

INTRODUCTION

Life Well Nurtured

Life is a process of unceasing genesis. The Chinese ancients considered that life is an evolutionary process of becoming, uninterrupted birth and more birth, continuous without cessation. The natural world is vast and unbounded, infinite and without horizon, always in the midst of limitless activity and change. The natural world's unceasing birthing and growing, producing and ripening is called "giving life to life" or "birthing birth." With regard to the myriad ["ten thousand," *wanwu* 万物] things, this is called "the power and virtue of life giving rise to more life." ... Among the myriad things of nature, humans are not only the product of the power and virtue of giving life to life, they also are most suited to embodying and making use of the power and virtue of giving life to life.

—Zhang Qicheng, "Life"

Life: the word escapes all attempts—scientific, philosophical, religious, linguistic—to pin it down in definitions or summaries. In a secular age, life is constantly invoked as the criterion of all value, the unquestioned positive term toward which the action of living beings orients itself, the matrix within which any orientation at all becomes possible. Under the banner of life, modern governments legislate everything from school milk programs to end-of-life technologies; in the name of the quality of life, disciplinary institutions control births, police the uses of urban space, regulate the purity of food and drugs, and fund (or not) our processes of dying.¹ But efforts to fix the meaning of life constantly fail. Neither the existentialist

argument that life takes on meaning through the human encounter with death nor the technical notions of “life itself” or “bare life” that have developed in bioscience and political theory can deliver a universally useful sense of what life is. People are not simply living organisms adapted to ecological niches; our strategies for getting by are not entirely explainable with biology or reducible to rational calculation. Everywhere we insist on the specificity, complexity, and quality of our lives. We humans are located in places, and we all have particular vantage points and blind spots; our living experience is inseparable from remembered and inscribed pasts, even as it is open to and promising uncertain futures. We are always engaged in “giving life to life” in a “myriad” of forms.²

The quote above, drawn from a review essay Zhang Qicheng wrote especially for this book, draws on and reaches out to a very diverse literature, but it is not a scholarly summary.³ Rather, it is a characterization of the way things are. The phrasing—relying much more on verbs than nouns in the original Chinese—insists on life as a process, an emergence both manifold in its diversity and rooted in a nature that is dynamic. Zhang’s definition emphasizes at the same time the generativity, constant change, and irreducible multiplicity of “the myriad things.” The very excessiveness of these words, with so many exuberant redundancies—life is both “uninterrupted” and “continuous,” the natural world is “vast,” “unbounded,” “limitless,” “without horizon” and “infinite” all in the same sentence—indexes a linguistic productivity and an authorial participation in “myriad” living processes. At the same time, it expresses both awe in the face of the vastness of life and a focused ethical commitment: “humans . . . are most suited to embodying and making use of [this] power and virtue.”⁴ If, however, humans are but one of these ten thousand things, or even if each human is only one of a myriad of always emergent objects, or things, there are new limits and possibilities to what we can hope to be and do. Chinese ways of nurturing life, the subject of this book, live within and explore these limits and possibilities, the power and virtue of life.

But we do not aim to understand “life itself.” It is difficult to

turn a scientific or scholarly gaze on life. No distance from living that would allow us to stand back and contemplate life as an object is available. John Dewey saw this when he spoke of efforts to study vision by abstracting “the eye itself”: “There is no such thing as ‘the eye’; there is only the seeing.”⁵ In this remark, Dewey rejects an anatomical tradition of analyzing “the human body” as an object, knowable as an object of contemplation. In a similar vein, Chinese medical writers and teachers,⁶ as they engage in the comparisons between “Chinese medicine” and “Western medicine” that global communication and health-care regulation seem to make necessary, argue that their tradition is a medicine of the living body, not the dissected corpse.⁷ As Michel Foucault argued in *The Birth of the Clinic*, it was the modern objectification of bodily space in the medical study of death that allowed biology to conceive of something as abstract and pure as “life itself.” But for our philosophical and anthropological purposes, one could paraphrase Dewey: There is no such thing as “life itself”; there is only the living.

“The Chinese ancients” invoked by Zhang Qicheng in this chapter’s epigraph saw their lives as nothing if not susceptible to active forming and crafting.⁸ A long tradition of self-cultivation (*zixiu* 自修), quite prominent in the earliest Daoist and Confucian works and much invoked in scholarly movements over the last two thousand years throughout Chinese and East Asian history, forms a historical setting for the contemporary emphasis on nurturing life that we consider here. In hoary analogies and ancient language that are often quoted in the twenty-first century, not least as proverbs or catch phrases, Mencius’s (fourth-century B.C.E.) insistence that the “first teacher,” Confucius, saw human nature as essentially benign still lives.⁹ His contemporary Xunzi’s stronger emphasis on the need for correct training to guarantee propriety and rectitude in flawed human beings is just as influential, and neo-Confucians such as Wang Yangming (1472–1529) more than a thousand years later further elaborated the natural relationship of human goodness and active cultivation. The whole Confucian tradition, so deeply embedded in everyday language, even today, maintained an expectation

that people will actively strive to attain the goodness proper to humans. (Very few Chinese philosophers held that humans could be good or responsible naturally, if “naturally” means by default.)

So, too, the many residents of contemporary Beijing of whom we will speak in this book actively seek to form and craft—to nurture (*yang* 养)—their lives.¹⁰ Many of them agree with Zhang Qicheng that humans, and perhaps especially modern or contemporary humans, are most suited to “nurturing life” (*yangsheng* 养生) in cultured, deliberate, and creative ways. Though few of them are theorists or philosophers, they tacitly presume that *yangsheng* activity participates in the natural power and virtue of giving life to life. We cannot delimit or objectify life, but we can generate it, feed it, train it, make it flourish.

