of its one-child policy. He did all this as a "barefoot lawyer," one who performs much like a formal lawyer — collecting evidence, preparing briefs, writing up findings — but without the official license. The state "has never supported barefoot lawyers; in fact, it actively persecutes them," he writes. He, too, was persecuted and served years in jail and under house arrest.

As his situation grew more tense, Chen made contact with other Chinese, and foreigners, who championed his cause. The work of outsiders — including dispatches by Washington Post correspondent Philip Pan, who later profiled Chen in his 2008 book, "Out of Mao's Shadow" — made a critical difference in his fate, he says. Chen used cellphones hidden from his guards to make videos and send text messages. A movement sprang up in which people posted photos online wearing dark sunglasses, like those of Chen. "The power of such simple yet effective gestures, which the party had no way of suppressing, cannot be overestimated," he writes.

Chen has lived most of his life in darkness but here casts a beacon of light into the shadows.

David E. Hoffman is a contributing editor to The Washington Post.

Copyright©2015 The Washington Post.