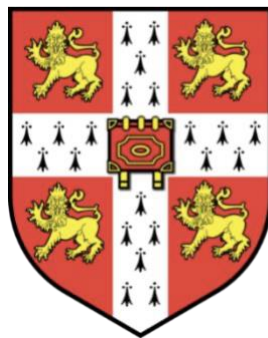


**‘Action through non-action’: self-transformation and social
transformation at the PRC grassroots**

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• This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy •

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Title

‘Action through non-action’: self-transformation and social transformation at the PRC grassroots

Author

Liangliang Zhang

Abstract

This dissertation is situated at the intersection of the anthropology of ethics and politics in the context of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). I ground my analysis in a long-standing ethical-political tradition, dating from the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE), which sees societal political progress as predicated on prior individual self-transformation. My overarching argument is that in contemporary China, discourses and practices of self-improvement have mediated, and continue to mediate, the relations between the political subject and the state. This dynamic is manifested in party-state-led projects of citizenry reform as well as in grassroots social initiatives centred on *xiuxing* – a polyvalent term denoting processes of self-amelioration, whose significance must be unpacked through a situated ethnographic exploration.

To this end, I examine the social life that unfolds via the ‘Wu-Wei School’, a private organisation that provides educative *xiuxing* retreats. The school claims to use an areligious rendering of Daoist ascetic techniques to help citizens live healthier, more fulfilling lives, thereby contributing to the national rejuvenation project inaugurated by the Xi government (since 2012). My primary interlocutors are organisers and participants of the school, the majority of whom are urban professional householders belonging to relatively privileged social groups. They embark on *xiuxing* projects via grassroots organisations such as this school to address tangible problems in their lives, especially in areas of health, child rearing, and relationships. Notably, many hold that by undertaking *xiuxing*, they are reshaping not only themselves, but also their families and their situated socio-natural environment. I trace how my interlocutors engage with esoteric forms of self-transformation knowledge-practice, adopt forms of Daoist autogenetic healing, and intersect with other alternative education schemas such as Steiner Education. While ostensibly retreating into their bodies and interiorities, I argue that these Chinese citizens articulate a historically-sedimented mode of influence which connects human interiorities and sociohistorical transformations through the avenue of reflexive self-improvement. I further demonstrate how this

mode of influence is integral to diverse components of the PRC political-cum-moral project, delineating the surprising ways in which my interlocutors operating ‘outside the system’ (*ti zhi wai*) coalesce with injunctions and techniques issued from ‘within the system’ (*ti zhi nei*).

Through a historically-situated consideration of grassroots initiatives centred on *xiuxing* in the PRC, this dissertation contributes to anthropological studies of ethics, personhood, education, health, and governance. My theoretical contributions are fourfold: Firstly, I deploy indigenous Chinese concepts as analytical tools on a par with social theories constructed in Euro-American academia, enriching the conceptual repertoire of anthropological analysis. Secondly, I explore new ways of engaging with the ‘affective’ domain of social life by analysing how actors deploy indigenous theories of influence and potentiality in their situated articulations of socio-political belonging. Thirdly, I propose a theory of citizen-state interrelation in the PRC: ‘coopetition’, a framework borrowed from management studies that underscores practical interdependence and creative coalescence, eschewing notions of a reified structural divide. Finally, I develop an analytic of ‘recreational asceticism’ to elucidate the ethical life found at the Wu-Wei School, which differs significantly from what has been described as ‘self-cultivation’ in the anthropology of ethics.

In honour of my grandmothers,

刘玉娥 Liu Yu-E and 张慧芳 Zhang Hui-Fang

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Chapter One

Xiuxing and Citizen-Making in the PRC

Introduction: *Xiuxing* as Keyword

The contemporary discursive landscape of the PRC is witnessing the rising popularity of *xiuxing* (修行),¹ a notion readily understood by native speakers in a variety of grammatical forms. Comprising the common characters of *xiu* and *xing*, this compound nonetheless escapes easy translation. In verb form *xiu* may variously denote to amend, administrate, build, embellish, repair, and revise. Meanwhile, *xing* primarily means to walk, travel, and put into action. Together the term *xiuxing*, often used colloquially as an intransitive verb,² communicates a lengthy process to ameliorate, perfect, reshape, and transform the person. While the 2011 edition of *Standard Mandarin Chinese Dictionary* stipulates that *xiuxing* is a ‘superstitious’ (*mi xin* 迷信) activity bound up with Buddhist or Daoist beliefs (p. 1224), in popular usage *xiuxing* has steadily gained currency across remarkably varied contexts.

Psychological counsellors hold online courses for couples to ‘*xiuxing*’ through intimate relationship. Tik Tok bloggers subtitle their children’s videos with the statement ‘parenting is a voyage of *xiuxing*’. Teachers within the state public school system describe the process of education via the notion of ‘*xiuxing*’ in lectures and reflection pieces. Translators use ‘*xiuxing*’ to render into Chinese French-Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh’s international bestseller on mindful living; originally entitled *Work: How to Find Joy and Meaning in Each Hour of the Day*, the title of the 2015 Chinese translation reads: *Xiuxing alongside Heavy Work*. More recently, in a widely circulated July 2021 feature article published on the party-state-supervised China Fund,³ a manager at the helm of a 10 billion RMB mutual fund professes investment (*tou zi* 投资) to be ‘a journey of *xiuxing*’.

¹ In this dissertation, I include original Chinese words or short phrases in the main body of the text and place original Chinese sentences or longer quotes in the footnotes, unless ethnographic or theoretical discussion explicitly deals with the translation of the quoted materials.

² I use the term *xiuxing* grammatically in ways that best approximate the context of the ethnographic or theoretical discussion, most often as an intransitive verb or a noun.

³ A financial asset management industry newspaper managed directly by the official news outlet People’s Daily.

In 2017, when I originally set out to study why increasing numbers of PRC citizens were becoming interested in diverse forms of activities subsumed under the banner of *xiuxing*, I treated the term as a Chinese equivalent of the English notion ‘self-cultivation’; however, I was quickly made to realise the narrowness with which I had delimited the field of my investigations. As it turns out, the act of *xiuxing* is deemed commensurate with parenting, illness recovery, intimate relationships, education within and outside the state-supervised system, careers in diverse sectors, and, to some people I spoke to, isomorphic with the ‘act of living’ itself. *Xiuxing* is seen as an undertaking of great import, and yet its users often appear to take this notion as self-explanatory.

The semantic ambiguity and communicative power of *xiuxing* were driven home to me during my initial visit in December 2017 to the ‘Wu-Wei School’.⁴ This private education organisation provides ‘a-religious’ (*fei zong jiao* 非宗教) *xiuxing* retreat learning experiences to its predominantly urban middle-class followers. Late one afternoon, I was helping assistant-teachers Fang-Hua and Fu-Yi prepare dinner in the refurbished farmhouse complex deep in central China’s Wu-Dang Mountains, which serves as one of the school’s two retreat learning facilities. Huddled in the small kitchen annex chopping potatoes and pumpkins, the young women took an interest in learning more about my life abroad and the study I proposed to conduct via the organisation. Overwhelmed by the gnawing cold and wanting to be concise, I said that I was interested in studying ‘the pursuits of people who *xiuxing*’. Their reactions took me by surprise.

In her friendly demeanour, Fang-Hua explained to me that studying the pursuits of people who *xiuxing* was a ‘false proposition’ (*wei ming ti* 伪命题). She further remarked, ‘There is no act of pursuit with *xiuxing*. We are simply living in a way that accords with the rhythm of the ten thousand beings (*wan wu de gui lv* 万物的规律).’

‘What is called *xiuxing* today was just the act of living in ancient times.’ Fu-Yi added in a flat, matter-of-fact voice.

If there is nothing ‘pursued’ in *xiuxing*, why is there the need to set up a teaching organisation dedicated to its transmission? If *xiuxing* is virtually the same as ‘living in a way that accords with the rhythm of the ten thousand beings’, why do people travel far to the school wanting to learn it? If *xiuxing* today is just how it was to live ‘in ancient times’, what forms of

⁴ All names in this dissertation are aliases to protect the identity of my interlocutors.

contemporary living do people have in mind when they undertake to *xiuxing*? More broadly, what does *xiuxing* amount to for those who come to organise a substantial part of their lives around this notion and its attendant practices, such as the organisers of the Wu-Wei School and its diverse followers?

In the context of the PRC, I posit that the notion of *xiuxing* constitutes a keyword in the sense given by Raymond Williams; the problems of its meanings, as with any keyword as understood by Williams, is ‘inextricably bound up with the problems it [is] being used to discuss’ (1983, p. xxvii). As Andrew Kipnis compellingly demonstrates via an investigation of the earlier notion of ‘*suzhi*’, the complex interactions between spoken and written forms, official and colloquial usages, render keywords like ‘*suzhi*’ both challenging and fruitful to unravel through ethnographic analysis (2006, p. 295). I intend this study as an attempt towards unravelling the complexities inhering in ‘*xiuxing*’ as a keyword. My overarching argument is that in contemporary China, discourses and practices pivoting on *xiuxing* and its cognates have mediated, and continue to mediate, the relations between the political subject and the state. This analytical project entails suspending the ‘self-cultivation’ paradigm⁵ in my ethnographic analysis, an otherwise obvious concept to encapsulate the social life that unfolds at and via the Wu-Wei School. I dedicate the following pages to explicating my foundational analytical choice, in the process of which I shall disambiguate my approach from the rich and diverse body of literature treating ‘self-cultivation’ in the anthropology of ethics and the anthropology of China.

⁵ In suspending ‘self-cultivation’, I do not wish to enter the debate over whether the ‘self’ is a Western construct and whether non-Western people (the Mainland Chinese in this case) have a ‘self’ as such. This, in my view, constitutes an analytical impasse that confounds more than it clarifies. While there are manifold nuanced and contextualised ways of understanding and being ‘oneself’, I find it both unhelpful and potentially exoticising to query whether certain groups essentially lack this relational concept. Avoiding the analytic of self-cultivation does not entail abandoning the ‘self’ as an ethnographic concept and an analytical notion. As I argue in chapter three, central to my interlocutors’ undertaking of *xiuxing* is a historically specific view of the self with efficacy scalable across distinct though concatenated registers of social life.

1. Why not ‘Self-Cultivation’: The Ethical-Political Imperative to Self-Reform in the PRC Political Order

My analytical suspension of ‘self-cultivation’ in this dissertation is firstly driven by a theoretical consideration with respect to the political order in which my interlocutors are situated, distinguished by an ethical-political imperative assigned to individual citizen-subjects to self-reform, self-improve, and self-perfect in light of national interest. As historian Arif Dirlik observes, the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) has upheld an unwavering goal of ‘fashioning a citizenry responsive to national needs, willing to endure hardship for the good of society, and ready to exert the maximum effort for the achievement of national progress’ (1975, p. 976). The CCP’s project rests upon a critical axiom which ‘link[s] individual improvement to social and political transformation’, and moreover posits a dialectical relationship between individual improvement and social change, ‘with changes in one dependent upon—and in their turn, determinative of—changes in the other’ (ibid., p. 977).

I argue that, despite the radical socio-economic transformations the PRC has witnessed in recent decades, the CCP-propounded project of citizen-reform remains entrenched. In this political order, the notion of ‘self-cultivation’, with its emphasis on the acting subject’s relationship of the self to the self, poorly captures the complex entanglement between individual citizens’ ethical pursuits to live a good life and the party-state’s political visions to fashion a cooperative citizenry. In this section, engaging with the work of historians, political scientists, and anthropologists, I shall delineate the historical transformations of this protean but pertinacious project of citizen-reform.

1.1 The Imperative to Self-Reform in the Communist Revolution and Maoist China

My analytical framing is indebted to historian Yinghong Cheng’s recent work (2009), which comparatively investigates ‘the creation of new man’ in twentieth-century communist experiments, epitomised in the Chinese, Soviet, and Cuban revolutions. Cheng carefully extricates a unifying theme behind these otherwise distinctive movements. He argues,

[B]ehind the ideological, political, and social change was a more ambitious and comprehensive goal: to remould the mind, psychology, and even character of individuals by means of various party and state policies designed for a ‘new man’ and, through this ‘new man,’ to make history and perpetuate the revolution (2009, p. 3).

This ‘new model of human being’ was to surpass ‘all other types hitherto known in the world civilization’ in its moral and psychological calibre; the task of human reform was furthermore seen as indivisible from the task of ‘creating a new society’, which was to surpass ‘all known human societies’ (ibid.). In the context of China, Cheng conceives of three stages in the communist experiment with remoulding human nature: the Yan’an period (late 1930s and first half of 1940s), the 1950s to the early 1960s, and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (ibid., pp. 59-125). Cheng emphasises how the CCP has devised a multitude of vehicles for the engineering of the ‘new man’; among these were thought reform (comprising ‘intensive ideological study, confession, self-criticism, and physical labour’), model emulation, and large-scale resettlement from cities to the countryside (ibid., p. 5, p. 59).

Crucially, Cheng underscores what he calls ‘the unbounded belief in human malleability’ peculiar to Chinese communism, which he deems to be rooted in traditional Chinese political philosophy (p. 48). Cheng identifies several distinctive elements integral to early Chinese thought, which he argues ‘can be clearly seen in Chinese communist efforts to reshape human nature in identical or modified manifestations’ (p. 50). These include the classical Confucian tenet that ‘moral education and emulation were essential in establishing a good society’, the necessity of a ruler to enforce human reform articulated by the legalist-inclined Confucian philosopher Xunzi, and the Song Dynasty neo-Confucian beliefs in the transformative effect of intensive textual studies and its view of life as ‘an endless journey of self-reform’ (pp. 48-50). Cheng’s thesis, which sees the Chinese Communist Revolution as distinguished by a concern of generating new kinds of political subjects through inciting them to undertake ceaseless self-reform, is echoed by several scholars of China.

In a recent important historical ethnography, Christos Lynteris identifies a protracted contestation between two ‘technologies of the self’ which animated the formation and reformation of political subjects in Maoist China. These consist of a) a ‘self-cultivation’ thesis espoused by neo-Confucianism informed technocrats⁶ in the Yan’an Era and b) a ‘self-abolition’ thesis engineered from a ‘mass line’ perspective during the Cultural Revolution. Lynteris compellingly argues that the dialectics between these two modes of socialist self-formation established ‘a total architecture of subjectivation’ that captured citizen subjectivity and dictated ‘the possibility and impossibility of selfhood in Maoist China’ (2013, pp. 119-120). His nuanced analysis sheds light on the

⁶ Represented by Liu Shaoqi, senior CCP leader, first vice chairman of the CCP (1956-1966) and President of the PRC (1959-1968).

fundamental existential condition of Maoist political subjects: the imperative to self-reform in response to compulsory and yet countervailing political injunctions.

Political scientist Elizabeth Perry similarly highlights an underlying logic of ‘the fundamental malleability and perfectibility of human beings’ (2002, p. 119) operative in Maoist political campaigns. In the context of thought reform, Perry observes, ‘[w]hereas Soviet prisoners were to be shot once they had confessed, those subjected to Chinese thought reform were expected to emerge reborn as committed converts to Communism’ (ibid.). The fact that even the worst of class enemies, among whom ranked the last emperor Pu Yi, were considered re-educatable and reformable, distinguishes the ideological pedigree of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, which many scholars have traced to influences in traditional Chinese political thought (Chang, 1988; Cheek, 2019; Cheng, 2009; Lifton, 1961; Lynteris, 2013; Perry, 2002).

This persistent fashioning of political subjects by inciting them to undertake ‘never-ending self-reform’ (Cheng, 2009, p. 57) continues to figure prominently in the contemporary PRC’s political order. The (ever-changing) end-goal has moved decidedly away from ‘Mao’s good soldiers’,⁷ and the self-improvement activities expected of citizens continue to transform in keeping with the party-state’s protean priorities; the normative responsibility for citizen-subjects to undertake self-improvement and self-perfection, however, remains entrenched. It is *within* this macro-level project that ordinary citizens’ micro-level ethical strivings take place.

I further argue that the entwined ethical-political imperative to self-reform finds its roots in a tradition prominent in early Chinese thought, which sees a) the viable political subject as necessarily and continuously educable, malleable, and perfectible; and b) societal political progress as determined by prior reflexive self-transformation undertaken by political subjects. As I show across the ethnographic chapters, actors as diverse as the party-state and my interlocutors encountered at the Wu-Wei School partake in this foundational conception.

⁷ Dirlik delineates ‘the attributes of the ideal Communist’ during the Maoist era: ‘physically rigorous, brave, progressive and creative, independent-minded yet disciplined—all out of selfless devotion to society’. He furthermore underscores how such attributes bear a resemblance to the ‘new Chinese’ or ‘the paradigm of the good citizen’ the Nationalist regime had wished to but failed to engineer (1975, p. 976). This resemblance evinces a perceived co-constitutive relationship between individual behaviour and socio-political transformation held by the two successive regimes, and their overlapping visions for the new citizen-subjects necessary for national survival in the twentieth century.

1.2 From Perfecting the Person to Bringing Peace to All Under the Heaven: The Conceptual Architecture of the *Great Learning*

Several sinologists have argued for the existence of a long-standing ethical-political tradition that sees societal political progress as predicated on prior individual self-transformation (Gardner, 2007; Ivanhoe, 2000; Tu, 1979). It was first established, they suggest, during the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE) and heightened by the eleventh century Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian Renaissance (Keenan, 2011; Virág, 2015). This tradition postulates a political subject whose interiorities are bound up with the natural, social, and political environment, and whose actions on the microcosmic level directly affect developments on the macrocosmic level. This normative model of the political subject, sedimented over two millennia of socio-political life in imperial China, manifests in the CCP's insistence on forming and reforming 'the mind, psychology, and even character of individuals by means of various party and state policies' (Cheng, 2009, p. 3).

The logics underlying this normative political subject, instantiated in a multitude of classical texts, are most succinctly presented in the Confucian canon *Great Learning* (*da xue* 大学),⁸ which Wu-Wei School participants are required to memorise as an introductory text. The *Great Learning* sets out a 'sequential practice' (Keenan, 2011, pp. xxi-xxii), comprising four initial internal actions and four further actions, that conjoins the political subject's interiority and the situated environment: (1) Investigate Things and Affairs (*ge wu* 格物); (2) Extend One's Knowledge (*zhi zhi* 致知); (3) Make One's Intentions Sincere (*cheng yi* 诚意); (4) Rectify One's Mind (*zheng xin* 正心); (5) Perfect the Person (*xin shen* 修身); (6) Regulate the Family (*qi jia* 齐家); (7) Order the State (*zhi guo* 治国); (8) Bring Peace to All Under the Heaven (*ping tian xia* 平天下). From this perspective, the political subject's interiority and reflexive self-improvement are inextricably bound up with the fate of the family, the state, and the situated human-natural environment.

Both the party-state's insistence on the imperative to self-reform and Wu-Wei participants' insistence on the importance of undertaking *xinxiing* show the influence of this conceptual architecture. However, this linchpin structure has not received sufficient attention in anglophone anthropology. In chapter three, I revisit anthropologist 费孝通 Fei Xiao-Tong's conception of the Chinese self as traditionally situated at the heart of 'scalable networks' (*fu yu shen suo xing de wang luo*

⁸ The *Great Learning* belongs to the canon known as the 'Four Books and Five Classics' (*si shu wu jing* 四书五经). These Confucian texts constituted the core curriculum for imperial examinations in Ming (1368-1644 CE) and Qing (1644-1912 CE) Dynasties (Gardner, 2007).

富于伸缩性的网络) (Fei, 2018 [1947], p. 27), which draws upon the sequential practice articulated in the *Great Learning*. Putting the Wu-Wei ethnography in dialogue with Fei's early exposition, I suggest the notion of 'scalable self' as a lens to capture the enduring assumptions regarding the viable political subject (and indeed the social person), upon which both 'creating the new man' and *xinxing* become possible and compelling.

1.3 The Continued Imperative to Self-Reform in Xi-Era China

How then does the ethical-political imperative of self-reform, self-improvement, and self-perfection bear on social life in the contemporary PRC, a political order that is distinctive, highly mutable, and not wholly understood? In this section, I adumbrate some key injunctions for contemporary PRC citizens, whose biological, intellectual, moral, and social capabilities continue to be seen as inextricable from the macro-historical process of party-state-nation building.

Since the Reform and Opening Up (*gai ge kai fang* 改革开放) era, commencing in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping, the CCP has relented from attempting radical individual-cum-social transformation via 'the creation of new man' (see Yan, forthcoming; Tian and Yan, 2019). The party-state is currently concerned with forming citizen-subjects who metonymise the strength of the contemporary political-cum-moral regime, with each individual contributing to the telos of what President Xi Jinping terms the 'Chinese Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation' (*zhong hua min zu wei da fu xing de zhong guo meng* 中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦).

A word is due on the contemporary government under Xi. While many observers claim that Xi represents a sharp reversal of the moderation seen in the Deng, Jiang, and Hu eras (1979-2011) (see Economy, 2018), I argue with Perry Link (2015) and Aminda Smith (2019) that Xi's agenda is more adequately seen as an effort of 'tying it all back together' (Smith, A. 2019, p. 199). Those who conceive of a simple reversal overlook the evolutionist, teleological, and dialectical materialist historiography that defines the *raison d'être* of the CCP regime. Despite staggering inconsistencies across over seventy years of governance, the CCP has manifested astonishing resilience and performed unceasing (and so far successful) route recalibration, reflecting its commitment to the Maoist emphasis on praxis (*shi jian* 实践) over theory (*li lun* 理论). In this light, the reinvigorated propaganda and tightened information control under Xi is better interpreted as hypercorrection, not reversal; the CCP's governance trajectory remains a teleological and 'authoritarian route to wealth and power' (Link, 2015, p. 27).

Since Xi's ascendancy in 2012, the party-state has promulgated an updated set of self-reform imperatives, through which citizen-subjects would come to embody the multiple coordinates of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics':

- high quality (*gao su zhi* 高素质) citizen bodies and conducts;⁹
- domestic and international competitiveness;
- continued material success;
- socialist core values;¹⁰
- selected moral values gleaned from early Chinese thought;
- national-civilisational pride and party-loving patriotism.

I shall elaborate on these coordinates across the ethnographic chapters. For now, it is important to note that this new regime remains underpinned by dialectical materialist and social evolutionist commitments (Pang, 2019, p. 70). Underlying these new directives for self-reform is a view of history as a linear progression towards the fulfilment of what Xi calls the 'Chinese Dream', animated by citizen-subjects' personal advancements across multiple axes of existence – biological, economic, cultural, educational, and moral. As we shall see, it is in relation to the continued imperative to self-reform (which I posit is ever-changing in content but not in form) that many urban middle-class Chinese turn to organisations such as the Wu-Wei School; some seek to better respond to it, while others hope to find escape.

The question of how and through which state practices people experience the party-state injunction to self-reform is complex, and demands further empirical research; for the purpose of introducing the current project, I shall restrict myself to the following preliminary remarks.

Based on my fieldwork experiences (between 2017 and 2019), citizens experience the self-reform imperative in ways that are often irreducible to outright 'coercion'. Across urban and rural areas of the country, party-state propaganda billboards display messages guiding citizen's self-improvement in diverse aspects: psychological self-care, interpersonal relationships, hygienic behaviours, elderly respect, care for minors, pride of traditional culture, and patriotism, just to

⁹ A discourse that binds together personal improvement, national rejuvenation, and economic development (see Anagnost 2004, 2008; Kipnis, 2006; Kuan, 2014), which I discuss in section 3 of this chapter.

¹⁰ A set of official interpretations of the morality of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' promoted at the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012. These include the national values of 'prosperity', 'democracy', 'civility', and 'harmony'; the social values of 'freedom', 'equality', 'justice', and the 'rule of law'; and the individual values of 'patriotism', 'dedication', 'integrity', and 'friendship' (Xi, 2014, p. 424; Gow, 2017).

name a few. The school-aged children I spoke to via the Wu-Wei School could all fluently recite the core socialist values, as they were tested on this material in their ‘ideological and moral character’ (*si xiang pin de* 思想品德) classes. During my visits to fourteen participant families in five major cities, I found that slogans for self-reform covered the public spaces within their gated communities and the semi-public places of the lobby, the elevator advertisement boards, the staircases, and even the communal waste storage chambers. Such official injunctions are even more prevalent in internet spaces. Figures 1 to 3 are some common examples published under the genre of ‘pro bono advertisement’ (*gong yi guang gao* 公益广告),¹¹ the first of which explicitly uses the concept ‘*xiu shen*’ (修身) found in the famous sequential practice of the *Great Learning*. While these diverse and everyday encounters with (detailed though fragmentary) prescriptions of *the* good citizen was not my explicit research objective, I posit that they exert a palpable influence upon my interlocutors.



Figure 1: A poster guiding citizen self-improvement whose key message reads: ‘civilised self-perfection, book-scented society’ (*wen ming xiu shen, shu xiang she hui* 文明修身，书香社会)

¹¹ These posters were published in July 2020 by the ‘office for the spiritual civilisation construction committee’ (*jing shen wen ming jian she wei yuan hui ban gong shi* 精神文明建设委员会办公室) of Songjiang District, City of Shanghai (*song jiang qu*, 2020). In chapter three, I further discuss the category of the ‘spiritual’ in the contemporary PRC.

社会主义核心价值

富强 文明 自由 公正 爱国 诚信
民主 和谐 平等 法治 敬业 友善

讲文明 文明健康
树新风 有你有我



开展爱国卫生运动 养成文明健康习惯



松江，我们美丽的家园，正在创建全国文明城区

松江区精神文明建设委员会办公室

Figure 2: A poster guiding citizen self-improvement whose key message reads: 'carry out patriotic hygiene campaigns, cultivate civilised health habits' (*kai zhan ai guo wei sheng yun dong, yang cheng wen ming jian kang xi guan* 开展爱国卫生运动，养成文明健康习惯)

社会主义 **核 心** 价值观

富强 民主 文明 和谐
自由 平等 公正 法治
爱国 敬业 诚信 友善



爱国

是一个公民起码的道德，是中华民族的优秀传统，也是调节个人与祖国关系的行为准则。它同社会主义紧密结合在一起，要求人们以振兴中华为己任，促进民族团结、维护祖国统一、自觉报效祖国。

区精神文明建设委员会办

Figure 3: A poster guiding citizen self-improvement whose key message reads: 'patriotism', or 'love for the state' (*ai guo* 爱国)

Significantly, I wish to draw attention to the vagueness of these official prescriptions for citizen self-improvement. Figure 3, under the theme of ‘patriotism’ or ‘love for the state’, affords an apt illustration. The explanatory paragraph reads:

[爱国] 是一个公民起码的道德，是中华民族的优秀传统，也是调节个人与祖国关系的行为准则。它同社会主义紧密结合在一起，要求人们以振兴中华为己任，促进民族团结、维护祖国统一、自觉报效祖国。

[Love for the state] is the fundamental moral quality of a citizen, an outstanding tradition of the Chinese nation, and the rule of conduct for mediating the relationship between the individual and the motherland. It is tightly integrated with socialism, and requires people to take the rejuvenation of China as their own responsibility, promote unity amongst ethnicities, safeguard the integrity of the motherland, and consciously serve the motherland. The directive is marked by both a totalising tone and a lack of specificity in relation to individual conduct. The fourfold prescription of 1) taking the rejuvenation of China as one’s own responsibility, 2) promoting unity amongst ethnicities, 3) safeguarding the integrity of the motherland, and 4) consciously serving the motherland may appear as empty verbiage at a first glance. However, such totalising yet ill-defined injunctions do important work.

Vagueness, I must emphasise, does not signal an erosion of party-state stress on ideological conformity. On the contrary, such vagueness shifts the responsibility of deciding *how* to act ethically and politically onto individual citizen-subjects.

In an article analysing the CCP mode of censorial authority, Perry Link (2002) underscores its prevalent use of ‘vagueness’ as a tool for psychological engineering, which he argues generates a more pervasive sense of risk than would clearly articulated prohibitions. Link suggests that the party-state power may be likened to ‘a giant anaconda coiled in an overhead chandelier’, whose ‘constant silent message is “you yourself decide”’. He argues that the party-state’s deliberately vague proscriptions engender ever-present ‘fear’ for miscalculation, ‘a dull, well-entrenched leeriness that people who deal with the Chinese censorship system usually get used to, and eventually accept as part of their natural landscape’. Such a sentiment exerts ‘impressive’ controlling power on the part of the acting subject. It compels individuals to undertake continuous self-censorship over a wide range of activities – across all areas which they deem, upon reflection, may fall into the amorphous prohibitions that may incur unpredictable punishments.

While Link's discussion focuses on censorship, his argument sheds light on a distinctive feature of the CCP's 'governing culture' (Kipnis, 2008): visibility coupled with vagueness. Censorship and citizen self-improvement may be understood as two directions through which this governing culture is applied – proscriptively and prescriptively; both, however, impute significant exegetical responsibility to the acting subject – 'you yourself decide'. Whereas in the case of censorship citizen-subjects¹² are to curtail activities that, upon their evaluation, may run counter to the party-state's interest, in the case of self-improvement citizen-subjects are to adopt activities that, upon their evaluation, may accord with party-state's priorities. In both cases, citizen-subjects are to interpret the highly visible though purposefully vague injunctions emanating from party-state centre of power and act upon their best interpretation. Nevertheless, vagueness in key state directives does not just create a sense of uncertainty and deterrence; as we shall see in chapter four, it also enables creative interpretations and situated interventions from the grassroots-levels.

The governing culture of visibility entwined with vagueness, moreover, divulges a structural tension in the contemporary imperative to self-reform: the simultaneous heightening of the individual and the party-state. Concurrent with the party-state's institution of individualisation as a developmental strategy since the 1980s, the citizen-subject is increasingly responsibilised to realise national rejuvenation through their idiosyncratic endeavours, rather than by subsuming themselves in the monolithic revolutionary collective moving in unison (see Kleinman et al. 2011; Kuan, 2014; Yan, 2009a, 2009b, 2017, forthcoming). This renewed emphasis on the citizen-subject's 'self-reliance', as Li Zhang demonstrates, is articulated in conjunction with the party-state's unwavering claim to be the "ultimate guardian of 'the people'" (2012, p. 215). Arthur Kleinman and co-authors capture the form of new citizen-subjectivity generated via such atomising processes through the notion of the 'enterprising and desiring self' (Kleinman et al., 2011, p. 15). They emphasise how this new subjectivity is marked by pervasive inner tensions, chief among which is the tension between the self-enterprising individual and the loyal constituent of the party-state (ibid., p. 26). In chapter five, I explore the subjective effects of living with imperatives to self-reform as a constituent of the party-state and as a self-enterprising individual among followers of the Wu-Wei School.

¹² It is important to note that this governing culture is also applied to non-citizen actors who have a stake in the representation of the contemporary PRC, including foreign scholars.

The contemporary PRC is a political order in which the production of citizen-subjects of certain kinds has been – and continues to be – integral to the formation and the reproduction of the party-state structure. Within this strict context, I submit that my interlocutors’ reflexive self-transformations, which I designate as *xiuxing* following their usage, become more than just a matter of self-directed cultivation of virtue. Here, the Socratic question of ‘how ought one to live’ must be contextualised as a question of ‘how ought one to live *as a constitutive member of this singular and all-encompassing political order*’ (see also Laidlaw, 2002, pp. 315-317; Williams, 1985, pp. 174-196). As long as a person wishes to remain a pertinent and significant member of this political order, they must: stay sensitively attuned to the injunctions emanating from that order; interpret the entailments of such injunctions; and enact reflexive self-transformations to the best of their knowledge and capacity. As such, I posit that the *xiuxing* undertaken by my interlocutors at the Wu-Wei School differs so much in degree from what has been described as ‘self-cultivation’ in the new anthropology of ethics that it constitutes a distinctive phenomenon. To elucidate this argument, I now turn toward an exploration of the anthropology of self-cultivation.

2. Why not ‘Self-Cultivation’: New Insights in the Anthropology of Ethics

2.1 The Anthropological Study of Ethics: Freedom and the Human Subject Reconceptualised

This dissertation draws critically on insights generated in the anthropology of ethics, but refrains from adopting the paradigm of ‘self-cultivation’ that has been prominent in this new field of study. As is well known, the anthropological study of ethical life is theoretically and programmatically indebted to Michel Foucault’s later project, which he named a ‘genealogy of ethics’. In this, Foucault sought to eschew the totalising continuum of power-resistance that has constrained critical projects drawing on Marxist and Freudian traditions. Foucault’s turn towards ethical life, as James Laidlaw elucidates, was informed by a foundational question: when had human freedom and the human subject been systematically understood in ways that are different than the absence of power and the subject of desires? (Laidlaw, 2018, p. 177) To address this question, Foucault embarked on an ‘archaeology of knowledge’ (Foucault, 1972) whose scope spanned classical Athens, the Hellenistic period and early Christianity, tracing the ways in which the conduct of pleasure gave way to the interpretation of desires as the dominant field of problematisation (Foucault 1985, 1986, 1997a, 1997b, 2005).

For the anthropology of ethics, Foucault's most influential legacy may lie in the invention of a now widely employed set of conceptual tools (see Faubion, 2001; Laidlaw, 2002; 2018, pp. 177-182; Mahmood, 2005, pp. 27-29). These analytics achieved two theoretical breakthroughs. Firstly, they decoupled the externally prescriptive and internally constitutive aspects of ethical life, what Foucault respectively designates as moral codes and ethics, or 'codes of behaviour and forms of subjectivation' (Foucault, 1985, p. 29). Secondly, they laid the groundwork for theoretical and ethnographic explorations of what James Laidlaw has termed 'reflective freedom'; that is, freedom exercised by subjects situated *within* and *in relation to* structures of power, mediated by actors' situated ethical reflections (Laidlaw, 2013, pp. 102-103, 131, 147-149; see also Foucault, 1997, p. 117). Over the past two decades, anthropologists studying ethical life have developed Foucault's insights by productively exploring ethical practices and exercises of reflective freedom across recognisably liberal and non-liberal contexts (e.g., Cook, 2010; Dave, 2012; Hirschkind, 2006; Lazar, 2017; Mahmood, 2005; Mattingly, 2014; Pandian, 2009; Robbins, 2004).

My current project is fundamentally informed and inspired by these movements toward considering all forms of ethical life as historically contingent and sociologically consequential objects of ethnographic inquiry. It closely follows forerunners in the anthropology of ethics in recognising that the human subject and its pursuit of freedom does not exist in the absence of power relations. By contrast, experiences of freedom are defined and at times heightened in a subject's interaction with the encompassing social structure and the multitudinous injunctions interpellating her existence (Laidlaw, 1995, 2013; Hirschkind, 2006; Mahmood, 2005; Cook, 2010). If the anthropological enterprise is to steer clear of the 'analytical pitfalls of both social determinism and atomistic individualism' (Cook, forthcoming), then we must take seriously all exercises of reflective freedom, even and especially those enmeshed in social contexts that appear to actively deprive subjects of such a notion. For this reason, contemporary China, where an authoritarian agenda of citizen-subjectivity reformation entwines with diverse localised projects of reflexive self-transformation, constitutes a prime ethnographic site for enriching the anthropological understanding of human freedom and the possibilities available to contemporary human subjects. Nevertheless, given the peculiarities of this political order and the specificities of the ethnographic context at hand, I refrain from investigating the Wu-Wei School's *xinxiing* practice through the paradigm of self-cultivation in order to avoid the latter's explicit analytical emphasis on a) the cultivation of virtue and b) the acting subject's relationship of the self to the self.

2.2 Theoretical Disambiguation vis-à-vis the Anthropological Study of Self-Cultivation

In the anthropology of ethics, a productive line of inquiry explores actors' situated self-constitution as moral subjects via a focus on 'self-cultivation'. Developed under the influence of both a Foucauldian approach to ethical life and Aristotelian virtue ethics, this corpus often understands processes of self-cultivation to be synonymous with processes for the cultivation of virtue, whether in highly formalised 'pedagogical' contexts (e.g. Cook, 2010) or more fragmented 'ordinary' situations (e.g. Das, 2012). These studies, in focusing on reflexive self-transformations which hold the acquisition of certain virtuous dispositions as the explicit objective, often analytically privilege the acting subject's *relationship of the self to the self*, and see this relationship as the primary axis through which ethical strivings unfold. This analytical privileging may also derive from the prominent Foucauldian legacy in the anthropology of ethics.

Foucault's original discussions of ethics are famously founded in an archaeological and genealogical analysis of the *pratiques de soi* employed by a privileged social sector of Greek, and then Greco-Roman, society. In these political orders – and given the structural location of the writers with whom Foucault chose to engage – the form of contemporary ethical life both presumed, and aimed to intensify, the autonomy and authority of the ethical actor in his relationship to the self. The Socratic 'care of the self' (*epimeleia heautou*), as Foucault's analysis of *Alcibiades* shows, originally entailed reflexive self-transformation in preparation for a political career in the city-state. In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault traces how this once restricted activity became amplified into a more general 'art of existence' (*technē tou biou*) whose apotheosis would be a 'conversion to self' (*epistrophe eis heautou*) (1986). The attainment of this 'conversion to self', as Foucault observes in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, would culminate in the twinned conditions of 'ataraxy (the absence of inner turmoil, the self-control that ensures that nothing disturbs one) and autarchy (the self-sufficiency which ensures that one needs nothing but the self)' (2005, p. 184). In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault writes further of the 'arts of existence' as 'those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (1985, pp. 10-11).

For investigating ethical self-formation (which is understood to be invariably circumscribed by historically-specific moral codes) Foucault delineates four areas of empirical analysis, which have subsequently informed important works in the recent anthropology of self-

cultivation (e.g. Mahmood, 2005; Cook, 2010). Firstly, what is the ‘ethical substance [*substance éthique*]’, or the aspects of the self amenable to ethical evaluation and transformation? Secondly, what is the ‘mode of subjectivation [*mode d’assujettissement*]’, or ‘the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations?’ Thirdly, what is the ‘self-forming activity [*pratique de soi*]’ that one carries out on the ethical substance, in response to the moral injunctions adopted? And, finally, what is the ‘telos [*téléologie*]’ of the ethical conduct, or the mode of being one seeks to inhabit through these constitutive practices? (1997b, pp. 263-267).

As we shall see, the ethical pursuits of the Wu-Wei participants diverge conspicuously from the Foucauldian four-pronged paradigm in their contingent and flexible engagement with *xinxing*. Many come to the school without having adopted prior moral commitments or having ascertained the telos of their ethical conduct. They have often chanced upon the school through personal networks while trying to address imminent challenges in their everyday lives, ranging from children’s education to illness recovery (see chapters three and four).

The ways in which my interlocutors engage with ethical practices learnt at the Wu-Wei School also deviate from Foucault’s vision of ‘technologies of the self’, which he defines as practices which ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ (1997a, p. 225). While Wu-Wei participants learn a regimen of ethical practices which promises a state of attunement with the encompassing cosmological order, many hold that they would *never* be able to attain that state and demonstrate a remarkable attitude of acceptance (see chapter five). For many, this attitude stems from a common self-conception as ‘ordinary Chinese folks’ confronted by manifold structural constraints, whose ethical strivings must recognise and accommodate these limitations.

The kind of ethical life found in this context, I suggest, demands analytical accommodation beyond Foucauldian studies of self-cultivation, which consistently construe reflexive self-transformation as equivalent to the acquisition of virtue and privilege the ethical actors’ relationship of the self to the self. To more fully unpack the significance of this move away from Foucauldian analysis, I shall briefly consider two important studies in the field of anthropology of ethics.

Saba Mahmood, who brings Foucauldian analysis together with an Aristotelean conception of virtue ethics, argues for treating Cairene women involved in mosque-based piety movements as ethical actors with historically and culturally specific ‘agentival capacity’ (2001, p. 212). From this vantage point, her ethnographical analysis explicates how these women deploy ‘socially prescribed performances’ as scaffolding for their individual self-realisation, which culminates in the ‘ideal virtuous self’ (2005, p. 2, p. 31). As an important early contribution to the anthropology of ethics, Mahmood’s work expanded the intermediate space between the compulsion of social norms and the manoeuvres of reflective actors (see also Robbins, 2004, pp. 314-316; Kuan, 2015, pp. 7-8). She undertakes a critical project to a) parochialise ‘liberal-progressive’ accounts of ‘women’s fulfilment or self-realization’ (2005, pp. 11-12) and b) delineate how her interlocutors’ piety-oriented activism challenges ‘normative liberal conceptions of politics’ (ibid., p. 4). Adopting a post-structuralist conception of politics as imminent in social practices and discursive articulations, Mahmood analytically privileges how mosque participants fashion themselves into increasingly pious Islamic subjects through varied pedagogical processes, ritual performances, and female interpretive practices of authoritative Islamic texts. In viewing her interlocutors’ ethical projects as isomorphic with the political, however, Mahmood eschews issues of how the more ‘structured’ domains of political life, such as state injunctions and gender hierarchies, bear upon the pietists’ self-directed cultivation of virtue.

As another example in recent literature on ethical self-cultivation, Joanna Cook investigates the lived experiences of cultivating the Buddhist ethical non-self (*anattā*) in a northern Thai monastery that practises and propagates *vipassanā* meditation. Her project is chiefly concerned with grasping the ‘ascetic interiority’, implicitly the primary locus of ethical action (2010, p. 15, p. 174). Cook analyses meditation “in the Greek sense of ‘*askesis*’”, or ‘the disciplined practices and forms of self-regulation that become imperative for ... the personal development of particular virtues’ (2010, p. 16). She focuses on how ‘the practitioner wills, observes and experiences the changing nature of the mind and the body through a very conscious process of self-fashioning’ (ibid.).

Importantly, Cook observes that the progressive dissolution of the self is only rendered meaningful in an ethicised community of practice. While the embodied meditation work takes place individually, the teaching of techniques and interpretation of sensory phenomena in light of Buddhist principles takes place interpersonally, such as in group teaching and in daily ‘Examination of Feeling’ sessions (one-on-one with a teacher) (pp. 70-86). Cook argues that the renunciate is grounded in, and defined by, the relationships, moral codes, and institutions of which he or she is

a part (pp. 126-134). Nevertheless, given the highly formalised religious context in which she conducted fieldwork and the particularised soteriological good (i.e. the non-self) her interlocutors seek to attain through their ethical actions, Cook retains a prominent focus upon the renunciate's 'hermeneutic relationship with the self' (pp. 15-18, 186-190), even when this relationship is enmeshed in the social relations of their situated religious community.