This book explores the myriad forms of life, or, in ancient Chinese parlance, “the ten thousand things” that life is and is becoming, through an ethnographic and philosophical study of everyday life activism in contemporary Beijing. “Ten thousand things” is a term that, in modern Chinese, names everything and nothing, the sheer miscellany of manifest reality, just one thing after another, the overwhelming noise of the material world against which the signals of important matters can appear as discrete and meaningful. Ancient cosmogony had it that the Way (*dao* 道) gave rise to the two aspects, kinds, or forces of *yin* and *yang qi*, that the interaction of *yin* and *yang qi* generated space in the form of heaven and earth, and then time emerged in the form of the four seasons. From these even-numbered formations arose, just as spontaneously and without divine intention, the ten thousand things, the *wanwu*.¹¹ There is no great commitment to the quantity of ten thousand in this philosophy, of course; rather, “ten thousand” comes to mean “manifold,” “myriad,” “particular,” “manifest,” “emergent,” and even a bit “miscellaneous.” (Nowhere in Chinese cosmogony do we find the Great Chain of Being hierarchy prefigured in Genesis.)¹² Perhaps it is precisely because the ten thousand things were relatively unstructured at their mythic beginnings—certainly subject to a *yinyang* dynamic (generative oscillations of dark and light, warm and cool, senior and

junior, and so forth), but not neatly sorted into ontological kinds or essences and (mere) manifestations—that people with desires and intentions must be active in cultivating, crafting, and nurturing the forms of life that are good, for themselves, their families, their communities. Perhaps the myriad things *are* just one thing after another, all active in “giving life to life,” but none in their very nature more or less generative. Productivity, in a metaphysics of the Way and its manifestations, its *wanwu*, must be seized and made human, made good. This book, then, is a study of social and sociable craftwork, cultural practices that produce articulate forms of life in an environment of at least imaginable plenty: the myriad things are generative in ten thousand ways; we can “embody and make use of” this power and virtue.

Life nurturing in Beijing is instructive beyond China—this study of it is, therefore, both more and less than ethnography or history. We began this study with a common interest in urban ethnography, with the thought that in talking with those who nurtured their lives in the present, we might find embodiment especially well articulated, and with the hope that the historicity of Beijing’s urban life—including its connection to both ancient and recent sources of significance, from ancient metaphysics to Maoist values and terms, could be appreciated. Undertaking ethnographic research centering on participant observation in parks and a series of interviews with *yangsheng* enthusiasts, we found a great deal of common ground with our own “life” experience. Gentle exercise and simple eating, fresh air and regular habits, became topics that we—a Chinese and an American academic, neither of us a “native” of the city—joined in exploring with many who were more than willing to advise us on the nurturing of our own lives. In what these Beijingers said, we heard echoes of questions we had already developed as researchers;¹³ but as we worked, we were more engaged by everyday matters than by anthropological theory or living history. We all—*yangsheng* practitioners and researchers alike—naturalized, as it were, the contingencies of body and discourse. Everything began to look like obvious common sense.

Nevertheless, we have sustained a sense of urban Beijing's social and historical distinctiveness, and we devote much of this book to conveying a sense of the place and the time. Chinese people all over the world are turning up in urban parks to practice *taiji* and *qigong*, to jog and do calisthenics. But Beijing, and especially its old downtown neighborhoods, recommended itself to us as an especially good site for *yangsheng* research. We felt we knew the city well (though we discovered otherwise), and we had witnessed there a growing popular enthusiasm for “self-health” (*ziwo baojian* 自我保健) activities that everyone classified under the heading of *yangsheng*. The neighborhood in which we did most of our fieldwork included both large and small parks, around which much of the housing was low-rise, overcrowded, and occupied by retirees. These older residents had lived there for a long time, at the heart of several cultural revolutions, one of the most dramatic having been a radical turn toward global capitalist participation in the early 1990s. Their enthusiasm for a little-commodified, constitutively local, pleasurable way (Way?) of crafting lives impressed us as both responsive to historical experience and a way of making history, crafting an urban culture for a present and future Beijing.¹⁴ This study is not about China or Chinese people, exactly, though surely, Beijing urban life much resembles that of other Chinese cities and Chinatowns around the world. It is, rather, searching in one place for those specificities that can nuance our sense of the common ground we all must try to occupy.

To this end, though we eschew direct practical advice, we have found in sharing our drafts with colleagues that this study is more likely to be read for its insights on how to live than for its character as ethnography or history. We hope it can also propose—drawing on local resources both ancient and recent in Beijing—some productive terms for philosophical and historical thought not yet imagined by Anglophone social theory. Further, our reflections and those of the Beijingers we talked with might be a way to bring the taken-for-granted habitus—that of readers, that of *yangsheng* enthusiasts—into awareness in a way that encourages a better, but not necessarily Chinese craft of living. We hope that a book, too, can contribute to the nurturance of life.

Yangsheng and Ten Thousand Things

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a culture of nurturing life has become a widely recognized feature of Chinese public life and “local color.”¹⁵ Parks are full of exercisers and hobbyists who speak of their activities as life nurturance, and media outlets provide much advice on how most effectively and enjoyably to nurture life. *Yangsheng* discourses and practices are forms of modern self-help (or self-health), but the term itself is ancient. The nurturance of life is locally spoken of and globally recognized as peculiarly Chinese and particularly traditional.¹⁶ A recent study by François Jullien has reminded those who work in Chinese Studies that the second chapter of the influential Daoist writings attributed to Zhuangzi is all about the nurturance of life,¹⁷ and a globalizing traditional Chinese medicine claims the term *yangsheng* as rubric for its classical orientation toward preventive medicine, or “treating the not yet ill.”¹⁸ Some in the Chinese intellectual movement known as National Studies (*guoxue* 国学), to which we return below, would place a great deal of the national heritage under the heading of *yangsheng*, as well. This impression of Chinese traditionalism in a popular health movement holds even though the techniques drawn on in the literature of modern *yangsheng* are often indebted to global science, medicine, and psychology and are propagated through a modern state’s public-health apparatus. (There are echoes of this scientific modernity in Zhang’s epigraph, in his evocation of evolutionary process and nature.) They are propagated so successfully, in fact, that it is methodologically difficult to separate discourses from practices, thoughts and intentions from embodied activities. As we will see, health information is an immensely popular arena of media consumption, and the people we met in parks and community centers often assiduously tried to develop their lives along recommended lines.

