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Review of *Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China* (New York: Pantheon, 2004) ix + 324 pp.

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The willingness of ordinary Chinese to take extraordinary risks to challenge their state is widely known. Just what kind of people they are, and what wellsprings of personality and events drive them to do so, is harder to fathom. Ian Johnson's *Wild Grass* provides three fascinating cases that illuminate the question. Moreover, it implicitly points to the power of law not just to shape protest, but to bring it about in the first place. It's also a great read.

His first protagonist is Ma Wenlin, the "peasant champion". A pretty ordinary 1962 Xi'an university graduate who worked quietly in local government for decades, in the early 1990s he taught himself the law and became a "legal worker", concentrating mainly on contract and civil cases. In 1997, during a visit to his ancestral home, local farmers, inspired by a successful case nearby, prevailed on him to file a class-action suit against their township government for excessive levies. He demurred, but the farmers pressured him backhandedly by starting rumors that he was bribed by local officials to stay out of the matter. Rather than turning against them, he felt he had to clear his good name. He took the case. The failure of his legal filing, combined with his stubborn personality, his moral sensibility, and the inoculation against authority provided by the Cultural Revolution, emboldened him to participate in a political fight for his beleaguered clients. He helped the farmers organize local demonstrations, all citing the law, and eventually found his way the Petition and Appeals Office of the State Council in Beijing. There Ma was detained, beaten, and eventually tried and sentenced to five years in a labor camp.

Johnson's second story centers on property development in Beijing – the destruction of *hutongs*, the profiteering and corruption that feed on it, and the efforts of ordinary Beijingers to fight, first for their homes and then for their city and against the abuses ruining it. We meet a range of protagonists. Messrs. Luo and Feng failed in their legal efforts to save their own homes or get proper compensation for them, and ended up banding together to organize a class-action lawsuit. Fang Ke is a Qinghua graduate student whose love of old Beijing impelled him to produce an encyclopedic underground book documenting the "development". Lawyer Wu represents Old Zhao, whose house is slated for demolition. The story is less dramatic than the other two: no one is incarcerated or knocked around. Repeatedly defeated, the advocates for historic Beijing nonetheless soldier on.

The final and by far the most compelling narrative concerns the Falungong, Johnson's *Wall Street Journal* accounts of which won him the Pulitzer Prize. He provides a textured story of the development of the movement, its criticism by intellectuals, and the government's efforts first to cope with and then to suppress it. Threading through the account are the fifty-seven year old Chen Zixiu and her daughter Zhang Xueling. Chen was an ordinary Shandong woman who happened onto some practitioners early one morning in 1997 and joined up. Angered by the 1999 crackdown against what she experienced as a salubrious exercise program, she took political action for the first time in her life, journeying to Beijing to join fellow adherents in a protest in Tiananmen Square. She was arrested, sent home, put under surveillance, and warned off Falungong. *Au contraire*, the experience emboldened Grannie Chen, who set off again for Beijing. She was nabbed by the local gendarmes, and, after escaping and being rearrested, beaten to death. Ms. Zhang soon found herself embarked on an unsuccessful quest for the death certificate, like her mother before her undergoing her own unexpected politicization. Her persistent efforts landed her in jail for three years, which disabused her of any notion that legally-based efforts like hers could succeed in China for the foreseeable future. Her story ends with a line that sums up so many extraordinary struggles like hers: "China is still trustworthy, we're still waiting."

The rising use of law to canalize, legitimize and rhetoricize protest in China is widely known. *Wild Grass* documents that but also goes beyond it. Johnson's protagonists don't just use the law; they are seduced and politicized by it. In each case, ordinary citizens find themselves drawn into previously unthinkable political activism when they connect an everyday grievance with the prospect of legal channels for resolving it. Johnson shows us how the rise of law in China, precisely because of its tentativeness and incompleteness, actually helps mobilize protest.