Given this prominence of the acquisition of virtue and the concomitant foregrounding of ethical actors' relationship of the self to the self in the literature treating self-cultivation, I choose to suspend the usage of this otherwise productive analytic. My objective is to describe the complex and meaningful ethical actions my interlocutors undertake via *xiuxing*, and how these intersect with ethical-political injunctions emanating from the party-state centre of power. Though the popularisation of *xiuxing* discourse and practice in the PRC bears an ostensible resemblance to the increased popular uptake of *vipassanā* meditation in Thailand and the pietists' concerted efforts to cultivate the 'ideal virtuous self' in Egypt, it would be analytically imprecise to adopt a lens similar to that of Mahmood's or Cook's. Despite drawing on selected ascetic practices and selected languages of virtue, *xiuxing* for many Wu-Wei participants amounts to a multilayered social action (through, but not necessarily aimed at, the relationship of the self to self) which explores and constitutes particularised ways of living a good life as citizens-subjects of the PRC. In chapter five, I develop an analytic of 'recreational asceticism' to describe the kind of ethical life found in this context, which differs significantly from the self-cultivation undertaken by ethical actors who subscribe to a prescriptive regime grounded in an identifiable soteriology.

3. Why not ‘Self-Cultivation’: Theoretical Disambiguation vis-à-vis the Anthropology of China

3.1 An Analytical Imbalance in Anthropological Studies of Political and Religious Life: Positioning the Party-State

My analytical suspension of ‘self-cultivation’ is furthermore driven by two entwined theoretical concerns in relation to the anthropology of China. The first concern is an analytical imbalance in some recent anthropological studies of political and religious life in the PRC, concerning the positionality of the party-state in ethnographic analysis. As I illustrate below, studies in the anthropology of politics tend to overemphasise the coercive power of the party-state; meanwhile, the literature treating ‘self-cultivation’ in the Anglophone anthropology of religion, and some recent work in Chinese anthropology of religion under the banner of ‘*xiuxing* anthropology’ (*xiu xing ren lei xue* 修行人类学), tend to overlook party-state influences in the shaping of citizen subjectivity.

In anthropological studies of political life, which have taken a major interest in post-Mao population politics and citizen subjectivity formation, the citizen-subject is frequently construed to be passive in the face of a totalising and coercive state structure. Here, ethical life is conspicuously absent. This tendency is epitomised in the recent corpus investigating the notion of *suzhi* in relation to post-Mao forms of governmentality.

Since the onset of market restructuring, the party-state has reformulated its governing platform across multiple axes, one of which concerns propounding a discourse of citizen-improvement pivoting on *suzhi*, usually glossed as ‘quality’ (Kipnis, 2006, p. 296). This broad signifier, first introduced through birth control campaigns, was subsequently disseminated across diverse spheres of life, from state education to management practices (Anagnost, 2004, 2008; Greenhalgh, 2010; Kipnis, 2006; Kuan, 2012, 2014; Murphy, 2004; Yan, H., 2003; Woronov, 2009). As Tamara Jacka shows, in recent popular and official usage, *suzhi* can name any innate and nurtured ‘physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct’ (2009, p. 524). In this way, Teresa Kuan argues, the *suzhi* discourse ‘constructs the problem of national strength and economic development in terms of personal improvement’ (2014, p. 67).

Anthropological studies of *suzhi* have shown how the concept functions as a social operator for indexing value differentials between members of the society, and ordering their subject positions in a state-wide hierarchy. For Yan Hairong, discourses around *suzhi* powerfully evince the party-state adoption of neoliberal governmentality. She argues that via the discourse of *suzhi* and a concomitant set of administrative practices, human subjectivities are reterritorialised into the public sphere of development, where every citizen-subject is subsumed into the goal of national resurgence and becomes responsible for it in variable and unequal ways (2003, p. 498). A poignant illustration is found in Ann Anagnost's exposition of the contrasting subject positions of the middle-class child and the rural migrant. Anagnost observes that, by virtue of the distinct levels of *suzhi* potential imputed to the two kinds of citizen-subjects, the middle-class child is positioned for affective nurturance and the rural migrant discipline and labour extraction (2004). In this way, normative conceptions of citizen-subjects' *suzhi* potential effectively justify their hierarchical emplacement on a graduated scale of socio-political belonging.

While writers such as Anagnost and Yan convincingly expose the 'classificatory thought' (Foucault, 1973, p. 8) operative in post-Mao governmentality and population politics, their approaches are marked by a prominent structural focus. In their otherwise rich and sophisticated analyses, the acting party-state is positioned in the foreground while citizen-subjects are construed as passive subjects being produced and acted upon, acquiescing to the 'subject-positions' imputed to them. In this study, I build on this crucial insight generated from anthropology of politics: citizen-subjects of the contemporary PRC are enfolded (in unequal ways but without exception) in an ineluctable and enduring project of party-state formation; their self-improvement becomes coterminous with the aggrandizement of their enveloping political order.

However, as I show across the ethnographic chapters, the middle-class citizen-subjects I worked with demonstrate remarkable sagacity and reflexivity in how they operate in relation to the normative injunctions emanating from the party-state centre of power. I argue that injecting a focus on ethical life into studies of political life in the PRC will enrich our appreciation of the complexities in how citizen-subjects and the party-state interrelate. Based on my ethnographic analysis, furthermore, I question the prevailing view that the party-state deployment of *suzhi* discourse and its emphasis on citizen-subject's responsibility to self-improve signals a movement towards neoliberal forms of governmentality (cf. Anagnost, 2004, 2008; Greenhalgh, 2010; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Yan H., 2003).

Whereas the aforementioned studies of the PRC's political life tend to overemphasise party-state influences in citizen-making, a contrasting tendency to understate party-state involvement in citizen subjectivity formation is seen in recent works analysing 'self-cultivation' and '*xiuxing*' in Anglophone and Chinese anthropologies of religion. Here, ethical life is too quickly extracted from political life and relegated to a domain away from the formations and negotiations over citizenship belonging.

In Anglophone anthropology and its allied disciplines, researchers have widely observed how a) policing the 'religious sphere' has long been instrumental to Chinese state processes and modernising ambitions since the late Qing Dynasty; and b) the contemporary religious domain, since the post-Mao rehabilitation of religious life, has come to harbour multifarious aspirations and agendas issuing from both the party-state and the grassroots-level (see Ashiwa, 2000; Ashiwa and Wank, 2009; Chau, 2005; Fisher, 2015; Goossaert and Palmer, 2011; Potter, 2003; Van der Veer, 2013; Weller et al., 2017; Yang, 2008). However, less attention has been directed to ethical life in the margins of the explicitly religious domain, and how citizens and party-state interact therein.¹³ While some prominent writers have taken an interest in the ethical dimension of elite and popular religiosities, their approaches tend to analytically emplace citizen-subjects in a pre-determined religious domain where the party-state fades into the background. Here, ethical life – usually glossed as 'religious or spiritual self-cultivation' – is identified as a sub-category of religious or spiritual activities, and construed as a rarefied mode of social action reserved for the religiously-minded actors.

For instance, in a recent monograph, David Palmer and Elijah Siegler (2017) document encounters between Daoist monks of Quanzhen Order and American spiritual cultivators ('Dream Trippers') in Mount Hua, a sacred site for both groups. They frame this study as an anthropological account of cultural contact; through the lens of Daoist spiritual self-cultivation, they seek to shed light on what they term the 'predicament of modern spirituality' (i.e., the simultaneous dissolution of sources of authority and standards of authenticity). Their sensitive and nuanced ethnography, however, is marked by assumptions of holism and insufficient consideration of the political. Palmer and Siegler argue,

¹³ An important exception to this is seen in discussions over the rise and fall of *qigong*, where researchers have investigated how the party-state and citizen-subjects contingently co-construct but also contest the legitimacy and significance of these practices derived from indigenous healing traditions and Daoist bodywork (e.g., Liu, 2019, pp. 1-38; Otehode, 2009; Palmer, 2003, 2007). In chapter four, I build on this body of literature to illustrate how my interlocutors' ethical pursuits continue to be ambivalently entangled with the troubled legacies of *qigong*.

The encounters at Huashan reveal the impasse which threatens both trajectories today, in a condition of high modernity: the fragility of a fully autonomous spiritual self on the one hand, and the crumbling away of the traditional authority of Chinese Daoism on the other. For both, there is a temptation to find another source of authenticity by crossing over to the other side. Either way, the protagonists face an impossible choice: taking refuge in a broken lineage and tradition, or a flight into pure subjectivity? (p. 79)

From this perspective, these ethnographers construe the ‘shared predicament’ besetting two groups of otherwise sociologically distinct spiritual self-cultivators as symptomatic of a globalised problem. Throughout the book, Palmer and Siegler remain preoccupied with how two modes of Daoist spirituality – the ‘ultramodern’ and the ‘encapsulated’ (pp. 430-431) – respond to the exigencies of ‘modernity’, conceptualised as a homogenous condition that gives rise to a single, universal form of political-economic order and regime. They specifically remark that Daoist spiritual self-cultivation appears to survive among increasingly marginalised religious professionals and international spiritual seekers, while such undertakings remain largely irrelevant to the lives of urban Chinese citizens (pp. 441-442).

The Wu-Wei ethnography throws this observation into question, if we are willing to delay the ready association of a) *ethical striving* with ‘self-cultivation’ and b) *the transmission of autochthonous knowledge-practice* with *teaching activities taking place in state-supervised religious institutions*. While retreating into remote areas and learning forms of self-transformation founded in Daoist philosophy and bodywork, the urban middle-class participants to the Wu-Wei School nonetheless discursively dissociate their endeavours from the domain of religion. Instead, they ground *xiuxing* principally in the domain of ‘Chinese traditional culture’, and construe their efforts as significantly contributing to the well-being of themselves, their family, and their situated socio-political order. Attending to these complexities entails suspending the a priori equation of self-transformative practices with religious self-cultivation. The Wu-Wei School and its attendant sociality constitutes what Fisher (2015) terms a ‘multi-aspirational site’, where multiple and sometimes countervailing aspirations come into contact. As I illustrate, these aspirations far exceed what may be accounted for by way of religious self-fashioning.

The work of Adam Chau provides another example of the tendency to limit ethical life to the narrowly-delineated religious domain. In an overview of religious life in China, Chau (2019)

ranks self-cultivation among five ‘modalities of doing religion’ in contemporary China’s transforming religious landscape. He writes of what he terms ‘the personal-cultivational modality’,

This modality presupposes a long-term interest in cultivating and transforming oneself (whether Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, or sectarian). The goals of this transformation and cultivation are different in each religious tradition: to become a so-called ‘immortal’ (*xian*) in Daoism, to be reincarnated into a better life or to achieve nirvana in Buddhism, and to become a man of virtue or to be closer to sagehood (*sheng*) in Confucianism. But the shared element is the concern with one’s own ontological status and destiny, something akin to a Foucaultian “care of the self.” In other words, the practices in this modality provide “technologies of the self.” (p. 27)

Chau postulates a loose correlation between the ‘personal-cultivational modality of doing religion’ in the PRC and the Foucauldian ‘care of the self’, an association which I have already problematised in section one. For Chau, self-cultivation comprises practices motivated by religious actors’ concern with their own ‘ontological status and destiny’, the goal of which differs per religious tradition. This approach pre-emptively confines self-transformative activities to the domain of religion. It leaves unexplored a crucial ethnographic and conceptual avenue: what do people mean when they talk about and undertake transformative work on and through their constituent parts – the ‘body’ (*xiu shen* 修身), the ‘heart’ (*xiu xin* 修心), the ‘constitution’ (*xiu xing* 修性), the ‘life’ (*xiu ming* 修命), and beyond? What forms of efficacy do they seek to engender? What kinds of influence do they seek to enact? What are the crucial assumptions about personhood and sociality upon which various forms of reflexive self-transformation become practical and persuasive?

As I demonstrate, while those undertaking *xiuxing* via the Wu-Wei School are indeed concerned with their own ‘ontological status and destiny’ and enthralled by Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian resources, they are hardly interested in becoming immortals, achieving nirvana, or attaining sagehood. Instead, their primary considerations are variously related to diverse facets of life (including health, education, career, and personal fulfilment) that converge upon the making of a worthy existence in the contemporary PRC. In this context, *xiuxing* becomes inextricable from the articulation of socio-political belonging in a political order that prescribes the imperative to self-reform in diverse (though relentless) ways.

Recently, some researchers in the Chinese-speaking anthropology of religion have explored the phenomenon of ‘*xiuxing*’ (e.g. Chen, 2017; Lun and Dong, 2019; Yang and Chen, 2017; Yang et al., 2017). Notably, since 2013, Chen Jinguo 陈进国, Huang Jianbo 黄剑波, and Yang Derui 杨德睿 have made programmatic proposals for a ‘*xiuxing* anthropology’ (*xin xing ren lei xue* 修行人类学), intended to ‘provide a new, reflective approach to indigenous Chinese anthropology of religion’¹⁴ (Yang et al., 2017, pp. 120; see also Chen, 2017; Yang and Chen, 2017). These scholars identify the proliferation of discourses and activities pivoting on ‘*xiuxing*’ in Chinese societies and seek to concentrate research efforts by delineating a sub-field of anthropological study explicitly treating this phenomenon. Nevertheless, I suggest that their proposed analytical framework suffers from inbuilt imbalances comparable to the aforementioned works on self-cultivation in the Anglophone anthropology of religion.

To begin with, these researchers pre-emptively consign *xiuxing* to the domain of religion. Yang Derui, for instance, suggests that ‘*xiuxing* anthropology’ has as its object of analysis:

对特定宗教的追随者为了成为更理想的宗教信徒——超凡入圣——而从事的各种学习活动，研究人们如何逐步习得并体现 (embody)¹⁵ 某种宗教所欲陶冶的特定类型的宗教情绪、感受、认知、意志、想象、实践等惯习的过程 (ibid., 2017, pp. 123).

The learning activities undertaken by followers of particularised religions in order to become more idealised religious believers – to transcend the mundane and enter the divine – [the study of which entails] researching how people gradually acquire and embody particularised religious sentiments, felt experiences, cognitions, volitions, imaginaries, practices, and other habitus¹⁶ that these religions wish to inculcate [in their followers] (my translation).

This analytical agenda rests upon a priori structural distinctions of the mundane against the divine and the religious against the non-religious; in treating these complexly entwined domains of social life as self-bounded and self-explanatory, it risks excluding ethical strivings in the margins of (and especially those that self-proclaim to lie outside of) the ostensibly clearly identifiable religious sphere. As Peter Van der Veer shows, the category of religion ‘has a complex genealogy in Western history and has been applied to China (and elsewhere) not to empirically describe but to conceptually produce a particular social field’ (2013, p. 154). The descriptive project of

¹⁴ My translation of the original: ‘*hua ren ben tu de zong jiao ren lei xue you xin de fan si lu jing* 对华人本土的宗教人类学有新的反思路径’.

¹⁵ English term in the original.

¹⁶ ‘惯习’ (*guan xi*) is the conventionally used Chinese theoretical term that translates the Bourdieusian ‘habitus’.

anthropology risks both conceptual imprecision and analytical impoverishment if sharp boundaries are prematurely drawn between social fields traversed by phenomena such as *xiuxing*.

Further to this, ‘*xiuxing* anthropology’ explicitly espouses assumptions of holism, and with it a concomitant disregard for sociological and political specificities of the ‘Chinese world’ (*hua ren shi jie* 华人世界) under consideration. Chen Jinguo suggests that the upsurge of *xiuxing* is inextricable from the forces of ‘globalisation, informatisation, and urbanisation’ (*quan qiu hua, xin xi hua, cheng zhen hua* 全球化, 信息化, 城镇化) (Yang et al., 2017, p. 122). He furthermore argues:

修行话语的盛行也是都市人之精神时尚和阶层分化的有机组成部分，是都市精英主义的精神诉求和异化。

The prevalence of the *xiuxing* discourse is also an organic constituent of the spiritual fashion and class stratification of urbanites – [it] issues from the spiritual quest and the alienation of urban elitism (ibid., my translation).

I must dissent from this hastily and homogenising attribution of the rise of *xiuxing* phenomenon to globalising forces and ‘urban elitism’ in Chinese societies. What is conspicuously absent in this framing is the register of the political, and how the PRC’s particular political-economic regime exerts pressure on individual ethical strivings (and beyond).¹⁷ As we shall see, while many Wu-Wei participants may indeed be categorised as the rising urban elite, analysing their ethical strivings via the lens of ‘spiritual fashion’ and ‘urban elitism’ would make light of the efforts they make in order to live well in the PRC’s idiosyncratic political order.

3.2 Ambiguity in Current Analytical Usages of ‘Self-Cultivation’ in the Context of the PRC

A further reason for my analytical suspension of ‘self-cultivation’ concerns the ambiguity present in current analytical usages of ‘self-cultivation’ in the Chinese context. In the study of China in anthropology and its allied disciplines, the concept of ‘self-cultivation’ has been used to render into English diverse forms of reflexive activity, generally pivoting around the verb *xiu* and in implicit or explicit reference to pre-Communist forms of sociality and moral praxis (see Ivanhoe, 2000). In addition to invocations in the context of religious life (e.g. Chau, 2019; Goossaert, 2012; Palmer and Siegler, 2017), the term ‘self-cultivation’ surfaces in studies across vastly different

¹⁷ Perhaps the conspicuous absence of the political and the overwhelming inclination towards universalising, economising explanations in this otherwise astute and nuanced proposal constitute an oblique reflection of the peculiar political-economic regime in which it is situated (see also Link, 2002).

historical periods and sociological contexts. Examining Liu Shaoqi's 1939 lectures collectively titled 'How to Be A Good Communist', Christos Lynteris uses 'self-cultivation' to translate Liu's injunction for CCP members to undertake unending *xinyang* (修养), with the objective of continuously enhancing their revolutionary will (2013, pp. 29-57). Tian Li and Yan Yunxiang, analysing 679 conjugal letters written by a politically devout couple between 1961 and 1986, describe these multivocal exchanges as efforts toward 'the self-cultivation of socialist personhood' (2019, p. 88). Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang, exploring the practices of *yangsheng* (养生) among their predominantly retired interlocutors in Beijing's West City District in the 1990s, use 'self-cultivation', 'hobbies', and '*yangsheng*' as interchangeable terms for activities ranging from ballroom dancing and bird keeping to *qigong* and quiet-sitting meditation (2005, pp. 306-307). Canglong Wang, writing of students pursuing a form of 'classical education' in the 2010s (*jing dian jiao yu* 经典教育) which features rote memorisation of Chinese classical texts, describes the student experience as a 'turn to classical education for moral self-cultivation' (2016, p. 440).

This indistinctness in current analytical usages of 'self-cultivation', which now roughly denotes all sorts of reflexive activities aimed at the enhancement of personal efficacy, presents several problems.

First, in relying on the trope 'self-cultivation', a notion firmly rooted in sinology and its textual studies of early Chinese thought (e.g. Ivanhoe, 2000; Keenan, 2011; Roth, 1991; Tu, 1979; Virág, 2015), ethnographers risk overemphasising conceptual continuity at the expense of ignoring actors' creative and sophisticated appropriation of indigenous resources. Instead of hastily ushering a diverse array of contextualised activities into the established but elusive conceptual field of self-cultivation, in this study I experiment with treating *xiuxing* as a node in a web of aspirations and activities. I ask, what chains of associations and networks of events are being activated when people talk about and undertake to *xiuxing*? What are moreover left unspoken, and why?

Secondly – and more importantly – the term 'cultivation' poorly conveys the weight, propulsion, and intensity inherent in the Chinese notion of *xiu*,¹⁸ which denotes a variety of activities pivoting on amending and ameliorating existing flaws. The prominence of *xiu* found in varied ethnographic contexts (such as in the studies mentioned above) demands explanation;

¹⁸ As explained earlier, in verb form *xiu* may variously denote to amend, administrate, build, embellish, repair, and revise; when compounded with the verb *xing*, which primarily means to walk, travel, and put into action, *xiuxing* denotes a lengthy process to ameliorate, perfect, reshape, and transform the person.

instead, these nuances are currently being explained away through indiscriminate usages of ‘self-cultivation’. This dissertation is an attempt to go some ways toward furnishing a situated (and necessarily limited) perspective. I examine the social life of *xiuxing* at the Wu-Wei School, vis-à-vis the prominent career of *xiushen* and *xiuyang* in early Chinese philosophy, party-state discourses, and contemporary governmental practices. Attending to both conceptual continuities and sociological specificities, I work to reveal the interplay between intellectual history, political formation, and the act of living in contemporary PRC, which unfolds against a rapidly transforming (and deeply contradictory) economic, political, and moral landscape (Liu, 2000, 2002, 2009, 2017; Santos and Harrell, 2017; Kleinman et al., 2011; Osburg, 2013; Oxfeld, 2010; Yan, Y., 2003, 2009). What postulates about the viable social person, and what visions of socio-political life, are revealed by the complex interactions between official and popular usages of *xiuxing* and its cognates? How do these suppositions and visions, in turn, animate Wu-Wei participants’ endeavours of living a good life as well as the party-state’s historical project of national rejuvenation?

4. Theoretical Positioning: *Xiuxing* in the Context of Citizen-Making

In this dissertation, I explore the social life of *xiuxing* unfolding via the Wu-Wei School, in the context of citizen-making specific to the political order of contemporary PRC. Since British sociologist T.H. Marshall’s influential formulation of citizenship as a status accorded to full members of a political community (Marshall, 1983 [1950]), in political science and political sociology, extensive discussions have unfolded over how citizenship belongings may be demarcated and how citizen rights may be extended (e.g. Brubaker, 1998; Turner, 1990; Smith, 1999; Karolewski, 2010). Their richness notwithstanding, these works have concerned the prescriptive dimension of citizenship: a normative structural position franchised by political authorities of a given nation-state. More recently, animated by interventions from postcolonial critical theory, anthropology, and cultural sociology, a growing corpus of empirical research has investigated how actors in structurally compromised positions interpret, contest, and negotiate their distinctive modes of citizenship belonging (e.g. Beaman, 2015; Holston, 2008; Lazar, 2008; Petryna, 2002; Rao, 2010; Rosaldo, 1994, 2003; Wang C., 2016). Conceived thusly, citizenship can no longer remain a passively accorded status (Isin, 2008, 2012); it becomes coterminous with claims for recognition articulated from ‘marginal spaces’ (Turner, 2016) and acts of ‘constructing’ one’s political belonging (Glenn, 2011) against ‘coercive definitions of citizenship that emanate from state centers of power’ (Rosaldo, 2003, p. 1).

Aihwa Ong, in an important early article, propounds a view of cultural citizenship as a Foucauldian process of ‘subject-ification’, by which she means ‘a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society’ (Ong, 1996, p. 737). Ong’s conception of citizenship, as a dialectical process of subjectivation and subjection, lends itself to critical reflections on citizenship in contemporary China, where the party-state continues to dominate the formation of citizen subjectivity on the one hand, while the ongoing marketisation enables more diverse grassroots-level citizen-making projects on the other. The domain of education proves a particularly fertile ground for this dialectical elaboration of citizenship belongings. Recent studies have underscored how macro-political tensions in ongoing party-state modernisation efforts become enfolded in micro-political acts of parenting, schooling, health-maintenance, and individual striving for socio-political inclusion (Dutournier and Wang Y., 2018; Kuan, 2015; Sheng, 2015, 2019; Wang C., 2016, 2018).

In this dissertation, I expand on this new body of literature by critically investigating the constitution of political subjectivity and the construction of socio-political belonging at the Wu-Wei School, both of which take place via discourses, practices, and interactions pivoting on *xiuxing*. My analysis accentuates the complexities of citizen-making in an educational setting ‘beyond the state reach’ – how it both imitates prescriptions and priorities emanating from the party-state, while also sophisticatedly deploying earlier forms of knowledge-practice to negotiate distinctive modalities of belonging in relation to the ongoing PRC state building.

In a recent theoretical piece, Sian Lazar makes twinned propositions in relation to anthropological research into ‘non-normative citizenship formations’: to recognise ‘languages of citizenship other than that of rights’, and to attend to non-normative locations for the practices of citizenship (2016, pp. 6-7). Heeding her compelling suggestions, I pay attention to my interlocutors’ unconventional languages of political action, available to them as situated political subjects in the PRC political order. In so doing, I probe citizenship formations in surprising locations, such as a small grassroots-level organisation for learning ‘*xiuxing*’ informed by what is known as ‘China’s Traditional Culture’ (*zhong guo chuan tong wen hua* 中国传统文化).

My study differs in its approach from recent works on the PRC population politics such as Susan Greenhalgh’s famous study entitled *Cultivating Global Citizens* (2010). Though similarly concerned with the formation of citizens and, in turn, its formative influence on the ongoing party-

state-building, my analysis complements Greenhalgh's comprehensive though overtly state-centred approach. I attend to the multiple lines of forces inhering in citizen-making, which takes place in seemingly improbable loci such as the Wu-Wei School and via surprising languages such as *xiuxing*. While I sympathise with Greenhalgh's argument that the making of PRC citizens is guided by a 'unique assemblage of logics', comprising elements of Confucianism, Leninism, Maoism, social Darwinism, and reasoning of materialist science (2010, p. 29), I show how Wu-Wei School participants do not take such logics at face value but instead supply their own sophisticated interpretations. This is not to say that my interlocutors somehow extricate themselves from what Greenhalgh terms China's 'vital politics', aimed at the production of new citizen-subjects for a modern socialist state. Rather, the formation of PRC citizen-subjects is a process marked by the situated ethical deliberations and sophisticated manoeuvres of grassroots-level actors.

Insofar as I am concerned with the interactivity between citizen-subjects and the party-state at the site of the person, I draw critically on the pioneering studies of Farquhar and Zhang (2005, 2012) and Kuan (2015), which bring together the anthropological studies of politics and ethics. In the context of Beijing retirees' life-cultivation (*yangsheng*) practices and Kunming middle-class parents' child rearing activities, these ethnographers identify how citizen-subjects seemingly comply with state injunctions, but subtly depart from these normative demands by constructing spheres of personalised ethical-political influences; they do this via situated ethical deliberations and creative manoeuvres.

In the first case, retirees are observed to craft individualised, comprehensive programmes for maintaining their bodily and mental efficacy. Farquhar and Zhang argue that these *yangsheng* activities, which ostensibly accommodate the state vision of raising population quality, establish a sphere away from the state where the values of the self are continuously augmented and asserted in highly personalised ways (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005, pp. 318-323). In the second case, Kunming parents are observed to deploy what Kuan calls the highly flexible 'art of disposition' in child-rearing, despite nominally following state directives. While fully conscious of the official injunction to raise the young generation's *suzhi* and competitiveness (and moreover finding such endeavours essential for securing a bright future for their children), Kuan's interlocutors see successful parenting as creating a space apart for their children's individualised flourishing outside the state's directives while simultaneously meeting these ineluctable demands (Kuan, 2015, pp. 62-84, pp. 110-139).

While my project is inspired by these innovative approaches to PRC social life, my emphasis differs from these theoretical forerunners in two ways. First, Kuan and Farquhar and Zhang are primarily interested in how their interlocutors “‘create a space apart’ even while collaborating with the state” (Kuan, 2015, pp. 25-26; Farquhar and Zhang, 2005, p. 323). I am instead concerned with the complex ways in which my interlocutors interact with the party-state while seemingly creating ‘a space apart’. Secondly, Kuan sees her theoretical agenda as the formulation of ‘an alternative theory of power rooted in indigenous Chinese thought’; through this, she seeks to offer a framework ‘that can simultaneously accommodate, on the one hand, the consideration of political rationality, expert knowledge, and economic transition, and on the other hand, the actor’s point of view, that is to say, the concern with personal efficacy and the capacity to influence’ (2015, p. 25). While I aspire to strike a comparable balance in my ethnographic analysis, I am less concerned with offering ‘an alternative theory of power rooted in indigenous Chinese thought’ or ‘non-modern’ in its nature (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005, p. 304). My theoretical agenda is instead to offer a new analysis of the relationship between the citizen-subject and the party-state, which I argue continues to exert foundational influences in the lives of PRC citizens.

As I elucidate throughout the ethnographic chapters, for my interlocutors, undertaking *xiuxing* by engaging with earlier forms of esoteric knowledge and modalities of influence is hardly directed at creating an autonomous (though admittedly limited) domain of power and efficacy. It is instead a thorough-going relational endeavour to generate a more advantageous arrangement of one’s positionality, vis-à-vis the field of influences (both material and immaterial) encompassing one’s existence. I capture this entwined ethical-political undertaking via the notion of ‘reflective manoeuvre’ in chapters three and five.

As we shall see, both the reflective manoeuvre of my interlocutors and the citizen-subjectivity formation of the party-state are underpinned by historically-specific postulates of personhood, whose defining features are a) the imperative of reflexive self-improvement and b) the capacity of scalable influence. It is partly upon these shared conceptions that citizen-subjects and the party-state creatively and contingently coalesce, despite maintaining multipolar and sometimes irreconcilable differences. I capture this complex form of citizen-state interaction via the notion of ‘coopetition’, which I elaborate through an investigation of Wu-Wei healing practices in chapter four.

My overarching ambition in this dissertation is to adumbrate a framework that attends to both the sagacity and reflexivity of the citizen-subjects undertaking *xinxiing* on the one hand, and the pervasiveness and persistence of the party-state undertaking citizen-reform on the other. As Lazar argues, ‘at its most elemental, a focus on citizenship is a way of approaching the political’ (2016, p. 9). In the context of the PRC, the political is inextricable from personal strivings to enact a worthy existence, as well as party-state strivings to enact a peculiar historical vision.

5. Situating the Current Project: Context, Methodology, and Chapter Overview

5.1 Policy Context: Reviving ‘China’s Outstanding Traditional Culture’

Despite its founding anti-traditionalism, since the 1989 Tiananmen Square Movement, the party-state has cautiously embraced a version of previously denounced ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ (hereinafter CTC) which is deemed conducive for political legitimation. Some first signs of the official rehabilitation of CTC appeared in 1993, with the publication of two feature articles highlighting the ‘comeback’ and ‘charm’ of ‘national learning’¹⁹ in the party-state controlled *People’s Daily* and *Guangming Daily* (Xie, 2011, pp. 43-44). Thereafter concepts rooted in early Chinese philosophy and imperial modes of governance increasingly penetrated the CCP’s official discourse as blueprints for socialist modernity. Among these are the notions of ‘moderately prosperous society’ (*xiao kang she hui* 小康社会) and ‘harmonious society’ (*he xie she hui* 和谐社会), now enshrined in the ‘Two Centenary Goals’²⁰ advanced at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012.

The discursive mobilisation of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ reached new intensity since Xi Jinping’s ascendancy in 2012, culminating in the 2017 State Council directive for ‘Implementing the Project for Inheritance and Development of Fine Chinese Traditional Culture’. Remarkably, the President deals with the issue of ‘traditional culture’ head-on in a recent official anthology, *The Governance of China* (2014a, 2014b). There, Xi attributes an unprecedented significance to CTC in

¹⁹ National learning (*guo xue* 国学) was first invoked by May Fourth intellectual Liang Qichao (梁启超) in 1902 and later defined by Zhang Taiyan (章太炎) as the ‘indigenous learning’ of a country (Xie, 2011, p. 39). Chinese traditional culture and national learning – two semantically ambiguous and politically loaded concepts – are used interchangeably in the nationwide discourse on CTC revival as well as by my interlocutors at the Wu-Wei School.

²⁰ The ‘Two Centenary Goals’ (*liang ge yi bai nian fen dou mu biao* 两个一百年奋斗目标) involve 1) ‘the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects by the centenary of the CCP (founded in 1921)’ and 2) the building of a ‘modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious by the centenary of the PRC (founded in 1949)’ (Xi, 2014b, p. 153).

the realisation of the CCP political vision. Across six pieces collected under the chapter ‘Culturally Advanced China’, Xi predicates the twinned agendas of the ‘Two Centenary Goals’ and the ‘Chinese Dream of Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ upon what he terms the ‘strengthening of the cultural soft power of the nation’ (Xi, 2014a, p. 403). He further elaborates on the mechanism through which China’s ‘cultural soft power’ is to be elevated: the comprehensive inculcation of ‘core socialist values’ among citizen-subjects.²¹ This set of twelve injunctions, Xi asserts, constitute vehicles that ‘carry forward [*chuan cheng* 传承] and sublimate [*sheng hua* 升华] China’s outstanding traditional culture’ (2014b, p. 171).

Two crucial points must be noted in relation to the CTC revitalisation project Xi adumbrates. First, by aligning ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ with party-state governing directives, Xi appears to profess a radical revision of CCP founding political-cum-moral vision, which vehemently denounced all things traditional. However, Xi’s discursive mobilisation of CTC retains a subtle yet crucial qualification: ‘outstanding [*youxiu*]', alternatively rendered into English as ‘fine’. Across Xi’s speech and writings, there is hardly any mention of CTC without this qualifier. It is my contention that Xi’s deployment of ‘outstanding’ achieves two objectives. On the one hand, it avoids an outright rupture with the party-state’s founding Marxist-Leninist commitments. On the other hand, it articulates that his government is only interested in recuperating selected elements of CTC conducive for its political agenda: elements relating to social stability, respect for authority, strong leadership, collectivist morality and nationalist allegiance²² (Ho, 2009; Link, 2015; Xie, 2011, pp. 4-5; Xu, 2018, p. 617). Secondly, Xi’s formulation, though innovative and ambitious, nevertheless upholds the enduring CCP political tradition discussed in detail in section one. He unapologetically enlists individual citizen-subjects in the realisation of party-state visions by impelling them to undertake continued self-reform – a sui generis political endeavour which Teresa Kuan terms “the project of modernizing China by ‘modernizing’ subjectivity” (2015, p. 209).

Nevertheless, despite adopting a highly circumscribed approach, in promoting forms of ‘China’s outstanding traditional culture’, the party-state effectively legitimates a vast discursive field in which citizen-subjects may formulate their own modalities of socio-political belonging and

²¹ The ‘core socialist values’ the party-state set forth at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (2012) include the national values of prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony; the societal values of freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law; and the personal values of patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship (Xi, 2014b, p. 424).

²² It is worth remembering that, as part of the failed New Life Movement propounded in 1934, Chiang Kai-Shek similarly deployed a selected traditional vocabulary – specifically recuperating the four Neo-Confucian virtues of propriety, righteousness, integrity and cleanliness, and sense of shame (*li, yi, lian, chi* 礼, 义, 廉, 耻) – to condition new cultural attitudes and shape the ‘new citizen’ (see Dirlik, 1975 for a detailed analysis).

pertinence. Indeed, concurrent with the party-state's authorization of CTC as a legitimate domain of social actions has been the proliferation of both official and grassroots initiatives for CTC education. Along with the injection of CTC elements into public primary and secondary education curricula (Xu, 2018), private and informal organizations for CTC learning have also flourished²³ (see Dutournier and Wang, 2018; Sheng, 2015, 2019; Wang, 2016, 2018). 'Chinese Traditional Culture' has thus become a signifier of the PRC's particular brand of citizenship allegiances.

5.2 Ethnographic Context: The 'Wu-Wei School'

The 'Wu-Wei School' is a private organisation for the transmission of *xiuxing* founded in 'traditional culture', which consciously subscribes to the nationwide CTC revitalisation. The organisation engages primarily with adult urban middle-class learners with tertiary educations and significant disposable incomes. Having operated informally since 2010, the school was established in early 2017 by retired journalist and self-taught *xiuxing* specialist Yin-Xian. The school is operated by Yin-Xian along with a team assistant-teachers who work on a voluntary basis, in exchange for the opportunity to study with Yin-Xian for a period of a few months to three years.

The organisation is registered as a 'cultural communications company limited' (*wen hua chuan bo you xian gong si* 文化传播有限公司) with a threefold mission:

- 1) to provide 'positive energy' [*zhengnengliang*] for the realisation of the 'Chinese Dream';
- 2) to relocate traditional knowledge and practices from temples to classrooms; and
- 3) to enable national learning to return to the space of the ordinary people [*minjian*].

These statements adumbrate a form of grassroots revivalist nationalism in step with Xi-era governance priorities, with both assigning a privileged place for 'Chinese Traditional Culture'. However, the ways in which the school engages and enacts elements of the CTC constitute anything but a simple rehearsal of official injunctions. The Wu-Wei School primarily enacts its mission through propagating a proprietary five-pronged *xiuxing* regimen which putatively derives from a synthesis of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian teachings (Table 1). In chapter four, I extricate the theoretical underpinnings of this proprietary regimen in relation to Wu-Wei healing and health practices; I describe how this *xiuxing* regimen is underpinned by an Analogical ontology (Descola, 2013), which unsettles the party-state deployment of CTC as building blocks of socialist modernity.

²³ According to a 2019 report issued by a private Chinese think tank, by the end of 2017 there existed over 20,000 private traditional culture education institutions with over 8.68 million students.

Table 1: The Wu-Wei School <i>Xiuxing</i> Regimen	
Vigorous walking (<i>xing xiang</i> 行香)	Fast paced, vigorous walking exercise in silence.
Self-directed vigilance over one's deportment (<i>li</i> 礼) ²⁴	Continuous self-directed vigilance over one's deportment in ways that aspire to reflect sagely dispositions, especially focusing on regulating one's 'visual experiences, auditory experiences, speech, and actions' (<i>shi ting yan dong</i> 视听言动).
Sitting meditation (<i>da zuo</i> 打坐)	Sitting meditation informed by the Wu-Wei method of Daoism.
Recitation (<i>song jing</i> 诵经)	Reciting classical texts of the Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist (<i>ru shi dao</i> 儒释道) traditions in a slow, sonorous, and solemn manner.
Classical text learning (<i>ke cheng</i> 课程)	Seminars in which Yin-Xian or assistant-teachers provides elaborate exegesis of the meaning and the contemporary relevance of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist classical texts.

The school holds year-round *xiuxing* retreats for adherents in its two retreat facilities, one in rural central China's Wu-Dang Mountains and the other near rural south-western China's Lu-Gu Lake. Along with a small sum contributed by his followers, Yin-Xian invested over two million RMB²⁵ personal funds to start up both facilities. The Wu-Dang centre is a repurposed farmhouse

²⁴ Within the five-pronged regimen, the component of vigilance over one's deportment (which I designate as deportment in shorthand) is the least well-defined, and intentionally so. As we shall see in chapters two and four, Wu-Wei teachers seek to help their students extricate themselves from contemporary social heteronomy and to enter a state of being in greater attunement with the superlative cosmological order (or the Dao). In a state of improved attunement with the Dao, participants are to autogenously acquire embodied dispositions that approximate those of the ancient sages, which they are to individually glean from their studies of the classical texts and from the other embodied ethical practices. Because the Wu-Wei teachers hold that the 'Way of the Sages' (*sheng ren zhi dao* 圣人之道) is irrevocably lost – with only fragmentary elucidations found in Chinese classical texts – they argue that they are not in a position to prescribe how the adherents ought to behave. There is thus an intentional vagueness and lack of stricture in this area of the ethical practice.

²⁵ Equivalent to £ 225,200 at the CNY/GBP exchange rate on 19 September 2021.

with a ten-year lease agreement.²⁶ Equipped with eleven rooms, it can currently accommodate up to twenty visitors, in addition to Yin-xian and three to five assistant-teachers. This is the main site for the school between April and December. The Lu-Gu Lake site is a commercial guesthouse built on the family plot of a local ethnic Na family with which Yin-Xian maintains adoptive kinship. Equipped with twenty-five rooms, the Lu-Gu Lake site can accommodate up to fifty visitors at any time. This is the winter base for the school, where Yin-Xian stays from January to March, teaching and celebrating the Lunar New Year joined by his adoptive family, his students, and their families. The suggested financial contribution is 200 RMB²⁷ for teaching and a further 200 RMB for room and board (per person per day), though fees are waived for (the very few) adherents who demonstrate financial hardship.

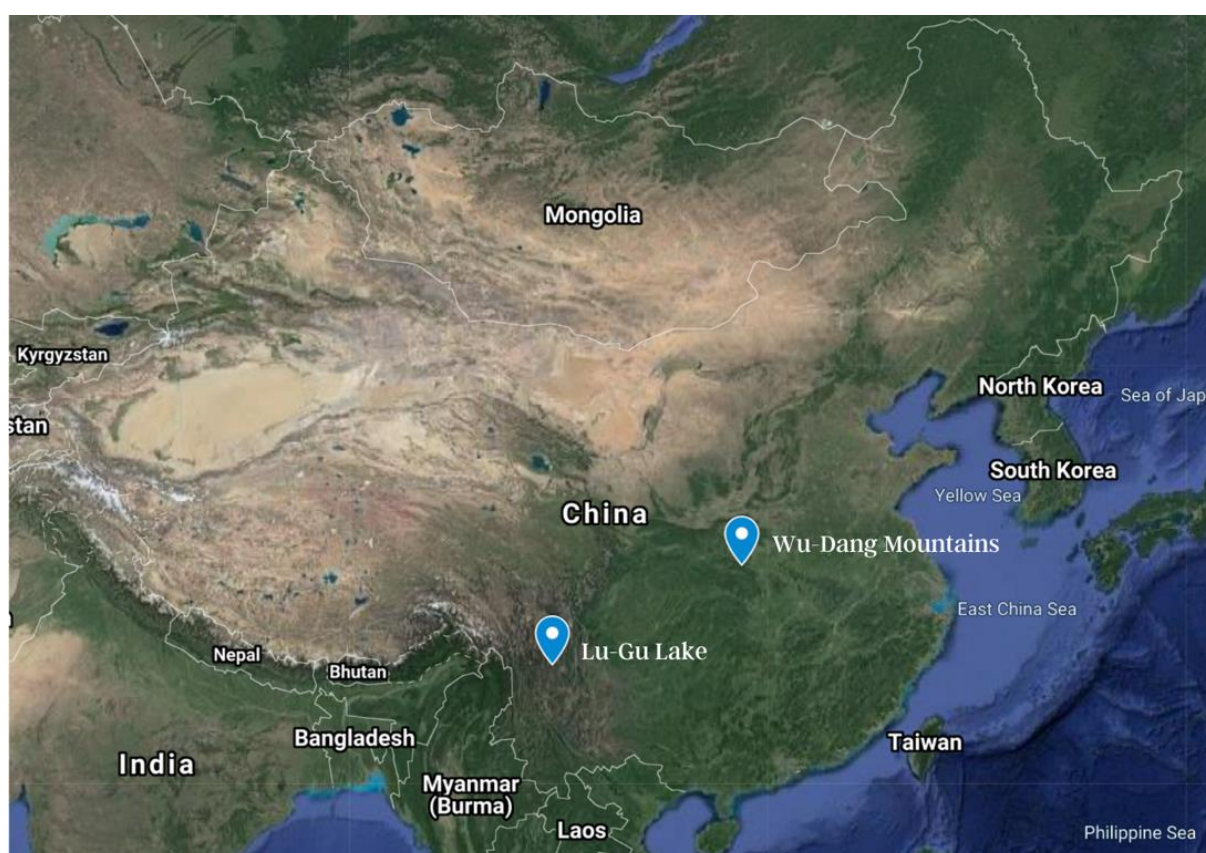


Figure 4: Annotated satellite image of China showing the geographical location of the two retreat facilities of the Wu-Wei School
(Source: Google Maps)

The activities of the school straddle the spheres of openness and secrecy. Located in two renowned national scenic areas, both facilities are nonetheless a step removed from the bustling tourist scene. The *xiuxing* activities are equally unknowable to the passer-by. The Wu-Dang centre has no visible form of identification. Situated in an unfrequented valley and occupying two farmhouses within a cluster of four, the centre can only be visually identified by a modest bamboo

²⁶ April 2017 to April 2027.