The prototypical life-nurturing citizen, in the highly mediated images that circulate especially through photojournalism, is an elderly person who practices *taiji quan* (t’ai chi) or *qigong* among friends in a public park. But there are many other activities that fall

under the heading of *yangsheng*, including exercises such as calisthenics, jogging, swimming, and walking backward; hobbies such as water calligraphy (performed outdoors with large sponge brushes on pavement), dancing, singing, and keeping birds (which must be exercised outdoors in their cages); forms of connoisseurship such as the appreciation of tea, wine, and medicinal cuisine; and many forms of “spiritual” self-cultivation ranging from meditation to learning a foreign language.¹⁹

A popular ditty explains what sort of culture *yangsheng* is:

The Way (*dao*) of *yangsheng* is eating and sleeping, talking and singing,
playing ball and taking pictures, writing and painting,
writing poetry line by line, playing chess to banish the blues,
chatting of heaven, speaking of earth.²⁰

This bit of lore suggests considerable variety within the category of life nurturance. The proverb mentions the most necessary and obvious elements of everyday life, “eating and sleeping,” alongside physical exercises such as playing ball and cosmopolitan hobbies such as taking pictures. This Way is pleasant, good for “banishing the blues.” Some things are even philosophical: “chatting of heaven, speaking of earth.” This list of activities, short as it is, belies any resort to oversimplification that the term “nurturing life” might suggest. Instead, we glimpse a manifold culture of the everyday, one that is global and local, embodied and discursive, even ecological and cosmic.²¹

Readers for whom the foregoing comments raise no theoretical or critical questions are encouraged to skip what remains of this introduction and plunge right into “City Life” (Chapter 1). Our *yangsheng* interlocutors in Beijing do not share our concern to position our writing in relation to the shared dilemmas that have arisen in our own fields, and it is arguably more important to begin to hear from them than to split more academic hairs in this introduction. But some readers may be curious about how we have conceived, for this project, the responsibilities and challenges of anthropology, Chinese Studies, and cultural studies in the contemporary world. These curious

companions are encouraged to read on as we dwell a bit further on the political nature of *yangsheng*, on methodological problems that have arisen in translation, on the particular character of time(s) in today's Beijing, and on ways of being inventive about tradition.

Chronic Concerns: The (Bio)political

When China is mentioned, politics is never far behind. We have noted above that *yangsheng* takes on some of its significance (for us, at least) in the context of state-driven biopolitical reorganizations of the social. The power/knowledge formations of institutionalized medicine and public health are also fundamental influences in the emergence of a *yangsheng* movement. But power is generated, sustained, and challenged through everyday practices; ordinary life—especially in China—is full of political concerns. The carnal life that flourishes in Beijing's parks, vacant lots, and back alleys, aided by the arts of life nurturance, is both a case of and a challenge to the biopolitical projects of state and transnational apparatuses. Where life itself is felt to be at stake, and the civil and deliberate lives of ordinary people are under construction, sovereign power merges into personal effectiveness, and the resources that can be mobilized in the service of the good life yield both pleasure and strength.

It is common to remark, along with the Aristotelian tradition of political thought, that the aim of politics is the good (collective) life. By this reasoning, modern Chinese practices of life nurturance are political by definition. But the politics of modern nation-states and the institutions they authorize have seized upon life in particular ways; to some extent, modern biopower has traveled with the nation-state form wherever it has been established. Thus, China is no exception in the field of modern biopolitics, despite its indigenous political philosophies, its long history of imperial bureaucracy, and its more recent revolutionary history of Maoist socialism. At the same time, the particular convergence of power and life that we study here is deeply historical, which is to say nonmodern, in instructive ways.²²

Obviously, we draw not only on Foucault's well-known explorations of biopower and the care of the self, but also on Giorgio

Agamben's extension of these ideas into a broad theory of modern nation-state sovereignty. In an earlier paper, we found Agamben's grounding of modern sovereignty in a distinction between "bare life" (*zoë*) and "the form or way of living of an individual or group" (*bios*)²³ rather eerily useful, and since the constitutive violence of the founding of the Chinese party-state still lives in modern memory, we have had to acknowledge the pertinence of his analysis of states of exception to the history of the People's Republic of China. Similarly, it is tempting to adopt Foucault's translations of Hellenistic and Roman concerns such as "the arts of existence" and "practices of the self" to talk about the activities we have observed, discussed, and read about in Beijing.²⁴ We will suggest, however, that resemblances between the broad topics and special terminologies taken up by Foucault and Agamben and the forms of life and techniques of cultivation employed by contemporary Beijingers are more superficial than they might seem. While some forms of life and arts of existence appear to be encouraged by modern nation-states anywhere, we argue that classical Chinese theories of sovereignty and modern practices of life in China offer inspiration to theory and resources for anthropological understanding that have not been properly appreciated in the Anglophone human sciences.