²⁷ Equivalent to £ 22.4 at the CNY/GBP exchange rate on 19 September 2021.

gate and tile effect wallpaper. The Lu-Gu Lake guest house is up and running on Ctrip.com, a leading online travel provider. Touting ‘ethnic-themed’ decor and ‘star-gazing’ rooms, the guesthouse webpage belies the ethical project it accommodates alongside tourists. In everyday practices, Yin-Xian, assistant-teachers, and visiting students simultaneously promote the school via personal networks and avoid public attention, especially in quotidian interactions with ‘outsiders’. They categorically avoid substantive interactions and *xiuxing*-related discussions with tourists who accidentally come across the Wu-Dang centre and guests who stay at the Lu-Gu Lake guesthouse. Moreover, every few months prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, devoted adherents invited Yin-Xian to teach *xiuxing* in their home cities for one to two weeks. These closed-door teaching trips took Yin-Xian and some assistant-teachers to Beijing and Kyoto in 2015, to Singapore, Changchun, and Changsha in 2016, to Beijing and Shanghai in 2017, to Chengdu and Shenzhen in 2018, and to Changsha and Chengdu in 2019.

Wu-Wei members inhabit the indeterminate space between openness and secrecy in ways which bear resemblance to other grassroots-level actors operating in the ‘space of the people’ (*min jian* 民间). Investigating traditional-style private education initiatives known as *sishu* (私塾), Dutournier and Wang (2018) argue that *minjian* functions as a socially productive (albeit legally precarious) domain for actors operating ‘outside the system’ (*ti zhi wai* 体制外). The Wu-Wei School is situated within the same structural ambiguity as *sishu* projects (and a vast number of alternative education projects, some of which I discuss in detail in chapter three) and shares a comparable set of concerns over legality and legitimacy.

While exhibiting a marked preference for keeping a low profile, the school has an extensive reach through its publication efforts and adherents’ participation. Yin-Xian collaborates with a Singaporean NGO²⁸ to publish his book series on the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* regimen and exegetical comments on Chinese classics including the *Book of Changes* (*yi jing* 易经), the *Classic of the Way and Virtue*, or the *Dao De Jing* (道德经) and the *Great Learning*. Most adherents, some of whom we meet in the ethnographic chapters, are employed full-time in and outside the PRC, in sectors ranging from civil service and education to finance and arts. Participants visit the school’s two retreat centres to learn, correct and strengthen their individual practices, with a view to incorporating what they acquire in these intensive experiences into their everyday lives in urban China or elsewhere. They are free to choose the duration of their stay in consultation with the organisers.

²⁸ With a mission to propagate ancient Chinese medical knowledge and classical philosophy.

5.3 Methodology

This project is based on a total of thirteen-month participant observation conducted between December 2017 and August 2019. I chose to participate in the Wu-Wei School as a practising member. During this period, I conducted participant observation in the Wu-Dang centre and in the Lu-Gu Lake centre and participated in Wu-Wei teaching trips to Changsha (Hunan Province) and Chengdu (Sichuan province). I engaged in all requisite *xiuxing* practices. Following Yin-Xian's injunction, I conducted in-depth textual studies of the *Book of Changes* and the *Dao De Jing*, which I critically deploy as analytical tools on a par with social theories constructed in Euro-American academia. I conducted one-to-two-hour-long open-ended ethnographic interviews with a total of ninety-seven school participants aged 8 to 70. Furthermore, I visited fourteen participant families living in five major cities in China,²⁹ observing and documenting the ways in which they imbricate *xiuxing* with their other pursuits in everyday situations.

I wish to draw the reader's attention to two features of my ethnographic fieldwork, both of which significantly shape the collection of data as well as the presentation of analysis. First, I understand my fieldwork as simultaneously multi-sited (Marcus, 1995; Falzon, 2009) and de-territorialised (Appadurai, 2000, p. 7; Pieke, 2009). It is multi-sited in the sense that I follow my interlocutors across the multiple localities through which their *xiuxing* projects take form: the retreat facilities and their natural surroundings, the intimacy of participants' homes, as well as the parks, the underground journeys, and the dinner table discussions where practices and discourses of *xiuxing* unfold in quotidian life. However, to say that these fragments together constitute a 'whole' which equates the social life of *xiuxing* at the Wu-Wei School would risk both ethnographic oversimplification and theoretical impoverishment. As I elucidate in the ethnographic chapters, each participants' imaginative amalgamation of space, time, people, knowledge, practice, and forms of influence constitute the *site* of their idiosyncratic endeavours. The contour of such endeavours, moreover, remains necessarily labile and incomplete. Throughout the ethnography, I endeavour to treat the Wu-Wei School as an 'arbitrary location' in the sense given by Matei Candea, understanding it as "the actually existing instance, whose messiness, contingency, and lack of an overarching coherence or meaning serve as a 'control' for a broader abstract object of study" (2007, p. 180). This volatile and de-territorialised field site serves as a contingent, explicitly partial window into the complex phenomena of proliferating grassroots-level ethical-political projects in response

²⁹ In order to protect the anonymity of these interlocutors, I shall refrain from naming the cities in which they are based.

to nationwide rehabilitation of CTC, of which the Wu-Wei School is an illuminating, though limited, instantiation.

Secondly, a note on my positionality. I was born in Inner Mongolia and migrated south with my family to Shenzhen and Zhuhai, both Special Economic Zones in the province of Guangdong, the economic powerhouse for China's marketisation. Having completed junior high school education, at the age of 15, I migrated to the US as an international student, this time by myself. What I had not expected when embarking upon my ethnographic fieldwork was how my decade of living and receiving academic training in the US and Europe would present thorny issues in everyday ethnographic encounters. Researching a context with which I partially identify but departing from the epistemological alterity of British Social Anthropology, I encountered frequent suspicion and pressures of contested political allegiances. My interlocutors often expressed concerns over how I would represent a complex and admittedly controversial domain of social life in China to a foreign audience – in particular, whether I would adopt a respectful stance to the ancient traditions and enduring values that inform their self-identity and self-transformation. Nevertheless, sharing social and cultural affinities with many Wu-Wei organisers and participants also enabled diverse forms of deep connections and mutual learning. This ethnography is thus produced in an uneasy intermediate space between likeness and otherness. I have attempted to provide a critical account that is respectful in tone and balanced in its approach. However, there no doubt remains many unresolved tensions and potential theoretical oversights.

5.4 Chapter Overview

My ethnographic explorations begin with investigating the pedagogical encounters at the Wu-Wei School *xiuxing* retreats, where the school's organisers and participants co-elaborate the signification of *xiuxing*. In chapter two, I examine the ethical pedagogies, or 'pedagogies of the ultimate, of ends and commitments worthy in and of themselves' (Faubion, forthcoming), encountered at the two residential learning facilities. There are two Parts to 'the ultimate' being taught at the Wu-Wei School retreats. Part I is orientated toward fostering the value of 'spontaneity' (*zì rán* 自然), and Part II the value of 'love' (*ài* 爱); both values are given a particularised valence in the context of the Wu-Wei project and sensitively attuned to the exigencies of ongoing social transformations. As I shall delineate, the ethical pedagogy of Part I evokes the ethics-governance ideal of 'Without Wei' (*wú wéi*, 无为) rooted in the *Dao De Jing* and Part II the contrastive ideal of 'With Wei' (*yǒu wéi*, 有为). Though representing two distinct modalities of ethical pedagogies

embedded in early Chinese thought, the two Parts converge in privileging the visceral over the intellectual dimension of learning. Throughout my analysis, I underscore how pedagogical techniques deployed by the Wu-Wei teachers evoke the CCP's mobilisation and politicisation methodologies since the party's inception in the early twentieth century; both are predicated on the orchestration and intensification of emotional responses (Liu Y., 2010; Lee, 2007; Perry, 2002). In so doing, I draw attention to the enduring interest in the 'visceral register' (Mahmood, 2001, p. 224) or 'affective-volitional structures' (Hirschkind, 2001, p. 629) evinced in projects of citizen (trans)formation in the PRC.

In chapter three, I move beneath and beyond the Wu-Wei ethical schooling experiences to explore conceptual interfusions and practical interrelations between this grassroots social initiative and a surprising ally: Steiner Education (*si tan na jiao yu* 斯坦纳教育). A worldwide educational movement and introduced to China around the turn of the twenty-first century, Steiner Education is founded upon Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner's writings and pedagogy, which privileges the child's spiritual development. There is a significant number of Steiner Education advocates (mostly mothers) among those who come to the Wu-Wei School. Though engaging with vastly different intellectual resources and pedagogical approaches, these Steiner Education advocates and Wu-Wei School organisers converge in their concern with the lack of affectivity – the *embodied ability to receive and exert influences* – among citizen-subjects of today's PRC. My interlocutors involved in both initiatives construe affectivity as an important axis for their own subjectivity formation (through *xinxing*) as well as their children's subjectivity formation (through a variety of education experiences).

In the second part of the chapter, I describe how some of my interlocutors deploy a language of affectivity to elaborate a peculiar form of socio-political belonging. Their discourses are marked by a teleological and social evolutionist view of history, and an emphasis on the role of the individual citizen-subject in civilisational advancement. Such logics bear a striking resemblance to those underlying the CCP citizen-reform agenda. These resemblances, nevertheless, cannot be adequately explained by false consciousness or ideological inculcation. In the final part of the chapter, I discuss some indigenous views of the viable political subject and social person which may help us better understand the conceptual parallels across party-state and grassroots levels. Specifically, through revisiting the classical work of China's pioneering social anthropologist Fei Xiao-Tong (1947), I postulate how the citizenship projects of the Wu-Wei School, Steiner

Education and the CCP show the influence of a dynamic model of human-environment interrelation underpinned by affectivity and expandability, which I term the ‘scalable self’.

In chapter four, I turn toward investigating the practical and discursive formation of a non-materialist alternative healing programme practised at the Wu-Wei School, which opens an unexpected window into the intricacies of citizen-state interrelations in the contemporary PRC. I first detail the conceptual underpinnings of the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* regimen, which draws on Daoist intellectual resources and is founded in what Philippe Descola (2013) terms a pre-modern form of Analogical ontology. I then describe the healing encounters taking place at the Wu-Wei School. As we shall see, organisers assert that the *xiuxing* regimen has a primary effect over each person’s health maintenance and illness recovery, while performing supplementary interventions underpinned by forms of efficacy and influence outside materialist causalities. In the latter part of the chapter, I describe how my interlocutors co-elaborate the efficacy of the Wu-Wei curative programme, which founder Yin-Xian calls a form of ‘China’s Chinese medicine’ (*zhong guo de zhong yi* 中国的中医); they do so by situating Wu-Wei healing within the recent state-backed ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ revival while simultaneously distinguishing it from the state-espoused scientific-materialist ‘Traditional Chinese Medicine’. This particularly is a site of marked tension in the Wu-Wei context: an uneasy coexistence of discursive affinities with, and ontological divergences from, party-state directives. I argue this tension is irreducible to party-state power. Instead, the unstable discursive locations of Wu-Wei healing instantiate a mode of citizen-state interrelation in contemporary China, which I call ‘citizen-state cooptation’. Ambiguity in key party-state directives has often allowed grassroots and state actors to coalesce, contingently and productively, on a practical level; this is despite actors’ disparate structural positions and upholding divergent ontological commitments.

Having explicated the tension and complexities inhering in Wu-Wei healing, in the final ethnographic chapter, I analyse how some participants appear to eschew the burden of the CCP’s prescription of citizen self-reform in their deliberate and flexible approaches to *xiuxing*. While seriously practising the Wu-Wei regimen, these actors treat *xiuxing* as a) having a ‘non-vocational’ nature, b) orientated towards realising a set of subjective *teloi*, such as internally felt qualities of happiness, freedom, and ease, c) validated by the perceiving-evaluative self, and d) underpinned by pragmatic rather than soteriological commitments. Nevertheless, I suggest that despite the primacy and authority accorded to the self, these participants’ ethical striving is imbricated with an emergent form of governmentality in urban areas of the PRC. As I show, this psychologising-

atomising governmentality fosters self-reliant subjects who willingly strive to meet a current party-state agenda: to locate the source of social improvement and personal fulfilment in the 'heart' of individual citizens and their subjectivity transformation *rather than* in the heart of society and its structural transformation. The Wu-Wei project, therefore, may be read as coalescing with the existing party-state vision rather than adumbrating an alternative future.

Chapter Two

Ethical Pedagogies at the Wu-Wei *Xiuxing* Retreats: Between ‘*Wu Wei*’ and ‘*You Wei*’

不尚贤，使民不争；不贵难得之货，使民不为盗；不见可欲，使民心不乱。

是以圣人之治，虚其心，实其腹，弱其志，强其骨。

常使民无知无欲，使夫知者不敢为也。

为无为，则无不治。

— 道德经 | 第三章

Not paying honour to the illustrious leads the people to avoid conflict.

Not showing reverence for precious goods leads them to not steal.

Not making a display of what is desirable leads their hearts away from chaos.

Therefore, the Sages govern by emptying people’s hearts and filling their stomachs.

They weaken the people’s commitments and strengthen their bones.

They make sure that the people are without knowledge or desires.

And that those with knowledge do not dare to act.

The Sages act by *wu wei*, and by this they govern all.³⁰

— *The Dao De Jing* | Chapter Three

³⁰ This translation is modified from the version by Ivanhoe and Van Norden (2001, p. 164).

Introduction

This chapter explores the ethical pedagogies encountered at the Wu-Wei *xinxing* retreats, in keeping with James Faubion's conception of ethical pedagogies as 'pedagogies of the ultimate, of ends and commitments worthy in and of themselves' (Faubion, forthcoming). There are two Parts to 'the ultimate' being taught at the Wu-Wei School retreats. Though representing two distinct modalities of ethical pedagogies, the two Parts converge in privileging the visceral over the intellectual dimension of learning. Part I is orientated toward fostering the value of 'spontaneity' (*zì rán* 自然), and Part II the value of 'love' (*ài* 爱), both given a particularised valence in the context of the Wu-Wei project. As I shall delineate, the ethical pedagogy of Part I evokes the ethics-governance ideal of 'Without Wei' (*wú wéi*, 无为) rooted in the *Dao De Jing* and Part II the contrastive ideal of 'With Wei' (*yǒu wéi*, 有为).

The notion *wéi* forms the conceptual fulcrum upon which the two modules of ethical learning sustain a relationship of complementary tension. Philosopher Chad Hansen writes of *wéi* in the *Dao De Jing*, where the concept originated:

...for Laozi *wéi* signals socially induced, learned, patterns of response—the opposite of autonomous or spontaneous response. (1992, pp. 212-213)

Seen in this light, Part I may be understood as teaching to undo conventional ways of being, in order to foster the value of 'spontaneity'. Specifically, these conventions problematised at the Wu-Wei retreats extend to both cognitive and emotional registers. Part II, on the other hand, may be deemed as teaching to generate and instil a different set of 'socially induced, learned, patterns of response', one which expresses the value of 'love' defined in the Wu-Wei School's terms. Together, the two parts are thus concerned with the subtle but fundamental rearrangement of an ethical subject's 'visceral orientations' (Hirschkind, 2001, p. 640).

As understood by the Wu-Wei School, the two parts do not function in isolation but support one another in an upward spiral. The embodiment of 'spontaneity' (Part I) supports the grasp of 'love' (Part II); having become an abiding visceral orientation, 'love' then sharpens and heightens 'spontaneity'. Through the sustained interaction of the two modules in the human entity, the participants are to shed their old, socially disciplined dispositions and then acquire new,

tradition-infused ways of being. This rearrangement of visceral orientations, furthermore, is consistently articulated at the level of being PRC citizens, rather than private persons.³¹

In addition to ethnographically describing these teachings, I shall underscore the specific pedagogical techniques deployed by Wu-Wei teachers. These techniques evoke the CCP's mobilisation and politicisation efforts since the party's inception in the early twentieth century; both are predicated on the orchestration and intensification of emotions. In what follows, I draw attention to the enduring interest in the 'visceral register' (Mahmood, 2001, p. 224) or 'affective-volitional structures' (Hirschkind, 2001, p. 629) evinced in projects of citizen (trans)formation in the PRC. Such surprising embroilments in the pedagogies deployed across the party-state and grassroots levels, moreover, reveal the complex subjective effects of living through radical socio-political transformations, an emergent area of research to which this chapter seeks to make a situated contribution.

1. A Pedagogy for Grasping 'Spontaneity': The 'Wu Wei' Module

I begin this section by underscoring a fundamental contradiction inhering in the ethical pedagogy of Part I: the value of spontaneity cannot be systematically taught. While the very idea of *teaching* spontaneity is pregnant with paradox across diverse contexts of ethical teaching (e.g. Cook, 2010, pp. 16-17), at the Wu-Wei School, this aporia is inextricable from the specific philosophical tradition in which the value of spontaneity is embedded. The notion of *zì rán*³² or spontaneity originated in the *Dao De Jing* across five chapters (17, 23, 25, 51, and 64), which treat subjects as diverse as the wind and human governance. A commentator conceives of spontaneity invoked in these varied discussions as 'the movement of the Tao as the Tao'³³:

It is the movement of the Tao as the Tao, namely the underlying unity of all things as well as the underlying source of the life of all things. One important aspect of *tzu-jan* [*zì rán*] is that the movement of things must come from the internal life of things and never results from engineering or condition by an external power. (Cheng, 1986, p. 356; cited in Lai, 2007, p. 330)

³¹ The current chapter is primarily concerned with a description of the pedagogical processes, whereas the 'learning outcome' or the impact of experiencing these pedagogies at the retreats and participants' multivalent responses will be explored in the subsequent chapters.

³² In Anglophone scholarship, two widely adopted translations construe *zì rán* as designating 'spontaneity' or 'nature'. *Zì rán* in the valence of spontaneity is more relevant for the Wu-Wei ethical pedagogy, and I shall consistently use spontaneity to denote *zì rán* in the following pages.

³³ Tao is an earlier romanisation of the Chinese term 道, which I romanise as Dao throughout this dissertation.

Much like Cheng's view that *zì rán* cannot result from 'engineering or condition by an external power', the Wu-Wei organisers categorically hold that spontaneity can only be grasped autogenously. In Part I, the organisers fashion the enabling conditions for such intuitive grasping but refrain from systematic inculcation of normative sensibilities.³⁴ In other words, the teaching of Part I is primarily achieved through the provision of what Hansen aptly terms 'a socio-cultural environment wherein individuals are not subject to the imposition of artificial, conformist, and universally binding norms' (1992, pp. 213-214). In such an environment, philosopher Karyn Lai suggests, individual potentiality would ideally unfold in ways that are utterly autonomous and yet in full accord with the rhythm of the Dao (2007, p. 331). This conception is largely congruent with the Wu-Wei vision.

Specifically, led by the founder Yin-Xian, the Wu-Wei teachers envision the retreat centres³⁵ to be 'fields of the Dao' (*dao chang* 道场). There, through a mode of influence known as resonance (*gan ying* 感应)³⁶ – rather than inculcation – retreat goers become disposed to the spontaneous unfolding of their inner potentiality in unity with the ineffable Dao. In other words, *ideally* speaking, participants *autonomously* shed their socially acquired ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (all of which stand in awful asynchrony from the rhythm of the Dao) and *voluntarily* surrender to a pre-social, pre-discursive state of mystical union. This mode of influence is underpinned by a non-materialist vision of the *ideal* human as characterised by uninhibited affectivity³⁷ – the embodied ability to engage 'the omnipresent information flow in the universe',³⁸ independent of socio-linguistic mediation. Teaching spontaneity through resonance, as I shall illustrate, is an ethical pedagogy in line with the Daoist ethics-governance ideal of *wu wei*, 'effortless action' that nonetheless leaves nothing ungoverned (see Slingerland, 2007).

However, the Wu-Wei teachers are resolute realists. They are perfectly aware that the visitors who come their way are far from *ideal* humans with uninhibited affectivity. On the contrary, as the Wu-Wei teachers see it, most retreat participants have almost entirely lost touch with this innate capacity, their senses and perceptions dulled by the rehearsal of social conventions since early childhood. Given this 'social reality' that plagues contemporary Chinese citizens, besides

³⁴ As we shall see, the systematic inculcation of normative sensibilities becomes integral to the ethical pedagogy of Part II.

³⁵ Primarily the Wu-Dang retreat centre, since only long-term adherents are invited to the Lu-Gu Lake centre to celebrate the Spring Festival with Yin-Xian and his adoptive family. See section 2 for details.

³⁶ See chapter four for a detailed discussion.

³⁷ See chapter three for a detailed discussion.

³⁸ Yin-Xian, 5 June 2019, seminar at the Wu-Dang retreat centre.

maintaining the ‘fields of the Dao’, the Wu-Wei organisers reckon that they must do more than ‘effortless action’ and assist their students in the rearrangement of visceral orientations.

In what follows, I describe how students are inducted into the ‘field of the Dao’ in the Wu-Dang mountains, where they are led to ‘unlearn the learnt’ in multifarious yet subtle ways. I further observe how, in order to accentuate the value of spontaneity without prescribing it, Wu-Wei organisers use a peculiar form of exegetical device which I will call ‘momentary magnification’. My analysis draws critically upon political scientist Yu Liu’s astute analysis of what she terms the ‘technique of magnification’ central to the propagation of Maoist political discourse (2010). This pedagogical method involves organisers’ impromptu interpellation of participants’ mundane actions as manifestations of ‘spontaneity’. In these instances, retreat-goers are momentarily made into heuristics for themselves and others; they come to grasp what the abstract and labile value of ‘spontaneity’ could *look* like as embodied experiences. The accompanying emotional experiences of surprise and shock, furthermore, catalyses the grafting of this value onto participants’ subjectivities.

1.1 Induction into the ‘Field of the Dao’: ‘Ripe Melons’ Need ‘No Rules’

In a long-term adherent’s words, the most common feeling regarding the Wu-Wei *xinxing* retreat is a pervasive kind of confusion. He puts it in a proverb: ‘It’s like you can never manage to touch the head of a three-meter tall monk’ (*zhang er he shang, mo bu zhaou tou nao* 丈二和尚,摸不着头脑). Indeed, a distinctive characteristic of the Wu-Wei immersive experience is that retreat-goers rarely come with concrete ideas about how their time in the mountains will look, let alone the ends and commitments that are in store for them. New participants learn of the Wu-Wei network and the enigmatic master Yin-Xian through the word-of-mouth of existing participants, who usually have a marginally clearer grasp of the gist of the retreats.

Importantly, Wu-Wei organisers don’t ‘organise’ retreats as scheduled events. Instead, they maintain their ‘field of the Dao’ by undertaking *xinxing* at the physical site and wait to receive people who contingently and spontaneously decide to come to them. This *modus operandi* constitutes the first stratum of the Part I pedagogy orientated towards spontaneity. Borrowing the metaphor of two melons that Yin-Xian loves to chant – ‘a melon forcibly twisted from the stem can’t possibly be sweet’ (*qiang niu de gua bu tian* 强扭的瓜不甜) and ‘only a ripe melon falls off its

stem' (*gua shu di luo* 瓜熟蒂落) – we could say that in the eyes of the organisers, Wu-Wei retreat-goers are 'ripe melons' serendipitously finding their way up the Wu-Dang mountains.

Prior to their arrival, participants receive very little information about they can expect. Couples or families newly introduced to the network usually decide to make an initial short trip to the Wu-Dang centre, usually between five days and a week, drawing on scant (and frequently sensationalised) anecdotal information about the 'celestial mountains' (*xian shan* 仙山), the 'quaint cottages' (*nong she* 农舍) that make up the *xiuxing* centre, and the 'transcendental aura' (*chao fan tuo su de qi zhi* 超凡脱俗的气质) of the sexagenarian who runs the show.

Once couples or families make up their mind, a WeChat name card is passed to them by their liaison. With a few taps on the multipurpose app, the inductees add one of the assistant-teachers as their contact and work out the logistics of their visit. They have to make this trip based on a good deal of faith. There is no brochure, no contract, no consent form, no code of conduct, no dress code, not even a deposit. A few pictures on the sparsely populated WeChat public account, a few lines about Yin-Xian and the school of knowledge he claims to have synthesised, plus a couple of seminar recordings make up the whole introductory package. Participants pack their bags according to the curt advice given by the assistant-teacher and embark on their journey fuelled by imagination. They frequently assume that they'll find out more about this entire business of *xiuxing* retreat once they get there. However, this is not necessarily the case.

Upon arrival at the *xiuxing* centre in the Wu-Dang Mountains National Scenic Area as couples or families (very rarely as individuals), first-time visitors attend a welcome tea hosted by master Yin-Xian in what would have been the living room of the refurbished cottage, now a multipurpose space primarily used for meetings and seminars. In these conversations, which usually begin from an account of the journey to Wu-Dang, Yin-Xian queries the visitors' place of origin, health, parents and children, profession – the prosaic details that many people thought would only bore this 'sage outside the mundane world' (*shi wai gao ren* 世外高人). Unless mentioned by the visitors, the subject of *xiuxing* is left aside. If pressed by impatient visitors for clarification, Yin-Xian explains that 'here we have a set of practice-based *xiuxing* methodologies (*shi xiu gong fa* 实修功法), which the teachers will show you over the course of your stay.' The elaborate theoretical framework undergirding this methodology (see chapter four) is never explained to the newcomer.

The welcome tea usually lasts no more than thirty minutes, after which Yin-Xian hints at assistant-teachers to show the newly arrived their quarters. Couples and families are invariably accommodated in the same room unless they requested otherwise. Long-term adherents are more often accommodated in the same cottage as the master himself, and first-timers at the cottage in the back. Having received a few dozen new-comers alongside Yin-Xian and the assistant-teachers, I have noticed that retreat-goers at the end of the welcome tea often feel discombobulated. What many expect to be a formal briefing session where requirements, rules, and codes of conduct would be communicated turns out to be, in an adherent's north-eastern colloquialism, 'tea and natter' (*he cha lao ke* 喝茶唠嗑).

A significant number of adherents have previously participated in the short-term monastic retreats (both Daoist and Buddhist) that have proliferated in the contemporary PRC and beyond, during which they take precepts or at least follow an elaborate set of rules over a limited period (see Laidlaw and Mair, 2019). Some have even done so in the Wu-Dang mountains through one of the Daoist nunneries, the Zi-Xiao Palace (*zi xiao gong* 紫霄宫). Many have envisioned that the Wu-Wei retreats would function along the same lines, with rigid routines, an abundance of injunctions, and not an insignificant amount of chastisement; they take comfort in knowing that they can endure the hardships of engaging in *xiuxing*. However, at the Wu-Wei retreats, from the moment of their arrival, visitors are hurled into uncharted waters.

Beginning from the unexpected opening 'tea and natter' session, visitors confront a curious absence of rules and guidance. They quickly find out that a day at the Wu-Dang retreat functions on multiple timelines, varied rhythms, and distinct levels of intensity. Uniformity is of minor concern. Discipline is entirely non-existent. While the five-pronged regimen (see chapter four) nominally structures the daily retreat experience, people usually have to figure out a large part of their routines for themselves. There is no centralised timekeeping. Participants are occasionally given a handwritten schedule, usually if they insist or if they appear particularly lost. More often, they are simply offered a cursory verbal description of the daily activities when settling into their quarters and left to use their own discretion.

This arrangement is not a marker of negligence, but rather a carefully designed avenue for visitors to travel (autogenously) toward spontaneity. To the Wu-Wei organisers, visitors need first and foremost to unlearn their socially conditioned sensibilities about how everything works, including a *xiuxing* retreat. Crucially, visitors need to overcome their 'obsession' (*zhi nian* 执念)

with ‘rules’ (*gui ze* 规则) and ‘discipline’ (*ji li* 纪律). Furthermore, if the students do not grasp spontaneity autogenously, intense practice of the *xinxiang* regimen will only speed them down the wrong path of instrumental striving towards misrecognised ends. As Yin-Xian enjoined during a closed-door session held for the assistant-teachers:

People who come to us have as their first task to rid themselves of the ‘shoulds’ and the ‘oughts’. In today’s society, people have become obsessed with what’s right or wrong. These boxes are the greatest hindrances to any experience of spontaneity. So, as a rule-of-thumb, do not give them rules!

Figure 5 charts out a typical daily schedule of those who are present at the Wu-Dang retreat. I have coloured the communally spent time in green and privately spent time in blue. There are at least eight waking hours in which the participants do not have any formal oversight (the brackets indicate some possible courses of actions). Furthermore, the foci of the day – the seminars where all come together to listen to Yin-Xian’s exegesis of classical text – are far from mandatory.

Figure 5: A Typical Day at the Wu-Dang Retreat Centre

	Yin-Xian		Assistant-Teachers	Visitors	
5:00	Sitting meditation			(Sleep in?) (Sitting meditation?) (Morning stroll?)	
5:30					
6:00					
6:30					
7:00					
7:30			Sitting meditation		
8:00			Prepare breakfast		
8:30	Breakfast and wash-up				
9:00					
9:30	Writing		Recitation		
10:00	Morning Seminar				
10:30					
11:00	Sitting meditation		Sitting meditation	(Sitting meditation?) (Cook lunch?) (Nap?) (Study?)	
11:30	Snack and nap		Snack and nap		
12:00					
12:30					
13:00	Writing		Study		
13:30					
14:00	A	B	Vigorous Walking (Could be done as a group or individually)		
14:30	Mountain Jogging	Sitting meditation			
15:00					
15:30					
16:00					
16:30					
17:00					
17:30			Cooking	(Assist with cooking?) (downtime?)	
18:00	Dinner				
18:30					
19:00	Writing		Recitation		
19:30	Evening Seminar				
20:00					
20:30	Tea and Chat				
21:00					
21:30	Sitting meditation		Sitting meditation	(Sitting meditation?)	
22:00	Sleep		Sleep	(Sleep?)	
22:30					
23:00					

As earlier indicated, behind this puzzling lack of specification and supervision is the ethics-governance ideal of *wu wei*. Rooted in the *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi*, *wu wei* is a distinctive vision for guiding the conduct of political subjects (governmentality in Foucauldian terms). According to the classical prescriptions, a ruler abiding by *wu wei* rejects coercive policies and practices, and instead espouses spontaneous acts fully attuned with the harmonious functioning of the Dao, the indescribable yet ineluctable cosmological order (see Lai, 2007; Feldt, 2010; Slingerland, 2007). Chapter Seventeen of the *Dao De Jing* elucidates this superior mode of governance in contradiction to lesser ones:

The greatest of rulers is but a shadowy presence;
 Next is the ruler who is loved and praised;
 Next is the one who is feared;
 Next is the one who is reviled.
 Those lacking in trust are not trusted.
 But [the greatest rulers] are cautious and honor words.
 When their task is done and work complete,
 Their people all say, “This is just how we are.”³⁹

In keeping with this conception of governance by *wu wei*, Yin-Xian deliberately maintains ‘a shadowy presence’ in the retreat centre, practising the most rigorous version of the five-pronged regimen without demanding conformity. The assistant-teachers function as intermediaries, practising a slightly attenuated version of the regimen and taking care of the basic needs of Yin-Xian and the visitors. Nevertheless, this raises a pedagogical question: if true spontaneity can only arise from within, how do students discern the quality of spontaneity in their own subjective experiences at the retreats? As we shall see, *zi ran* is made comprehensible and memorable by a technique I call ‘momentary magnification’. Adopting the famous butterfly trope found in the *Zhuangzi*, this pedagogy may appear as capturing ‘spontaneity’ as it flutters.

1.2 ‘Effing the Ineffable’: Interpellative Momentary Magnification

Wu-Wei organisers categorically avoid imposing rules upon visitors so as to foster the latter’s experience of spontaneity; they remain cognizant, however, that spontaneity is a capricious state of being that may manifest in the human entity, in inexplicable ways, in a ‘field of the Dao’. Informed by this understanding, Wu-Wei organisers keep a keen eye on their students for any moments of what they consider to be unwitting alignment with the Dao. These moments are

³⁹ Translation cited from Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 2001, pp. 170-171.

snatched out of the flow of time and made into pedagogical materials for participants to ponder. In these moments, the unwitting deeds of the one who manifests *zi ran* become magnified. The innocent act becomes a vital index for particularising and lodging the value of spontaneity in participants' subjectivities. In other words, the technique of momentary magnification serves to crystallise the ethereal and 'eff the ineffable' (Cook, 2010, p. 18). Nevertheless, while ostensibly orientated toward liberating participants from contemporary social heteronomy, this pedagogical technique mirrors high socialist politicisation strategies and paradoxically entrenches authoritarianism.

My analysis in this section draws critically upon political scientist Yu Liu's theorisation of the technique of magnification as a politicising technology during Maoist times. Magnification, she argues, mobilises all aspects of life for the installation of revolutionary political consciousness:

Magnification is a technique of politicizing all aspects of life, including petty thoughts or behaviours, with a grand political discourse or, in Chinese, *shang gang shang xian*. Magnification generated emotions through the power of interpretation. Ordinary words or deeds were not ordinary anymore in the light of political interpretation. Something as simple as innocently miswriting one of Mao's quotations could be an astonishing counter-revolutionary crime generating "great proletarian indignation." Helping a lost child home could be a revolutionary act exhibiting "great proletarian sentiment." In other words, magnification paved an exegetic road on which the contemporary could travel to the eternal, the personal to the national, and the contingent to the inevitable. It strengthened the revolutionary discourse in that it sustained an extremely high level of political consciousness, generating deep guilt when people deviated from the official line or a great sense of self-righteousness when they toed the line. (2010, p. 335)

Magnification, defined in Liu's terms, can be understood as an interpellative mode of exegesis that infuses mundane acts with highly specific and politically galvanised moral meanings. The power of magnification, I suggest, pivots on the ways in which the subject (along with their deeds) becomes reconfigured as a text for political inscription. The process of magnification may be understood as premised on the antipode of the Pacific opacity of mind doctrine (see Robbins, 2008; Robbins and Rumsey, 2008; Stasch, 2008), insofar as magnification entails a complete surrender of autonomy; it is predicated on an operative assumption that those who hold the authority of interpretation alone can pinpoint the significance of people's actions. At the Wu-Wei retreats, a form of exegetical ethical pedagogy evocative of the Maoist politicising technology is at

play. In invoking Liu's analysis, I do not intend to narrowly construe the Wu-Wei teaching as a form of ideological residue. Instead, I wish to draw attention to the resemblance in *form* (rather than *content*) of the two didactic techniques, making a case for the remarkable technological intimacy between earlier party-state politicisation strategies and Wu-Wei ethical pedagogies.

A preparatory step required for momentary magnification to work at the Wu-Wei retreats involves a subtle disturbance to participants' existing valorisation schema. Specifically, this reshuffling of ethical sensibilities entails decentering the values of discipline and intellectual striving. Among the rank and file of Wu-Wei School followers are plenty of advanced degree holders and high-achieving professionals across public and private sectors. Intelligence and diligence are the commonly held values of this otherwise diverse group. Nevertheless, adherents who prize their mental agility and practical rigour have a hard time finding validation at the Wu-Wei retreats. Those who swiftly commit entire classical texts to memory rarely receive more than a curt acknowledgement. Nor do adherents who wake up the earliest and faithfully carry out the five-pronged regimen find exceptional affirmation.

To Wu-Wei organisers, discipline and intelligence follow from socially habituated modes of thinking and behaving, and thus are antithetical to spontaneity. While downplaying the significance of these values, the Wu-Wei organisers carefully monitor any actions that mark a momentary departure from the received contemporary value regime. Two examples help to illustrate the ethical pedagogy of momentary magnification.

Jia-Jia, a star student from a highly competitive middle school in Hubei province, was intent on marshalling her best academic performance to distinguish herself at the retreat. However, in seminars, her carefully constructed answers never appeared to impress her teachers. Feeling downtrodden one afternoon, Jia-Jia went all out on her vigorous walking to let off some steam. The undertaking apparently whetted her appetite. At dinner, she uncharacteristically helped herself with a second bowl of rice. As the girl settled back into her seat, her eyelids lowered, Yin-Xian suddenly broke the silence,

Tremendous (*hao ji le* 好极了), Jia-Jia, you've come a long way in this week! When you arrived a couple days ago you had the appetite of a sparrow. You didn't even finish half a bowl of rice. Now you are eating two bowls! You are now more spontaneous and relaxed (*zi ran le, fang song le* 自然了, 放松了). This is excellent.

Her chopsticks frozen in mid-air, Jia-Jia's facial expression betrayed a mixture of puzzlement and surprise. Having barely received any attention from the *xinxiang* master since her arrival, she encountered her long-awaited validation in the least expected moment. Her innocent act of serving herself a second bowl of rice was magnified in front of the co-present retreat participants – and most importantly, laid out in front of herself – as a worthy and laudable act. While the idea of spontaneity was only mentioned in passing, the shock effect engendered on the occasion would instigate a slightly different line of ethical reasoning in Jia-Jia. She put it this way when I interviewed her regarding her learning at the end of the stay:

Honestly, I'm not entirely sure just yet [about what is it that I learnt]. It's been a bit confusing. But I feel that I might have learnt something different from what I thought I was supposed to learn. Hmm...maybe part of it was about not always trying so hard (*na me nu li* 那么努力)?

For Xiao-Xu, a sweet-natured financial professional based in Jiangsu province, momentary magnification came at a time when she was expecting reprobation. For two consecutive years, the thirty-year-old devoted her precious five-day annual leave to the Wu-Wei retreat. Despite her best intentions to stay alert and engaged, the bags under her eyes betrayed her exhaustion from working long hours. The afternoon of her arrival, Xiao-Xu thoroughly lost herself in slumber. She slept through vigorous walking and was late to dinner by half an hour. When she finally appeared, embarrassed and apologetic, Yin-Xian waved his hand and said,

There's no need to apologise. In fact, I want to applaud you. You are acting intention-less-ly (*wu xin er dong* 无心而动) – 'I'm tired and I need to sleep'. That's fantastic. Forget about the schedule. Undo your punctuality and all those habits accumulated at work. You are here not to learn more discipline, but to learn the opposite. I'm glad you are becoming more spontaneous. Once people become spontaneous, they come closer to their true selves (*zhen wo* 真我).

Assistant-teacher Fu-Yi happily pulled over a bench and had the slightly bewildered Xiao-Xu sit down beside her. Passing her a plate of dishes carefully reserved at the start of the meal, Fu-Yi winked, 'See? Not like what you think. Now come eat.' At the end of her stay, Xiao-Xu noted the incident to me:

Remember the day when I massively overslept? When I woke up that day I panicked – felt just like clocking in late for work. I was so surprised by how the teachers received me. It was such a small incident but nonetheless made me think a lot. All my life I've been worried about being punished if I made a mistake. I've become so tense [...] I thought the teachers

would care the most about me learning the *xiuxing* routines and the classical texts, but it seems that this is not the case. I've been mulling over that intention-less-ness. I really like to think that one day I can consistently act from there.

In these two (fairly common) instances, the participants found their unpremeditated deeds – which they consider morally neutral, if not slightly dubious – momentarily reconstrued as overwhelmingly positive and edifying. These pedagogical moments, suspended and magnified, are often accompanied by a degree of shock; they become the experiential ground upon which participants engage in an evaluative appraisal of their expectations and habituated ways of acting and thinking. Notably, however, the pedagogy of momentary magnification is inextricable from a specific configuration of power relation: the fact that subordinates cannot know *a priori* what actions would engender praise or criticism fixates them in a highly uncertain and intensely *dependent* position in relation to those in authority, who may declare at will whether acts are admirable or reprehensible. An analogous (though much more draconian) dynamic underpinned the CCP's deployment of magnification during the high socialist era. In the Wu-Wei retreats, the practice of momentary magnification endows Yin-Xian (and to a lesser extent the assistant-teachers) with unquestionable authority, which far exceeds forms of authority founded on rules that are open to interpretation and debate. As such, while the quality of spontaneity putatively arises from within a person's interiority following their extrication from social norms (the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' in Yin-Xian's words), the pedagogy of 'momentary magnification' paradoxically instills forms of authoritarianism.

Generally speaking, the Wu-Wei retreat-goers find themselves in an unusual valuation structure where the most mundane, somatised, and pre-reflective undertakings are construed as indices of something overwhelmingly desirable. During my time at the two retreat centres, the activities/attitudes that became the object of the organisers' exegetical magnification included the following:

- Unelicited weeping
- Improved appetite
- Ability to drink a large amount of water
- Oversleeping and missing regular events
- Wandering off into the mountains
- Increased agility in walking, closing doors, holding cups
- Taking a keen interest in farm animals (feeding chicken, dogs, and pigs)

- Being angry and confronting co-present visitors (as opposed to suppressing one's feelings)

Meanwhile, the activities/attitudes that were met with dissuasion have included the following:

- Being physically and mentally 'tense' (*jin zhang* 紧张)
- Being disciplined
- Being competitive
- Being equivocal about one's feelings
- Being too concerned with 'doing the right thing'

If the value of spontaneity supposedly follows from a person's improved attunement with the larger cosmological order, and is socio-symbolically construed to manifest itself in a capricious and erratic manner, by what criteria do Wu-Wei organisers discursively ascertain whether an act issues from spontaneity or deliberate exertion? As we shall see, these ethical pedagogues maintain that true spontaneity is empirically verifiable by two interrelated (and again highly subjective) ethical conditions – 'intention-less-ness' (*wu xin* 无心) and 'directness' (*zhi jie* 直接).

1.3 Ascertaining Spontaneity: 'Intention-less-ness' and 'Directness'

Drawing on the *Diamond Sutra* (*jin gang jing* 金刚经) and the *Book of Changes* (*yi jing* 易经) – in a move to synthesise selected Buddhist and Daoist ethical ideals – Wu-Wei teachers hold that any human action arising from intention (*yi nian* 意念) or cognition (*si wei* 思维) necessarily issues from delusive thoughts (*wang nian* 妄念). These delusive thoughts eclipse the Primary Force of Yang (*liang yi zhi yang* 两仪之阳) inhering in the human entity – the rightful driver of human actions in attunement with the Dao – and mislead people into acting in ways that depart from their 'true selves'.

Based on his reading of the *Book of Changes*, Yin-Xian holds that the Primary Force of Yang moves without deliberation, and yet, by virtue of its unbridled affectivity, is omniscient and omnipotent. To Yin-Xian, this is summed up in a famous phrase found in the 'Upper Book of the Great Commentaries, Chapter Ten' (系辞|上传|第十章):

The changes have no deliberate thought or deliberate action; they are quiescent and still. Yet when affectively stimulated, they shall penetrate all situations under heaven.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ My own translation of the original: 'yi wu si ye, wu wei ye, ji ran bu dong, gan er sui tong tian xia zhi gu 易无思也，无为也，寂然不动，感而遂通天下之故'.

To Yin-Xian, these abstractly existing ‘changes’ (which are understood as metaphysical entities rather than events manifested in the physical world) epitomise a state of being free of ‘deliberate thought or deliberate action’. As such, ‘changes’ are absolutely attuned with Yang, the metaphysically existing animating agent of the Dao and hence of all existences; it is by virtue of this complete attunement that ‘changes’ hold the affective potentiality of ‘penetrating all situations under the heaven’. By extension, the human entity who is attuned with Yang ought to manifest similar qualities of unpremeditated clairvoyance and efficacy. But this is clearly not the case for most people. Therefore, in order to help participants recuperate the innate connection with the Primary Force of Yang, Wu-Wei organisers encourage their followers to identify and privilege the mode of activity characteristic of the Yang – non-deliberate, intention-less action (*wu si er dong, wu xin er dong* 无思而动, 无心而动). As seen in the cases of Jia-Jia and Xiao-Xu, non-deliberate, intention-less action, in the simplest form, consists of acting without premeditation and manifests on the somatic-emotional level.

Yin-Xian explained the mechanism of intention-less action to a few long-term adherents in a seminar on the Diamond Sutra:

Intention-less action is action according to the most spontaneous instincts. This is not difficult to achieve in theory. Just smash every thought (*ji sui mei yi ge nian tou* 击碎每一个念头) that arises in your mind and closely observe how your instincts drive you, until you find yourself in a state where your mind is utterly empty (*tou nao kong kong dang dang* 头脑空空荡荡) while your hands and feet are constantly occupied. Then you will have learnt to let the Primary Force of Yang within you to lead the way. However, what is easy in theory is extremely difficult in practice. Even if you might move with intention-less-ness at this moment, you might lose touch with it at the next. That’s why we *xiuxing* ceaselessly.

To foster the ability to act via intention-less-ness and avoid the distraction of delusive thoughts, adherents are further encouraged to embody the ethical condition of ‘directness’. For instance, whenever adherents are asked a question about the classical texts – especially in the context of the seminar – they are enjoined to blurt out an answer right away, usually within a count of five and animated by Yin-Xian’s passionate coaching: ‘Don’t think! Say directly!’ Adherents across the board find this exercise extremely stressful, and most often blush and shake their heads in resignation – ‘I don’t know!’ ‘Your answer in five hours will not turn out better than the one you give in five seconds,’ Yin-Xian once told a frustrated middle-aged salesman.

We are not dealing with knowledge (*zhi shi* 知识) here, but wisdom (*zhi hui* 智慧). To unleash your wisdom, you need to become extremely direct and let Yang [within in you] take over your thinking self. Yang acts spontaneously and in lightning speed – the second that you begin to think, you’ve already missed your window of opportunity [to be aligned with the movement of Yang].

In another closed-door training session with the assistant-teachers, Yin-Xian elaborated on the theoretical foundation for privileging directness:

Your job is tricky in the sense that you are far from simply running some programmes or teaching some classical texts. You are helping our students enter a new realm (*xin de jing jie* 新的境界). In this realm there is only what is authentic and direct (*zhen yu zhi* 真与直), and not what’s right or wrong (*dui yu cuo* 对与错). What is authentic and direct is frequently masked by programmatic things (*cheng xu hua de dong xi* 程序化的东西) people have learned since they were young. These [programmatic things] block their wisdom and are extremely detrimental [...] The purpose of many of our exercises is to rid people of the programmatic things or thought-related things (*si wei hua de dong xi* 思维化的东西), to allow everyone to return to their true self. Remember, the true self is direct and moves intention-less-ly.

In light of the objective of helping people return to their ‘true selves’ (construed as presocial selves which fully embody innate spontaneity), the Wu-Wei teachers craft their didactics under the ethics-governance ideal of ‘effortless action’, though with contextualised modifications. To assist their affectively impoverished students, the Wu-Wei teachers prompt students to rearrange their visceral orientations, with a view to precipitating a new way of being in the world – in a realm where there is only what is ‘authentic and direct’, instead of what is ‘right or wrong’. The eschewing of rules, the decentring of the conventionally held values of discipline and intellectual striving, and the momentary magnification of pre-reflective acts cohere to impart spontaneity without directly prescribing it. Taken together, the Part I ethical pedagogy intends to mitigate the detrimental effects of ‘programmatic’ or ‘thought-related things’ that adherents acquire through socialisation. The learning outcome is to reconnect the human entity with the inenarrable yet ineluctable cosmological order known as the Dao, whose primary driving force is understood to be the metaphysical entity of the Yang. The metric for success is the embodied manifestation of spontaneity, ascertained through the entwined ethical conditions of ‘intention-less-ness’ and ‘directness’.

Significantly, despite the organisers' professed intentions, teaching the value of spontaneity does not necessarily enable the subject's extrication from contemporary social heteronomy. The Wu-Wei School's emphasis on spontaneity amounts to a form of nature-based moral claim in the sense given by Hampshire (1983), which premises the validity of moral valuation on putative notions of human nature so that universal viability is imputed to the proffered claims (see also Laidlaw, 1995). As in any hierarchically organised institution propounding an allegedly universal ethical vision, the founder Yin-Xian holds the ultimate explanatory authority in the Wu-Wei School over what constitutes spontaneity – and, by extension, valuable ethical striving. This introduces gerontocratic and patriarchal biases into the exegeses routinely carried out on adherents' actions. Nevertheless, as we shall see in Steiner art teacher 'Tao-Yao's reflections in chapter three, Yin-Xian's prestige and authority – conferred by his *xiuxing* achievement, gender, and seniority – are not necessarily met with unconditional deference. In the contemporary PRC, the Wu-Wei founder and followers alike confront a multiplicity of value hierarchies, where seniority and andrarchy (Harrell and Santos, 2017, p.26) constitute but two axes. For now, let us continue with the exploration of the Wu-Wei ethical pedagogies. In the next section, I turn toward the 'effortful' (or *yong wei*) module, which actively inculcates the value of 'love' (understood in a particularised valence) through the orchestration of emotionally charged experiences.



Photo removed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

Figure 3: A filmed seminar with Yin-Xian at the Wu-Dang retreat centre

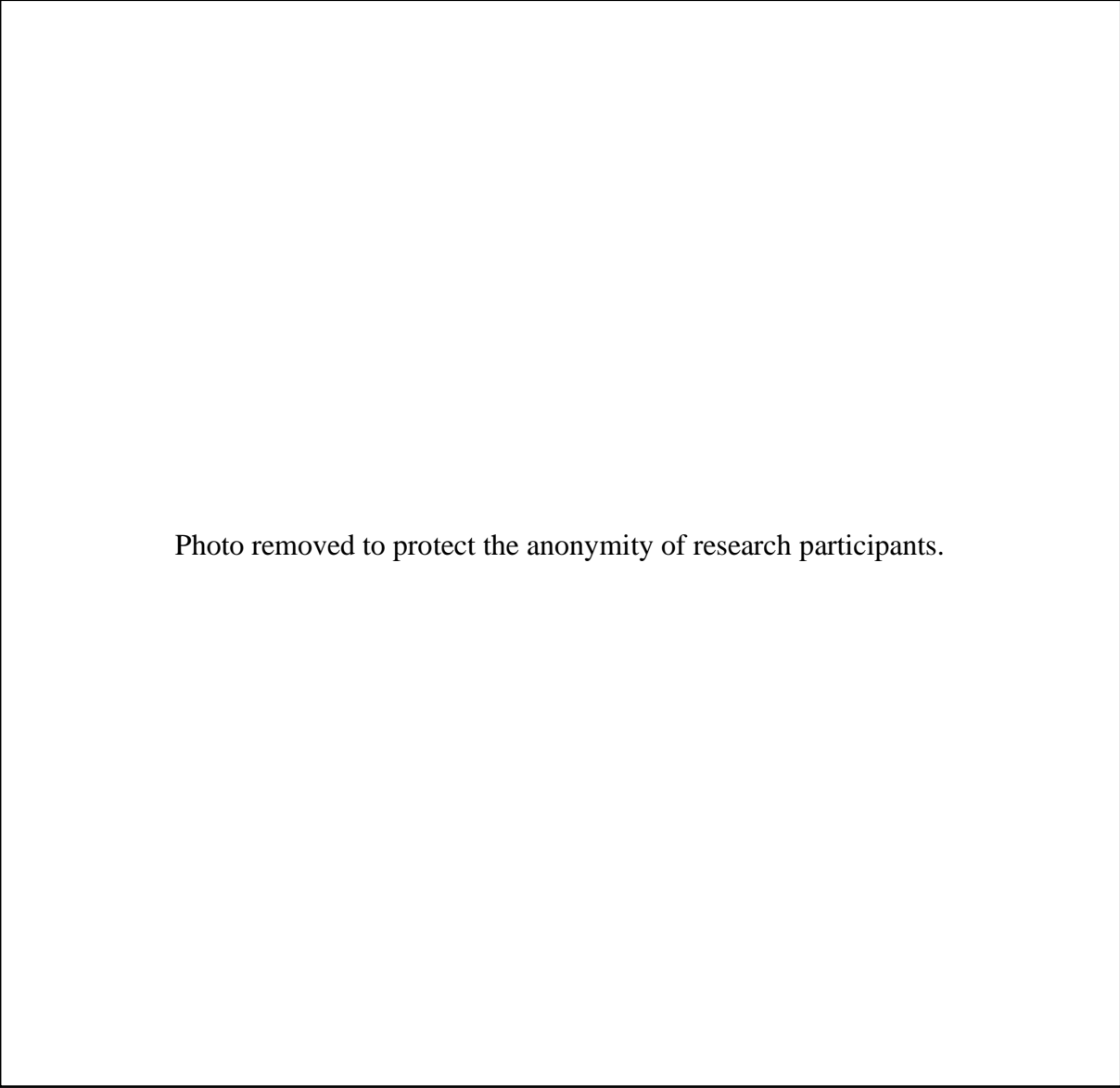


Photo removed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

Figure 7: A sitting meditation practice at the Wu-Dang retreat centre

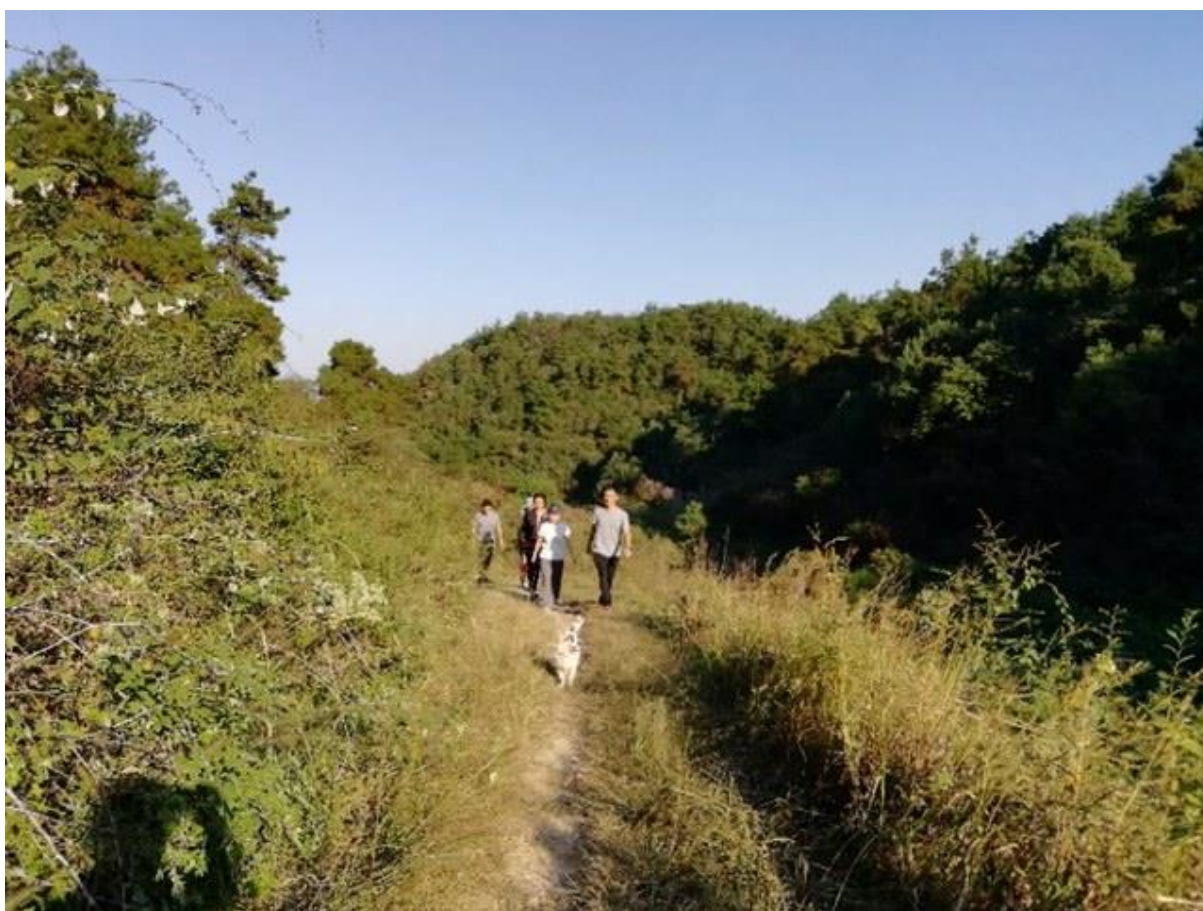


Figure 8: A vigorous walking practice in the Wu-Dang mountains

2. A Pedagogy for Grasping ‘Love’: The ‘*You Wei*’ Module

In Part II, the retreat-goers are enjoined to embrace the value of *ai* (爱), which finds its most direct and spontaneous instantiation in the value of *xiao* (孝). Commonly translated into English as ‘love’ and ‘filial piety’ respectively, the two multivalent concepts are particularised at the Wu-Wei retreats to instil a new set of visceral orientations. Together they command two things: 1) parental/elderly respect, though unconventionally articulated in the language of children’s self-realisation; and 2) the ability to experience ardent and unfettered love, seen as lost in most contemporary small, selfish individuals, who suffer from ‘the atrophy of the ability to love’ (*ai de neng li ku wei* 爱的能力枯萎).

As in Part I, the Part II ethical pedagogy mobilises embodied experiences to crystallise the value of love. However, while in Part I emotion (namely surprise) is implicit in the technique of momentary magnification, in Part II emotion (e.g. surprise, guilt, sadness, feeling moved) becomes the explicit instrument for binding ‘love’ to adherents’ subjectivities. Part II pedagogy evinces ‘effortful action’ (or *you wei*) rooted in an enduring Confucian tradition that seeks to engender social change from the locus of the person. However, as a departure from classical Confucianism, at the Wu-Wei School this process of personal-social reinvention is animated by heartfelt feelings, and, for some, imbued with a romanticised view of high socialism.

A word is due on my usage of ‘filiality’ instead of the more common ‘filial piety’ to render the notion of *xiao* taught at the Wu-Wei School. In making this choice of translation, I seek to underscore the specificities of the school’s situated interpretation of this well-worn notion, which to most Chinese speakers denotes a normative vision of the parent-children relationship founded in the parent’s unquestionable authority. Despite ostensible conceptual continuities with classical Confucianism, Wu-Wei teaching fundamentally transforms the conceptual signification and practical entailments of *xiao*. In so doing, the teachers strikingly reproduce party-state discourse in its recent revival of the Confucian ‘filial tradition’; both innovatively interpret filial obligations as rooted primarily in feelings (*gan qing* 感情) towards the parental figures, rather than in substantive duties such as physical care. As I shall elaborate, in repurposing China’s filial tradition in keeping with the party-state, the school propounds a version of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ adapted to changing socioeconomic circumstances and appealing to its urban middle-class participants.

2.1 Filiality as ‘Love’: From Duty to Feelings

‘If people were to take only one teaching home with them, we want it to be filiality.’ Yin-Xian remarked while cooling himself with a folding fan emblazoned with Mao’s headshot. In the back garden of the Wu-Dang centre, newly arrived adherents were reciting the Confucian *Classic of Filiality* (*xiao jing* 孝经)⁴¹ led by assistant-teacher Gao-Chen.

The Wu-Wei network’s enthusiastic propagation of filiality is motivated by a concern that most adherents, by virtue of their participation in the ‘contemporary society’ (*dang jin she hui* 当今社会), are beset by what the organisers refer to as ‘the atrophy of the ability to love’. To Yin-Xian, this worrisome condition reduces people from ‘superior persons responsible for harmonising the heaven and the earth’ (*he xie tian di de da ren* 和谐天地的大人) into ‘selfish individuals’ (*zi si de ge ti* 自私的个体) with very small, egoistical concerns. Importantly, ‘the atrophy of the ability to love’ has far-reaching social consequences. The Wu-Wei founder explained in an interview in August 2018:

Without the ability to love, not only do people suffer physically and emotionally, they also suffer in their careers and all other aspects of their lives. What we do in the retreats is to sprout their power to love (*rang ai de li liang sheng fa* 让爱的力量生发) by using methods that are simple (*jian dan* 简单), spontaneous (*zi ran* 自然), down-to-earth (*jie di qi* 接地气), and founded in practice (*shi jian wei ji chu* 实践为基础).

To the Wu-Wei teachers, the first step for ‘sprouting people’s power to love’ is to help them rekindle the love for their parents, deemed as the ‘most sincere and spontaneous form of love’. Rekindled love for parents, in turn, will unleash people’s ability to love others and beyond. The teaching of filiality is thus the first step of a larger project aimed at reverse-engineering ‘selfish individuals’ back into ‘superior persons’, a personhood ideal founded in the *Book of Changes*. For the Wu-Wei organizers, the ‘superior person’ constitutes an affective totality with the situated environment and exerts an eminent influence in the cosmological-social-political order (see chapter three). These underlying logics connect ‘the power to love’ with undertakings with wider political resonance, making such *xiuxing* practices inseparable from adherents’ citizen-subjectivity formation.

⁴¹ *Classic of Filiality*, also translated as ‘*Classic of Filial Piety*’, is commonly dated to between the 4th century and 2nd century BCE. While its authorship remains an issue of ongoing debate, the text is usually attributed to a conversation between Confucius and his disciple Zengzi.

The Confucian *Classic of Filiality* is the induction text for all adherents and is introduced through a variety of contexts (seminar, recitation, or memorisation assignment). Invariably, however, retreat-goers experience great surprise when they discover the remarkable departure in the Wu-Wei interpretation of the well-worn Confucian concept of filiality. Namely, the Wu-Wei School rejects the received wisdom that Confucianism equates filiality with obedience (*shun* 顺). This is considered a gross hermeneutic error which digresses from the injunctions found in the *Classic of Filiality*. Retreat goers are invited to memorise the following definition of filiality, taken from the chapter entitled ‘The Scope and Meaning of the Treatise’ (*kai zong ming yi* 开宗明义):

Filiality commences with the care of one’s body, to every hair and every bit of skin, as these are received from the parents and must not be injured or wounded. Filiality culminates in establishing oneself by following the righteous course of action, propagating one’s name across the world, thereby glorifying the parents.⁴²

Gao-Chen explained the text to an elementary school boy once:

Xiao has nothing to do with obedience or materials. This is where people have been deeply mistaken. Let’s see what the *Classic of Filiality* asks of every one of us. On the first level, it requires you to protect yourself (*bao hu hao zi ji* 保护好自己) – your life is a precious gift by the parents. On the second level, it requires you to have righteous achievements and help others (*you suo jian shu he bang zhu bie ren* 有所建树和帮助别人). As you can see, according to our classic, filiality is not about following what your parents say or buying nice things for them. Filiality is a kind of deep love (*xiao shi yi zhong shen shen de ai* 孝是一种深深的爱) that you hold in your heart and use to guide your actions.

The boy later related to me that, when he read the same text at a public school, his teachers there gave a completely different interpretation of filiality – ‘they told me to just obey what mom and dad say.’ He added, ‘I like teacher Gao-Chen’s explanation more.’

Adults also consistently expressed to me how they were surprised by such a formulation of *xiao*, which they usually understood in relation to ‘duty’ (*ze ren* 责任) rather than ‘sentiments’

⁴² My translation of the original passage: ‘*shen ti fa fu, shou zhi fu mu, bu gan hui shang, xiao zhi shi ye, li shen xing dao, yang ming yu hou shi, yi xian fu mu, xiao zhi zhong ye* 身体发肤，受之父母，不敢毁伤，孝之始也。立身行道，扬名于后世，以显父母，孝之终也.’ Compare with James Legge’s classical translation: ‘Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety. When we have established our character by the practice of the (filial) course, so as to make our name famous in future ages and thereby glorify our parents, this is the end of filial piety.’ (2020 [1879], pp. 4-5).

(*gan qing* 感情). ‘Though unusual, this teaching makes so much sense for today’s society,’ remarked a father.

For our generation born in the 60s, how much can we expect from our only-children in terms of taking care of us in our old age? My wife and I have already planned to cruise around the world then move to a quality nursing home. We need no economic support from our daughter, nor would we expect her to wash our clothes or wipe our bodies when we are bed-ridden. We need her to be safe, pursue a career that’s meaningful for her, and to do something good for the society. That would amount to filiality to us.

The retreat goers’ encounters with the value of filiality are far from purely cerebral. Participants have shared with me experiences of being gripped by strong emotions during sitting meditation, walking, recitation or seminars at the retreat. Being in the retreat appears to prompt participants to reflect on how they fell short of appreciating the greatness (*wei da* 伟大) of their parents or loving them adequately.

A few participants burst into tears when reading the *Classic of Filiality* out loud for the first time or participating in their first seminar on the exegesis of the text. On these occasions, the eruption of emotions place participants in a pedagogical relationship to their momentarily heightened selves. These intense experiences, I argue, comprise an autogenous (as opposed to interpellative) form of momentary magnification, where the adherents perform auto-exegesis and the ethical teachers take a supportive role. As such, adherents spontaneously make themselves into heuristics; they come to grasp what the value of filiality could *feel* like as embodied experiences. I shall illustrate this with the help of Ms. Guo’s experience.

Ms. Guo, an engineer based in a major city in Hubei province, accompanied her eight-year-old daughter to the retreat in August 2018. On her second afternoon, Ms. Guo sat down with us for tea in Yin-Xian’s cottage while the children grudgingly recited the *Classic of Filiality* led by assistant-teachers Fu-Yi and Gao-Chen in the back cottage. Suddenly, having taken a sip from her cup, Ms. Guo started weeping. I was slightly startled, but Yin-Xian and assistant-teacher Fang-Hua appeared undisturbed. After a few seemingly eternal minutes, the teary-eyed Ms. Guo began to narrate her experience, her voice still quivering:

I’ve been walking around the nearby farmhouses yesterday and today. Being surrounded by the hills and the valleys, the chicken and geese, and not having a lot on my mind, I thought of my mother. My mother, who could hardly read, somehow managed to send all of us to university. I used to be ashamed of her. Her rustic ways were a burden to my

fragile self-esteem, especially when I first moved to the city for my studies. For a long time, I saw little good in her. Somehow, being here in this very simple environment (*pu shi de huan jing li* 朴实的环境里), I was reminded of many things that I had chosen to forget... The smell of wood burning in the farm stoves... I remember smelling the same scent waking up before sunrise. My mother worked hard to care for me and my siblings. There was always hot breakfast in the kitchen before our long walk to the school. My mother was sensitive and intelligent (*min gan cong hui* 敏感聪慧) in her own way. She knew every goose and chicken we kept at home and could tell them apart. She always understood our needs and the needs of the animals. Somehow, all these years living in the cities, I've forgotten about her gifts. Now I feel ashamed of myself.

Ms. Guo articulated how her embodied experience at the 'simple environment' of the retreat activated memories and feelings associated with her mother, which she had 'chosen to forget'. Her public confession of shame was accompanied by strong emotional release. This incident epitomised the ways in which adherents, having been discursively predisposed to 'filiality as a form of deep love', reflexively magnified their emotional upsurge into pedagogical materials for grasping this value. Throughout her soliloquy, Ms. Guo was neither encouraged to attenuate her emotional release nor elicited to provide further auto-analysis. The teachers simply formed a backdrop to her heart-felt reflections. We remained silent for a while as Ms. Guo sobbed, Fang-Hua calmly serving tea as the cups emptied. The quietude of the valley, occasionally broken by the sound of a flustered chicken, magnified her strained breathing. A long while later, Yin-Xian rolled up his fan and gently said,

Very good. You are a person with intuitive intelligence (*ling xing* 灵性). The most spontaneous part of your heart has moved (*ni nei xin zui zi ran de bu fen dong le* 你内心最自然的部分动了). Your life will become much better from this moment onward.

He then retired to his room for the afternoon sitting meditation. Ms. Guo rolled up wet tissues in a tight ball, gave Fang-Hua and me a misty-eyed smile, and exited the sitting room. A few days later, when she left with her daughter, Ms. Guo thanked Yin-Xian and the assistant-teachers. Tears swimming in her eyes, she vowed to never forget about the love she felt for her mother during the time at the retreat.

While Ms. Guo was left uninterrupted throughout her soliloquy, founder Yin-Xian's exegetical comments construed the episode as a crucial and positive step in Ms. Guo's *xiuxing* and even life journey. Such abrupt outbursts of emotions were always treated favourably by the

teachers. Yin-Xian gave a teleological account when I asked him to share his thoughts on people's emotional release:

When people come to the retreat, we want them first and foremost to relax (*fang song* 放松). Only when they become relaxed can they possibly become spontaneous (*zi ran* 自然). When people become spontaneous, delusive and extraneous thoughts fade (*wang nian za nian tui qu* 妄念杂念退去). What arises in them instead is a heart of gratitude (*gan en zhi xin* 感恩之心), and what appears in their mind is most frequently their love for their parents. This is the first step in the sprouting of their ability to love. Crying is a very good sign. Living in today's society, so many people have forgotten how to cry, how to feel, let alone how to love. When they start to feel emotions again, and when they remember their deep love for parents, people are on their way towards harmonising heaven and earth.

In this reflection, Yin-Xian adumbrates the contour of the ethical journey retreat participants are enjoined to embark upon. As participants become relaxed and subsequently more spontaneous, they are expected to feel an upsurge of their 'deep love for parents', which often manifests in crying. Adherents' ability to 'feel emotions again' is seen as the crucial signpost in their journey towards becoming 'superior persons'.

The Wu-Wei organisers' emphasis on the labile value of love, and the treatment of filiality as its 'most spontaneous and sincere' instantiation, demands sociological contextualisation. As intimated by interlocutors cited above, the school's rendering of filiality in the valence of 'love' strikes many as unusual. They are instead accustomed to, and expect, a deontological understanding of filiality (as children's, primarily sons', obligation to provide old-age security for their parents); however, most participants immediately find the school's novel interpretation of 'filiality' sensible and appealing. As we shall see, the binding together of filiality and love, along with the concomitant substitution of normative duty with visceral feeling, acknowledges shifting dynamics in intergenerational relationships in a context of demographic and socioeconomic transformations. This interpretation is furthermore complexly embroiled with the recent party-state rehabilitation of the previously denounced 'filial tradition'.

2.2 Reconfiguring Filial Obligations to Benefit Socioeconomic Transformations

The Wu-Wei ethical pedagogy reconfigures the value of filiality in two notable ways. First, the Wu-Wei teaching construes the realisation of filiality as primarily a matter of the child's self-realisation. This feature ought to be contextualised in what anthropologist Hong Zhang calls the 'crisis of filial piety' (2017) unfolding across the levels of state governance and family life. On the one hand, young, working-age Chinese adults are increasingly caught between the countervailing demands of their careers and parental care. On the other hand, the party-state is confronting a deepening population management crisis in the aftermath of the one-child policy (in effect between 1979 and 2015).

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the party-state has espoused a series of legislative and propaganda measures to promote the Confucian filial tradition, seen as having crucial stabilising effects on a society weathering increased volatility and drastic demographic changes. Hong Zhang observes that, alongside developing a national pension system, the party-state's renewed interest in filiality is part of a two-pronged approach to old-age security in the context of marketisation and the transition to a consumer-based society (2017, p.234). The new discourse of filiality is marked by what Stevan Harrell and Goncalo Santos term a 'shift to affection' across official and popular levels (Harrell and Santos, 2017, p.22). Since 2004, the CCP is observed to increasingly emphasise the affective aspect of filiality. It has institutionalised the annual selection of national filial exemplars modelled on the Yuan Dynasty twenty-four filial paragons; designated the month of October as Respect the Elders Month; and even formally decreed that adult children must pay their parents regular visits via an amendment to the 1996 Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly. Parallel to these party-state efforts, Hong Zhang identifies a shift in filial expectations among her urban middle-class interlocutors in Beijing and Shanghai. These parents are primarily concerned with 'not becoming a burden' to their children, and increasingly choose to 'outsource' physical care to paid elderly services; meanwhile, they consistently privilege emotional connection with their children over financial support (Zhang, 2017, pp. 241-247). Several ethnographers working in other contexts corroborate this transformation in intergenerational relationships, whereby the value of filiality is reinscribed with an increasingly strong emotive valence (Yan, 2003; 2009; cf. Stafford, 2013). Such a reconfiguration of filiality allows for working-age Chinese adults to flexibly fulfil their filial duties without having

to compromise their professional commitments in the highly competitive socialist market economy (Zhang, 2017, p. 249).⁴³

As hinted by the father cited in the previous section, with the coming of age of the ‘only hope’ (Fong, 2004) generation born under the ‘one-child’ birth control policy and the normalisation of the inverse triangle extended family structure, China’s demographic shift alongside deepening marketisation has necessitated novel interpretations and practices of filiality. The recipe of filiality participants learn at the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* retreats closely accommodates this logic. Out of the multitudinous ancient texts treating the subject of filiality (and indeed the seventeen multivalent chapters contained within the *Classic of Filiality*), the school has canonised a formulation that demands little tangible contribution (financial, labour, care) and privileges the children’s self-protection and self-actualisation. Implicit in this teaching is an abatement of parental claim on the child’s substantive resources and efforts. The Wu-Wei teaching of filiality, I suggest, illustrates what Hong Zhang calls the ‘realignment of the state, family, and market interests in China’ (Zhang, 2017, p. 249). Here, the putatively unchanging essence of ‘filial piety’ is sophisticatedly reinscribed and redeployed to befit reconfigured intergenerational relationships and socioeconomic transformations.

The second way in which the Wu-Wei ethical pedagogy reconfigures the value of filiality concerns the accentuation of the ‘felt’ dimension of filiality. In a recent article examining cases of Good Samaritan extortions in China, Yan Yunxiang argues that these cases reveal a multi-dimensional moral transformation unfolding in the PRC, part of which concerns the giving way of high socialist moral sensibilities to an ‘individual morality of rights and self-realisation’ (2009, p. 22). The Wu-Wei teaching on filiality simultaneously nods to this trend and tries to complexify it by reinjecting emotive sensibilities evoking memories of high socialism. As I delineated earlier on, the teachers equate filiality with a form of ‘deep love’, emphasising its viscerally felt qualities and encouraging participants’ to grasp this value through emotionally charged experiences. This feeling-infused view presents a neat departure from received interpretations of what filiality entails in classical Confucianism.

As Charlotte Ikels shows, the ideograph of *xiao* (孝), composing the top half of the character *lao* (老 elderly) resting on top of the character *zi* (子 son), denotes a variety of hierarchical

⁴³ Flexible and highly commercialised filial practices will likely deepen existing social inequalities, an important area which invites further empirical research.

relationships: children's support for parents, intergenerational dependence, parental burden, even parental oppression (2004, p. 3). In imperial China, filiality not only structured the relationships within the virilocal extended family, but also paradigmatically indexed the relationships between the emperor and his subjects, demanding unconditional allegiance and obedience from the children-cum-political-subjects (Harrell and Santos, 2017, p. 10). Nevertheless, between the 1911 Revolution and the 1937 war with Japan, the Confucian value of filiality came up against a new public discourse centred on youth, iconoclasm, science, and democracy; this discourse was fuelled by the pro-Western intellectual-led aspirational project of building a new modern national culture (Mitter, 2004). Confucian gerontocracy and conservatism were among the first tenets to be problematised and rejected from this new ethos. The May Fourth iconoclasts, Haiyan Lee notes, especially denounced filiality for its 'empty formality and disregard for the psychological and emotional life of the inner self' (2007, p. 6). Contrary to early twentieth-century modernisers' dismissal of this central Confucian moral doctrine as characterised by 'aridity and hypocrisy' (Lee, 2007, p. 5), the value of filiality Wu-Wei participants come to appraise is infused with sentimentality. As I elaborate below, this remarkable innovation is mediated by the Wu-Wei founder's and some followers' remembrance of Maoist China (that is, despite its spectacular rejection of filiality).⁴⁴ Their recollections, which are partial and often romanticised, are marked by an arresting emotional depth; this colours the particular pedigree of filiality being taught at the school, which is founded in love, and more specifically, the ardent kind of love.

2.3 Love, the Ardent Kind: From the Ability to Love to the Future of the Polity

The overarching value of love celebrated at the Wu-Wei School, of which filiality is deemed the first and most direct instantiation, has a complex social history. As religious study scholar Guo Ting explicates, the articulatory category of love (understood as private sentiments) is a recent and politically charged addition to the Chinese lexicon. The character 愛⁴⁵ originally denoted Confucian values of generosity, clemency, and kindness, manifested through status-appropriate conduct. Nineteenth-century missionaries were among the first to adopt this well-worn character to render biblical accounts of love, conveying a range of meanings including subjectively felt sentiments (Guo, 2020, pp. 40-41). In recent Chinese history, the construction of love as a legitimate sentiment has gone hand in hand with the quest for a sovereign, modern polity and the production of citizen

⁴⁴ See Parrish and Whyte (1978), Diamond (1975), and Stacey (1983) for in-depth discussions of Maoist nuclearising family policies to disintegrate clan structures and to destroy deep-rooted filial sensibilities, which were seen as a crucial private emotion vying for citizen-subject's undivided emotional allegiances.

⁴⁵ Note that this character is in traditional Chinese; the equivalent simplified Chinese character is 爱.

subjects capable of heartfelt emotions, especially emotions directed at the nation-state. Both Republican and Communist political actors deployed the rhetoric of love for their respective state building projects, where love as a form of universalist affect was to function as the glue bringing together the otherwise fragmented society. However, according to some scholars, the CCP has capitalised on the radical, passionate potential of love more effectively than its Republican predecessor (Guo, 2020; Liu, 2010; Lee, 2019; Perry, 2002).

During the first three decades of the PRC, alternatively known as the era of high socialism (1949-1978), love as a form of private sentiment came under intense scrutiny. On the one hand, love founded on sexual attraction was frequently dissuaded and heavily regulated (see Yan, 2003). On the other hand, expressions of love motivated by patriotic devotion were elicited and heightened. Politics became the only legitimate arena for passion, while particularistic private attachments were seen as dangerous competitors to universalist nationalistic allegiances. Notably, Guo Ting (2020) identifies the coinage of a new term during this period – the ‘hot’ or ardent love (*re ai* 热爱) – which further sharpened the visceral affection and boundless devotion each citizen-subject ought to feel vis-à-vis the Communist polity, epitomised in the cult of Mao.

In the post-Mao era, while private and diversified forms of ‘love’ have become increasingly available to citizens, the CCP has not relinquished its claim on the visceral sentiment. However, compared to the radical devotion requisite of high socialist subjects, the emotion the party-state elicits from its citizens is significantly attenuated. Ordinary citizens typically are called upon to channel their ‘love’ to a common list of entities: love for the state (*ai guo* 爱国), love for the party (*ai dang* 爱党), love for the school (*ai xiao* 爱校) overseen by the party-state, and love for their situated social collective (*ai ji ti* 爱集体), among others. These political appropriations of love often feel vacuous if not alienating to the younger generations. Those who were born after the birth-planning era (1979-onward) have never experienced the ardour of high socialist times but have tuned into plenty of critical voices denouncing CCP propaganda. As some Wu-Wei adherents astutely observe, for young members of the citizenry, especially the so-called ‘Gen Z’ born around the turn of the century and now just reaching the cusp of their adulthood, CCP official incitements of ‘love’ are at best amusing anachronisms and at worst pathetic residues of a ludicrous era. Younger generation’s rejection of politically construed, collectively oriented love, however, unsettles the moral sensibilities of the older generations. ‘If you ask fifteen-year-olds whether they

have more love for the country or for *Honour of Kings* (*wang zhe rong yao* 王者荣耀),⁴⁶ I bet you they won't even bother to pretend,' observed a mother visiting the Wu-Dang centre with her middle-school-aged son, in a half joking and half indignant tone.

Retired state primary-school teacher Mrs. Wang voiced her concerns over the lack of harmony of the contemporary society, which she attributed to the 'dispassion' and 'lack of a loving heart' among 'today's children':

Our society today is wealthier but not more harmonious. Having taught at a public school for thirty years, I find it appalling how many of today's children lack a loving heart (*que fa ai xin* 缺乏爱心). Even though our government constantly spreads messages about nurturing and cultivating a loving heart (*pei yang ai xin* 培养爱心) and giving out a portion of our love (*xian chu wo men de yi fen ai* 献出我们的一份爱), our children remain dispassionate (*wu dong yu zhong* 无动于衷). They don't even love their parents; how can they give out their love in any way? This is why I bring my little granddaughter here [to the Wu-Wei School *xiuxing* retreat] during her summer vacation. It's very rare to find teachers who can teach people how to do personhood (*zuo ren* 做人). I entirely agree with the teachers here that children must first sprout their love for their parents, and then sprout greater kinds of love. What kind of future would our society have if our children don't even know how to love!⁴⁷

Here, Mrs Wang invokes the classical Confucian notion of 'doing personhood' and makes 'sprouting love' central to this process. Yan Yunxiang (2017) conceives of 'doing personhood' as a process of becoming a full moral person through social actions, and further argues that this dynamic view of 'the person' underpins the radically different moral regimes of the Confucian, Maoist, and contemporary periods. Crucially, to Mrs. Wang, by teaching children how to 'do personhood' through 'sprouting' their ability to love, Wu-Wei ethical teaching could help restore harmony to contemporary society, made up of wealthier but 'dispassionate' individuals. As such, the sentiment of love is endowed with wider social signification and explicit instrumental value. That love ought to have a socially oriented teleology harkens back to Maoist collectivity-oriented ardent love.

⁴⁶ The world's most popular multiplayer online battle arena game published by Tencent, a Chinese multinational technology conglomerate holding company that also developed WeChat, the world's largest standalone mobile app.

⁴⁷ '*ru guo wo men de hai zi lian ai dou bu hui le, wo men de she hui hai you shen me qian tu a* 如果我们的孩子连爱都不会了, 我们的社会还有什么前途啊'.

Wu-Wei founder Yin-Xian would have agreed with Mrs. Wang's comments. He expressed his dismay with the younger generations on a separate occasion during a conversation with a few senior adherents visiting from Shenzhen:

I'm afraid to say that the '80s, '90s and '00s generations are a disaster (*zao gao tou le* 糟糕透了). They have no ideals, no ambitions, and not much emotion.⁴⁸ They lack the power of love (*ai de li liang* 爱的力量). I fear for our country when they have to be the mainstay of the society. Our young people need a lot of help, they are not like the generations that grew up under Mao.⁴⁹

This was one of the rare occasions where the otherwise discreet Yin-Xian articulated what he perceived to be an intimate relation between 'the power of love' and 'the generations that grew up under Mao'. Like Mrs. Wang, he found the lack of passion besetting young generations problematic and possibly having devastating implications for the polity. Notably, Yin-Xian implied that the Wu-Wei School helped young people in their state of 'disaster' to foster the power of love because of a keen concern for the country and the society; in his view, the younger generations' lack of ideals, ambitions, and emotional depth threatened not their own futures but the future of the PRC.

This assertion – that the people's potential to sustain the existing political-social order is predicated upon their possession of 'the power of love' – betrays how Yin-Xian and some participants harbour positive (and explicitly partial) memories of Maoist China; it is characterised as an era of pulsating emotional forces, while its terrors are neatly jettisoned. Despite the tendentious nature of such views, their emphasis upon passionate love nonetheless becomes the conceptual fulcrum for an innovative synthesis of the three Schools of thought that inform the Wu-Wei project. Specifically, Yin-Xian holds that the value of love is at the intersection of the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist teachings, and that it constitutes the true animating force of all human endeavours—from the reproduction of the family to strengthening of the nation. Consider this seminar excerpt from the National Holidays Week in 2018, when three adherent families visited the Wu-Dang retreat centre.