As anthropologists of everyday life in the peaceful and well-managed neighborhoods of the Chinese capital, we have wondered to what extent the violent history of the state still lives in the experience and tactics of citizens. Following the literature of everyday life, there seems little doubt that sometimes subtle, but deeply felt political agendas can inhabit the practices of space, time, and embodiment.²⁵ As Chairman Mao said, via a *Red Flag* editorial writer a long time ago, "class struggle exists even at the tips of your chopsticks."²⁶ Though the literature of everyday life has often focused on intimate dominations such as those of race, class, and gender, in modern situations where the history and development of the nation-state forms part of the daily consciousness of the people, questions of state sovereignty and legitimacy are far from absent in daily practice. Some studies of modern China have seen the burgeoning consumerist

and business-centered life of the coastal cities, which appears so thoroughly depoliticized and “naturalized,” as still haunted by the deprivations, idealisms, and anxieties of the Maoist past.²⁷ Similarly, the simple common sense about bodies and health reported by Beijingers, when it is placed in historical perspective, can be seen to harbor a sense of the political that has everything to do with life and death. But this everyday lore also draws on another theoretical world concerned with power and life: classical Chinese philosophies of lordship in which the power of the exemplar generates social form through enlightened and exemplary self-cultivation. Many of the materials we cite herein relate more to that model of power than to neoliberal governmentality or biopolitics.

We have elsewhere discussed the political and social contradictions experienced by Beijingers before the present Reform Era truly got underway and have considered the influence these lived histories might have had on the emergence of a *yangsheng* movement.²⁸ It could be argued that nowadays, the state and its Communist Party politics is more benign and that its violent sovereignty has become the generative and cajoling voice of a classically Foucauldian power/knowledge apparatus. Power most often appears as the voice of the state-supported expert, pushing good nutrition or “quality births,” explaining why a cancellation of state social supports amounts to a greater freedom to thrive.

Indeed, most important for the topic of *yangsheng* is the withdrawal of the state from the provision of health care. In the 1980s, a great deal of national government support was withdrawn from hospitals, medical schools, and clinics, and there was a rapid shift to fee-for-service models of payment. In the 1990s, there was a massive growth in health-insurance schemes, bringing in train many of the same problems we see in North America. Health insurance is too expensive for many, the premiums and copay amounts are too high, and the costs of medical care are rising fast. In this anxious climate, an aging population is bombarded with state-sponsored public-health information and free disease-screening programs, even while they complain ever more vociferously that it is almost impossible to

“find a doctor,”²⁹ much less pay for medical services. Where their health is concerned, most people realize that they are on their own.

So when people say that they swim in frozen lakes or walk backward up mountains in the early morning “for their health,” we take them at their word. Some of these *yangsheng* regimes are very good for physical health, and if the Beijingers of today don’t take care of their health, who will? But within this sensible instrumental reasoning lies a historically nuanced formation of the passions. Utilizing all manner of socialist apparatuses of power, the Maoist state determined what proper life would be—collective, productive, egalitarian, and so on—while openly and violently expelling bare life from its polity. For a long time, the particular Maoist relationship between *bios* (the life of the citizen) and *zoë* (bare life) engaged the emotional commitment of many Chinese people. Now, however, the strong collectivist state has transformed itself into a rather conventional neoliberal regime whose relation to life is—or appears to be—simply to “let [citizens] live.” At this point in this history, then, when we see a pointed assertion of deliberate forms of life on the part of ordinary citizens, however humble they may be, we can presume that there is some deeply felt strategy at work. In a context of modern biopower, life in myriad forms is a focus of the political passions of the people.³⁰

Yangsheng is not about freedom or overt political power. One is reminded of de Certeau’s discussion of the tactics of everyday life, actions that involve “a logic articulated on situations and the will of others.” *Yangsheng* allows people to “escape without leaving” a sometimes uncertain social and political order that is both experienced and remembered as hand built, but fragile, always threatened by “chaos” (*luan* 乱). The politics of everyday tactics developed by de Certeau can accommodate the classical Chinese notion of nonaction with respect to sovereignty (*wuwei* 无为), even as it emphasizes an almost resistant agency: “Such a politics should also inquire into . . . the microscopic, multiform, and innumerable connections between manipulating and enjoying, the fleeting and massive reality of a social activity at play with the order that contains it.”

The politics proposed by de Certeau and framed by the theorists of biopower allows us to think more clearly about the possible and actual relations between the pleasures involved in creative life—*bios*—and the power of the state, which reserves its rights over bare life, *zoë*.

These reflections on pleasure and power lead us back to an even fuller appreciation of the literature and daily practice of *yangsheng*. The vision of health and pleasure these materials offer can ground civil, rich, and enjoyable lives in the activity of an individual, but one who is inseparable from an unbounded collective while demanding little from others. No wonder so many in Beijing are practicing the arts of *yangsheng*.

Chronic Concerns: Translation

The only language we two authors have in common is Chinese. Planning, researching, and writing *Ten Thousand Things* has been a long process of translating between manuscript drafts, intellectual projects, and the textual materials in two languages that have inspired these projects. Each of us knows enough about the other's literary world to guess well the significance of texts and the agenda of the schools of thought that have produced them. But we both also worry about how much is lost in translation. The historical significance of contemporary writings—how they are read, in effect—and the context of citations from “old” texts are the first things to go. We have done what we could here to provide historical context for *yangsheng* in Beijing, but we have found no way to preserve the Chinese-language-specific heteroglossia of many of our materials. In rendering classical Chinese medical writing for an Anglophone audience, for example, one must often choose between the technical English of biomedicine and the poetics of folklore and cosmology, even though the original Chinese language manages to be medical, philosophical, and commonsensical all at once. Rendering a term for “heart depot” (*xinzang* 心脏) as “cardiac visceral system” transforms a localizing storage and processing function that is as concerned with thoughts as with blood into an anatomical structure, that is, a discrete organ

that can ground a known physiology or be the site of a lesion.³¹ The management problem, the relationship between local accumulation and wide circulation, presented by a depot, storehouse, or granary is in such a translation decentered or even forgotten. But “cardiac visceral system” has other virtues; it renders a Chinese medical entity as rationally materialistic, grounded in a known body. It sounds altogether less symbolic than “heart depot.”

Another example: translating *jingshen* 精神 as “spirit” captures the modern importance of this Christian and Cartesian notion—invoked, for example, in the “antispiritual pollution campaigns” of the early reform period. But it loses any sense of the Chinese medical entities *jing*-essence and *shen*-vitality, not to mention the physiological relationship between them, which has a *yinyang* character. Quite often, the better translation for *jingshen* involves translating them as two substances, “essence” and “vitality,” and making some reference to their dynamic relationship. Readers of medical and philosophical works in Chinese can easily see the commonsense metaphors and images that enrich and enchant an ancient language and that combine practical healing concerns and massy bodily entities with aesthetic and cosmological insights. This rich reading is much harder to achieve in English translation.

These translation tactics are consistent with our title, *Ten Thousand Things*, a phrase that invokes both multiplicity and materiality, as we have said. The term is a very ancient one, *wanwu* (万物), and as noted, the number “ten thousand” is not literal; *wanwu* refers rather to an unthinkable vastness, an infinity of forms, all manifest reality. And the *wu* of the term truly is “things”—the materiality is clear. As such, the word could just as well evoke a sense of burdensomeness, rather than the exuberance evident in this chapter’s epigraph. Because it doesn’t seem to do so for speakers of modern Chinese, we have at times adopted a Dante-esque word like “myriad” to preserve a certain teeming enjoyment in sheer quantity. But once heard as awe-inspiring, “ten thousand,” too, rolls off the tongue with pleasure. *Wanwu* may be just one thing after another; but this is life, and life can be enjoyed. As the argument that follows will gradually

show, Chinese philosophy and (even) modern commonsense Chinese language presume a natural scatter, a kind of entropic diffusion of many, many things: human activity involves gathering and holding a few things together, assembling contingency into form in the service of local and temporary human ends.

Chronic Concerns: History and Temporality

Our title also invokes the contemporary.³² It might have been more modest to refer to a “modern,” “reform,” or “postsocialist” moment, as so many other studies have done. But all of these terms have a way of distancing us and our readers from our contemporaries in Beijing. Rapid globalization and the emergence of Beijing as a city of world importance, host of the 2008 Olympics, make any such distancing or othering implausible.

China’s twentieth century saw the emergence and eventual hegemony of a modern nation-state and a familiar set of scientific values and secular institutions. Though many writers presume that in its early years (1949–1978), the People’s Republic of China was static and isolated, neither truly modern nor contemporary with “the free world,” we are more inclined to see socialist modernity as having many basic features in common with the midcentury world of liberal democracies.³³ One important formation common to both the “first” and “second” worlds was a vast public commitment to progress, development, and a utopian vision of what human societies could achieve. This modernist chronotope sought to discipline time and space into a vast world picture with a troubled, but logically necessary teleology.³⁴ In the Chinese midcentury world, after 1949, the modern telos was often spoken of as “true communism,” imagined as a not-yet-realized state of unrestricted plenty, Marxist internationalism, and advanced technology. After the utopian tenor of Maoist modernism began to recede, however, and especially after Deng Xiaoping proposed that a society of “moderate well-being” (*xiaokang* 小康) should be achieved in China, the certainties of a univocal national modernity and progress became more tenuous.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, “modernization” and “getting

on track with the world” were still the watchwords on everyone’s lips (though both of us authors at that time were framing research that challenged the hegemony of modernization logics and its narratives of one-way globalization).³⁵ By the end of the 1990s, a temporality founded in ambitious visions of progress had lost its grip on many of China’s lived worlds. American material life no longer appeared the be-all and end-all of modernization as a specifically Asian commodity culture began to thrive along city streets and in the media. Even those with the means to build on and increase their control over daily life became increasingly uncertain about what the future could hold for them personally or for their nation.³⁶ Meanwhile, many Beijingers already considered themselves to be quite good at the arts of crafting a life of moderate well-being. The old arts of life nurturance, many of them embedded in a conservative habitus and accustomed to certain nonnegotiable comforts (a thermos of boiled water, a thick quilt, fresh food, warm clothing), have been brought into service to organize a post-utopian life.³⁷

As China’s public culture moved definitively away from socialist asceticism and the collective imperative of service to the people, waves of fads, or “fevers” (*re* 热), began to diversify the aims of life. From backward-looking fads focusing on Chairman Mao or the model soldier Lei Feng,³⁸ to the past-denying imagery of “plunging into the [global] sea” propagated by the important documentary *He Shang* (River elegy) of the late 1980s,³⁹ from “high culture fevers” on the part of 1980s philosophers and cultural critics⁴⁰ to enthusiasms for *qigong* meditation shared by ordinary city dwellers and elite scientists⁴¹—everyone was now able to find some popular orientation on the problem of past and future, one of ten thousand possible viewpoints on the problem presented by the decline of a shared modernist teleology.

Practitioners of the *yangsheng* arts are thus our post-utopian contemporaries, and this is especially clear in the multiplicity of their life habits. Their interests and routines escape the totalizing discourses of vast public campaigns, such as the “One World, One Dream” ideology that dominated Olympic Beijing for a few years

before 2008. Moreover, in their practices they dwell on problems of time as they seek to achieve a wholesome aging process in nonteleological personal trajectories. Perhaps there is something particularly “contemporary” about the population we found to be the most enthusiastic participants in the life-nurturing arts in Beijing. These are mostly men and women who have retired, some of them as young as forty-five or fifty, from socialist work units (schools, factories, government agencies, the military) and who are making do materially on limited incomes from state pensions and contributions from their children. They are old enough to remember—indeed, they cannot forget—the Maoist past, when state-mandated disciplines extended to all aspects of everyday life,⁴² and they are connected to the neoliberal present through the tense and competitive careers of their children, who no longer enjoy work-unit guarantees or many direct social services from the state. This generation has access to a wide range of media: they read, watch, and listen to all kinds of news, advertising, and public education, and they enjoy fictional genres such as soap operas that recall many past cultures and that narrativize a number of possible presents. Many of them are relieved to have lived on into a depoliticized era in which private desires are quite legitimate, but most of them also worry that collective morality has been compromised by the “selfishness” and “competition” of neoliberal public priorities. They are aware of living in a different rhythm than younger people, often saying they share no language or interests, even with their own children.