The deepest kind of love is the love of blood and flesh (*xue rou zhi ai* 血肉之爱). Students who visit us mostly come as parents and children together. This is tremendous. Nothing is more spontaneous (*zi ran* 自然) and more direct (*zhi jie* 直接) than the love of blood and flesh they share. This love is the true treasure of all human beings. It is inexhaustible and

⁴⁸ 'mei you li xiang, mei you bao fu, ye mei you duo shao gan qing 没有理想，没有抱负，也没有多少感情'.

⁴⁹ 'mao zeng dong ying xiang xia de na ji dai ren 毛泽东影响下的那几代人'.

un-depletable (*qu zhi bu jin, yong zhi bu jie* 取之不尽, 用之不竭). All great careers originate from this kind of love.⁵⁰ Departing from the love of blood and flesh, we can sprout the boundless grand love (*sheng fa wu jiang de da dai* 生发无疆的大爱).

Here, Yin-Xian not only exalts the parent-child emotional bond, but further proclaims that the intensification of such ‘love of blood and flesh’ enables a second, superior kind of love: ‘the boundless grand love’. In the Wu-Wei founder’s conception, the parent-child love, though ‘spontaneous’, ‘direct’, and ‘sincere’, is a form of ‘small love’ (*xiao ai* 小爱). The intensification of ‘small love’ is the precondition for the ‘grand love’ (*da ai* 大爱) of which superior persons are capable. Such ‘grand love’ knows no limits; it is spontaneous, selfless, and profound. It is modelled upon the parent-child love, though can be liberally applied to any subject(s) or object(s). Notably, the conception of the ‘grand love’ evokes the high socialist ardour; it is constructed as unpremeditated and powerful, pregnant with promises of the sublime, and indispensable for achieving the harmonisation of heaven and earth.

This raises yet another pedagogical question: if retreat-goers learn to grasp the ‘small love’ via hermeneutic encounters with their emotionally galvanised selves, drenched in visceral affection for their parents, how then do they come to apprehend the far more abstract ‘grand love’, predicated on a high level of *xinxing* achievement? In what follows, I delineate how the ‘grand love’ is made experientially available via Yin-Xian’s own exemplary conduct in forming fictive kinship with a family of the Na ethnicity⁵¹, who are now de facto managers (and legal owners) of the Lu-Gu Lake retreat. Through weaving a dense web of emotive and economic ties with a family of complete strangers, generously investing time and resources, and refusing material compensations, Yin-Xian has striven to crystallise through his unconventional conduct this otherwise intractable value. His adoptive kinship relation is performatively enacted (by himself) and discursively construed (by adherents) as the textbook definition of the ‘grand love’.

⁵⁰ ‘*Suo you wei da de shi ye yuan yu zhe zhong ai* 所有伟大的事业源于这种爱’.

⁵¹ The Na, alternatively known as the Mosuo people, is a small ethnic group (of approximately 40,000 individuals) living in Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces and currently omitted from the PRC’s officially recognised 55 ethnic minority groups (see Cai, 2001).

2.4 ‘The Boundless Grand Love’: Exemplarity through Fictive Kinship

Lu-Gu Lake, the winter home of the Wu-Wei network, is a landmark on adherents’ *xiuxing* journey; an adherent from Changsha even described her family trip there as imbued with a kind of ‘sacredness’ (*shen sheng gan* 神圣感). Committed adherents bring their families (sometimes all three generations) to celebrate the Lunar New Year with Yin-Xian and his adoptive family. While *xiuxing* activities continue to run throughout this period, including on the New Year’s Eve, the tone of the retreat experience is decidedly more festive and earthlier compared to that in the Wu-Dang mountains.

Yin-Xian’s relationship with his Na adoptive family is a widely circulated tale within the network. Almost every long-term adherent can recount the story vividly, which more or less goes like this:

From 2009 to 2010, at the height of his career in journalism in Hunan Province, Yin-Xian *spontaneously* made two pivotal trips. In the Wu-Dang mountains, while wandering around the ancient Daoist nunnery known as the Zi-Xiao Palace, he encountered a vision of himself in sitting meditation on a red brick wall. Later, at Lu-Gu Lake, he *spontaneously* decided to give up his job in pursuit of his calling: the practice of *xiuxing* and the transmission of Chinese traditional culture. Following this radical career change, he also fundamentally restructured his personal life – divorcing his wife,⁵² forming familial ties with a Na family, moving to a tiny ‘hut’⁵³ in the Wu-Dang mountains, and investing most his savings in building a guesthouse under the name of his adoptive family.

On his first visit to Lu-Gu Lake, Yin-Xian and his wife at the time stayed in the nearby hotel where Fang-Hua, the eldest daughter of the Na family, worked as a waitress. Over a casual conversation, Fang-Hua invited Yin-Xian and his partner to dine with her extended family. The ‘harmony’ (*he xie* 和谐) and ‘virtue’ (*mei de* 美德) of Fang-Hua’s family, rarely seen in the ‘society outside’ (*wai mian de she hui* 外面的社会) tarnished by the onslaught of totalising commercialisation,

⁵² Given the sensitive nature of this topic, and Yin-Xian’s unwillingness to share further information, I was unaware of how this decision was reached. There were also conflicting versions of the story among the adherents; some suggested that this was Yin-Xian’s second wife.

⁵³ Yin-Xian’s earlier quarters were located in a different part of the mountains from the current centre, close to the Zi-Xiao Palace.

greatly touched Yin-Xian. Viscerally moved, he *spontaneously* formed lasting ties with these complete strangers.

In early January 2019, I followed Yin-Xian and assistant-teachers Fu-Yi and Gao-Chen to the lakeside retreat facility. While enjoying our welcome tea in the Na family courtyard, connected to the guesthouse via a side entrance, Yin-Xian reminisced on that first encounter a decade ago.

I was moved by their hospitality and courtesy. Even though they had very little, the family house was clean, flourishing, and harmonious (*gan jing, xing wang, he xie* 干净, 兴旺, 和谐). The head of the household, grandmother Aji, was a pious Tibetan Buddhist and had the aura of a *xiuxing* practitioner (*xiu xing ren* 修行人). Her three daughters and one son were kind and diligent. Though we didn't speak much of each other's language, I immediately felt very comfortable with them.

Fang-Hua had a little sister, Fang-Ling, who was dark and skinny. She was reading a torn magazine left behind by a tourist. I went a few times to the family house, and each time, I noticed that Fang-Ling was reading the same torn magazine. It seemed that she had no other book to read. So, I brought a book to teach her. [...] I assigned her a dozen ancient texts to memorise and helped her with her studies. She got much better grades at school. The second year, I came back and taught her *the Analects*. Since then, I've come back to her house at least once every year.

The three sisters did not have a father figure in their lives as they were born of walking marriage⁵⁴ and their mother was not on speaking terms with their biological father. It was a simple decision to support them. The second year when I came back, I asked Fang-Ling, 'do you want a dad?' She teared up and nodded her head. She did not call me 'dad' right away, but she wrote 'dear dad' in the letters she sent me. It was very touching.

From 2011 until Fang-Ling graduated from university with a degree in Chinese literature in 2018, Yin-Xian paid for her tuition fees and her living expenses (approximately 20,000 RMB⁵⁵ per year). Fang-Ling's two elder sisters, Fang-Hua (the eldest) and Fang-Ya (the middle) also

⁵⁴ Anthropologist Cai Hua has written extensively on the sexual practice of the Na known as walking marriage (*zun hun* 走婚), which consists of furtive or open visits between sexual partners at night and does not entail co-habitation or other matrimonial arrangements. He documents repeated attempts by the local government to impose monogamy and the institution of marriage upon the Na, and the ways in which the Na moral sensibilities come into conflict with the state's ethical vision and socialist administrative practice (Cai, 2001, pp. 385-448).

⁵⁵ Equivalent to £2,251 at the CNY/GBP exchange rate on 19 September 2021.

recognised Yin-Xian as their adoptive father. The arrangement was never legally formalised, which Yin-Xian stressed was deliberate.

Most people adopting children nowadays go through the lengthy legal process and get an adoption certificate. But what is the point of wasting time getting that government document (*zheng fu wen jian* 政府文件)? There are so many children without a father or mother. They need love and support rather than a sheet of paper.

It's important to note the ways in which this narrative (as well as some further remarks by Yin-Xian and adherents that will later appear) is pervaded by a form of Orientalism directed at an ethnic other. The Na family is discursively construed as an emblem of 'harmony' and 'virtue', on account of their perceived geographical and sociological isolation from the urban, commercialised landscape. The tendency to exoticise ethnic minorities, or what Dru Gladney terms an 'internal Orientalism' (1994, p. 94), is a recurring theme across official and popular discourses in the PRC, and is inextricably bound up with the construction of a Han ethnicity-dominated nationalistic imaginary.

In an article examining media representations of ethnic minorities in the PRC, Gladney (1994) shows how the strength and superiority of the Han nation are relationally constituted through widespread socio-symbolic practices of feminising other ethnicities. In state-sponsored media production such as the televised Chinese New Year's Program, public mural painting, and museum displays, the fifty-five ethnic minorities are portrayed primarily through feminine figures. Outside state-orchestrated symbolic practices, popular portrayals of ethnic minorities also tend to focus on the female figure, which is furthermore imputed a degree of sensuality in contradistinction to the demure image of Han females. This is epitomised in the Yunnan Art School's internationally acclaimed artworks featuring eroticised minority female figures. In these processes of representation unfolding across the party-state and popular levels, non-Han ethnicities become the effeminate, primordial, a-historical internal other against which the masculine, advanced, modern Han nation is reified and legitimated.

The important question of contemporary interethnic relations nevertheless lies beyond the scope of this current project. This is primarily because I was unable to interact with Yin-Xian's adoptive family independently or over a prolonged period. Moreover, the unquestionable authority of Yin-Xian within the fictive kin relationship, and indeed the economic and care entanglements between Yin-Xian and the Na family, rendered any critical investigation a potentially detrimental

undertaking. While the daughters were at times observed to exhibit visible dissatisfaction in the face of Yin-Xian's patronising gestures, they rarely articulated any critique. The lack of ethnographic evidence in this area constitutes a limitation of this study. With this in mind, I return to the story between Yin-Xian and his Na adoptive family, which necessarily constitutes a one-sided account.

In 2016, when Yin-Xian heard that the Na family had obtained a governmental license to build a guesthouse but was nowhere near having enough funds, he swiftly decided to help. At the time, Yin-Xian's old apartment in the city centre of Changsha was demolished (*chai qian* 拆迁) and he received 1 million RMB⁵⁶ for compensation. He contributed the entire sum plus a further 0.15 million RMB⁵⁷ in personal savings to the guesthouse project, which took around 1.3 million RMB⁵⁸ to finish. A few Wu-Wei adherents contributed a small sum of money, while the Na family obtained a micro loan to cover the rest. Once again, the family and Yin-Xian did not establish any binding legal document. Yin-Xian responded to my queries while having tea one day at the Lu-Gu centre,

I didn't even ask them to write a note (*da zhang tiao* 打张条) about my funds. When the guesthouse opened in 2017, grandma Aji offered to pay me 100,000 RMB⁵⁹ back each year, but I declined. I don't need any money. I have a room in the guesthouse and eat with the family at the same table when I'm here. That is all I needed.

This story so flagrantly defies prevalent economic logic in the PRC that many Wu-Wei followers find themselves flabbergasted upon first hearing it – usually from a long-term adherent. Once on a home visit, I witnessed veteran adherent Tian-Yi recounting the story to two inductees who were private business owners. The wife promptly expressed her shock, 'Who does that these days? Putting all his money into a random project in the middle of nowhere without even a written note! Was the master out of his mind?' Tian-Yi had a knowing smile on his face, 'No one does that these days. That's why the master does it. Unlike us who act upon endless deliberation (*shen si shu lu* 深思熟虑), he does everything spontaneously (*quan ping zi ran* 全凭自然).'

⁵⁶ Equivalent to £ 112,551 at the CNY/GBP exchange rate on 19 September 2021.

⁵⁷ Equivalent to £ 16,883.

⁵⁸ Equivalent to £ 146,316.

⁵⁹ Equivalent to £ 11,255.

On a separate occasion, when I was chatting with two adherents from Yin-Xian's hometown who were partners running an alternative traditional medicine clinic, one of them put it this way:

The master does what he teaches. He is a paragon (*kai mo* 楷模) for us. We are lay Buddhists (*ju shi* 居士) and do a lot of volunteering. But it is not as spontaneous (*zi ran* 自然) or pure (*chun cui* 纯粹) [compared to the master]. We felt awed and humbled when we visited Lu-Gu Lake and saw the bond between the master and his adoptive family. Truly touching (*fei chang gan ren* 非常感人). Hopefully one day we will sprout the grand love in ways that approximate the master (*sheng fa xiang shi fu na yang de da ai* 生发像师父那样的大爱).

In these narratives, the Wu-Wei founder and his followers construe the entwined emotional and economic bond between Yin-Xian and the Na family as an exemplary antidote to the 'atrophy of the ability to love' that plagues contemporary society. On the one hand, Yin-Xian articulates how the 'boundless grand love' originates in the 'love of blood and flesh' of biological relatedness and extends beyond the confines of the biological family. Adherents, on the other hand, often pick up this cue and exegetically infuse the Wu-Wei founder's peculiar lived experience with didactic significance. Notably, the students gloss Yin-Xian's rather incomprehensible actions as manifestations of a high degree of attunement with the Dao, as evidenced in their invocation of *zi ran*. This reveals the mutually sustaining relation between the values of spontaneity and love some adherents come to perceive.

In her now classic 1997 article, Caroline Humphrey draws attention to a mode of moral reasoning common among her Mongol interlocutors, which she calls 'morality by exemplarity'. She argues that morality by exemplarity is an open-ended mode of ethical action, whereby reflective subjects call upon a specific exemplar from a rich cultural repository to inform their own moral decisions in particularised circumstances (frequently when confronting moral dilemmas) (Humphrey, 1997). Later, building on Humphrey's exposition, Joel Robbins (2015; 2018) takes up a different though related interpretation of exemplarity. Robbins defines exemplars in explicit relation to values, as people or institutionalised cultural forms (including rituals and stories) which realise singular values to the fullest extent possible in a given cultural setting (Robbins, 2018, p. 175). In this view, exemplars serve important roles in the development of people's moral sensibilities, enabling them to encounter 'the values they find actually existing and experientially available in the exemplary figures and institutions of their social surround' (ibid., p. 191). Furthermore, drawing on Max Scheler's phenomenology of value perception (Scheler, 1987, cited

in Robbins, 2018), Robbins contends that emotions are a primary way in which ethical exemplars come to exert a force on the learning subjects.

Their important differences notwithstanding, Humphrey and Robbins both treat exemplarity as a generalised mode of moral reasoning endemic to a sociocultural context, rather than a deliberate form of ethical pedagogy. My approach owes much to Humphrey and Robbins' fine-tuning of the concept. Nevertheless, I conceive of exemplarity in the Wu-Wei School as a pedagogical device. Exemplarity in this context is enacted through the intersubjective articulations of the ethical teacher and their students, rather than the learning subject's 'interiorised and subjective' reflection (Humphrey, 1997, p.34). The story about Yin-Xian's legendary 'grand love' becomes a crucial experiential ground upon which ethical students encounter and savour a sublimated kind of love, which is unimaginable in their putatively limited ethical-affective universes. Just like the visceral gratitude or regret that strikes adherents contemplating their parents, the shock and awe this story inspires in its listeners work to lodge the value of love (in its grand form) in their subjectivities.

To some adherents, however, there exists a hint of familiarity in the apparently radical act of the Wu-Wei founder. A middle-aged civil servant put her reaction this way:

An ordinary person (*pu tong ren* 普通人) today would have at least gotten a written acknowledgement for his contribution or allocated some funds for his own old-age security. But the master does not appear to be concerned with any of these. I feel like he is oblivious of himself (*wang wo* 忘我). He reminds me of some people from earlier times (*cong qian de ren* 从前的人).

With the remark 'oblivious of himself', the ethical student put her finger on something crucial. As I have shown throughout this section, the 'effortful action' of 'sprouting people's ability to love' has as its telos the channelling of heartfelt feelings to sociocentric ends. Such a manoeuvre harkens back to the high socialist ethical ideal of the 'spirit of selflessness', which Mao coined in his famous 1939 eulogy for the recently deceased Canadian doctor Norman Bethune.⁶⁰ In a recent historical ethnography, Christos Lynteris convincingly argues that two all-encompassing 'technologies of the self', based on contesting exegeses of the 'spirit of selflessness', dialectically delimited 'the possibility and impossibility of selfhood' throughout Maoist China (2013, pp. 119-120). These technologies consisted of a) a 'self-cultivation' thesis espoused by neo-Confucianism informed

⁶⁰ Bethune was a medical volunteer in the Chinese Communist Eight Route Army.

technocrats in the Yan'an Era, and b) a 'self-abolition' thesis engineered from a 'mass-line' (*qun zhong lu xian* 群众路线) perspective during the Cultural Revolution.

The Wu-Wei Part II ethical pedagogy, pivoting on the two registers of the value of 'love', shares the same structural logic as the dialectical 'technologies of the self' Lynteris artfully extricates. The 'small love', instantiated in the 'love of blood and flesh' and filial affections, demands a subject's intentional self-transformation as an affectively sharpened entity. The 'grand love', the sublimation of these heightened feelings for realising 'social harmony', necessitates a subject's self-abolition as a rational calculative individual. Both registers are, moreover, given persuasive force through the elicitation of heartfelt emotions from the students.

The 'grand love' discourse moreover bears an uncanny structural resemblance to the 'ardent love' invented in the high socialist era: both rely on the paradox of a loved object,⁶¹ construed as simultaneously strong/worthy enough to deserve a totalising form of love and weak/fragile enough to require such love to survive and thrive. The 'ardent love' demanded of Maoist citizens is directed at the Communist polity: a loved object that is construed as superordinate and all-encompassing (strong/worthy) *and simultaneously* requiring constant active preservation on the part of individual citizens (weak/fragile). The 'grand love' elaborated by the Wu-Wei founder is directed at the adoptive family: a loved object that is construed as 'clean, flourishing, and harmonious' (strong/worthy) *and simultaneously* requiring money, protection, and an active father figure (weak/fragile). This structural tension, inhering in both formations of totalising love, engenders an unrepayable debt that sustains an ineluctable bond.

Conclusion

The story of the Wu-Wei School, as I have chosen to present it thus far, unfolds in evocatively ambiguous relation to the story of the party-state. In this chapter, focusing on the pedagogical processes encountered at the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* retreats, we gained a detailed appraisal of how the Wu-Wei teachers deploy techniques that evoke the emic ethics-governance ideal of 'effortless action' and its antipode of 'effortful action'. We further examined how both modules recruit students' visceral registers and harken to some of the earlier CCP signature subjectivity-reform strategies, which privileged the orchestration and intensification of emotions.

⁶¹ I am grateful for Oscar Nearly's incisive comments and analytical suggestions regarding the 'paradox of a loved object'.

In an important article exploring the mass mobilisation of emotions across various stages of the Chinese Communist revolution, Elizabeth Perry argues that the CCP systematised ‘emotion work’ as part of a conscious strategy of political subjectivity formation (2002). According to Perry, Communists cadres deliberately harnessed the ‘emotional energy’ of the masses, not only through routinely inciting public expressions of anger, fear, and shame, but also via instituting public rituals of confessions during the Cultural Revolution. She furthermore underscores how the legacy of revolutionary ‘emotion work’ continues to powerfully shape the ‘attitudes and actions of state authorities and ordinary citizens alike’ in post-Mao China (ibid., p.124). The abiding influences are observed in the highly emotive state propaganda campaign against Falun Gong as well as local protests against government resettlement programs (ibid.). In the context of the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* retreats, we have also seen the continued, haunting presence of the emotional intensity of Maoist times.

As Haiyan Lee argues, discourses of sentiment constitute ‘articulatory practices that participate in (re)defining the social order and (re)producing forms of self and society’ (2007, p. 8). The fact that emotion is a privileged site of ethical teaching at the *xiuxing* retreats, I posit, is intimately related to the Wu-Wei organisers and participants’ embodied experiences as political subjects in the PRC. They have seen staggering inconsistencies in their lived experiences and have been called upon to produce and perform their socio-political belonging in intimate and visceral ways. In this idiosyncratic political order, discourses and practices of sentiment have animated both top-down projects of citizenry reform and ground-up projects of citizen-subjectivity formation. The enduring interest in the ‘visceral register’ or ‘affective-volitional structures’ serves as a reminder of the complexities and contradictions inhering in both the macro-political process of PRC state-building and micro-political processes of striving for a good life.

Chapter Three

When Steiner Education Meets the Wu-Wei School: Grassroots-level Initiatives to Foster Citizen-Subject Affectivity

天地感而万物化生，
圣人感人心而天下和平，
观其所感，而天地万物之情可见矣。

— 周易 | 下经 | 咸卦第三十一

Heaven and earth affect each other and thus all beings come into existence.
The Sages affect men's hearts and thus there is peace all under the heaven.
Observing their affectivity, the nature of all beings between heaven and earth
becomes seen.⁶²

— *The Book of Changes of Zhou* |
The Lower Book | The
Thirty-First Hexagram of
Xian

⁶² This translation is modified from the version by Wilhelm et al. (1990, p. 301).

Introduction

This chapter investigates the multi-layered interrelation between two grassroots-level social initiatives with ambitions to reshape citizen-subjectivity in the PRC. Both Steiner Education (*si tan na jiao yu* 斯坦纳教育), also known as Waldorf Education (*hua de fu jiao yu* 华德福教育), and the Wu-Wei School operate ‘outside the system’ (*ti zhi wai* 体制外) in the ‘space of the ordinary people’ (*min jian* 民间). While the now nationally established Steiner Education movement draws on very different intellectual and pedagogical resources and involves many more participants than the nascent Wu-Wei School, both initiatives constitute nodes in a complex web of aspirations and activities that converge upon the formation of viable and valuable citizen-subjects. To set the scene for this ethnographic analysis, I shall first adumbrate the protean but pertinacious project of citizen-reform propounded by the CCP; this macro-level project and my interlocutors’ micro-level initiatives continually exert pressure on one another, sculpting the discursive and aspirational environment for education in contemporary China.

Citizen Subjectivity Formation in Education: Creative Manoeuvres and Profound Ambivalences

In chapter one, I argued that the PRC political order is distinguished by the responsibility assigned to individual citizen-subjects to undertake self-reform, self-improvement, and self-perfection. While the overarching theme and individual components of the party-state vision for citizen-subjectivity have transformed radically since the Maoist era, I posit that the imperative to undertake continuous self-reform remains entrenched despite radical social and economic changes. This is epitomised in the Xi government urging individual citizen-subjects to self-improve across the multiple axes indicating the essence of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ (which I delineate in chapter one, section 1.2); these individual projects of self-improvement, in keeping with the party-state vision, cohere to manifest the ‘cultural soft power of the nation’, thereby enabling the realisation of the ‘Chinese Dream of Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ (Xi, 2014a, p. 403).

The pervasiveness and persistence of this citizen-reform project, however, coexist with the post-Mao liberalisation of the market and fragmentation of the party-state’s once absolute control over the citizenry. In this context, grassroots-level actors are observed to negotiate with injunctions from the government to stake out their own modalities of socio-political belonging. The domain of education becomes a privileged arena for these intricate negotiations between citizen-subjects and the party-state, both harbouring multivalent and complexly embroiled agendas.

Examining the revival of grassroots private institutions for traditional Confucian education known as *sishu* (私塾) in rural China, Guillaume Dutournier and Yuchen Wang (2018) underscore the surprising ways in which these private initiatives position their own projects as closely related to the official system. Despite state regulations that severely constrain them, the rural *si shu* advocates perceive their precarious enterprises as ameliorating – rather than contesting – contemporary state education.

Canglong Wang, investigating practices and debates around the reading classics (*du jing* 读经) movement,⁶³ extricates how this polemical contemporary education regime 1) enfolds the macro-level tensions and contradictions inherent in ‘the Chinese path to individualisation’ (2016, p. 448), at the core of which is a protracted struggle between individualism and authoritarianism; and 2) exhibits a tendency towards heterogenisation, as demonstrated by heated debates in the popular media and the diversification of frontline educators’ didactic commitments (2018).

Teresa Kuan, working with middle-class parents (predominantly mothers) in Kunming, observes how the macropolitical project of modernising China’s citizen subjectivity creates dilemmas on the micro-level (2014, 2015), requiring an impossible balancing act between the child’s success in a hyper-competitive system and the child’s health and happiness. Drawing on the indigenous notion of scalar correspondence (2015, p. 25), Kuan suggests that two different orders of government in the PRC – running a country and raising a child – are equally implicated in what she calls ‘the ethics of trying’ and ‘the art of disposition’. She argues that these moral practices recognise that human activity is embedded in historically specific forms of governmentalities, while simultaneously locating opportunities for creative manipulation of available conditions (2015, pp. 21-24).

Across such diverse contexts, these anthropologists identify the creative manoeuvres of PRC citizens as they depart from the pressures and strictures emanating from ‘within the system’ (*ti zhi nei* 体制内); however, they equally underscore how parents, children, and educators aspire to legitimisation, and indeed success, within that very system. This chapter contributes to this new body of literature, which maps Chinese citizen-subjects’ endeavours to reshape their subjectivities in education, animated by intense desires to escape the state complex and agitated by equally profound ambivalences.

⁶³ An alternative education regime propounded by Taiwanese intellectual Wang Caigui (王财贵), who prescribes a method of ‘honest and extensive’ (*lao shi da liang* 老实大量) rote memorisation of Chinese classical text as the sole content of children’s education.

As we shall see, the otherwise dissimilar Steiner Education movement and the Wu-Wei School initiative converge in their emphasis on ‘affectivity’, a term I translate from the Chinese term *gan* (感) to denote the *embodied ability to receive and exert influences*. My interlocutors involved in both initiatives construe affectivity as an important axis for their own subjectivity formation (through *xiuxing*) as well as their children’s subjectivity formation (through a variety of education experiences). They variously capture this ethical ideal-cum-pedagogical goal via notions of *gan zhi* (感知), *jiao gan* (交感), and *gan ying* (感应) across a range of written and spoken contexts. In the second part of the chapter, I describe how some of my interlocutors deploy a language of affectivity to elaborate a peculiar form of socio-political belonging. Their discourses are marked by a teleological and social evolutionist view of history, and an emphasis on the role of the individual citizen-subject in civilisational advancement. Such logics bear a striking resemblance to those underlying the CCP citizen-reform agenda, most particularly in the early project to create the ‘new man’ who would make history and perpetuate the Communist revolution (see Cheng, 2009; Yan, forthcoming). These resemblances, however, cannot be adequately explained by false consciousness or the coercive power of the party-state (see also Kuan, 2015, p. 14). In the final part of the chapter, I discuss some indigenous views of the viable political subject and social person, which may help us better understand the conceptual parallels across party-state and grassroots levels. Specifically, through revisiting *From the Soil*, an early work by China’s pioneering social anthropologist Fei Xiao-Tong (1947), I posit that the citizenship projects of the Wu-Wei School, Steiner Education, and the CCP are influenced by a dynamic view of the social person-cum-political subject marked by sharpened affectivity and expandable influences. I capture this conception via the notion of the ‘scalable self’.

A Situated Exploration of Influence: Disambiguation with ‘Affect Theory’

While I use the term ‘affectivity’ to describe the corporeally rooted ability to receive and exert influences concerning my interlocutors, my approach to the ‘affective’ differs from those developed by writers associated with ‘affect theory’ (e.g. Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b; Bennet, 2010; Massumi, 1995, 2002; Thrift, 2004; Stewart, 2007). This corpus draws variously upon interpretations of neuroscience literature (e.g. Massumi, 1995), a Deleuzian-Guattarian attention to human-non-human assemblages and open systems (e.g. Thrift, 2004; Stewart, 2007), and a post-humanist emphasis on materiality and its palpable influences, which Jane Bennet captures via notions of ‘thing-power’ and ‘vital materialism’ (2010, pp. 20-38; cf. Barad, 2007). Their differences notwithstanding, contemporary affect theorists partake in a shared theoretical enterprise to distinguish the affective from the social (see also Leys, 2011; Martin, 2013; Mazzarella, 2009). For

Brian Massumi, affect is ‘autonomous’, a form of precognitive ‘asignifying intensity’, which may be momentarily captured and enclosed via ‘formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions’ but always escapes such confinement (2002, p.96, p.102). Kathleen Stewart, as another example, writes of ‘ordinary affects’ as ‘the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingences, and emergences’, and that they are therefore ‘transpersonal or prepersonal’ (2007, p. 1, p. 128).

These movements draw a sharp boundary between (a) the putatively *asocial* affective domain comprising intensities, impacts, and influences, and (b) the social domain constituted by ideologies, significations, meanings, reflections, and intentions; they moreover tend to analytically privilege the role of (a) over (b) in the constitution of human experiences, emphasising how the pre-semiotically mediated register of subjective experiences (according to some of the most influential affect theorists) harbours ‘unformed and unstructured potential’ (Shouse, 2005, p. 5; see also Massumi, 1995, pp. 91-95).

In my view, contemporary affect theorists propose a universalising theory of influence and human-environment interrelation; such a proposition, while usefully challenging the extreme psychologisation of felt influences as only exuded from and taking hold in the psyche (see also Navaro-Yashin, 2012, pp. 21-27), carries with it two problematic corollaries. First, in emphasising the precognitive, *asocial* qualities of affect, these writers risk overlooking socio-historically specific theories of influence, which are elaborated in everyday situations and fundamentally shape how actors perceive the constitution and transmission of influences across human and non-human domains, cognitive and precognitive registers. Secondly, in describing the operations of affect below the threshold of human perception and construing these as prevailing over rational thought in shaping political life (e.g. Massumi, 2002), these writers draw too sharp of a dichotomy between putatively conscious and unconscious precincts of power, thereby reproducing Cartesian mind-body dualism in a radical manner (see also Leys, 2011, pp. 457-458). They do so at the expense of ignoring how theories of influence and human-environment interrelation feature in political subjects’ context-specific articulations of socio-political belonging – just as the corporeal-material participates in the generic constitution of political subjects. As Ruth Leys argues, the severance between meaning and affect ‘produces as one of its consequences a relative indifference to the role of ideas and beliefs in politics, culture, and art in favor of an “ontological” concern with different people’s corporeal-affective reactions’ (2011, p. 451).

The present chapter is an ethnographic experiment to merge the meaningful and the affective through particularising and historicising influence; it seeks to unravel how situated

political subjects deploy theories of influence to make their educative experiences socially and politically meaningful.⁶⁴ As we shall see, while my interlocutors are enthralled with the idea of unmediated potentiality, they avow a socio-historically specific view of influence and human-environment interrelation. These grassroots-level actors consider their particularised visions of affectivity as eminently related to the constitution of the socio-political belonging of themselves and their children. This ethnographic context thus demands analytically integrating the ‘affective’ and the ‘social’, and, moreover, attending to how historically-sedimented cultural and intellectual resources feature in actors’ elaboration of influence and potentiality.

Briefly, as I shall explicate, the theory of influence propounded by my interlocutors diverges from the ‘asignifying’, ‘asocial’, and ‘autonomous’ affect in three ways. To my interlocutors:

- 1) While affective flows are understood to resist semiotic mediation, their functional importance is amenable to human understanding and awareness, if only through imperfect approximation via language;⁶⁵
- 2) Given that humans can appraise the importance of affective flows in constituting their subjective experiences, they ought to sharpen their abilities to receive and exert influences; hence, affectivity becomes an explicitly ethical telos, something inextricable from the pursuit of a good life;
- 3) Through improving their discernment of a contingent web of forces enveloping themselves, and perfecting their corporeally-rooted reception to material and immaterial influences, my interlocutors see themselves as gaining potentiality to exert greater influence in their situated socio-political order. Crucially, some construe their children who otherwise suffer from developmental disabilities as endowed with affectivity, and hence unconstrained potentiality to contribute to state-building and even human civilisational improvement.

In sum, recognising the palpable existence of influences that exceed language and human cognition, these grassroots-level education experimenters seek to construct embodied pathways to channel such influences into the subjectivities of their children and themselves; in so doing, they seek to constitute themselves into sites ‘where affective forces could be put into play in the changing of a

⁶⁴ See Åhäll, 2018; Martin, 2013; Navaro-Yashin, 2009, 2012 for programmatic arguments to ethnographically problematise a-historical, a-social conceptions of the affective.

⁶⁵ As I detail in section one, this view is congruent with my interlocutors’ situated understandings of selected teachings of the *Dao De Jing*.

country's future' (Kuan, 2014, p. 67). With this in mind, I shall now turn towards an ethnographic exploration of these coalescing grassroots-level initiatives to foster citizen-subject affectivity.

1. An Improbable Collaboration to Foster Affectivity in China's Educative Marginality

In November 2018, a notice circulated on the Wu-Wei School WeChat groups regarding a winter parent-child *xiuxing* retreat, jointly conducted by Wu-Wei founder Yin-Xian and a Steiner teacher-mother and long-term adherent to the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* regimen, whom I will call Tao-Yao. Entitled 'The Heart of a New-Born' (*chi zi zhi xin* 赤子之心), this week-long programme would innovatively combine Yin-Xian's teaching on the *Book of Songs* (*shi jing* 诗经)⁶⁶ and Steiner aesthetic education (*mei yu* 美育) inspired by Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy:

[The event takes place in] the holy land of Tibetan Buddhism where folk customs are as pure and simple as the time of 'Er Nan'.⁶⁷ Learning [the *Book of Songs*] enables the germination of a heart of kindness (*shan xin* 善心). Participants can use this heart of kindness to unleash wisdom, 'understand the society, form friendships, and critique social realities,' so as 'to assist the parents and assist the sovereign.'⁶⁸ [...]

Aesthetic education, through nature observation, meditation, singing, and group interactive activities, allows participants to awaken their senses, to improve their experiential abilities of nature, and to improve the perceptive abilities (*gan zhi* 感知) of their heart and spirit. [...]

As betrayed by the disjointedness inhering in these cursory descriptions, the retreat represented the coalescence of two vastly different forces: one orientated towards the acquisition of Confucian social-moral sensibilities, and the other towards the attunement to one's 'heart' and 'spirit'. Having already described the Wu-Wei School and its ethical teaching in the previous chapter, I shall briefly introduce Steiner Education and its development in the contemporary PRC.

⁶⁶ Ranked among the famed 'Five Classics', the *Book of Songs* is a Confucian canon which contains the oldest existing collection of early Chinese poetry, comprising 305 pieces dating between the 11th and 7th centuries BCE.

⁶⁷ This refers to the first two chapters of the *Book of Songs*, 'Zhou Nan' (周南) and 'Shao Nan' (邵南).

⁶⁸ The descriptions of '*wei guan, wei qun, wei yuan* 为观 为群 为怨' and '*shi fu, shi jun* 事君 事父' are directly quoted from the chapter entitled 'Yang Huo' (阳货) collected in the *Analects* (论语), recognised as a Confucian classical commentary on the moral significance of the *Book of Songs*.

1.1 Steiner Education in China: Questions of Legal and Ideological Precarity

A worldwide educational movement, Steiner Education is founded upon Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner's writings and pedagogy, with the first Steiner school established in Stuttgart, Germany in 1919 (Uhrmacher, 1995, p. 381). Steiner (1861-1925) was involved in the nineteenth-century Theosophical movement before founding his own Anthroposophical movement. He defined Anthroposophy as 'a manner of acknowledgement which wishes to lead the spiritual in the human entity to the spiritual in the universe' (Steiner, 1982, p. 14, quoted in Goldshmidt, 2017, p. 347). Steiner saw human development as a process of relating to the individual as a whole. Thus, Steiner pedagogy usually encompasses multifaceted processes; the tools used include, but are not limited to, meditation, observation, and emotional and cognitive exercises, among others (Goldshmidt, 2017, pp. 348-355). For Steiner educators, artistic experiences constitute a privileged method of relating to pupils and of shaping the educational environment (*ibid.*, p. 357). The first Steiner school was introduced to China around the turn of the twenty-first century. Since 2004, there has been a rapid expansion of Steiner organisations in the PRC. A recent study estimates that more than 400 kindergartens and 77 Steiner Schools have been founded in China (Sun, 2019). While Steiner Education has grown in popularity over the past decade, most organisations remain small and discreet. This is a tactical choice, for legal and ideological reasons.

First, the legal consideration. China's compulsory nine-year-education law, which was instituted in 1986 and revised in 2006, currently stipulates that all school-age children with Chinese citizenship have the right to receive compulsory public education free of tuition and miscellaneous fees; meanwhile, parents have the legal obligation to enrol their children in state public schools for the requisite nine years (OECD, 2016, p. 12)⁶⁹. In this context, educators and parents seeking alternative education choices often risk violation of the nine-year-education law. Such legal precarity besets those pursuing (the often-interpenetrating alternative education models of) 'traditional' or 'classical' education (Dutournier, 2011; Dutournier and Wang Y., 2018; Wang C., 2016, 2018), home schooling (Sheng, 2015, 2019), and Steiner education (Sun, 2019), among others.

Second, the ideological consideration. This complication issues from the privileged place of the 'spiritual' in Steiner pedagogies—a deceptively straight-forward notion in the context of the PRC. The PRC regime is famously founded upon a firm commitment to materialism (*wei wu zhu yi* 唯物主义) (see Lynteris, 2013; Pang, 2019), an ontological position inextricably bound up with

⁶⁹ <https://www.oecd.org/china/Education-in-China-a-snapshot.pdf>

China's fight for sovereignty and (ongoing) search for modernity. As Peter Van der Veer argues, the term 'spirituality', though habitually used to qualify life experiences in Asian countries such as India and China, is a decidedly European notion whose polyvalence fills the vast conceptual space between institutionalised secularity and institutionalised religion (2013, pp. 35-36). Ironically, while the introduction of Daoism to Europe by nineteenth-century sinologists shaped the contemporaneous Orientalist imaginary of China as a 'spiritual' realm, within nineteenth-century China, anti-imperial proto-nationalist projects were constituted *against* notions of Chinese spirituality, seen as backward, humiliating, and politically devastating – a lesson epitomised in the failed Boxer rebellion (ibid., pp. 35-62, pp. 90-114). In light of these fraught histories, a protracted project of dichotomising the 'spiritual' into a permissible 'religious' sphere and an inadmissible 'superstitious' sphere has traversed Chinese state processes since the late nineteenth century.⁷⁰

The profound para-religious tenor of the Chinese Communist Revolution in general – and its apotheosis, the Cultural Revolution, in particular – further complicates the category of the spiritual in contemporary China (see Dutton, 2004; Van der Veer, 2013; Yan, forthcoming). Yan Yunxiang observes the ways in which Maoist China demanded total and absolute loyalty to the party-state-motherland and its attendant moral-cum-spiritual vision, which precluded the devotion of citizen-subjects to any other moral-cum-spiritual causes (Yan, forthcoming).

Notably, despite the CCP's explicit usage of the term 'spiritual' in its strategic discourse since the 1986 turn towards 'the construction of socialist spiritual civilisation' (*she hui zhu yi jing shen wen ming jian she* 社会主义精神文明建设),⁷¹ the 'spirituality' invoked is reinscribed with a scientific materialist valence. The PRC's 'spiritual civilisation' consists of two dimensions, 'thought and morality qualities' (*si xiang dao de su zhi* 思想道德素质) and 'science and culture qualities' (*ke xue wen hua su zhi* 科学文化素质) (Zhong gong, 2007). Aimed at forming citizen-subjects who will propel 'the construction of socialist modernity' (*she hui zhu yi xian dai hua jian she* 社会主义现代化建设), neither dimension connotes the non-materialist spiritual-cum-moral pursuits that animate Steiner Education. In the next chapter, I shall say more about such striking discursive entanglements between the party-state and grassroots-level actors, in which both sides resort to identical terms to denote different – and in this case antithetical – contents. For now, it suffices to note how the

⁷⁰ A survey of this complex history lies beyond the scope of the current chapter. It is important to note, however, that in the contemporary PRC, five legitimate religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam) are recognised in keeping with a Christian model 'institutionalised through an educated clergy, realised in sacred texts, and based on individual choices of personal belief' (Weller et al., 2017, pp. 28-34).

⁷¹ Set into motion during the Sixth Plenary Session of the Twelfth CCP Central Committee on September 28, 1986.

‘spiritual’ possesses an unstable and contested meaning in contemporary China, which complicates the Steiner Education advocates’ quest for legitimacy and socio-political belonging.

While confronting questions of legal and ideological precarity, it must be noted that my interlocutors involved in Steiner Education, as well as 75-80% of my interlocutors following the Wu-Wei School, are distinguished by their relatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Most of them belong to the growing urban middle-class, with significant disposable income and diversified assets (owning private apartments, stock portfolios, and other types of financial instruments). In her ethnographic study of parent-child experiences in two Steiner schools in Beijing and Chengdu, Yifan Sun (2019) also finds an over-representation of affluent middle-class urbanites, with advanced educational backgrounds and social and economic resources to afford the hefty fees of the Steiner schools (around 40,000 RMB, or circa 4,500 GBP in annual tuition fees). Analysing Confucian home schooling in Shanghai, Sheng (2015, 2019) similarly concludes that such alternative education programmes are a corollary of the rise of a new urban middle-class since the 1990s. Therefore, despite their fraught structural location in what I call ‘China’s educative marginality’, ethical-educative pursuits represented by Steiner Education and the Wu-Wei School are nonetheless inextricable from the relative material abundance (available to a growing though limited sector of society) enabled by party-state orchestrated marketisation.

1.2 The Steiner/Wu-Wei Joint *Xiuxing* Retreat: Fostering Affectivity despite Pedagogical Differences

In January 2019, I participated in the joint parent-child *xiuxing* retreat by the Lu-Gu Lake and witnessed how the two disparate forces were brought into a complex choreography. The small crew of seven participants (including teacher Tao-Yao and her daughter Si-Yin) arrived at the Lu-Gu Lake centre on a sunny afternoon. I met the group as they wandered around the guest house and peaked into rooms. Tao-Yao’s laughter reached me across the hallway before I could see her. The forty-three-year-old artist had a slender build and a formidable voice. Si-Yin, however, stood behind Tao-Yao and remained quietly inspective. It would take her a few more hours before deciding to speak with me.