In the 1980s, references to “Chinese backwardness” were everywhere. The very generation we speak of here, the midlifers and those later in life who have enthusiastically claimed one of the world’s most modern cities as their own⁴³ and who fill public spaces with the mundane purposes of their own lives not so long ago thought of themselves as suffering from a chronic backwardness as the world developed all around them. This identification with lack was, of course, the predictable other side of that pervasive emphasis on modernization characteristic of the reform era as captained by Deng Xiaoping. Backwardness was the explanation given for

everything from failed public services and daily discomforts to corrupt back-door dealings and inequalitarian gender relations. But the language and the stigma of lagging behind is no longer plausible for many Beijingers. Witness the well-pressed and brightly colored silks and satins worn by those who gather in Beihai Park to sing old songs: they are expressing their cosmopolitan good taste and modernity in the present, even as they sing to recover the moments of their youthful years when they wore dark, padded-cotton jackets and cloth shoes, worked to build socialism, and studied Mao Zedong Thought. These days, confidently embodying a mixed temporality, *yangsheng* enthusiasts such as these singers assert their coevalness with moderns everywhere.⁴⁴ But this is a coevalness that includes having a past.

Chronic Concerns: Tradition

One scholarly method of taming a proliferation of temporalities is to speak of tradition, conceived as a more or less static reservoir of cultural resources that may be deployed or even “invented” in the context of modernity to sometimes political ends.⁴⁵ Those who read about and practice *yangsheng* in Beijing do not generally speak of tradition in this essentializing way. In our experience, they seldom even use the word “tradition” (*chuantong* 传统), but they often see themselves as mining the Chinese past for life-nurturing wisdom.⁴⁶ They have been doing so in the current highly mediated manner for only about fifteen or twenty years, so in this sense, *yangsheng* is an invented tradition. The ancientness of the very words *yang* and *sheng* is, perhaps, a convenience as people draw on historical resources to paper over history’s major lacunae and ruptures. But we wish to argue that the *yangsheng* we investigate in this study is nevertheless a living tradition, even if (as some would say) it has been brought back to true liveliness quite recently.

The field of Chinese Studies in both Asian and European languages has been faced with a particularly interesting challenge as we frame and reframe what is meant by the concept of tradition (which is, of course, no more stable a category than its accustomed

partner, modernity). The cultural heritage preserved in countless archives and embodied in an old and continuous written language now faces Chinese readers, thinkers, tourists, and makers of cultural policy as a vast and unique problem. In fact, we have often heard commentators in the Chinese media refer to “the Chinese heritage” as a tremendous burden: Who will pay for the renovation and maintenance of all the precious temples, palaces, and beauty spots? How can scholars and their students do justice to the vast complexity of thought in Chinese history? How can research in Chinese find a place in global intellectual movements published in more powerful language worlds? Can “folk” customs and cultures find a path between commodity trivialization of culture and the sheer disappearance of every old thing, as those who remember an older way of life die? A now-discredited position on tradition—the Cultural Revolution approach, “Destroy the Four Olds”⁴⁷—still lurks, perhaps, as a temptation for some, given the tremendous demand on Chinese social and psychological resources of the Chinese past and its vast archive. It is not surprising that the television documentary *He Shang* (Death song of the river) was so appealing in the China of the late 1980s; this masterpiece of manipulative editing culminates with images of the long, silt-laden Yangtze River, winding through the entire breadth of a country impacted and befuddled with “old culture,” finally merging its dirty yellow waters with the refreshing blue vastness of the Pacific. At that time, the Chinese generation that expected to join their expertise and cosmopolitan sophistication with that of the world’s techno elite was referred to as “plunging into the sea.” Presumably these hopeful young people, armed with modern science and globally marketable skills, would be able to leave “Chinese culture” behind.⁴⁸

The rhetoric of *He Shang* is not ultimately different from that of empiricist history and anthropology, however. In both, the past is “othered,” made into an object of contemplation or a landscape to be viewed from the comfortable standpoint of the analyst’s secure position in modernity.⁴⁹ The rich and comparatively well-preserved Chinese past is made available, in this othering logic, to be summarized,

essentialized, and spiritualized. From Arthur Smith's *Chinese Characteristics* (1894) to Lucian Pye's *The Spirit of Chinese Politics* (1992), we have seen Western scholars, confident in their cultural superiority, deliver into English a static Chinese tradition. Some versions of this modernist historiography encourage cultural appropriation, treating Chinese tradition as a resource that can remedy "our" (read "Euro-American") alienation and shallowness. Thus, scholars propagating a new transnational "Confucian" Chineseness argue for business practices that are more collectively responsible, suggesting that Chinese people somehow understand better than Americans and Europeans how to make "Asian"—or any—contracts work. And successive generations of young readers in the United States seriously consider how they might live in accord with the relativism of the *Dao de jing* (*The Way and Its Power*, in Waley's classic translation) or gain confidence through the practice of Asian martial arts that are taught by old men and billed as ancient.

Not unlike these approaches to the Chinese past, *Ten Thousand Things* freely appropriates tradition to present-day ends. We do not claim to offer here a historical study that could defeat the reifications and essentialisms of mainstream Chinese culture studies, though we try to avoid oversimplifying past thought or rendering it static and timeless.⁵⁰ Especially in Chapter 2, we discuss the newly popular literature that propagates Chinese medical wisdom. As a contribution to the huge field of self-help works available in Beijing, this literature's new twist on the *yangsheng* tradition is frankly appropriative of the past.