The daily programme for the small group was scheduled from 9am to 9pm. After breakfast, we recited the *Book of Songs* for thirty minutes,⁷² before having a seminar with Yinxian on selected poems being read that day. After the seminar, there was time for the children to wander around before lunch. At 2pm, we set out for nature exploration and drawing. These sessions varied significantly in length. The first day, we walked to a Bon⁷³ temple 5km away from the guesthouse and drew Bon religious art. Mesmerised by the project, the group did not get back to the Wu-Wei centre until 8pm. On other days, these aesthetic education sessions lasted between three and four hours. In the evening, a second seminar and Pu'er tea awaited the group. While Tao-Yao participated in the *Book of Songs* session in the capacity of a student, Yin-Xian did not partake in the aesthetic education session.

Under Tao-Yao's instruction, participants engaged in deeply embodied artistic experiences. Each drawing session was preceded by a physical experience, such as a hike, feeding roaming farm animals, or standing in meditative silence on the lakeshore and tuning in to the natural soundscape. Participants were to forget normative notions related to drawing. One afternoon, after a long descent to a hidden beach with their drawing materials, the parents and children were asked to draw the lake in front of them by moving their hands along with the sound of the water without looking at the actual scenery. The only requirement was that they did not stop and think about how to construct the drawing. 'Forget about shape, forget about technique, and forget about everything your art teacher has ever taught you. I want you to play, feel, and finally, draw the world in any way you feel like,' Tao-Yao enjoined in a sincere and passionate tone before the first session.

Yin-Xian's teaching style provided a remarkable counterpoint to that of Tao-Yao. While the latter encouraged the freedom of perception, interpretation and expression, the former offered detailed exegeses of ancient poems as well as their underlying moral lessons. Whereas Tao-Yao sought to deconstruct prior notions of beauty and goodness, Yin-Xian sought to instil canonical notions of beauty and goodness he found in classical texts. The daily teaching of the retreat resembled a silent and sequential tug of war, where neither party wished to acknowledge the tension between their didactics.

⁷² As part of the Wu-Wei five-pronged *xiuxing* regimen (see more in chapter four).

⁷³ The Bon religion (*ben jiao* 苯教) is one of the indigenous religions in the Lu-Gu Lake region, closely associated with Tibetan Buddhism.

Yin-Xian's exegetical moralisation, infused with gerontocratic and patriarchal sensibilities, reached its apotheosis in a seminar on the poem 'Ge Tan' (葛覃).⁷⁴ In this session, he made a sweeping claim that the gender-specific 'female education in ancient China' was superior to the gender-neutral education in contemporary China. Yin-Xian began his teaching by confidently declaring that studying the Book of Songs would allow students to 'overturn' (*dian fu* 颠覆) many entrenched misunderstandings of Chinese traditional culture, especially on the status of women. According to the Wu-Wei founder, gender parity existed in ancient China, and was manifested in the existence of female education. This gender-specific education consisted of female virtue, female speech, female appearance, and female work:

Female appearance (*fu rong* 妇容) requires women to maintain a clean and tidy appearance rather than wear excessive makeup. Female speech (*fu yan* 妇言) requires women to think before they speak, and thus to avoid unscrupulous speech. Of course, no one should speak unscrupulously. All four virtues come together in the final component, female work (*fu gong* 妇功). Women's work was spinning and weaving. Their labour was the instantiation of their virtues [...] Indeed, without virtuous mothers, how could there be great children? A mother's character (*xing ge* 性格) directly influences the child. A child inherits his moral conduct (*de xing* 德行) from the mother.

Yin-Xian concluded his exposition with a resounding finale, 'Now, men and women learn the same curriculum. But I don't see any more harmony (*he xie* 和谐) resulting from this kind of education!'

As Yin-Xian does not encourage questioning right after seminars, none of the participants expressed any thoughts on the matter of female education and female virtues. We thanked the teacher as usual and went off for our noon-time activities. Nevertheless, doubts lingered in my mind: could Tao-Yao – an artist, mother of a young girl, and educator trained in Steiner and Montessori methods – have no reaction to such a provocative exposition?

A few weeks after the retreat, when I asked Tao-Yao if she felt any discomfort with Yin-Xian's pedagogy, especially the explicit patriarchal tone of the Ge Tan seminar, she burst into laughter over the phone:

⁷⁴ Selected in the first chapter of the *Book of Songs*, Ge Tan depicts an aristocratic woman in preparation for her impending visit to her maternal household. Yin-Xian considers this three-line poem an epitome of female virtue (*fu de* 妇德) in the classical times (*jing dian shi dai* 经典时代).

Gosh, I would have gone mad (*qi si le* 气死了) if I was as sensitive as you are [to these]! In the New Education Experiment (*xin jiao yu shi yan* 新教育实验)⁷⁵ space, there are more Confucian scholars who talk about gender roles – in much worse ways than teacher Yin-Xian – than you can imagine. This is China, where the best and the most putrid things are enmeshed together.⁷⁶ Before you find your proper path, hitchhiking with the teacher (*da lao shi de bian che* 搭老师的便车) for a journey can still be beneficial.

Having overcome her amusement, Tao-Yao shared how motherhood had increased her tolerance of ideas and positions that she once wanted to ‘tear into pieces’ at a younger age:

I try to treat our teacher’s teaching with an all-embracing spirit (*jian rong bing bao* 兼容并包) [...] My degree of tolerance increased dramatically when I became a mother. Without a child, I would have become an avant-garde artist, a real revolutionary, calling for radical change and protesting the things with which I was dissatisfied in this society. But now that I have a child, I find that the maternal instinct trumps the revolutionary drive.⁷⁷ I want to help my child thrive in this world. I therefore learned to tolerate and to embrace. I am sailing a ship that I do not dare sinking. When I was in my twenties, I thought that I was not afraid of sinking my ship. I wanted to change things, and I was fearless. When I was in my twenties, I had a strong hatred (*fen ben* 愤恨) of dark things. I wanted to tear them into pieces. But now that I am a mother, I want to gradually repair (*xiu fu* 修复) these things.

What stands out in Tao-Yao’s evocative reflection is a process of ethical-political reorientation initiated by her motherhood, encapsulated in the phrase ‘the maternal instinct trumps the revolutionary drive’. A shift from ‘protest’ to ‘tolerance’ runs through her narrative. She has reconciled herself to a country in which ‘the best and the most putrid things are enmeshed together,’ by adopting an ‘all-embracing spirit’. This process of evaluative self-repositioning epitomises what I call *reflective manoeuvre* – a form of ethical action that surfaces repeatedly in my interlocutors’ lived experiences; the reflective manoeuvre entails an actor’s evaluative rearrangement of her positionality vis-à-vis influences, relations, opportunities, and obstacles contingently converging in her situated environment. Tao-Yao has not dropped her former critical views, nor has she been ‘interpellated’ by the party-state governmentality or the Confucian patriarchy. Instead, she has effectively accommodated – through her reflective manoeuvre – what

⁷⁵ A term that loosely designates forms of alternative education in contemporary PRC.

⁷⁶ ‘*zhong guo jin shi, zui hao de, zui lan de, dou chan zai yi qi* 中国就是，最好的，最烂的，都缠在一起’.

⁷⁷ ‘*mu xing de li liang da yu ge ming de li liang* 母性的力量大于革命的力量’.

is requisite of her by her macrosocial environment and her role as a mother. Reflective manoeuvre is a *tango with*, rather than a *battle against*, the encompassing structure.

I shall say much more about this distinctive mode of ethical action in chapter five, where I suggest that the reflective manoeuvre structures a prevalent form of ethical striving seen among the Wu-Wei participants, which I term ‘recreational asceticism’. For now, I wish to simply underscore how the reflective manoeuvre is instantiated in Tao-Yao’s strategic adherence to Yin-Xian’s teaching, which she describes via the metaphor of ‘hitchhiking’.

In the same conversation, Tao-Yao also explicated her choice of bringing her young daughter to the joint *xiuxing* retreat, despite fully anticipating Yin-Xian’s patriarchal and gerontocratic bent. On a first level, Tao-Yao maintains Yin-Xian’s interpretations of the *Book of Songs* amount to ‘stories’ rather than an authoritative perspective:

The things that we call classics (*jing dian* 经典) are, strictly speaking, not to be interpreted. The *Diamond Sutra* (*jing gang jing* 金刚经) says, ‘even Buddha’s dharma should be given up, let alone the non-dharma (*fa shang ying she, he kuang fei fa* 法尚应舍，何况非法)’. Chinese classics like the *Book of Songs* have thousands and hundreds of years of history. No matter who is interpreting these texts, you need to keep in mind that [what you are hearing] is their personal understanding, rather than the original meaning, of the classics. In this way you will be relieved (*xiang kai le* 想开了). You only need to treat these interpretations as stories (*gu shi* 故事).

On a second level, Tao-Yao concedes that Yin-Xian is still erudite in Chinese traditional culture, and, moreover, the most important part of the *xiuxing* retreat took place outside the classroom:

The Steiner [inspired] new education experiments place significant emphasis on inheriting and propagating (*chuan cheng* 传承) the traditional culture of the host country. This is the point of convergence between us Steiner parents and master Yin-Xian. We find him a good source of knowledge for traditional culture. Whatever his perspectives might be, I know that he is a learnt (*you xue wen* 有学问) and respectable (*zheng pai* 正派) person. We have known each other since 2015, and yet the master has never forced me to accept his views. I feel that he has been constantly improving over the years of *xiuxing* in the mountains. Plus, the main reason why I organised the joint retreat was to keep Si-Yin company. [...]

I think it’s good for my daughter to listen to the master’s teaching at a young age. I also don’t think that my child will internalise the Three Obedience and the Four Virtues (*san*

cong si de 三从四德)⁷⁸ by simply listening to a week's seminars. Overall, I'm convinced that she took away many more positive things than negative things from this retreat. Remember the magnificent nature around us. Remember the beautiful things she got to see, smell, touch, and feel every day. My role was just to take her to that special place. She is like a sponge, and she absorbs more than we adults can imagine.

In these observations, Tao-Yao subtly unsettles the authority of Yin-Xian and, furthermore, decentres the dyadic relation between Yin-Xian and herself from her daughter's retreat experience. Even though Tao-Yao recognises Yin-Xian's expertise in the area of Chinese classics, she does not locate the retreat's primary significance in Yin-Xian's exegetical teaching, which she treats as mere 'stories'. Instead, she emphasises her daughter's embodied experience of the relational web at the Lu-Gu Lake, constituted not only by the formal components of the *xiuxing* retreat but (more significantly) the stimuli available in the natural environment. To Tao-Yao, the privileged mode of knowing is not through words but sensorial experiences, the 'beautiful things' her daughter got to 'see, smell, touch, and feel every day'. In using the metaphor of a sponge to describe her young daughter, Tao-Yao also implies that children (especially those raised through Steiner Education) are distinguished by their greater capacity to enter into relations with influences that contingently arise in their situated environments. As we shall see, this view is shared by a number of Steiner parents I met via the Wu-Wei School.

Despite Yin-Xian's poised authoritarianism, he agreed with Tao-Yao on the primacy of embodied knowing. To Yin-Xian, teaching through words effectively constitutes another form of 'hitchhiking', a strategic choice in response to existing limitations he perceives among his students.

Yin-Xian holds that a key objective of the Wu-Wei School is to help individuals restore 'affective abilities' (*jiao gan neng li* 交感能力). He explained a prevalent misconception to me while having tea in the Wu-Dang centre:

Most people seem to think textual learning is the only way to understand Chinese traditional culture. But that is such a misconception. Of course, you can learn all about the meaning of words. But the deepest teachings [in Chinese traditional culture] are simply incompatible with our current cognitive mode (*si wei mo shi* 思维模式) or knowledge system

⁷⁸ A set of moral codes for women derived from Confucian ideals of harmony and hierarchical social order (Dass, 2009). The three obediences include obedience to father prior to marriage, to husband during married life, and to sons in widowhood. Yin-Xian only keeps the four virtues in his teaching and omits the more contentious three obediences.

(*zhi shi ti xi* 知识体系). Accessing these teachings is not done through words, but *xiuxing*. We don't want people to use one brain. We want people to develop eight brains and innumerable tentacles (*ba ge da nao he wu shu ge tian xian* 八个大脑和无数个天线). Through *xiuxing* we seek to enhance our embodied knowing and communicative abilities.

To Yin-Xian, the 'Hexagram of Xian' (*xian gua* 咸卦) in the *Book of Changes* (see a key excerpt in this chapter's epigraph) most cogently sets forth this non-cognitive mode of knowing, which cuts across Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist teachings on the correct human-environment interrelation. Yin-Xian articulated this view succinctly in a June 2019 seminar in the Wu-Dang retreat:

Xian (咸), means *gan* (感) – the ability to become linked up to the Way of Heaven (*tian dao* 天道). You will find *xian* when you cut yourself off from cognition (*gen si wei duan jue guan xi* 跟思维断绝关系). You will need to develop unlimited receptive and processing abilities (*jie shou he chu li neng li* 接受和处理能力) [through your body]. Only then will you be able to intercept the omnipresent information flows in the universe. *Xian* allows you to discover true mystery (*zhen miao* 真妙). What is the true mystery? That of the unnameable (*mo ming qi miao* 莫名其妙).

In this dense and cryptic exposition, Yin-Xian mobilises the concept of 'true mystery' to designate the deep truth that putatively exists independent of human cognition. Such truth is deemed only accessible through the 'linking up' between the person and the Way of Heaven, a connection enabled by developing the embodied 'unlimited receptive and processing abilities'.

This conception invokes an ethical ideal delineated in the *Dao De Jing*, a foundational text in the Daoist tradition and a central intellectual resource for the Wu-Wei School. The concept of mystery (*miao* 妙) is encountered in the first chapter of the *Dao De Jing*: '*gu chang wu, yu yi guan qi miao* (故常无，欲以观其妙)'. While sinologists commonly construe this famous line as stating how constant 'desireless-ness' enables the contemplation of mysteries (for instance, see Ivanhoe and Van Norden, 2001, p. 163), the Wu-Wei founder interprets the phrase in a *cognitive*, rather than emotive, valence.⁷⁹ To Yin-Xian and his followers, it is *cognition-less-ness* that enables the contemplation of true mystery (*zhen miao* 真妙) through affectivity – the embodied ability to enter into relations with 'the omnipresent information flow in the universe', independent of linguistic mediation.

⁷⁹ As seen in the previous chapter, discourses of emotion occupy a prominent place in the Wu-Wei ethical teaching.

The Wu-Wei School *xinxing* regimen is founded upon an Analogical ontology (Descola, 2013) (see chapter four), which holds that a same set of forces govern and unite processes and existences across different orders of a vast relational web. In this framework, the physical body and its interiority mediate the interpenetration of essences and flows circulating across macrocosmic and microcosmic levels. Yin-Xian maintains that languages, as systems of abstract symbols which humans deploy to approximate these infinitely complex processes, are necessarily ‘inaccurate’, ‘limited’, and ‘partial’ (*bu zhun que, you xian, pian po* 不准确, 有限, 偏颇). However, since embodied knowing and mediating abilities are lost to most people, the Wu-Wei founder has no choice but to resort to verbal teaching to communicate with his sensorially deprived followers.

This leads us to the crucial connective thread underlying Yin-Xian and Tao-Yao’s seemingly divergent didactics. Both are concerned with the lack of affectivity among citizen-subjects of today’s PRC and strive to foster affectivity through their ethical teaching. Tao-Yao’s teaching reflects Rudolf Steiner’s emphasis on embodied, unmediated learning. In his writing, Steiner celebrates ‘intuitive knowing’ that takes place ‘without mediation’ (1995, *xix*). Steiner further argues that ‘the essence of thinking can be grasped only through intuition’ (*ibid.*). This is conspicuous in Tao-Yao’s education practice, which privileges sensorial engagement with the environment over cognitive experiences such as textual learning. Such emphasis on embodied knowing is congruent with Yin-Xian’s pedagogical vision, focused on the cultivation of ‘intuition’ (*zhi jue* 直觉) and ‘affective abilities’ (*jiao gan neng li* 交感能力). Despite his authoritarianism, Yin-Xian sees his exegetical moralisation as a secondary aspect of the overall Wu-Wei School project and accords primacy to the participants’ embodied *xinxing* work. The two educators thus find a foundational agreement in their wish to foster and enhance the affectivity within their students, thereby enabling a form of knowing independent of intersubjective processes mediated by language – and possibly (heavily socialised) cognitive processes altogether.



Figure 9: A sitting meditation practice led by Yin-Xian, taking place after a vigorous walking practice which led participants to the top of a mountain overlooking the Lu-Gu Lake. Both practices are intended to sharpen affective capacities.

2. Affectivity as a Situated Language of Socio-Political Belonging

Despite my interlocutors' marginal structural positions, their shared concern over fostering citizen-subject affectivity is far from unique in the political order of the contemporary PRC. Teresa Kuan (2014, 2015) has explicated how the 1999-onward 'quality education' (*su zhi jiao yu* 素质教育) reform, ostensibly an unapologetic biopolitical project, has involved a surprising attempt to cultivate children's affective capacities. State authorities and education experts alike were concerned that Chinese children in post-Mao test-taking education (*ying shi jiao yu* 应试教育) were 'bereft of direct experience', their bodies trapped behind desks and their experiences confined to studying 'dead books' (2014, pp. 67-70; 2015, p. 199). Against this perceived deficiency, the state-wide 'quality education' reform sought to 'stimulate and modulate a child's vitality and affective flow', thereby 'libera[ting] the potential of each and every child' (ibid., pp. 69-70). In this way, the body of the child 'has come to be seen as a site where affective forces could be put into play in the changing of a country's future' (ibid., p. 67). From this perspective, Kuan compellingly argues that 'quality education' may be read as a multi-layered experiment to foster affective subjects:

The affective subject has a porous body characterized and shaped by its responsiveness to external stimuli. This is a body characterized by affectivity: the capacity to infold the energy or vitality in an environment, and the power to convert intensity into externalized action. This is also a body that can be assembled into as many combinations as possible: the more relations an affective subject can enter into, the more relational capacities it will accumulate (2014, p. 72).

Kuan's fieldwork was conducted during the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the 'quality education' reform was in full throttle. Shifting forward to 2018-2019, when I conducted fieldwork, there was no mention of 'quality education' as a viable pathway to address the affective deprivation of Chinese children (and adults). Given the small total sample size of my study, I have no intention to extrapolate from this observation and proclaim the fate of the state-wide education reform. Nevertheless, it is revealing that an increasing number of parents and educators have taken their projects of fostering affectivity 'outside the system' into the 'space of the ordinary people', where they draw on resources as diverse as Steiner Education and Wu-Wei School's newly invented *xinxing* regimen.

As educators, Yin-Xian and Tao-Yao are concerned with creating propitious experiential conditions for children and adults to receive influences that arise within their situated environments. At a first glance, their tactics appear similar to what Kuan calls the 'art of disposition', a form of practical reason she identifies among middle-class mothers in Kunming. These mothers invoked the concept of *tiao jian* (条件) – which may be translated as 'conditions' or 'circumstances' – as the operator connecting their economic means with the child's potential to flourish in China's fiercely competitive landscape; the orchestration of *tiao jian* was the arena in which they asserted the utmost personal influence (2015, pp. 110-139). Nevertheless, Kuan observes her interlocutors to be enveloped by 'an acute, future-oriented anxiety over the possibility of being crowded out by competition' (ibid., p.124); this anxiety fuels their determination to catapult their children forward in the national race. By contrast, the parents and teachers I worked with yearned for eschewing the 'involution' (*nei juan* 内卷)⁸⁰ plaguing mainstream education (and contemporary Chinese society in general).

⁸⁰ A recent buzzword in China which describes a deep sense of defeat of those trapped within an intensely competitive social landscape (see for instance <https://www.sixtone.com/news/1006391/how-one-obscure-word-captures-urban-chinas-unhappiness>).

Notably, while problematising ‘mainstream education’ (*zhu liu jiao yu* 主流教育), the grassroots education experimenters I worked with do not present themselves as working against or contesting the party-state vision. The Wu-Wei School holds an official mission to contribute toward the realisation of the ‘Chinese Dream’ delineated by President Xi. Yin-Xian and a significant number of his followers construe their *xinxing* as constitutive of a superior social order (see chapter two) and the party-state’s grand historical vision. Meanwhile, the Steiner parents I encountered consider their educational-ethical practices as integral to the recent nationwide directive to revitalise ‘China’s excellent traditional culture’, given Steiner’s call to indigenisation and their perceived unity of the worlds’ great thought systems including Anthroposophy and China’s autochthonous traditions. The parents and teachers I spoke to, moreover, consider their continuous self-improvement – which many of them capture via the notion of *xinxing* – as the animating force of social progress. In so doing, their discourses appear to dovetail with the CCP in articulating the imperative of reflexive self-improvement to inaugurate sociohistorical transformations.

Nevertheless, such embroilments cannot be adequately explained by false consciousness or ideological inculcation, nor do they stem from sheer political expediency. Many expressed a genuine conviction that they were personally contributing to the flourishing of the party-state-nation, and even human civilisation.

I suggest that my interlocutors may be read as constructing a peculiar form of socio-political belonging for themselves and their children. Heeding Sian Lazar’s suggestions to recognise ‘languages of citizenship other than that of rights’ and non-normative locations for the practices of citizenship (2016, pp. 6-7), I attend to my interlocutors’ unconventional languages of political action, available to them as situated political subjects within China’s educative marginality. I argue that my interlocutors negotiate their distinctive modalities of belonging and pertinence in relation to the PRC’s ongoing state building by construing themselves and their children as sites of unusual affective potentiality; such unstructured potential, in turn, is seen as integral to ‘the changing of a country’s future’ (Kuan, 2014, p. 67).

In what follows, I analyse a group interview with Yin-Xian and three mothers who are involved in both the Wu-Wei School and Steiner Education, conducted during Yin-Xian’s informal teaching trip to a major city in Sichuan province in April 2019; this will help to illustrate how some of my interlocutors deploy the language of affectivity to discursively construct a distinctive mode

of socio-political belonging. The three women, whom I shall call Jian-Xi, Zi-Yi, and Miao-Li, had widely different personalities and belonged to three age groups (in their 40s, 30s and 20s respectively). However, they all had children diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In a five-hour conversation, the mothers generously shared their perspectives on the life-worlds of their children. Remarkably, they all underscored the extraordinary affectivity of their children and delineated a chain of correspondence, relating their *xiuxing* and parenting practices to the fate of the nation and wider humanity.

The eloquent and extroverted forty-five-year-old Jian-Xi ran a Steiner education-informed art therapy studio for ‘children whose hearts and spirits need special protection’ (*xin ling xu yao te shu bao hu de hai zi* 心灵需要特殊保护的孩子). This category, for her, included children who are biomedically diagnosed with ASD, Down’s syndrome, and learning disorders.

Jian-Xi’s career was previously in accounting, like many other Steiner mothers I met via the Wu-Wei School. After graduating from Sichuan University, she worked in the financial department of a Taiwanese-capital funded enterprise, which became increasingly dull. She left the firm after a few years and started her own business, which, according to her, ‘went very badly.’ Jian-Xi would have lived a ‘free and easy’ (*zi you san man* 自由散漫) life had it not been the 2008 Great Earthquake that ravaged Sichuan,⁸¹ which made her realise that she really wanted a baby. In many ways, Jian-Xi felt that her daughter, who was diagnosed with ASD by two, gave her a sense of direction in life. After having overcome the initial shock and dismay, Jian-Xi said that she realised her ‘lifelong project and opportunity had arrived’ (*ren sheng de ke ti he ji hui lai le* 人生的课题和机会来了). In order to find ways to access the ‘inner world’ (*nei xin shi ji* 内心世界) of her daughter, Jian-Xi went to study at a Steiner School in Beijing, where she first encountered Yin-Xian, who was invited to give a course on classical Chinese culture and *xiuxing*. Since then, she has introduced more parents and children with ASD to the Wu-Wei School, among whom were her friends Zi-Yi and Miao-Li.

Jian-Xi described the children diagnosed with ASD as the ‘halfway point in the history of humankind’ (*ren lei li shi fa zhan de zhong tu dao* 人类历史的中点). She explained:

⁸¹ Alternatively known as the Great Wenchuan Earthquake, which affected the mountainous central region of Sichuan on May 12, 2008; it caused almost 90,000 deaths (or missing and presumed dead) according to the final official government assessment (Pletcher and Rafferty, 2021).

In mankind's evolution into the newer version, we [ordinary people] are like the old human, whereas they are an attempt towards the next step, but are slightly off target. If the *Übermensch* of Nietzsche (*ni cai de chao ren* 尼采的超人) is the stage that human civilisation will eventually achieve, then these children could be the ones who make up the stage between us and the *Übermensch*. They have sacrificed a lot of capabilities, including what we the common people understand as communication and social capabilities. But in so doing they have gained access to many things we cannot imagine.

Zi-Yi and Miao-Li nodded in agreement. Having set out a visibly social evolutionist and teleological historiography for human civilisation, in which children diagnosed with ASD constitute an intermediate stage between the 'old human' and the '*Übermensch* of Nietzsche', the mothers moved onto an exposition of the unique affectivity of their children. Specifically, they argued that their children shared an 'intuitive love (*ben neng de ai* 本能的爱) for classics of diverse cultures'.

Jian-Xi reported that her daughter – who could barely sit for one minute in normal circumstances – sat quietly for forty to fifty minutes when listening to the reading of the 'Er Nan' chapters in the *Book of Songs*, lost in the rhythm of the ancient poetry.

In those moments, I can almost sense in her a hint of divinity (*shen xing* 神性) [...] Children like my daughter can intuitively perceive the beauty, the goodness and the rightfulness embodied in the classics. We have therefore learnt to find, through our children, the sense perception (*gan jue* 感觉) that's been lost in us.

To Jian-Xi, her daughter is a guide on her journey towards recuperating lost sensorial perceptive capabilities – specifically, the ability to be affected by the classics in an intuitive and embodied manner.

As we conversed that afternoon, it became clear that the trio were thrilled to discover the unexpected ways their children responded to classics and arts; they learnt that the key to their children's interiorities resides in reading classics, drawing, and theatre performances. The mothers were confident in their approach. 'You see, at least there is a group of people like us who are trying to treat with deep care children who would otherwise be considered inconvenient (*ma fan* 麻烦),' Zi-Yi proudly announced. Jian-Xi immediately followed up with a macro-level perspective:

There are probably around twenty million⁸² autistic children in China. If we consider the average family as having two parents and two grandparents, then close to a hundred million

⁸² There are no reliable statistics on childhood ASD prevalence in Mainland China. The figure of people affected by autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) in China provided by the NGO Autism Speaks in September 2018 is around thirteen

people in our country are affected by autism. A hundred million! If we cannot face autism correctly, in the future this problem will become a grave challenge, not only for the implicated families, but also for our country.

In addition to conceiving of their children as endowed with unique affectivity, the mothers further claimed that all the children whom they ‘guarded’ (*shou hu* 守护) through the classics-art network (of which Jian-Xi’s art therapy studio and the Wu-Wei School are two nodes) exemplified qualities of superior personhood delineated in the Chinese classics, which ‘normal people’ (*zheng chang ren* 正常人) like themselves could rarely attain in spite of lifelong *xiuxing*. Consider this statement from Jian-Xi:

[Chinese] classics instruct us to *xiuxing* to reach an ultimate state of non-self (*wu wo* 无我). Very few people realise, however, that our autistic children are already embodiments of the non-self. They perceive things that we cannot perceive. They are *at one with the world* (*yu shi jie rong wei yi ti* 与世界融为一体) [emphasis added]. [...] What they possess is something that we can hardly attain despite all our efforts in *xiuxing*. This demands us to have the perspicacity (*yan guang* 眼光) to recognise that these unusual characteristics of autistic children are qualities of human-beings when they have reached a certain [further] evolutionary stage.

Social scientific literature on the experiences of parents and children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is very limited, especially in the context of the PRC. In Hong Kong and in Heilongjiang Province, psychology and psychiatry researchers have documented the prevalence of societal stigma internalisation and care-giving stress among the parents of autistic children (e.g. Chen and Lam, 2018; Mak and Kwok, 2010; Wang et al., 2013). Similarly, Jian-Xi, Miao-Li and Zi-Yi shared that they had experienced a multitude of challenges in raising their children, routinely facing stigmatisation and social marginalisation. However, since discovering their children’s unusual affectivity, the mothers appeared to have gained renewed confidence in their children. Specifically, they believe that their children’s extraordinary affectivity, evidenced in an ‘intuitive love’ for classical texts, denotes an advanced existential state. The mothers have moreover found an affirmation of their views in the Chinese classics they learnt through the Wu-Wei School.

million children and adults. (<https://www.autismspeaks.org/life-spectrum/teacher-turned-journalist-reports-autism-china>). Meanwhile, using a meta-regression model based on reported prevalence estimates by relevant papers between 1987 and 2011, a 2013 study that aims to estimate childhood ASD prevalence in Mainland China reports a pooled prevalence of 11.8 per 10,000 individuals, with a 95% confidence interval of (8.2, 15.3) (Sun *et al.*, 2013).

As demonstrated in chapter two, during the Wu-Wei School *xiuxing* retreats, participants come to grasp – through a variety of embodied experiences – the value of ‘spontaneity’, understood to manifest in non-deliberate, intention-less actions in a state of attunement with the inenarrable yet ineluctable Dao. The emphasis on ‘spontaneity’, importantly, stems from Wu-Wei teachers’ concern over the affective impoverishment of students subjected to ‘programmatic’ things and ‘thought-related things’ since early childhood. In the first half of this current chapter, moreover, we have seen how the Wu-Wei founder Yin-Xian and his collaborator Steiner teacher Tao-Yao both construe non-cognitive knowing as the privileged form of learning. Yin-Xian specifically argues that affectivity alone, the embodied ability to enter into relations with ‘the omnipresent information flow in the universe’, enables a person to ‘link up to the Way of Heaven’. Only when an affectively sharpened person comes into full attunement with the rhythm of the cosmos are they able to exist in a state of ‘being at one with the world’, an existential state which even Yin-Xian says he cannot presume to have reached.

However, in conversation with the three Steiner mothers, Yin-Xian readily agreed with Jian-Xi’s claim and provided supporting evidence:

I still remember when Miao-Li and her son came to the Wu-Dang centre about a year ago, when he was only five years old. I taught the adults excerpts from Daoist classical texts for a week. It was all in ancient Chinese, and the ideas were obscure. How could any five-year-old understand such things? But towards the end of his stay, Miao-Li’s little boy suddenly stood up and exclaimed in front of all of us, ‘Learning the *Book of Songs* is for the spring and learning *Book of Changes* is for the autumn (*chun tian xue shi jing, qiu tian xue yi jing* 春天学诗经，秋天学易经)!’ I may have said that phrase in passing; I can’t even remember. This idea is based in the system of five phases (*wu xing* 五行) and is very difficult to comprehend.

⁸³ These children have terrifyingly strong affective abilities (*jiao gan neng li* 交感能力) [...]

Miao-Li, who had until now said very little, suddenly interjected: ‘My son never wants me to stop reading the *Book of Songs*. He just wants you to keep reading. He never wants to listen to ordinary books, but he does not get tired from listening to the classics!’

⁸³ A complex system for which I provide a situated description in the next chapter. Briefly, according to Yin-Xian, the Five Phases constitute five exhaustive ontological sets which include all perceivable and unperceivable phenomena. Both the *Book of Changes* (within the ‘Five Classics’) and autumn (within the five seasons, which in ancient Chinese calendar included a further season of long summer, or *chang xia* 长夏, in addition to the four conventionally known seasons) correspond to the phase of metal (*jin* 金), while the *Book of Songs* and spring correspond to the phase of wood (*mu* 木). Hence, it is believed that learning the *Book of Changes* in autumn and the *Book of Songs* in the spring is attuned with the larger cosmological rhythm.

The Wu-Wei founder finished his sentence in a contemplative mood: ‘yes, yes, they almost remind me of the affective abilities of the superior person (*da ren* 大人).’

The ‘superior person’ is a familiar ethical ideal to the Wu-Wei participants. Yin-Xian often invokes the notion to describe an advanced existential state understood to be accessible only through *xinxing*. Specifically, the ‘superior person’ is distinguished by unbridled affectivity. The ‘Hexagram of Qian’ (*qian gua* 乾卦) in the *Book of Changes* describes the ‘superior person’ as follows:

He accords in his character with heaven and earth; in his light, with the sun and moon; in his consistency, with the four seasons; in the good and evil fortune that he creates, with gods and spirits. When he acts in advance of heaven, heaven does not contradict him. When he follows heaven, he adapts himself to the time of heaven. If heaven itself does not resist, how much less do men, gods, and spirits!⁸⁴

The ‘superior person’ thus constitutes an affective totality with the external environment and enjoys absolute centrality in the cosmological-natural-social order. The ‘superior person’ is a non-self to the degree that he is *at one with* and *in the centre of* the world. It moreover epitomises the idealised state of ‘true self’ (*zhen wo* 真我) to which the Wu-Wei founder wishes his students would return (see chapter two). As Yin-Xian so often reiterates, ‘Who is the true self? The true self is the cosmos (*zhen wo shi yu zhou* 真我是宇宙)’.

In this conversation, the mothers and Yin-Xian articulate that 1) the mothers’ child-rearing via the classics-arts network are integrally related to the welfare of the polity; and 2) ‘children whose hearts and spirits need special protection’, existing in an advanced evolutionary state as indicated by their ‘terrifyingly strong affective capabilities’, should be treated as harbingers of the future capable of guiding others in the recuperation of affectivity. In so doing, they simultaneously disrupt the marginal discursive location of children with ASD and other forms of cognitive or developmental disabilities, and furthermore position their children in the epicentre of a civilisational advancement process.

On a separate occasion, another Steiner mother⁸⁵ described her twelve-year-old as among the people ‘whose spirit is truly five hundred steps ahead of others’ (*ling hun zhen zheng bi bie ren kuai wu bai bu* 灵魂真正比别人快五百步). According to this interlocutor, when her son was five

⁸⁴ Translation cited from Wilhelm et al., 1990, p. 704. The original: ‘夫大人者，与天地合其德，与日月合其明，与四时合其序，与鬼神合其吉凶。先天而天弗违，后天而奉天时，天且弗违，而况于人乎！况于鬼神乎！’

⁸⁵ She did not share with me whether her child has been diagnosed with ASD or other forms of biomedically diagnosed cognitive disabilities, though she shared that he could not possibly participate in mainstream state education.

years old, he was already describing to her the experience of cyclical reincarnation, in striking consistency with Rudolf Steiner's theorisations. She further reported that her little boy once said:

When you are fifteen steps ahead of others, others could still see you. They would revere you as their leader and attempt to follow you. However, when you are five hundred steps ahead of others, they will no longer be able to see you. They would either consider you a lunatic (*shen jing bing* 神经病) or have many doubts about you.

Upon sharing this remarkable account with me, she added, 'I am grateful for those whose spirit is five hundred steps ahead of others, though I also hope that they can find a way to return to somewhere fifteen steps ahead of others to guide them towards the future.'

Given the sensitive nature of the subject, and these interlocutors' wish to protect their children's identity, I was rarely invited to directly interact with their children. In reproducing these narratives, I seek to neither confirm nor deny my interlocutors' claims. My focus is instead on how, through these discourses, my interlocutors elaborate a peculiar form of socio-political belonging for themselves and their children. Crucially, they use affectivity as a marker of Chinese citizenship, not just of validity as citizens but their potentiality to contribute to national and civilisational advancements along an evolutionary axis. Drawing on early Chinese intellectual sources in a discursive context of *xiuxing*, they further articulate how their children (otherwise seen as suffering from developmental disabilities associated with ASD) are endowed with an innate form of affective capacity which far exceeds anything that 'normal people' like themselves might attain. Their discursive repositioning of their children vis-à-vis the enveloping socio-political-cosmological order, I suggest, constitutes a remarkable form of reflective manoeuvre. Specifically, they connect a) classical notions of the affectively potent 'superior person' with b) contemporary imperatives of citizen self-improvement, and through self-improvement the realisation of the party-state's historical vision; via this connection, they avow that their affectively gifted children deserve socio-political belonging, by virtue of their unconstrained and unstructured potentiality.

By deploying affectivity as a situated language of socio-political belonging, the Steiner mothers relate their experiences at the micro-level to developments at the macro-level. They locate their life-worlds in a linear process of civilisational progression, with their children as the embodiment of unlimited potentiality. These children are construed as the 'halfway point in the history of humankind', 'those whose spirit is truly five hundred steps ahead of others', and the veritable 'non-self'. The mothers explicate how children with ASD are endowed with unique capabilities, or even a unique mission, in the progression of human history. Their narrativisations

skate between the individual-family and the society-nation-and-beyond; it constitutes the affectively sharpened children as the link between present and future, whose existence conjoins the trajectories of the family, the nation, and humanity. My interlocutors' discourses are thus marked by notions of scalar correspondence, a social evolutionist teleology, and an emphasis on individual citizen-subject's potentiality to make history through remaking themselves—familiar themes that (as analysed in chapter one) surface in various citizen-reform projects propounded by the party-state.

3. Indigenous Theories of Influence: The Affectively Potent Political Subject and the 'Scalable Self'

In this final section, I would like to explore a theoretical question that arises from my ethnographic explorations thus far. Namely, what should we make of the intense emphasis on individual citizen-subject's ability to receive and exert influences (or affectivity), seen across citizenship projects elaborated at distinctive levels of the PRC? What shared assumptions about the viable political subject, and indeed the social person, underpin projects as varied as 1) the Maoist creation of the 'new man' who would perpetuate the Communist revolution; 2) the recent 'quality education' reform to reconfigure children's bodies into sites 'where affective forces could be put into play in the changing of a country's future' (Kuan, 2014, p. 67); and 3) the articulation of socio-political belonging via the language of affectivity I encountered through the Steiner/Wu-Wei School nexus? While a comprehensive answer lies beyond the ambit of a doctoral thesis, I would like to suggest how some indigenous theories of influence gleaned from early Chinese thought and Chinese anthropological writing may help to explicate this complex question.

3.1 The *Great Learning* and the Affectively Potent Political Subject

In chapter one, I described a long-standing ethical-political tradition that sees societal-political progress as predicated upon prior individual self-transformation, which finds its most direct exposition in the *Great Learning* (see also Gardner, 2007; Ivanhoe, 2000; Keenan, 2011; Tu, 1979; Virág, 2015). This tradition postulates a political subject whose interiorities are bound up with the situated natural, social, and political environment, and whose actions on the microcosmic level directly influence developments on the macrocosmic order. The Wu-Wei founder Yin-Xian would deem the 'superior person', elaborated in the *Book of Changes*, an apt illustration of this affectively potent political subject.

However, given the radical extent to which early Chinese thought (especially Confucian classical texts on governance and ethics) was denounced and decentred from social life throughout the twentieth century (see Mitter, 2004), such conceptions of the viable political subject-cum-social person remain obscure to most contemporary Chinese citizens. This holds true for most Wu-Wei followers and Steiner advocates prior to their participation in various grassroots-level ‘traditional culture’ programmes like the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* retreats. Given the profound rupture in the transmission of classical knowledge, it remains unsatisfactory to explain the emphasis on citizen-subject affectivity exclusively via historical conceptual schemas such as the theory of influence found in the *Great Learning*.

In what follows, I suggest that another perspective can be gained by revisiting anthropologist Fei Xiao-Tong’s conception of the Chinese self as traditionally situated at the heart of ‘scalable networks’⁸⁶ (2018[1947], p. 27). Based on Fei’s writings, I propose the notion of ‘scalable self’ as a lens to capture the enduring assumptions regarding the viable social person and the apposite human-environment interrelation. Attention to such indigenous theories of influence and potentiality may help us better understand the conceptual parallels in diverse formations of citizenship projects, articulated from the party-state centre of power, wider society, and marginal places.

3.2 *From the Soil and the ‘Scalable Self’*

A student of Bronislaw Malinowski, Fei is known principally in English-speaking academia for his studies of village life (see for instance Fei, 1939); one of the most widely cited is *Xiang Tu Zhong Guo* 乡土中国, first published in 1947 and translated into English in 1992 as *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. In this work, Fei formulates the influential concept of ‘*cha xu ge ju*’ 差序格局, which his translators Hamilton and Wang render into English as ‘differential mode of association’.

Since its publication in English, Fei’s notion of *cha xu ge ju* has been predominantly used in the analysis of *guanxi* networks (see for example Herrmann-Pillath, 2016; Yan, 2015), which Barbalet helpfully defines as ‘advantageous personal connections based on favor exchange’ (2020, p. 356). In my view, this reading of *cha xu ge ju* – with a narrow focus on interpersonal exchange relations – impoverishes the conceptual power inhering in Fei’s original conception. I offer instead

⁸⁶ My translation of the original: ‘*fu yu shen suo xing de wang luo* 富于伸缩性的网络’.

a reading of Fei's chapter on *cha xu ge ju* that bears on the entwined ethical-political domain of Chinese social life. Namely, the 'differential mode of association' describes a dynamic view of the Chinese self as situated at the centre of complex scalable networks, a form of person-environment interrelation which I call the 'scalable self'. I shall do this through a close reading of Fei's text, examining its 1992 English translation against its Chinese version (2018[1947]) popularly available in the PRC today.