But tradition in this study runs deeper than that. Through Zhang Qicheng's wide reading in the medical and metaphysical Chinese archive, we ourselves select, very pointedly, pieces of text that are of present-day use—to us, to our readers, and, we argue, to practitioners of *yangsheng* in Beijing's parks. Without proposing any determinate relationships (the "influence" of intellectual history, for example), we juxtapose terms, concepts, and poetic extracts from past sources with the lively cultural concerns of China's contemporaneity. The aim is to put ancients and moderns in dialogue, not

just through reading, but through learning. This form of presentism may be a historical sin, but we have good company in our misbehavior: not only anthropologists who persist in deploying the study of difference as (North American) cultural critique,⁵¹ but also the translator-commentators who insist on finding modern theoretical and philosophical riches in ancient Chinese writing.⁵²

More important to us, in our conversations with *yangsheng* enthusiasts, we began to hear deep currents of resonance with Chinese discourses that an empiricist historiography would have long ago declared to be dead (even if subject to resuscitation as “invented tradition”). Though the retired workers and teachers, soldiers and bookkeepers with whom we most often spoke seldom cited the classics in so many words, we have occasion to point out, especially in Chapter 3, that the commonsense values they reported have much in common with ancient wisdom. Their crafted daily lives recall the self-cultivation (*zixiu* 自修) that has been theorized in Chinese philosophy since at least the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E – 220 C.E.), and their self-conscious orientations toward life processes respond to a living tradition of knowing the Way. (Response itself [*ganying* 感应] was much theorized in China’s classic philosophy as the interresponsiveness of the ten thousand things, understandable and predictable with the help of a—far from dead, even now—*yinyang* logic.)⁵³

Though we found much that was classical to appreciate in what our interlocutors in Beijing had to say, we nevertheless hold that the knowing of a tradition goes beyond the verbal and does not alter historically in the same way or at the same pace as explicitly narrativized ideologies do. Dipesh Chakrabarty, commenting on largely critical studies of invented traditions in Japan—while thinking of India, another country with a massive heritage “problem”—clarifies:

If even invented traditions need genealogies for their own effectiveness, no such genealogy can ever consist of an inventory of ideas alone. Ideas acquire materiality through the history of bodily practices. They work not simply because they persuade through their logic; they are also capable, through a long and heterogeneous history of the cultural

training of the senses, of making connections with our glands and muscles and neuronal networks. This is the work of memory, if we do not reduce the meaning of that word to the simple and conscious mental act of remembering. The past is embodied through a long process of training the senses.⁵⁴

Ideas acquire materiality in bodies, and bodily practices have long and heterogeneous histories. Chakrabarty's writing recalls Marx's famous dictum that "the forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present."⁵⁵ Certainly, in the Chinese context, such historicity of the body and its life cannot be thought apart from the continuities of the Chinese language. The fact that third-century or fourth-century B.C.E. thinking about the seasons and the sensations was expressed and remains legible in words that are still in daily use facilitates memory in Chakrabarty's sense. Some ancient/modern words and phrases, as we will see in the world of *yangsheng*, invite the making of connections to glands and muscles and neuronal networks. Others are consumed as—at least—metaphors for the otherwise little-theorized experiences of tasting food, resting after exertion, or chatting with friends. In calligraphic mode, the concepts that are materialized as the writer's effort and dispositions flow out and manifest in ink on a surface are, in *yangsheng* "readings," further realized in bodies, entered into the bloodstream of lives. To appreciate the powers of tradition in modernity fully, a process of living in and constantly remaking both a flow of meaning and breaks in that flow becomes central. It is both a privilege and a burden for Chinese contemporaries that they have such a deep fund of resources on which to draw as they craft a living tradition and embody myriad daily lives.

Chronic Concerns: Collaboration

The writing of this book has been collaborative in a special sense. We authors work between anthropology and philosophy, between literary interpretation and practical strategies, between American and Chinese scholarship, between Judith Farquhar's and Zhang

Qicheng's habits, training, idioms, and writing styles. In doing collaborative field research, both of us also moved between our shared scholarly world of Chinese medicine studies and the street-level views of Beijing's ordinary city dwellers. As we have moved across these various great divides, some familiar terrain has been sacrificed, but much has been gained. The anthropology we here offer, for example, somewhat shortchanges historical and sociological contextualization, even as it preserves anthropology's populist and interpretive commitments. At one point the two of us undertook, for example, a long written exchange on the anthropological notion of resistance; for a while it seemed important to ask whether hobbyists gathering in public spaces might constitute a form of popular opposition to instituted state power. Once we had understood each other's positions on the subject, however, we both decided that this book can do without the problematic of resistance. Further, the philosophy we undertake has ignored most grand narratives in favor of selective appropriations of the language of China's great writers, hoping to speak to contemporaries in intimately philosophical ways. Zhang's usual style is to offer, as a philological historian, the best and most accurate readings of difficult ancient texts. But as we selected materials for discussion here, we preferred the places in his writing where he reaches out to contemporaries with mundane advice and engaging poetic language. As we developed a style of reading and commentary that draws at once on the very different talents and training of an American ethnographer and a Chinese philologist, we found that there was much we could not attempt. Some of our familiar projects had to be abandoned: neither Zhang's tendency to provide close commentary on Chinese medical and metaphysical works nor Farquhar's penchant for extensive literary and theoretical interpretations could be fully indulged. Neither of us is very conversant with the other's most-studied archive, so we rely on each other to invoke authorities. Both of us see *Ten Thousand Things* as a worthwhile continuation of our own scholarly projects, but here we have had to find a different voice (or, to be more exact, several different voices) than the voice of authority our home disciplines

and accustomed idioms normally afford. We write from a space of encounter where deep global differences and inequalities produce frictions between knowledge worlds.⁵⁶ Part of this friction appears when we translate: Zhang Qicheng has struggled with post-Cartesian ideas such as “habitus” and “embodiment,” and Judith Farquhar despairs of translating *wanwu* or *jingshen* well. The very nature(s) to which we anchor our perceptions of the healthy and the socially good differ—the ancient Daoist cosmogony that gave rise to the myriad things by way of *yin* and *yang*, heaven and earth, contradicts evolutionary science. Zhang feels no need to reconcile this inconsistency; both accounts can be true, for his purposes. Farquhar worries about an asymmetry between Chinese metaphysics (which sounds like myth or religion) and the equally unprovable assumptions of the modernist sciences (which are seldom addressed in theory, since they are assumptions). Operating in still distinguishable conceptual worlds, we constantly encounter objects that do not travel well into the thinking of our expectant readers. But we have enjoyed negotiating this uneven terrain; it has been full of surprises and has given us at times great pleasure. Some of this enjoyment, we hope, enlivens the book.