In the chapter entitled *cha xu ge ju*, Fei begins from an observation of what he calls 'the problem of self-centredness' (*si de mao bing* 私的毛病) in the 1940s, manifested in, for instance, how people in the water town of Suzhou freely littered into the public canals (2018[1947], p. 23). To explain this phenomenon of 'self-centredness' (*si* 私), Fei argues, we need to consider 'the pattern of the entire social structure' (*zheng ge she hui jie gou de ge ju* 整个社会结构的格局). This entails an investigation of 'how to draw the line between the group and the individual, between others and our own selves' (ibid.). He then gives a schematic account through a dichotomous disambiguation. Fei argues that Western societies are configured like well-bundled haystacks in which individuals form organisations with clearly demarcated boundaries. He calls this pattern of social structure *tuán tǐ gé jú* 团体格局, which Hamilton and Wang translate as the 'organizational mode of association' (1992, p. 62). But the Chinese pattern of social structure, says Fei, is not like 'distinct bundles of straws':

Rather, it is like the ripples that go out in circles on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it. Every person stands at the centre of the circles produced by the rippling effect of their social influence. They come into interrelation when the ripples come into contact. One may not touch the same circles at each time and place (2018[1947], p. 24, [my translation]).⁸⁷

This *cha xu ge ju* (or the 'differential mode of association') characterises the pattern of China's 'traditional social structure'. In the context of 'our rural society', Fei observes, this pattern of organisation characterises not only kinship relationships but also spatial relationships (2018[1947], p. 24). Note how Fei explicitly construes the pattern of China's traditional social

⁸⁷ Hamilton and Wang translate the same section thusly: 'Rather, it is like the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it. Everyone stands at the center of the circles produced by his or her own social influence. Everyone's circles are interrelated. One touches different circles at different times and places' (1992, pp. 62-63).

structure, which he calls *cha xu ge ju*, at a higher order of abstraction.⁸⁸ What then is distinctive of this *cha xu ge ju*? Fei writes:

在这种富于伸缩性的网络里，随时随地是有一个“己”作中心的。这并不是个人主义，而是自我主义。个人是对团体而说的，是分子对全体。在个人主义下，一方面是平等观念，指在同一团体中各分子的地位相等，个人不能侵犯大家的权利；一方面是宪法观念，指团体不能抹煞个人，只能在个人们所愿意交出的一分权利上控制个人。这些观念必须先假定了团体的存在。在我们中国传统思想里是没有这一套的，因为我们所有的是自我主义，一切价值是以“己”作为中心的主义 (2018[1947], p. 27).

Hamilton and Wang translate this crucial paragraph thusly:

In these elastic networks that make up Chinese society, there is always a self at the center of each web. But this notion of the self amounts to egocentrism, not individualism. With individualism, individuals make up organizations in the same way that parts make up the whole. The balance between parts and whole produces a concept of equality: since the position of each individual in an organization is the same, one person cannot encroach on the others. It also produces a concept of constitutionality: an organization cannot deny the rights of an individual; it controls individuals merely on the basis of the partial rights they have willingly handed over. Without these concepts, such organizations as these could not exist. However, in Chinese traditional thought, there is no comparable set of ideas, because, for us, there is only egocentrism. Everything worthwhile rests on an ideology in which the self is central (1992, p. 67).

I must disagree with Hamilton and Wang's rendition of Fei's two linchpin notions: '富于伸缩性的网络' (*fu yu shen suo xing de wang luo*) as 'elastic networks' and '自我主义' (*zi wo zhu yi*) as 'egocentrism'. First, regarding 'egocentrism', such a rendering introduces an implicit negative value judgment over the 'ideology in which the self is central', a hasty assessment precisely problematised in Fei's nuanced original analysis. A number of scholars in Chinese-speaking academia have chosen to translate '自我主义' (*zi wo zhu yi*) as 'selfism' (see for instance Wang Hejian, 2006; Wang Georgette and Zhong, 2010), which I find a more satisfactory translation. Relatedly, I find 'elastic networks' a less robust rendition of '富于伸缩性的网络' (*fu yu shen suo xing de wang luo*) compared to 'scalable networks'.

⁸⁸ Stephan Feuchtwang, in a 2015 article, similarly observes that while Fei was writing about rural China, he intended *cha xu ge ju* to operate as 'a model of observable and historically described Chinese society' (p. 131). However, Feuchtwang's interpretation of Fei remains focused on kinship practices and social reproduction.

In making these interventions, I suggest a neutral reading of selfism as the *centrality of the self in social relations and social actions*, which allows for the extension of this crucial concept to the analysis of both broadly prosocial and antisocial phenomena, across discrete yet interrelated scales.

Let us return to the rest of Fei's arguments. To illustrate the *modus operandi* of such a selfism-based pattern of social organisation, Fei refers to the conceptual architecture elaborated in the *Great Learning*:

The ancients who wished to display illustrious virtue throughout the empire first put their own states in good order. Wishing to order their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their own self. Their self being cultivated, their families were regulated; their families being regulated, their states were correctly governed. Their states being well governed, the whole empire⁸⁹ was made tranquil and peaceful. Now we can see that the boundary between the public and private spheres is relative—we may even say ambiguous. [...] (1992, p. 69).

'In this pattern of oscillating but differential social circles,' Fei reiterates, 'public and private are relative concepts' (ibid.). He concludes with the following remarks:

[I]n traditional China, the concept of public was the ambiguous *tianxia* (all under heaven), whereas the state was seen as the emperor's family. Hence, the boundary between public and private has never been clear. The state and the public are but additional circles that spread out like the waves from the splash of each person's social influence. Therefore, people must cultivate themselves before they can extend outward (1992, p. 70).

By relativising the public and the private in 'this pattern of oscillating but differential social circles', Fei describes a kind of selfism that is morally neutral (as opposed to what Hamilton and Wang gloss as 'egocentrism') and underlies a wide range of social phenomena. Crucially, he argues that the ambiguous boundary between the public and private spheres allows selfism (an ideology in which the self is central) to sustain social actions in two directions. 'In *The Great Learning*, public order is achieved by moving toward the center of the discrete circles. [...] Private selfishness, however, is justified by moving outward, toward the state' (1992, p. 69).

Therefore, while Fei's exposition begins somewhat misleadingly from a discussion of Chinese people's apparent 'self-centredness', a closer reading reveals that his objective is to shed light on the deep-seated ambiguity between public and private domains of social life, and how this

⁸⁹ Here I disagree again with Hamilton and Wang's translation of *tianxia* 天下 (all under the heaven) as the empire, which prematurely narrows the scope of discussion.

feature forms a conceptual avenue through which the self may travel to *tianxia* and vice versa. In developing the notion of *cha xu ge ju*, he postulates a pattern that in his view describes pre-Communist Chinese sociality. Like ‘the ripples that go out in circles on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it’, this pattern is marked by affectivity, dynamism, and scalability. The act of traversing these discrete (though interrelated) circles, furthermore, can be undertaken in directions both *toward* and *away* from each contingently situated person. In this theory of influence and potentiality, the person and the *tianxia* are conceptually co-constitutive and practically inseparable.

While the contour of Chinese social life has transformed radically since Fei’s writing, the theoretical contribution of this piece remains salient. Bringing this reading to bear upon the intense emphasis on the affective capacity of citizen-subjects in diverse formations of citizenship projects, I suggest that at least a part of such emphasis can be explained via a historically specific view of the viable social person as possessing a scalable self. This scalable self is situated at the cynosure of a complex network, and is seen as possessing efficacy scalable across discrete, though concatenated, registers of social life. The scalable self is both suffused with affectivity (the ability to receive influences from and exert influences upon the situated environment, constituted by humans and non-humans, synchronic and diachronic forces) and expandability (the capacity to extend beyond the level of the personal and the present to herald a desired polity and, indeed, future).

This view of the viable social person-cum-political subject, I suggest, underpins my interlocutors’ perception of affectivity as an important axis of citizenship belonging. The scalable self may be seen as one among many concepts which coalesce to form a complex mechanism that establishes the inextricable connection between human interiorities and socio-political formations. This inextricable connection becomes the ground upon which my interlocutors construe their affectively-gifted children as valuable members of the polity. It equally becomes the ground upon which the party-state continues to insist on the responsibility of citizen-subjects to self-reform, self-improve, and self-perfect, so that they can contribute to the making of history.

Coda: The Courtyard

In June 2019, I was invited to visit the ‘Courtyard’, a Steiner residential community shared by seventeen families in the outskirts of a major northern Chinese city. Once the site of a deserted paint factory, the Courtyard was transformed by the concerted effort of three families in search of a living space close to their children’s unregistered Steiner school. In August 2016, the families signed a rental contract. In October, a three-stage renovation project was under way. By May 2017, the residences of the three founding families, each one designed by the occupants, were completed. The paint factory was thus reborn as a Steiner habitat.

The Courtyard is deep and quiet, composed of seventeen semi-attached houses arranged in three rows and an elaborate multi-purpose community building with a sports centre, meeting rooms, a kitchen and dining room, a tearoom, a carpentry workshop, and a pottery workshop. Two of the co-founder families generously received me and shared their parenting stories.

The ‘acting head of the Courtyard’, Hao-Tian, and his wife, Yu-He, moved from south China for their daughter’s education. Hao-Tian has had a successful career in real estate development, while Yu-He has been an advocate of Steiner Education for more than a decade and previously worked at the Steiner school their daughter Xun-Mei attended for five years. Since spring 2019, Xun-Mei has been home-schooled along with other three children of the Courtyard. In their brightly lit kitchen, Hao-Tian enthusiastically described his vision of starting an itinerant home school that teaches in the Mongolian steppe during the summer and in the Courtyard during the academic year. Yu-He was rather sceptical about her husband’s blueprint. She conceded that Xun-Mei probably needed to move on to an international school or attend high school overseas, and enquired about my own experience as a young international student (*xiao liu xue sheng* 小留学生) in the United States. At that time, Xun-Mei and her three friends were being partly taught in *si shu*⁹⁰-style, learning the *Four Books and Five Classics* (*si shu wu jing* 四书五经)⁹¹ from a scholar of traditional culture in the mornings, and partly in international school-style, attending weekly private lessons for ceramics, music, tennis, and carpentry in the afternoons, and participating in educational tours (*you xue* 游学). When I asked if they’d felt burdened by the endeavours involved

⁹⁰ *Si shu* (私塾), or old-style private school, was a form of private education institution in imperial China. These schools were usually small in size (there could be a few to a few dozens of students) and taught by one learned teacher. The principle subject of study was the *Four Books and Five Classics*, in preparation for the imperial examination (*ke ju kao shi* 科举考试). Dutournier and Wang (2018) discuss the return of *si shu* style private schools in the PRC.

⁹¹ Confucian texts which constituted the core curriculum for imperial examinations in Ming (1368-1644 CE) and Qing (1644-1912 CE) Dynasties.

in pursuing an educative pathway ‘outside the system’ – moving cities, changing careers, building a living community from scratch, collating a home-school programme, and contemplating sending Xun-mei abroad – the couple replied with a well-worn idiom: ‘Mencius’s mother moved three times’ (*meng mu san qian* 孟母三迁).

The story of Mencius and his mother is old and oft-recounted. It goes something like this: Mencius was born during the Warring States period, and was raised alone by his widowed mother. At first, mother and son lived close to a cemetery. However, the mother found that the young Mencius was imitating mourning rites for play, acting as undertaker and mourner. Seeing this, she said, ‘No, I cannot let my son live here.’ So, they moved close to a marketplace. However, the mother found that the young Mencius was now imitating hawking and butchering for play, echoing the cries of merchants. Seeing this, she again said, ‘No, I cannot let my son live here either.’ Finally, they moved close to a school. The mother found that the young Mencius was imitating court rituals and scholarly behaviours. She was, at last, satisfied: ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘this is where my son should live’.

This fable illustrates how children are highly receptive to influences within their situated environment, and how parents may exert influences upon their children through shaping their environment. While for Mencius’s mother the shaping of environment relied on moving residences, for Hao-Tian and Xun-Mei the shaping of environment entailed ongoing orchestration of rich and diverse direct experiences – through classroom studies, extra-curricular activities, educational tours, and a residential community. These undertakings evince the form of ethical action I have termed reflective manoeuvre, which involves ethical actors’ evaluative rearrangement of their positionalities (and those of their children) vis-à-vis influences, relations, opportunities, and obstacles contingently converging in their lifeworlds. Notably, the couple maintained (like many other Steiner parents I encountered during fieldwork) that the most important constituents of the educative environment are ‘parents themselves’ (*fu mu ben shen* 父母本身).

In an interview later that day, the second co-founder couple, Qiao-Song and Qi-Fei, shared further thoughts about the inextricable relation between parents’ *xinxing* and children’s education. Qiao-Song and Qi-Fei both graduated from the People’s University of China with MBA degrees. Qiao-Song works in higher management while Qi-Fei is a full-time mother. Their daughter had a ‘very difficult time’ in the private kindergarten downtown, which motivated them to explore options ‘outside the system’. This journey eventually brought them to Steiner Education. In co-

founding the Courtyard in 2016, Qiao-Song and Qi-Fei wished to create a living environment that ‘accords with both traditional Chinese culture and Anthroposophy’ for their daughter and themselves. ‘The macroenvironment (*da huan jing* 大环境) is something we cannot change by ourselves, but we can shape our microenvironment (*xiao huan jing* 小环境),’ Qiao-Song observed with satisfaction, gazing around the neo-classical living room which he designed from scratch.

To this couple, the uniqueness of their ‘microenvironment’ in the Courtyard is exemplified in the prevalence of *xiuxing*, informed (as is the Wu-Wei School) by the three traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. This undertaking is shared by almost all members of the seventeen resident Steiner families. Being Lay Buddhists (*ju shi* 居士) themselves, the couple observed that many parents and children of the Courtyard had participated in sitting meditation (*da zuo* 打坐) classes, Chinese medicine courses, classical text studies, and *xiuxing* retreats such as ones offered by the Wu-Wei School. Qiao-Song observed:

It’s safe to say that, in the Steiner circle, children won’t form a singular view on reality or a dualistic mode of thinking (*er yuan hua si wei* 二元化思维). They not only interact deeply with the material world through rich sensorial experiences, but also interact with diverse philosophical schools. The continuous learning, *xiuxing*, and self-improvement of us parents have profound influences on our children. Because of the environment we created and the examples we set, our children enjoy a rich and unfettered (*chong ying de* 充盈的) spiritual life. Their perceptions of the world are rich and unfettered.

To the couple, therefore, the ethical pursuits of parents have a direct bearing on their children’s flourishing as affectively astute persons. Through their manipulation of the ‘microenvironment’ and their ‘continued learning, *xiuxing*, and self-improvement’, parents of the ‘Steiner circle’ become capable of exerting ‘profound influences’ on their children.

In these ethical reasonings, we can discern these parents’ profound desires to craft ‘a space apart’ (Farquhar and Zhang, 2005) from the mainstream education, seen as both sensorially and spiritually impoverishing. However, just as in the ethical teaching in the Wu-Wei School discussed in the previous chapter, we can also detect ethical-political sensibilities of parents’ continuous self-improvement as the precondition to wider social change. While desiring for their children to have a ‘rich and unfettered’ mode of existence and doing their utmost to reform the children’s situated ‘microenvironment’ (both extending outward to the social world and inward to their own interiorities), Steiner parents must also ponder how they and their children might fit into the ‘macroenvironment’ of the contemporary PRC. Whatever the ‘outcome’ of their ethical-educative

projects, these middle-class parents may be seen as enacting indigenous theories of influence and potentiality in their situated ways. Standing at the 'centre of the circles produced by the rippling effect of their social influence', actors in China's educative marginality create waves that traverse the registers of the self, the family, and the 'micro-environment'. Perhaps their influences may reach the 'additional circles' of the 'state and the public'. Perhaps, on the macro-level, such 'splashes' are too small to be perceptible.

Chapter Four

Doing ‘Chinese Medicine’ and ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ at the Wu-Wei School: Citizen-State Coopetition across Divergent Ontological Commitments

黄帝曰：余闻上古有真人者，提挈天地，把握阴阳，
呼吸精气，独立守神，肌肉若一，
故能寿敝天地，无有终时，
此其道生。

— 黄帝内经 | 素问 | 上古天真论

The Yellow Emperor said: I have heard that in ancient times there were the so-called Immortals;
they mastered the Heaven and the Earth, and grasped the Yin and the Yang.
They breathed the vital essence, and were independent in preserving their spirit;
their muscles and flesh remained unchanged.
They could therefore live a long life, just as there is no end for Heaven and Earth.
All this was the result of living in accordance with the Dao, the Right Way.⁹²

— *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of
Internal Medicine* | Essential
Questions | Treatise on the
Natural Truth in Ancient
Times

⁹² This translation is modified from the version by Veith (2015, pp. 100-101).

Introduction

This chapter investigates the practical and discursive formation of a non-materialist alternative healing programme practised at the Wu-Wei School, which opens an unexpected window into the intricacies of citizen-state interrelations in the contemporary PRC. As we have seen in previous chapters, for the Wu-Wei School organisers and participants, *xiuxing* constitutes a node in a complex web of aspirations and activities, which converge upon the making of a worthy existence in their situated political community. While the undertaking of *xiuxing* promises different outcomes to each person – the recuperation of high-socialist moral sensibilities for some (see chapter two) and the enhancement of embodied affectivity for others (see chapter three) – almost everyone I have met via the Wu-Wei School readily suggests that *xiuxing* carries tangible health benefits. Some even come to the *xiuxing* retreats with the explicit goal of seeking remedy for their ‘intractable illnesses’ (*yi nan za zheng* 疑难杂症).

In October 2018, a few months into my field research with the Wu-Wei School, Yan-Yan and her father arrived at the Wu-Dang centre. Wearing a medical mask, Yan-Yan nervously recounted her medical history in fluent biomedical language: at age 29, she was diagnosed with lacunar cerebral infarction, anxiety disorder, clinical depression, insomnia, and chronic nasal infection. Yin-Xian, the Wu-Wei network founder, and three assistant-teachers patiently listened. When Yan-Yan finished, Yin-Xian responded simply: ‘I’m no doctor, and this is no hospital. But traditional culture can indeed heal illnesses (*chuan tong wen hua di que ke yi zhi bing* 传统文化的确可以治病). We can get you started from today if you’d like.’ Yan-Yan and her father’s faces lit up with relief.

While insisting that he is ‘no doctor’, in his 2015 book published in Singapore, Yin-Xian writes that the knowledge-practice underpinning the Wu-Wei project includes a form of Daoist medicine (*dao yi* 道医). This healing practice includes an intervention known as ‘Finger Needle Therapy’ (*zhi zhen liao fa* 指针疗法), devised by Yin-Xian and taught to committed assistant-disciples alone. In this intervention, a practitioner uses their fingers to stimulate the recipient’s fingertips and toes, understood to be terminals of major *qi* channels known as the twelve meridians and collaterals (*shi er jing luo* 十二经络). The Finger Needle Therapy derives from the meridian theory (*jing luo li lun* 经络理论) in the *Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine*.⁹³ This canonical

⁹³ An important early Chinese medical text conventionally dated to between the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and the Han dynasty (221–206 BCE).

Chinese medical text identified twelve interconnected conduits of *qi*, the foundational essence of the unnameable yet ineluctable Dao that animates all forms of vitality (Kohn, 2006, p. 3). The blockage of these conduits is considered a major aetiological factor in the Wu-Wei health theory. Finger Needle Therapy has the putative effect of alleviating *qi* blockage; such alleviation is supposed to manifest through blisters on those stimulated extremities.

Yin-Xian conducted Yan-Yan's first session on the evening of her arrival. He enclosed Yan-Yan's right thumb with his right hand and applied pressure below her nail. His movement was arrhythmic, and he seemed to use little force. However, Yan-Yan's complexion soon changed: her eyes narrowed, and her breathing grew louder. Witnessing this discomfort, assistant-teacher Fang-Hua whispered, 'You may cry out loud. Nobody will judge. Many have burst into tears and other have shouted and cursed.' After ten minutes, a blister formed on Yan-Yan's thumb. Yin-Xian explained to the assistant-teachers and co-present visiting adherents:

I am communicating and resonating (*jiao gan* 交感) with the large intestine meridian on the hand (*shou yang ming da chang jing* 手阳明大肠经). I am barely using any force, but she's obviously in a lot of pain. This shows the extent to which her large intestine meridian is stagnant and clogged (*yu du* 淤堵).

As Yin-Xian worked, assistant-teacher Gao-Chen prepared a cup of hot water which would 'facilitate Yan-Yan's metabolism (*xin chen dai xie* 新陈代谢)'. Meanwhile, assistant-disciple Fu-Yi heated a sewing needle on a cigarette lighter and soaked cotton swabs in medical alcohol. As soon as Yin-Xian withdrew, Fu-Yi adroitly popped Yan-Yan's blister and covered it with the cotton. 'When a blister forms, there's toxin (*du su* 毒素) coming out of her large intestine meridian which needs to be released immediately,' Fu-Yi explained.

So that I might understand how Finger Needle Therapy feels, I asked if I could receive the treatment for a few minutes. Yin-Xian happily obliged. As he tapped my right thumb, waves of soreness crept up my hand. Yin-Xian's force felt considerably stronger than it looked. I could feel electrical currents travel up my hand, and a blister soon emerged on my fingertip. Yin-Xian frowned:

You have a lot of blockages as well! The large intestine meridian is the sea of the five organs (*wu zang zhi hai* 五脏之海), where all *qi* channels interflow. Stagnation in this meridian signals the existence of blockages in all other channels. Young people nowadays are blocked all over the place. Thankfully you haven't had as many issues as Yan-Yan. But

the both of you must press on with the *xiuxing* practice, especially the sitting meditation component (*da zuo* 打坐).

‘What about the Finger Needle Therapy? Do we need to keep having it long-term?’ I asked, wiping away my tears in embarrassment. Yin-Xian exchanged a look with his assistant-disciples, ‘Like most people, you’ve got it upside down (*ben mo dao zhi* 本末倒置).’ No further explanation was provided on this occasion.

The Wu-Wei organisers offered the same bewildering advice during many other therapy sessions I observed: ‘So much about pinching fingers. In order to get better, what you really need is to persevere in *xiuxing* practice.’ Furthermore, Yin-Xian insisted that no-one should be charged for Finger Needle Therapy, unlike for learning the *xiuxing* regimen or attending *xiuxing* retreats.

What makes the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* regimen take precedence over the Finger Needle Therapy in health maintenance and illness recuperation? If Yin-Xian is ‘no doctor’ and the retreat ‘no hospital’, why do new and old adherents consistently visit to address a constellation of health issues, from common cold to cancer? What does ‘traditional culture’ entail to those involved in the network, and how does this ‘traditional culture’ heal illnesses?

In what follows, I first explicate the ontological postulates underpinning the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* regimen, a theory known as ‘Five Phase Correlative Resonance’ (*wu xing gan ying* 五行感应). This ‘ontological theory’ (as the Wu-Wei organisers themselves describe it – *ben ti lun* 本体论) is understood to enable forms of efficacy and influence outside materialist causalities, and determines that *xiuxing* practice outweighs exogenous interventions (Wu-Wei and otherwise) in each person’s health maintenance and illness recovery. In section two, I describe how my interlocutors discursively co-elaborate the efficacy of the Wu-Wei healing programme, which Yin-Xian deems a form of ‘China’s Chinese medicine’ (*zhong guo de zhong yi* 中国的中医); they do so by situating Wu-Wei healing within the recent state-backed ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ revival while simultaneously distinguishing it from the state-espoused scientific-materialist ‘Traditional Chinese Medicine’. This particularly is a site of marked tension in the Wu-Wei context: an uneasy coexistence of discursive affinities with, and ontological divergences from, party-state directives. I argue this tension is irreducible to party-state power. Instead, the unstable discursive locations of Wu-Wei healing instantiate a mode of citizen-state interrelation in contemporary China, which I call ‘citizen-state coopetition’. Through developing coopetition as an analytic, I suggest how

ambiguity in key party-state directives has often allowed grassroots and state actors to coalesce, contingently and productively, on a practical level; this is despite actors' disparate structural positions and upholding divergent ontological commitments.

Analytically, I am not concerned with the 'validity' or 'facticity' of the Wu-Wei healing programme or participants' illness narratives, which cannot be empirically verified and therefore I neither reject nor support. My focus is on how my interlocutors practise and receive, valorise or problematise different forms of 'Chinese medicine', and how their health choices and narratives spell particularised ontological commitments. As I show, ontological postulates matter deeply in my interlocutors' perception of what constitutes good health and the appropriate pathway towards attaining or restoring it. My objective in this chapter is to underscore: a) how theories of ontology and strategies of health management become co-constitutive for these contingently-situated actors; and b) how the complex interactions between citizen-subjects and the party-state in the domain of health and healing demand analytical accommodation beyond the tired dichotomy of domination-resistance. As I show, party-state and grassroots-level actors negotiate their ambivalently entangled visions about the 'right' ways to understand the nature of living, health, and healing via extended (and often indirect) disputes over the appropriate ontological content of 'Chinese traditional culture' and 'Chinese medicine'; these visions and disputes matter because they are the ground upon which the inextricably entwined projects of national and personal rejuvenation are crystallised.



Figure 10: A blister forming on Yan-Yan's thumb during the Finger Needle Therapy

1. 'Five Phase Correlate Resonance': Theoretical Underpinnings of the Wu-Wei School *Xiuxing* Regimen

The Wu-Wei School *xiuxing* regimen involves a seemingly straightforward quintuplet of embodied activities: vigorous walking (*xing xiang* 行香), self-directed vigilance over one's deportment (*li* 礼), sitting meditation (*da zuo* 打坐), recitation (*song jing* 诵经), and classical text learning (*ke cheng* 课程) (see Table 1 in chapter one, section five). This five-pronged regimen is underpinned by what Wu-Wei Founder Yin-Xian argues to be an 'ontological theory': 'Five Phase Correlative Resonance'. To explicate this esoteric theory (which lies outside the conceptual repertoire of most PRC citizens), I must unpack its two layers: the theory of 'Five Phases' (*wu xing* 五行) and the theory of 'resonance' (*gan ying* 感应). Both layers are rooted in pre-modern cosmologies, healing practices, and bodywork inextricable from China's indigenous Daoist tradition. It is important to note that the following theoretical discussions draw upon my study notes with the Wu-Wei School as well as selected sources from Anglophone Daoist Studies; they thus present a situated (and necessarily limited) view of these complex indigenous notions, whose genealogy and contemporary relevance

remain issues of ongoing debate. In this section, I elaborate on the notions of Five Phases and resonance insofar as they are necessary for an adequate reckoning with the internal logics of the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* regimen; this analysis subsequently enables us to understand how my interlocutors engage in cooptation with the party-state in the context of health and healing.

1.1 ‘Five Phases’: Five Domains of the Dao

The Wu-Wei organisers maintain that the Five Phases constitute five exhaustive domains of the Dao (道), a perspective which finds roots in ‘Daoist *xiuxing* traditions’ (*dao jia xiu xing chuan tong* 道家修行传统). As Daoist scholar Livia Kohn elucidates, Daoist *xiuxing* traditions conventionally take the body (both its interiority and its physicality) as the ground upon which a mystical union with the Dao, the unnameable yet omnipresent animating force of the universe, is to be attained (Kohn, 2006, pp. 3-5). Holding that the human entity and the entirety of its situated socio-natural environment are governed by the same set of forces, early Chinese cosmologists formulated an intricate system to describe the functional dynamics of all observable phenomena, ranging from natural cycles and human health to heavenly order and state governance (Jarrett, 2006, pp. 25-28). This corpus of knowledge finds systematised elaboration in the *Book of Changes*, the ancient philosophy-numerology text that serves as the foundation of the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* regimen.

For the Wu-Wei founder Yin-Xian, the *Book of Changes* describes how the Dao can be approximated and logically grasped via a dynamic system of representation. Having attended over fifty seminars on the *Book of Changes* during fieldwork⁹⁴, I find it apt to conceive of Yin-Xian’s exegetical teaching as outlining a fractalised system of the essential properties of the world, which I designate as the ‘syntagmatic chain of being’ for the sake of clarity and illustrate in Figure 11. Here I take inspiration from Peter Van der Veer’s (2013, pp. 9-10) borrowing of the term ‘syntagmatic’ from Saussurean linguistics to denote a group of terms which do not possess stable meaning unless placed in relation to one another.

In the first order of the fractal system, the Dao comprises two fundamental dimensions: the ‘Unmanifested Ultimate’ (*wu ji* 无极) and the ‘Manifested Ultimate’ (*tai ji* 太极). The Unmanifested Ultimate is seen as lying beyond human perception; in other words, it constitutes

⁹⁴ Most of these seminars were given to assistant-teachers in closed-door sessions because of the prior knowledge entailed, some were given in introductory ways to selected adherents; the Wu-Wei founder insisted that I must grasp this body of esoteric theory in order to adequately reckon with the *xiuxing* experiences and their ‘metaphysical foundations’ (*xing er shang de gen ji* 形而上的根基).

the ‘known unknown’ of the system. Meanwhile, the Manifested Ultimate is, in assistant-teacher Gao-Chen’s words, ‘the Dao as conceivable by human beings’ (*ren ke yi ren zhi de dao* 人可以认知的道). The Unmanifested Ultimate exists independently of human reason-perception, whereas the Manifested Ultimate is deemed observable and analysable.

In the second order of the fractal system, the Manifested Ultimate – ‘the Dao as conceivable by the human beings’ – can be further schematised through a series of metaphysical concepts characterised by infinite divisibility:

- 1) The Manifested Ultimate is schematised into the two Primary Forces (*liang yi* 两仪) of Yin and Yang (阴阳);
- 2) The Two Primary Forces of Yin and Yang are schematised into the Four Images (*si xiang* 四象) of Wood, Fire, Metal, and Water;
- 3) The Four Images are schematised into the Five Phases (*wu xing* 五行) of Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water;⁹⁵
- 4) The Five Phases are schematised into the Eight Trigrams (*ba gua* 八卦) known as Zhen 震 (☳), Xun 巽 (☴), Li 离 (☲), Qian 乾 (☰), Dui 兑 (☱), Kan 坎 (☵), Kun 坤 (☷) and Gen 艮 (☶);
- 5) The Eight Trigrams are further schematised into sixty-four Hexagrams (*liu shi si gua* 六十四卦);
- 6) Ad infinitum.

⁹⁵ The reader probably recognises that the orders of the Four Images and the Five Phases are remarkably similar. My interlocutors were never able to provide an explicit explanation other than pointing out the conceptual transference and interfusion among different Chinese classical texts. I can only surmise and suggest the following: it appears that the Four Images and Five Phases were developed across two different, though connected, theoretical lines in early Chinese thought – the former through numerology (epitomised in the *Book of Changes*), and the latter through cosmology-medical texts (epitomised in the *Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine*). In Yin-Xian’s effort to construct a proprietary *xiuxing* regimen founded in diverse Chinese classics, he may have chosen to consolidate these two theoretical systems into one and insert the layer of the Five Phases between the Four Images and the Eight Trigrams, which are presented as successive orders within the *Book of Changes*.

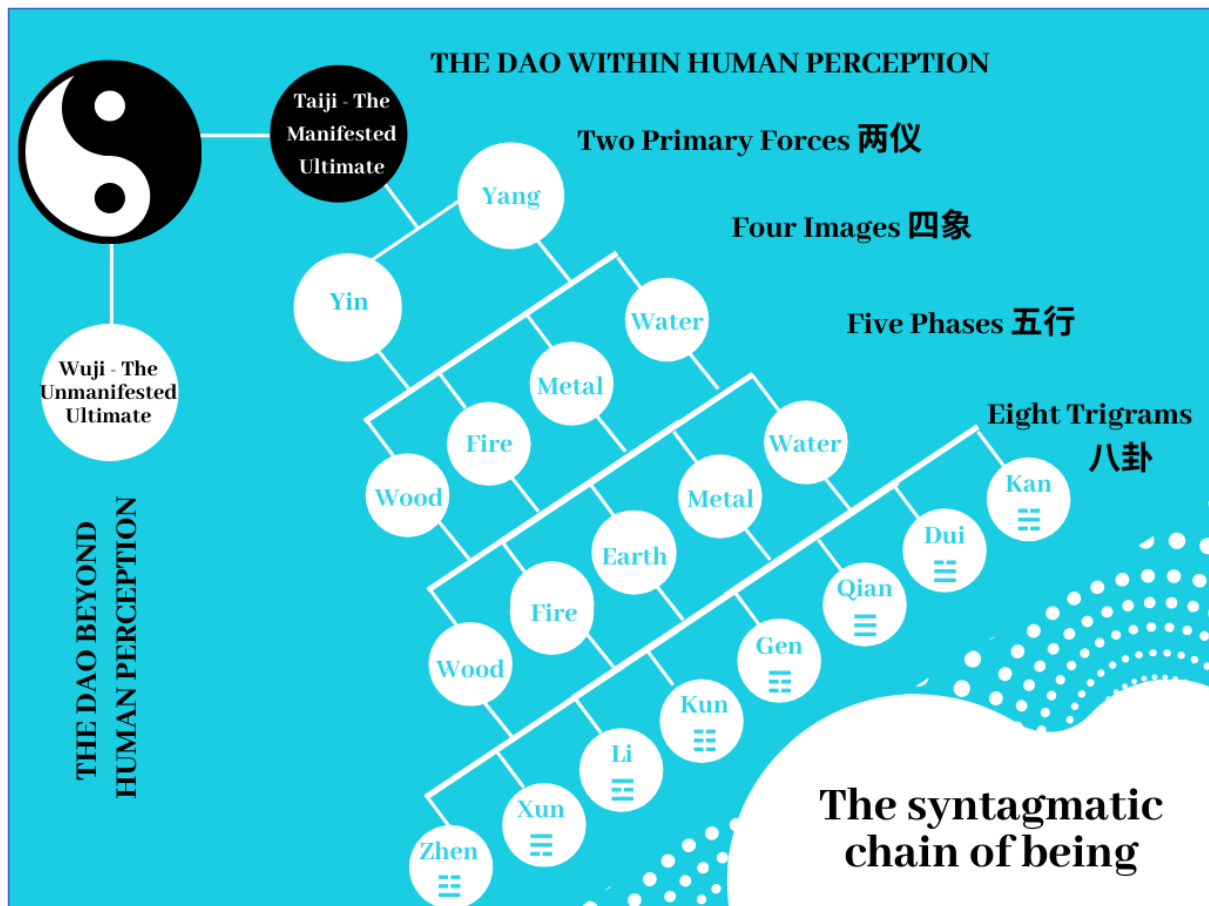


Figure 11: The syntagmatic chain of being (author's illustration)

According to Yin-Xian, this system provides a metaphysical mapping of the functional dynamics inhering in all phenomena across microcosmic and macrocosmic levels; furthermore, among the various orders of the infinite system, the interrelation between the Five Phases was most consistently mobilised in social life throughout imperial China. Therefore, each Phase constitutes a broad ontological set that contains an infinite number of items, understood as simultaneously metaphysical and physical. The Five Phases (like entities on other levels of the fractal system) are to comprise the whole of knowable universe (the Manifested Ultimate). Importantly, these five metaphysical entities are seen as dynamically interrelated via two sets of synchronous processes: a productive cycle and a controlling cycle (see Figure 12). Each Phase gives rise to a designated Phase continuously in a harmonious and unbroken sequence. Meanwhile, each Phase also has a controlling effect on another designated Phase to limit potential excesses (see also Jarrett, 2006, p. 25). In short, because of the balancing effect produced via these synchronous processes, in the purely existing metaphysical realm, the interrelations among the Five Phases undergo harmonious and uninterrupted transformations, in complete attunement with the rhythm of the Dao.

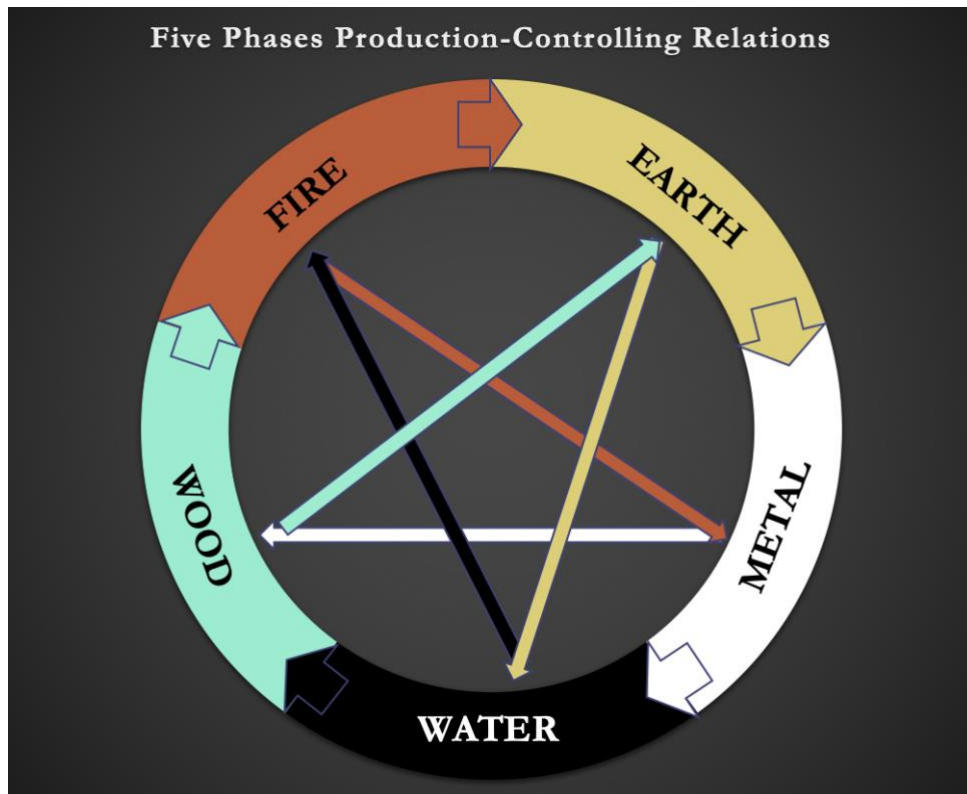


Figure 12: The production-controlling relations of the Five Phases (author's illustration based on the Wu-Wei teaching); each Phase generates the subsequent Phase in the productive cycle (outer circle relation), and each Phase controls the Phase that's one step removed from it in the controlling cycle (inner star relation)

According to Daoist scholars Kaptchuk and Jarrett, the Five Phase system and its interrelations were elaborated by cosmologist Zou Yan (邹衍) (305-240 BCE) during the Warring State period (Kaptchuk, 1983, p. 345, quoted in Jarrett, 2006, p. 24). Based on textual evidence, Jarrett argues that the Five Phases and their interrelations were widely used in pre-modern China as 'a qualitative standard of reference' for determining the attunement between all dimensions of human conduct (ranging from state ritual and governance to personal health and morality) and the Dao (2006, p. 25). Wu-Wei founder Yin-Xian holds a similar perspective. Maintaining that a healthy person necessarily lives in attunement with the dynamics of the Dao, Yin-Xian has devised a five-pronged *xinxiang* regimen that putatively enables its practitioners to achieve a high degree of functional balance across the five domains of their existence, in correlation with the Five Phases. However, how does this quintuplet of embodied activities aid in achieving functional balance across one's five ontological domains? How do abstractly existing metaphysical entities (Five Phases) relate to and influence concretely existing physical bodies and their spiritual-moral characteristics? Herein lies the significance of the second linchpin notion: resonance.

1.2 ‘Resonance’: The Bridge between Metaphysical Entities and Material Existences

As related in chapter three, Yin-Xian argues that a key objective of the Wu-Wei School is to help individuals restore their affective capacity (*jiao gan neng li* 交感能力), understood as an embodied form of knowing in contradistinction to cognition (*si wei* 思维). This mode of knowing finds its ontological underpinning in the theory of resonance (*gan ying* 感应). Given the complexity with which resonance is articulated and deployed in the context of Wu-Wei healing, I must delay a situated analysis until the ethnographic sections. Firstly, for some conceptual grounding, I shall use secondary literatures to describe the notion briefly, before explaining in the following pages how this theory, which is grounded in a pre-modern view of human-environment interrelations, shapes my interlocutors’ health management strategies.

Based on the Western Han cosmological-philosophical compendium *Huai Nan Zi* (淮南子),⁹⁶ Daoist Studies scholar Shawn Arthur observes that ‘resonance is the idea that the different aspects and levels of the cosmos are synchronically linked and engage in constant energetic interaction’ (2006, p.96). It is precisely this theory of resonance which informed what Nathan Sivin identifies as the enduring political ideology that emerged by the first century BCE and held sway until the last days of the Qing Dynasty: ‘the unity of body, state, and cosmos’ (1995, p. 31). Resonance, in short, is a mode of influence and interaction across distinct orders of existence. Furthermore, it dictates the replicability of macrocosmic patterns on the microcosmic level (Arthur, 2006, pp. 96-97). In pre-modern China, through the mediation of resonance, the interrelation among the metaphysical entities of the Five Phases found vivid correlations across cosmological, political, and bodily levels. Hence, resonance can be understood as the operating vector that enables actions and influences at a distance, cutting across self-contained orders which nonetheless share metaphysical resemblances.

In the Wu-Wei School *xiuxing* regimen, the five-pronged embodied activities are situated in a one-to-one relationship with a) the abstractly existing Five Phases and b) the concretely existing physical body and its interiority, which share metaphysical resemblances with the Five Phases. The interrelation between the five embodied activities replicates and resonates with the interrelation between the Five Phases; the correlative resonance (i.e., mutual influence) between the five embodied activities and the five metaphysical entities, in turn, is expected to improve the

⁹⁶ Commissioned by the Prince of Huainan, Liu An, of Western Han Dynasty (179-122 BCE).

harmony among, and curb any excess of, the *innumerable* quintuplet relations that comprise human existence (see Table 2 for a few commonly used quintuplet sets within the Wu-Wei School, founded on the *Book of Changes*).

Table 2 Key Five Phase Correlations for the Wu-Wei School					
Quintuplet Sets Phase	Embodied Activity	Body Part	Organ	Emotion	Virtue
Wood	Rigorous walking	Feet	Liver	Anger	Benevolence
Fire	Deportment	Eyes	Heart	Joy	Propriety
Earth	Sitting meditation	Hips	Spleen	Anxiety	Genuineness
Metal	Recitation	Mouth	Lung	Grief	Efficacy
Water	Learning	Ear	Kidney	Fear	Wisdom

We can see how the seemingly simple five-pronged *xinxing* regimen belies the intricacy of its theoretical grounding, a dizzying set of fractal divisions wherein the same cosmic patterns (of interrelation among the Five Phases) recur at progressively diminished scales (cosmos, state, family, person, components of the person, ad infinitum). With daily practice of the five-pronged regimen, the practitioner is expected to achieve progressively improved functional balance across the five broad and exhaustive ontological domains; such enhanced functional balance is expected to effect improvements across the innumerable quintuplet relations constituting her existence (social relations of diverse scales, body parts, organs, emotions, virtues, ad infinitum). Ultimately, through enacting such recursive correlative resonance, a person may attain mystical union with the Dao.

Despite the sophistication of the *xiuxing* regimen's theoretical underpinnings, however, the Wu-Wei teachers categorically avoid theoretical discussions with retreat participants. Such behaviour can only be explained partially via the Wu-Wei pedagogical emphasis on embodied knowing. While operating within the recently legitimated discursive field of 'Chinese Traditional Culture (CTC)', the ways in which the Wu-Wei School does CTC and CTC-informed healing depart fundamentally from the party-state vision. This departure, as I shall now explain, is on the level of ontology.