Though the book is written in English (there will also be a Chinese version), we have sought to avoid the domination of one Anglophone interpretive voice. Such a monotone tends to relegate work on Chinese philosophy and medicine to the domains of religion or spirituality, the New Age, and the fringe humanities. The English language is not well suited to capturing the simultaneous concreteness and dynamism, the down-to-earth practicality and truth, of Chinese worldviews. In any translation project, in fact, the first and largest element that is lost is the historical conversation within which the translated text originally made a contribution. Translators are often required to restore the social context of textual references in footnotes, as we sometimes do here. A deeper problem for translation, however, worries us more.

Objects themselves, and thus objective worlds, differ fundamentally between languages. Much of the friction in the encounters noted

above is ontological: what Zhang Qicheng calls “the three treasures of the human body: *jing*-essence, *qi*-energy, and *shen*-spirit,” for example, simply cannot be conformed to the body known to biology or even to the ordinary embodiment of our American readers. Though we argue in places that unfamiliar forms of being are actually not so strange as philosophers might make them out—*qi* is not hard to experience, once you start attending to it—we nevertheless can see that an English text that treats *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* as commonsense nouns is in danger of appearing quaint or “merely cultural.”

Our tactic for addressing this friction has been to multiply texts, to show many contexts in which the usual objects referred to in Chinese simply work. An empirical engagement with many forms of life (which must, of course, include the liveliness of texts, discourses, conversations) is, perhaps, a turn away from the great Western philosophical questions, especially those that have maintained a mind-body divide. The only way we see to get beyond the dualisms, essences, and self-serving comparisons of the usual East-West divide, however, is to multiply forms—even our method, then, insists on the ten thousand things.

To this end, we have adopted a style that sometimes combines and sometimes distinguishes our two authorial voices while also giving due recognition to the many speakers and writers we cite. Translations into English (all by Farquhar) have striven to reflect the style of the Chinese originals, sometimes preserving the oddness of unfamiliar logics, objects, images, and histories. Our coauthored commentary seeks to assist Anglophone readers to appreciate these linguistic and practical differences while finding in them—we both hope—something common and valuable. In Chapter 3, where we quote at length many Beijingers as they talk about their *yangsheng* practices, we have distinguished the comments of “JF” and “ZQC.” We two interviewers have heard different tensions and promises in these diverse remarks and see no need to homogenize our contributions to the chapter. In Chapter 4, a long essay by Zhang is the topic of the chapter, but the discussion of it is coauthored; the chapter nevertheless has a bias toward Farquhar’s reading of the essay.

Chapter 1 is even more Farquhar's, describing as it does a city life that Zhang decided, as we talked about the chapter, that he has no need to articulate; Beijing has been his home since the early 1990s. But as he edited drafts of the chapter, he added his own sense of the relationship between the contemporary city and its residents' ways of nurturing life. And Chapter 2 presents viewpoints on *yangsheng* from a variety of recent popular publications. One of these works is by Zhang, and another is by a colleague, Qu Limin, who helped us in our research in 2003. We have privileged these two sources in the coauthored discussion. This Introduction is the result of many discussions over several years as drafts of book chapters moved between us, in two languages. The Conclusion returns to the overarching questions of embodiment and historicity, to the myriad things, and it includes a record of a conversation we had over a meal as the writing was drawing to a close.

In the course of gathering materials from the popular health literature for use in Chapter 2, we came across the following remarks by Zhang Qicheng's colleague Qu Limin:

Basically, the Inner Canon is a book that teaches medical theory (or, the Way of medicine). Its opening chapters speak of nondesiring and vacancy, then it turns to the four seasons and the interactions of *yin* and *yang*—this tells everyone that the secret of a healthy longevity rests on whether one's emotions and the *qi* and blood of the circulation tracks are moving smoothly, and whether life's phases of emergence, development, retreating, and storing are all in order. If they are, it is just as the *Book of Changes* ("Uses of the Undivided") says: "If you see a host of dragons with no leader, this is auspicious."⁵⁷

Qu does not explain why this quote about dragons from the *Book of Changes* helps us understand the virtues of classical medical systems. Nor does she explain why a host of dragons, with no one dragon first among them, should be an auspicious manifestation. She seems to think the relevance and significance of the reference

are obvious. And perhaps they are obvious, or at least suggestive, to her Chinese readers. In a Beijing where one can readily visit several versions of “Nine Dragon Screens” and where cartoon images of dragons thundering through vast cloudy skies are quite common, a rippling mass of dragons is not hard to visualize.

The twisting and turning body of the dragon is a materialization of the alternating positive and negative, fast and slow dynamics of *yin* and *yang*; dragons share the space between heaven and earth where humans find their home; they have a special affinity with the courses of the winds and waters (the *fengshui*) that determine the quality and generativity of human life. And as anyone who has seen a dragon dance in a Chinese New Year parade knows, dragons *play*—with a flaming pearl, with each other. All this makes dragons a nice figure for human lives of “healthy longevity.” But this multitude of leaderless dragons, appearing with their ever-changing lines of flight and their irreducible multiplicity, also invites the viewer into an enchanted space. No authority limits the myriad ways that can be followed by dragons; embodied life is not just flesh and effort—it is also high spirits and simple pleasures. A life well nurtured might turn the everyday into the flight of a dragon, one among many.