2. Formations of 'Chinese Medicine': Questions of Ontology and Citizen-State Coopetition

My analyses in this section critically build on Philippe Descola's *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), which surveys cross-cultural modes of comprehending human-world relations. In this chapter, I follow Descola's broad conception of ontology as 'systems of the properties of existing beings' that 'serve as a point of reference for contrasting forms of cosmologies, models of social links, and theories of identity and alterity' (2013, p. 121). In using Descola as my theoretical starting point, I thus steer clear of the corpus associated with the recent 'ontological turn' (e.g. Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017; Viveiros de Castro, 1998, 2004). Unlike these theorists, my discussions of ontology are not concerned with a methodological move to collapse the boundary between 'nature' and 'culture', things and their representations, or concepts and objects (see Heywood, 2018 for a summary of critical perspectives). I focus instead on exposing how grassroots-level and party-state actors complexly interact in the embroiled discursive fields of 'Chinese Traditional Culture' and 'Chinese Medicine', and how their negotiations over the 'right' ways to understand the nature of living, health, and healing unfold via extended disputes over the appropriate ontological content of these discursive fields. These interactions and negotiations, which I capture via the notion of coopetition, are integral to the macro-level processes of state-building and micro-level processes of living a good life in the PRC.

Medical anthropologists have engaged extensively with questions of ontology, attending to the discursive and practical formations of healing categories and how such processes enfold and engender contingent modes of knowledge and power. Much of this corpus draws inspiration from philosophy and history of science, ethnographically expanding lines of inquiry pursued by thinkers such as Georges Canguilhem (1978) and Michel Foucault (1970; 1973). The objects of such analyses have spanned:

- a) psychic categories which beget new sensibilities, practices, and even ‘kinds of people’ (e.g. Hacking, 1995; Baum, 2018);
- b) biomedical pathological categories which arise clinically as ‘coordinated multiplicity’ (Mol, 2002), become crucial for organising and ordering clinical (inter)actions (e.g. Cussins, 1998; Mol, 1998), and produce spill-over effects in wider modes of comprehending normality/pathology beyond the clinic (e.g. Lock and Kaufert, 2001; Towghi, 2013);
- c) local ‘affliction’ categories which surface at the interstices of biomedicine and the domains of political, religious, and familial life (e.g. Kleinman, 1986; Rubinstein and Sakakibara, 2020; Vinea, 2018); and
- d) healing categories whose formations are integral to the constitution of twentieth-century nation-states and their situated visions of modernity (e.g. Croizière, 2014; Scheid, 2002; Pordicé, 2008).

This chapter builds on these works that make the question of politics integral to studies of health and healing. Specifically, I attend to ‘processes of emergence’ (Vinea, 2018, p. 54) within the overarching healing category of ‘Chinese medicine’, and how questions of ontology continue to sculpt such processes.

Wu-Wei organisers and participants co-elaborate the efficacy of the healing programme, or ‘China’s Chinese medicine’, by situating it within the recent (2017 onward) state-backed ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ revival while simultaneously distinguishing it from the state-espoused scientific materialist ‘Traditional Chinese Medicine’. In avowing forms of efficacy and influence which are only possible outside materialist causalities, my interlocutors depart from the party-state’s staunch materialist ontological commitments. Wu-Wei organisers enjoin health seekers to reconceptualise the premises of ‘health’, ‘healing’ and ‘the person’. Its healing programme pivots on a conception of the person as necessarily responsible and capable of health maintenance through autogenous strengthening, which is widely embraced by its followers. There is no clean alliance with or resistance against party-state directives in the Wu-Wei context; instead, discursive affinities and ontological divergences continually exert pressure on one another. While this may be easily explained away as an epiphenomenon of party-state power, which is often analytically construed as totalising and implicitly one-dimensional, I argue for a more complex analysis, within which the Wu-Wei tension is irreducible to this party-state power. Instead, the ambiguous discursive locations of the Wu-Wei healing programme instantiate a mode of multifaceted citizen-state interrelation in contemporary China. I call this interrelation citizen-state cooptation.

I borrow the notion ‘coopetition’ from contemporary management studies, where it designates the simultaneous pursuit of cooperation and competition at inter-organisational or intra-organisational levels. Coopetitive relations, according to a number of theorists, are marked as much by actors’ interdependencies as by pervasive tension (Dagnino and Rocco, 2009; Walley, 2007; Raza-Ullah et al., 2014). By invoking coopetition, I assume several basic conceptions regarding the PRC political order. I posit that a) no mode of political control is absolute; b) that party-state and grassroots actors are both involved in an identifiable, albeit vastly unequal, bureaucratic organisation; c) this bureaucratic organisation sustains an aspirational project that recruits every citizen-subject – ongoing PRC state-building and quest for national rejuvenation; and that d) these actors exhibit a certain degree of interdependency – that is, in governing and in being governed. Insofar as these postulations hold some validity, I consider coopetition a useful analytic operator to decipher the PRC context. It shifts the perspective from a zero-sum game of dominance-resistance to a more open-ended and unstable terrain of cooperation-competition. I suggest, moreover, coopetition has been visible in the sphere of health and healing beyond the ethnography at hand.

As I elaborate below, the Wu-Wei healing programme shares genealogical and practical affinities with *qigong*, an earlier popular healing regimen with explicit non-materialist ontological underpinnings. *Qigong* was influential at the party-state and grassroots levels during a large part of the PRC’s history until it became fertile ground for breeding moral-political dissent. Both the Wu-Wei ethnography and the more well-known story of *qigong* elucidate ways in which citizen-state coopetition unfolds in contemporary China. Considerable ambiguity in recent key CCP directives has often allowed grassroots and state actors to coalesce, contingently and productively, on a practical level; this is despite those actors occupying disparate structural positions and upholding divergent ontological commitments. In what follows, I uncover the tensions and paradoxes inhering in the citizen-state coopetition that unfolds in health and healing. I especially highlight how the party-state both depends on and is threatened by local formations of healing regimes, and how grassroots actors appropriate favourable party-state directives while being threatened by such manoeuvres. The analytic of citizen-state coopetition has conceptual worth beyond the specific context of alternative healing and *xinxiang* in the PRC. It points more generally to possibilities of analytically accentuating local processes of conceptual and discursive formations, which are often lodged within hegemonic processes, and yet subtly depart from them.

As we shall see, the Wu-Wei healing programme is situated complexly within the discursive fields of 'Chinese medicine' and 'Chinese Traditional Culture'; locating it requires a review of the sociohistorical 'processes of emergence', through which both fields gained salience as hegemonic discursive formations. Significantly, despite working at the intersection of these two discursive fields inaugurated by the party-state, the Wu-Wei programme operates on a different ontological plane to the party-state. The CCP follows a positivist materialist blueprint; they take up forms of traditional healing insofar as these practices can be validated by materialist science, and elements of traditional culture insofar as these promise a moral pathway towards national rejuvenation. The Wu-Wei School, in contrast, follows a non-materialist blueprint in the murkier territory of the two overlapping hegemonic discursive fields; they engage with health theory and healing practices insofar as these sustain a particular view of socio-somatic integrity, rooted in autochthonous cosmologies wherein the same cosmic patterns are seen as recurring at progressively diminished scales, synchronically connected via the non-materialist mode of influence known as resonance. As such, party-state and grassroots actors collaborate to animate these discursive fields, but also compete to define the ontological significance of these hegemonic formations.

To set the scene for an analysis of the intricate citizen-state cooptation, I first delineate the overlapping discursive fields of 'Chinese medicine' and 'Chinese Traditional Culture'. It is at the intersection of these two discursive fields where both the Wu-Wei 'China's Chinese medicine' and the CCP-espoused 'Traditional Chinese Medicine' derive legitimacy and persuasiveness, all the while engaging in the extended dispute on the ontological level.

2.1 The Discursive Field of ‘Chinese Medicine’: Analogism versus Naturalism

The PRC has a centralised healthcare system, which currently operates a ‘three-road’ (*san dao lu* 三道路) medical policy sanctioning the institutions of:

- 1) Western Medicine or biomedicine (*xi yi* 西医, hereinafter WM);
- 2) Traditional Chinese Medicine (*zhong yi* 中医, hereinafter TCM); and
- 3) integrated TCM-WM medicine (*zhong xi yi jie he* 中西医结合) (Unschuld, 2010, pp. 261-262; Scheid, 2002, pp. 82-84).

In this trichotomous system, Traditional Chinese Medicine⁹⁷ was born from the party-state’s effort, in the early decades of the PRC, to consolidate and scientise China’s medical heritages into a standard knowledge-practice system. As medical historian Kim Taylor (2011) compellingly demonstrates, rather than an organically formed domain of traditional therapeutic activities, TCM is the *new* state medicine of Communist China, with a nationalised training system, curriculum, and research institution.

The CCP-orchestrated reconfiguration of variegated traditional medicines into TCM was motivated by a desire to render these autochthonous knowledge-praxes legible to the dominant validating structures of modernity – specifically, those of materialist science (see Scheid, 2002, pp. 65-106). The modern, scientific TCM was to metonymise a modern, scientific Chinese nationhood under the aegis of the party-state. In addition to the CCP’s modernist aspirations, in the early decades of the PRC, the processes of emergence of TCM were also underpinned by an urgent need to produce a large number of ‘doctors’ quickly and at minimal cost, to reinvigorate and expand a public health infrastructure shattered by successive wars (*ibid.*). Thus scientised, TCM selectively preserves technologies and concepts from healing activities practiced in pre-modern China, but systematically removes the non-materialist metaphysical content which once supported the efficacy and legitimacy of these healing activities (Farquhar 1994, p. 16; Hsu, 1999).

Despite exalting China’s ancient medical traditions, TCM derives validation from imported materialist sciences as opposed to native non-materialist pre-modern medical theories. In contrast, the Wu-Wei School regimen recovers the non-materialist underpinnings of earlier forms of indigenous healing, thus departing ontologically from the state-espoused TCM. To delineate the

⁹⁷ The official English appellation of ‘Traditional Chinese Medicine’ was first invoked in the Chinese Medical Journal in 1955; and TCM was comprehensively incorporated into China’s primary healthcare system by 1963. (Taylor, 2011, pp. 151-153).

ontological differences between these two formations of ‘Chinese medicine’, I draw on Descola’s work investigating ontological variations cross-culturally and cross-historically.

In *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Descola sets forth a metatheory of four fundamental ontologies, organised by whether human ‘interiority’ (minds, effectively) and ‘physicality’ (bodies, effectively) are seen as shared with, or distinct from, other beings. Using these criteria, Descola delineates the four archetypal systems:

- a) Animism (shared minds, distinct bodies);
- b) Totemism (shared minds, shared bodies);
- c) Naturalism (distinct minds, shared bodies); and
- d) Analogism (distinct minds, distinct bodies) (2013, pp. 110-122).

Descola’s articulation of Naturalism and Analogism is crucial to my arguments in this chapter. In his account, Naturalism is epitomised in material sciences and informs the dominant mode of understanding human-world relations in contemporary Western industrial societies; Analogism is characteristic of prevailing cosmologies found in pre-modern China and Medieval to Renaissance Europe, among others. In this latter mode of comprehending human-world relations, humans possess distinctive minds and bodies, but are subject to the same set of forces operating across all levels of existence. In the ‘dizzying’ and ‘elusive’ worlds structured by Analogical ontologies, order is introduced through links of resemblance which construct meaningful pathways of association (2013, pp. 201-206).

The Wu-Wei School *xiuxing* regimen and healing programme are underpinned by the Analogical Mode of understanding human-world relations; they explicitly reject the materialist pathway of association, or physical causality, in favour of a non-materialist pathway of association, or metaphysical resonance (see section one). In contrast, TCM (which continues to dominate ‘Chinese medicine’ in the PRC) is underpinned by what I call a ‘Naturalist reinscription’ of healing practices that were once grounded in the Analogical Mode of understanding human-world relations. I use the concept of ‘reinscription’ in accordance with Chandler and Munday’s definition (2011), which denotes the ‘re-establishment of an existing concept in a different form from its conventional one’. Naturalist reinscription is far from an isolated process in the creation of TCM in the PRC; according to Descola, similar processes have been integral to the ascendancy of scientific materialism as the prevailing mode of organising human-world relations in Europe and beyond. In the European context, the changing ontological valences of theories associated with

‘the Great Chain of Being’ aptly illustrates the Naturalist reinscription of explanatory frameworks once grounded in Analogism (2013, pp. 201-206).

The ‘Great Chain of Being’, as a prevalent mode of indexing human-world relations, held sway from Classical Antiquity through to the Enlightenment. From Aristotle’s *Scala Naturae* to Medieval Scholastic theological reformulations, variabilities notwithstanding, theories associated with the ‘Great Chain of Being’ identify a continuous chain hierarchically linking together individually-existing entities with *distinct* bodies and minds. However, in Descola’s account, from the early seventeenth century onward the ontological valences of this corpus of theories became subject to a fundamental change. Instigated by advancements in material sciences, the insistence upon distinctions between entities on the chain was gradually displaced by a recognition of the ‘material continuity between existing beings’ (2013, p.204). As such, Descola observes,

the scale of beings gradually lost its analogical dimension and soon was employed only as a familiar metaphor in the service of naturalist ontology. It was a handy formulation of the principle of the continuity of physicalities that the knowing subject probably needed in order to affirm the uniqueness of his mind without doubt or remorse (ibid.).

In the context of China, I argue, a comparable process – a Naturalist reinscription of theory-practices grounded in an earlier Analogical ontology – has gone together with diverse modernisation projects since the late nineteenth century and continuing well into the present. This effort was epitomised by the CCP-led consolidation of Chinese medical traditions (previously grounded in an Analogical ontology) into the positivist, materialist TCM, ordered by materialist science instead of non-materialist resonance and association.⁹⁸ However, as Analogism permeates China’s social fabric, a forceful Naturalist reinscription of previously Analogically organised healing praxes has engendered complex and ambivalent feelings among the people I spoke to at the Wu-Wei School. The organisers and health seekers coalescing around this small grassroots-level organisation work to address their often inarticulable and yet ineluctable senses of ontological dislocation. As I detail below, in a striking move of cooptation, my interlocutors set out to reinscribe forms of healing theories and practices with earlier Analogical valences. Crucially, they do so by engaging in a second discursive field (interlocked with ‘Chinese medicine’) which recently gained hegemonic significance: ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’.

⁹⁸ Scientific materialist commitments also fundamentally underpinned the processes of emergence of the discursive field ‘religion’ (*zongjiao* 宗教). See Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Van der Veer 2013 for detailed discussions.

2.2 The Discursive Field of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’: Coopetition and Interdependence

As I have detailed the discursive field of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ in chapter one (see section 4.1), I shall only briefly revisit some of the key points. Despite the CCP’s founding anti-traditionalism, the party-state has intensified the discursive mobilisation of selected forms of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ (hereinafter CTC) since Xi Jinping’s ascendancy in 2012. This culminated in the 2017 State Council directive for ‘Implementing the Project for Inheritance and Development of Fine Chinese Traditional Culture’. Significantly, in a recent official anthology entitled the *Governance of China*, Xi predicates the twinned political agendas of the ‘Two Centenary Goals’ and the ‘Chinese Dream of Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ upon what he terms the ‘strengthening of the cultural soft power of the nation’ (Xi, 2014a, p.403). Moreover, according to the Chinese President, China’s ‘cultural soft power’ can only be elevated through the comprehensive inculcation of the newly formulated (2012) ‘core socialist values’, which ‘carry forward (*chuan cheng* 传承) and sublimate (*sheng hua* 升华) China’s outstanding traditional culture’ (Xi, 2014b, p. 171).

By aligning ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ with the party-state’s governing directives, Xi appears to profess a radical revision of the CCP’s founding politico-cum-moral vision, which had vehemently denounced all things traditional. However, Xi’s mobilisation of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ retains a subtle yet crucial qualification: ‘outstanding (*you xiu* 优秀)’, alternatively rendered into English as ‘fine’. Across Xi’s speech and writings, there is hardly any mention of CTC without this qualifier. Despite adopting a highly circumscribed approach, however, the party-state effectively legitimated the discursive field of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’; actors in diverse structural locations can operate and indeed coopete with the party-state over what constitutes authoritative and authentic CTC, ontologically and otherwise.

The Wu-Wei organisers and adherents consciously subscribe to this nationwide CTC renewal. The organisation professes a threefold mission:

- 4) to provide ‘positive energy’ (*zheng neng liang* 正能量) for the realisation of the ‘Chinese Dream’;
- 5) to relocate traditional knowledge and practices from temples to classrooms; and
- 6) to enable national learning to return to the space of the ordinary people (*minjian* 民间).

These statements adumbrate a form of grassroots revivalist nationalism in step with Xi-era governance priorities, with both assigning a privileged place for ‘Traditional Chinese Culture’. Nevertheless, this discursive entanglement belies the divergent ontological commitments that structure the Wu-Wei project and the party-state led CTC revival. These divergences are thrown into sharp relief in the Wu-Wei healing encounters, to which I turn in the following pages.

However, just as it is imprudent to see the Wu-Wei network as deploying CTC in the same vein as the party-state, it would be equally inapposite to see the Wu-Wei use of CTC as a form of resistance enacted against the injunctions of the party-state. The complex citizen-state interrelation instantiated in the Wu-Wei context, I argue, is better captured by the analytic of *citizen-state coopetition*. In coopetition, party-state and grassroots actors with competing interests collaborate with one another to sustain the vitality of shared discursive fields (e.g. ‘Chinese medicine’ and ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’); despite occupying disparate structural positions and upholding divergent ontological commitments, the success of each agenda is predicated on the existence of the other. In this case, the success of the Wu-Wei project (to propagate a *xiuxing* regimen and healing programme founded in pre-modern Analogical ontology) hinges upon the party-state’s rehabilitation of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ as a sanctioned discursive space and its continued endorsement of ‘Chinese medicine’ as a legitimate domain of healing practices. Meanwhile, the success of the party-state’s recent project (to recover the previously-denounced CTC for political legitimation and citizen reform, with the ultimate goal of national rejuvenation⁹⁹) depends upon citizen-subjects’ recognition and adoption of CTC as a meaningful arena of social action.¹⁰⁰

Despite their divergent interests and disparate positionalities, grassroots and state actors competitively produce ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ as an operable discursive field, while maintaining its productive polyvalence. Nevertheless, as is true of any form of citizen-state engagement, coopetition in the PRC is an inherently asymmetrical interrelation. The rules of competition are, unsurprisingly, always written by the party-state. As can be seen in management studies, cooperative interrelations are marked by sustained tension (see Raza-Ullah et al., 2014); in

⁹⁹ Enshrined in the ‘Two Centenary Goals’ formulated at the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012, which involve 1) ‘the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects by the centenary of the CCP (founded in 1921)’ and 2) the building of a ‘modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious by the centenary of the PRC (founded in 1949)’ (Xi, 2014b, p. 153).

¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the party-state’s former project (to consolidate and scientise China’s medical heritages into a standard knowledge-practice system to meet the pressure of public health services) relied on the acknowledgement of citizen-subjects – both from the contemporaneous medical establishment and health seekers – of the validity and efficacy of indigenous medical heritages, and a willingness to work towards the formation of the new state-supervised TCM. See Scheid (2002) for a nuanced analysis.

the context of citizen-state coopetition in the PRC, this tension is accompanied by palpable peril, not only for the citizen-subjects but also for the party-state. In the final section, I bring the Wu-Wei story in dialogue with *qigong*: an earlier popular health regimen, consolidated and propagated by the CCP in ways that may be understood as creating an uncanny doppelgänger of the scientific TCM. By drawing out the affinities that the Wu-Wei healing programme and *qigong* share, I shall illustrate the promise and peril of coopetition in the PRC.

3 How ‘Traditional Culture’ Heals: The Discursive and Practical Formation of Wu-Wei’s ‘China’s Chinese Medicine’

3.1 The Discursive Construction of Wu-Wei Healing’s Validity: Self-Reliant Sensibilities

At the two retreat facilities and during my visits across five cities to adherents’ homes, I encountered Wu-Wei followers from varying socioeconomic and education backgrounds. These interlocutors, however, concurred that the *xiuxing* regimen, underpinned by what they called ‘Traditional Culture’, was a highly effective mechanism for improving health and treating diseases. Wu-Wei organisers and participants consider the network as offering a pathway towards health that differs from the ‘medical care outside’ (*wai mian de yi liao* 外面的医疗). These perspectives are frequently articulated in relation to negative experiences within the trichotomous state healthcare system. Yin-Xian’s assistant-disciples, Fu-Yi and Bo-Ya, both in their late twenties, shared in their desire to learn the Wu-Wei healing practice as the main motivation for undertaking a three-year unpaid discipleship. Fu-Yi started her discipleship in November 2017, shortly after her father-in-law had passed away in a public hospital due to cancer, an experience that traumatised the entire family. One evening in December 2017, squatting around the induction cooker waiting for jujube tea to boil, Fu-Yi and I chatted about her recent experience of loss. Usually gentle and soft spoken, on this occasion Fu-Yi uttered her words in an air of rage mixed with repugnance:

My father-in-law’s sickness was handled so badly, especially towards the end. The doctors didn’t care about his person (*bu guan ta de ren* 不管他的人). They just cared about his illness (*zhi guan ta de bing* 只管他的病). After this, I don’t think I will ever set foot in a public hospital again. I decided to become a non-medicalisation-ist (*bu jiu yi zhu yi zhe* 不就医主义者).

Fu-Yi continued to explain that seeing the inefficiency and impersonality of public hospitals strengthened her commitment to three years of assistant-discipleship with Yin-Xian, with a focus on learning the ‘Daoist medicine component’ (*dao yi ban kuai* 道医板块). Bo-Ya, on the other hand, came to the network hoping to find alternative treatment for her parents, both of whom suffer from severe vision impairment. ‘No one at the public hospitals (*gong li yi yuan* 公立医院) at my hometown can be bothered with their problem.’ Bo-Ya remarked when we first met in December 2017:

‘Theirs is an intractable illness (*yi nan za zheng* 疑难杂症). Plus, there’s no money to be made.

You and I both know that doctors have their limits. Whether it will cure my parents or not,

I want to give our traditions a go (*shi shi wo men de chuan tong* 试试我们的传统).

Both assistant-disciples’ testimonies underscore a perceived lack of person-centred care in their experiences of public hospital healthcare. Their antagonism towards state health institutions instigated the two young women to explore ‘Daoist medicine’ and ‘traditions’ via the Wu-Wei School, with a view of becoming healers themselves. Among non-disciple followers, there exists a parallel narrative of self-responsibilisation over health management.

Tian-Yi, a freelance accountant in his early fifties who has suffered from ankylosing spondylitis since adolescence,¹⁰¹ found great confidence in the Wu-Wei healing practice after having explored many forms of alternative treatments. He remarked during a phone conversation in June 2018:

Master Yin-Xian does not look at [physical] illnesses (*bu kan bing* 不看病). He looks at illnesses of the heart (*kan xin bing* 看心病). But, of course, for a healer (*yi zhe* 医者), the highest state of attainment (*jing jie* 境界) is to condition and cultivate the constitution and the destiny (*tiao yang xing ming* 调养性命) rather than treating the [physical] illnesses. [...] Master Yin-Xian represents the summit in national learning (*guo xue zhi dian* 国学之巅). Many so-called Chinese doctors (*suo wei de zhong yi* 所谓的中医) simply can’t compare to him.

At the time of the conversation, Tian-Yi was receiving parallel treatment at an integrated TCM-WM clinic close to his home city in South China. There, he received localised injection of a traditional Chinese patent medicine (TCPM)¹⁰² along the spine, combined with TCPM intravenous

¹⁰¹ Ankylosing spondylitis (*qiang zhi xing ji zhu yan* 强直性脊柱炎) is a form of arthritis that causes chronic inflammation of the vertebrae and can lead to severe chronic pain (source: <https://www.spondylitis.org/Ankylosing-Spondylitis>).

¹⁰² TCPM (*zhong cheng yao* 中成药) refers to standardised herbal medicine extractions used in the state-supervised medical system.

infusion and TCPM oral medicine. Tian-Yi was explicit about the ways in which these interventions constituted a short-term fix rather than long-term solution:

The injections I receive at the clinic are effective for controlling the symptoms (*kong zhi zheng zhuang* 控制症状). But they cannot eliminate the root [of the disease] (*bu qu gen* 不去根). Practising the [Wu-Wei] regimen (*lian gong* 练功) is to self-strengthen the body (*shen ti zi qiang* 身体自强). This to me is for long-term recovery [...] The School provides a way for simultaneously ameliorating the constitution and the destiny (*xing ming shuang xiu* 性命双修).

In these testimonies, Tian-Yi enunciates several conceptual differentiations that show a clear preference for the Wu-Wei healing programme. Notably, he associates Yin-Xian with the native category of ‘healer’, explicitly ranking Yin-Xian above the ‘so-called Chinese doctors’. The distinction between ‘healers’ and ‘doctors’ cuts across my interlocutors’ accounts, with the latter category endowed with uncertain if not outright negative moral evaluations. I shall return to this point in the next section. As we have seen, Tian-Yi insinuates that his chronic illness amounts to an ‘ailment of the heart’, which most medical practitioners in the PRC (including those who practise standardised TCM and integrated medicine) fail to address. While he resorts to exogenous interventions such as injection of TCPM to ‘control the symptoms’, Tian-Yi seeks the elimination of the root cause by ‘self-strengthening the body’ via practising the *xiuxing* regimen.

Tian-Yi’s characterisation of the Wu-Wei School as providing a way for ‘simultaneously ameliorating the constitution and the destiny’ invokes an enduring evaluative regime traceable to China’s oldest existing text on herbal medicine. Originated in Han Dynasty and later consolidated by the Daoist scholar, alchemist, and pharmacologist Tao Hongjing (陶弘景 456-536 CE), the *Divine Farmer’s Materia Medica* (*shen nong ben cao jing* 神农本草经) sets forth a three-tiered hierarchy of herbal medicines (Jarrett, 2006, p. 19). The upper class of medicines ‘governed the nourishment of destiny’ (*zhu yang ming* 主养命), the middle class of medicines ‘governed the nourishment of inherent nature of constitution’ (*zhu yang xing* 主养性), and the lowest class ‘governed the treatment of physical illness’ (*zhu zhi bing* 主治病) (ibid.). To Tian-Yi and many other Wu-Wei adherents, the healthcare options available in their immediate social environments (whether via public hospitals or private clinics) are primarily concerned with physical illnesses, and thus constitute the lowest class of medicine. Such an evaluation is applied to the state supervised ‘three-road system’ of WM, TCM and integrated medicines. Consider this vivid account given by Xiao-Xu, a 30-year-old professional working for a large finance firm in Jiangsu Province:

Western Medicine feels ice-cold (*bing leng* 冰冷) to me. It uses metals to cut through (*qie ge* 切割) your body. It uses medical substances to mask (*zhe gai* 遮盖) your symptoms. But it never seeks to trace the origin of your illness. It has its existential value (*cun zai jia zhi* 存在价值) in treating trauma and acute illnesses. But I rely on Chinese medicine and *xiuxing* to self-remediate (*zi wo xiu fu* 自我修复). (Excerpt from interview conducted in November 2018)

Notably, while Xiao-Xu draws a line between the ‘ice-cold’ WM that ‘uses metals to cut through’ the body and ‘medical substances to mask’ the symptoms on the one hand, and ‘Chinese medicine and *xiuxing*’ on the other, seemingly leaving uncommented her valorisation of different formations of Chinese medicine, the conjunction of ‘Chinese medicine’ with ‘*xiuxing*’ subtly qualifies her statement to denote preference for a particular mode of ‘Chinese medicine’, one which privileges role of the self in health and healing. Whether in ‘self-remediation’ or ‘self-strengthening the body’, both Xiao-Xu and Tian-Yi construe their selves (*zi wo* 自我) as leading actors in the process of achieving desired health effects on the physical level. Likewise, adherents suffering from (biomedically diagnosed) psychological illnesses and (self-identified or diagnosed by Chinese or alternative medicine practitioners) psycho-somatic illnesses articulate a similar process of self-responsibilisation over their health management.

An entrepreneur in his early thirties and owner of a construction equipment manufacturing company in Hubei Province, Yan-Hua has been a follower of Yin-Xian since 2014, three years before the master decided to establish a *xiuxing* school. That year, Yan-Hua was diagnosed with clinical depression (*yi yu zheng* 抑郁症). He soon felt the limits of the WM treatments prescribed to him:

I was very young when I was diagnosed with clinical depression at a public hospital. I did not think that Western Medicine could cure depression simply with pills. Initially I did try to take the medication prescribed to me, but it had little effect. I then decided to change myself through my own efforts (*zi ji gai bian zi ji* 改变自己). I had a cousin who knew of master Yin-Xian and connected us. I then started healing myself by way of learning traditional culture (*tong guo xue xi chuan tong wen hua lai zhi liao zi ji* 通过学习传统文化来治疗自己).

Yan-Hua concentrated his efforts in learning sitting meditation. In the Wu-Wei five-pronged *xiuxing* regimen, sitting meditation corresponds with the metaphysical entity of Earth Phase. The asynchrony between the human entity and the abstractly existing metaphysical Earth Phase is considered to engender an abnormal amount of anxiety. Yan-Hua recalled that treating depression with sitting meditation required a good deal of perseverance (*jian chi* 坚持). In November 2018, at the time of this interview at the Wu-Dang retreat centre, Yan-Hua said that he had practised sitting meditation almost every day for more than four years. In the first year, his ‘perceived experiences’ (*gan shou* 感受) didn’t change much. However, starting from the second year, he began to sense ‘veritable happiness and ease’ (*zhen qie de kuai le he qing song* 真切的快乐和轻松) arising from each practice. Yan-Hua was convinced he had lifted himself out of clinical depression through *xiuxing*. He furthermore urged all his family members to learn sitting meditation for health maintenance and sent his sister Yan-Yan to the Wu-Dang retreat centre in the hope that Yin-Xian would guide her in recuperating from a complex set of illnesses (see introduction).

‘I trust our progenitors more than those imported medical treatments’¹⁰³, Yan-Hua wrapped up our conversation with a memorable phrase.

In January 2019, when Yin-Xian and his assistant-disciples relocated to the Lu-Gu Lake retreat centre, they were immediately greeted by villagers complaining of a multitudinous assortment of chronic discomforts. A few days a week, after dinner at Yin-Xian’s adoptive Na family house, the Wu-Wei team received health seekers against a backdrop of boisterous variety shows and soap operas. I quickly learnt that Yin-Xian and his assistants were known locally as the ‘big brother who treats illness by pinching and his students’ (*qia ren zhi bing de da ge he ta de xue sheng men* 掐人治病的大哥和他的学生们). The visitors, in the hope of receiving the ‘pinching’ therapy, usually brought gifts of food, such as boxes of milk, a few kilograms of fruits, or a large bag of baked goods. Yin-Xian and students always obliged and administered Finger Needle Therapy free of charge for a few days in a row, while characteristically enjoining the recipient to undertake the Wu-Wei regimen (especially the sitting meditation component) as a ‘long term strategy’. Before each session, moreover, each recipient was required to practise sitting meditation in a corner of the living room for ‘as long as they could’. Yin-Xian insisted that the therapy would be a ‘waste of time’ without this preliminary step.

¹⁰³ The original: ‘*bi qi zhe xie bo lai de yi liao, wo geng xin ren wo men de lao zu zong* 比起那些舶来的医疗, 我更信任我们的老祖宗’.

Photo removed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

Figure 13: Recipients of the Finger Needle Therapy practising sitting meditation in a corner of the living room before treatment

To Na-Zha, a guesthouse-owner in her fifties with a thirty-year headache history and a mild brain atrophy diagnosis, Yin-Xian advised – once again – that her ‘only way out’ (*wei yi de chu lu* 唯一的出路) was sitting meditation. This time, unusually, Yin-Xian provided a bit more explanation:

Sitting meditation, Na-Zha, your only way out is sitting meditation. As you continue to practise sitting meditation, you will sense a stream of qi (*yi gu qi* 一股气) surging up your spine. This can clear a lot of blockage (*yu du* 淤堵). You must keep practising every day, the longer a session the better. The pinching has very little effects (*qia de zuo yong ben xiao* 掐的作用很小). Do not blindly believe in doctors (*bu yao mi xin yi sheng* 不要迷信医生). I’m not a doctor, but I am confident you can get better. You must be prepared for the long run. Practise for a year or two to see how your body responds. You’ve been having this headache for thirty years. It is eligible for retirement after such a long career!

Na-Zha nodded in agreement, while those sitting around the living room murmured, ‘That’s right.’

In this lakeside village, there is a palpable lack of reliable medical care. The closest public hospital, which Fang-Hua calls a ‘mediocre hospital that specialises in sending people to larger hospitals elsewhere’, is at least two hours’ drive away. In this context, residents such as Na-Zha are persuaded by the suggestion to ‘not blindly believe in doctors’. However, we have seen similar views among Wu-Wei participants such as Tian-Yi, Xiao-Xu, and Yan-Hua, who live in urban areas with access to a variety of medical care options. This sensibility evokes the self-reliant medical belief propagated in the early years of the PRC, epitomised in the CCP-led invented tradition of *qigong*. I shall return to this point in the final section. In what follows, with the help of an important seminar given by Yin-Xian, I describe the internal logic of the Wu-Wei healing programme, which entails a re-conception of the premise of health and the person on the ontological level.

3.2 The Theoretical Foundations of Wu-Wei’s ‘China’s Chinese Medicine’

An early spring afternoon in March 2019, the Lu-Gu Lake retreat centre was rather quiet, the only people present were the Na family, four assistant-teachers, two long-term adherents and me. Having dealt with a flurry of local villagers complaining of manifold chronic illnesses in the recent weeks, Yin-Xian decided to give the assistant-teachers a theoretical refresher. In this seminar, he revealed three crucial dimensions of the Wu-Wei health theory and healing programme:

- 1) The maintenance and restoration of health transcend the material level. They entail working towards restoring a person’s pre-natal state of complete attunement with the dynamic balance between the Five Phases (understood as metaphysical entities whose interrelation affects the physical body), rather than direct alteration of the physical body.
- 2) The Finger Needle Therapy entails a healer’s communication with aetiological factors blocking the *qi* channels (with both *qi* channels and blocking factors understood as non-material entities) via resonance. This exogenous intervention is secondary to embodied *xinxing*, which constitutes an autogenous mechanism for attaining progressively improved functional balance across distinct though interrelated scales that together comprise human existence.

- 3) Given the primacy of embodied *xiuxing*, health seekers are responsabilised to be the primary actors leading their recovery.

Yin-Xian began the seminar by triangulating three forms of medicines through an unusual trichotomy: ‘Western Medicine’ (*xi yi* 西医), ‘China’s Chinese Medicine’ (*zhong guo de zhong yi* 中国的中医), and ‘the so-called Chinese Medicine’ (*suo wei de zhong yi* 所谓的中医):

People nowadays see Chinese Medicine from the perspective of Western Medicine (*xian zai ren men cong xi yi de jiao du kan zhong yi* 现在人们从西医的角度看中医); that is, from concrete to concrete (*cong ju ti dao ju ti* 从具体到具体). People want to know what bacteria or virus caused an illness, and what kind of medical substance kills those bacteria or virus. Nowadays, even the so-called acupuncture is concerned with treating specific diseases by stimulating specific acupoints. Unfortunately, I’m afraid that these are misconceptions. Chinese Medicine is not as simple as this. These ways of thinking depart from [one form of] Yin to arrive at [another form of] Yin (*cong yin dao yin* 从阴到阴). They cannot represent China’s Chinese Medicine (*zhong guo de zhong yi* 中国的中医). China’s Chinese Medicine is concerned with the interaction and harmonisation of Yin and Yang. This is lost in the so-called Chinese Medicine (*suo wei de zhong yi* 所谓的中医).

For instance, electro-acupuncture (*dian zhen liao fa* 电针疗法) has been invented. It is much more precise than our hands in locating acupoints on the body. The stimulation can be controlled to the finest degree. But is it more effective? I think not. It [electro-acupuncture] is informed by the same idea behind how Western Medicine treats tumours—finding a tumour in the body and removing it. For both, the healing rests on the bodily level (*shen ti ceng mian* 身体层面) and is concerned with symptoms (*guan hu zheng zhuang* 关乎症状). This form of healing can be effective, but it is not China’s Chinese Medicine, and it is relatively limited.

In this elusive and densely laden statement, Yin-Xian identifies a prevalent medical misconception, which concerns ‘seeing Chinese medicine from the perspective of Western medicine’. He attributes the crux of this misconception to ways of thinking about illness and healing that ‘depart from Yin to arrive at Yin’. In the Wu-Wei Analogical reasoning, the Yin-Yang pair is used to designate innumerable dyads with contrasting and yet complementary properties; the most fundamental of these dyads is the tangible world of material entities (associated with Yin) versus the intangible world of non-material entities (associated with Yang). Through invoking the

Yin-Yang dyad, Yin-Xian laments how the ‘so-called Chinese Medicine’ (e.g. the electro-acupuncture in state-authorised TCM) collapses the intricate interaction between non-material entities (e.g. the Five Phases) and material entities (e.g. the physical body) into a flattened chain of materialist causality. The TCM materialist view of health, premised on the interrelation between physical stimulation and somatic response, betrays the analogical logic which underpins what Yin-Xian considers to be ‘China’s Chinese Medicine’.

Remarkably, Yin-Xian’s critique of the ‘so-called Chinese Medicine’ resonates with wider anthropological critique of the biomedicalisation of ethnomedicines. Across Asian contexts, medical anthropologists have documented the ways in which a nominal synthesis between biomedicine and ethnomedicines consistently results in the subordination of selected ethnomedical praxes under an overarching biomedical diagnostic logic and treatment protocol (e.g. Adams and Li, 2008; Janes, 1995; Lock, 1990). In China, the theoretical framework of state-consolidated TCM is equally founded on the logic of biomedicine and its material science underpinnings (see Scheid, 2002, pp. 73, 88-96). In an ethnographic study of the transmission of Chinese medical knowledge-practices, Elizabeth Hsu identifies a systematic transformation of metaphysical concepts into material indices in the state TCM education (1999, p. 168). In a TCM college in Yunnan province where Hsu conducted fieldwork, the Five Phases are reinterpreted as referents of five anatomical organs – the heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys. The dynamic chain of resemblance and the indigenous modality of influence known as resonance are nowhere to be found in this scientised take on ancient Chinese medical theory. Hsu concludes, ‘By replacing the notion of the Five Phases (*wu xing* 五行) with that of Five Organs (*wu zang* 五脏), the focus of attention shifts from a preoccupation with change to one with matter’ (1999, p. 202). Such a shift of attention, in my view, has entailed a reinscription of the emic concept of Five Phases – originally grounded in an Analogical ontology – with a Naturalist-materialist valence. This Naturalist reinscription effectively dissolves the non-materialist logic central to pre-modern medical traditions, along with the earlier mode of comprehending the origin of illness and the entailments of healing. Without using the same conceptual scaffolding as medical anthropologists, Yin-Xian nonetheless pinpoints the ontological distinction between what he holds as ‘China’s Chinese Medicine’, founded in Analogism, and the ‘so-called Chinese Medicine’, by which he means the scientised, materialised TCM reinscribed with Naturalism.

Operating in the discursive fields of ‘Chinese medicine’ and ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’, but upholding an Analogical ontology, Wu-Wei healers deem their healing intervention as

secondary to autogenous amelioration through *xiuxing*. In the same seminar, Yin-Xian described the ways in which the Finger Needle Therapy constituted a form of information exchange, rather than a physical intervention to causally generate somatic results:

Healing in our tradition can be summarised thusly: to transmit your relatively harmonious information to the recipient in exchange for their relatively disharmonious information.¹⁰⁴ Such process is very demanding for the healer (*dui yi zhe de yao qiu ben gao* 对医者的要求很高). It is also a solemn process (*zhuang yan de guo cheng* 庄严的过程).

The Finger Needle Therapy is a means (*shou duan* 手段) through which you transmit your sincere intentions (*zhen yi* 真意) – the loving compassion generated in contingent situations (*sui ji qing kuang xia chan sheng de ai xin* 随机情况下产生的爱心) – to the recipient. Your fingers are the only medium through which such information of loving compassion can be transmitted. Other instruments, including moxa rolls or acupuncture needles, cannot function like fingers in transmitting your information (*xin xi* 信息) to others. For anyone to use their fingers for healing, they need to have at least some degree of *gong fu* (功夫)¹⁰⁵. The better your *gong fu*, the clearer your *qi* information, and the more adroit you will be in healing.

You can see how the precise location, the force applied, or the mechanics of the setup are not as important. What matters is the communication (*jiao liu* 交流) of your vital *qi* (*zhen qi* 真气) with the illness (*ji bing* 疾病) in the recipient's body. You must persuade it [the illness] to leave (*quan ta zou* 劝它走). However, you can only do so much by communication. Each person needs to open their *qi* channels and harmonise their information through their own *xiuxing*. There's no other way.

As we stepped out of the seminar room, a long-term adherent could barely contain her amazement:

When I recently went to see a Chinese Medicine doctor outside (*wai mian de zhong yi* 外面的中医), he said that I suffered from *qi* deficiency (*qi bu zu* 气不足). He prescribed a bunch of TCPM pills and powders and told me to drink ginseng chicken soup. But now I see how he's got it upside down (*ben mo dao zhi* 本末倒置). Taking medicine doesn't replenish

¹⁰⁴ The original: 'ba ni xiang dui he xie de xin xi chuan gei dui fang, ba dui fang xiang dui bu he xie de xin xi shou hui lai' 把你相对和谐的信息传给对方，把对方相对不和谐的信息收回。

¹⁰⁵ In the Wu-Wei context, this polyvalent term usually denotes attainment in *xiuxing* practices.

your qi. Finger Needle [Therapy] doesn't entirely harmonise your qi either. One can only rely on oneself (*zhi neng kao zi ji* 只能靠自己)!

Normally, Yin-Xian and his assistant-disciples categorically prefer the teaching of embodied *xiuxing* and exegesis of classical texts to the elaboration of the foundation of Wu-Wei knowledge-praxis. This seminar, therefore, provides a rare glimpse into the structuring logic of the Wu-Wei healing programme and, by extension, that of the *xiuxing* regimen. The Wu-Wei project entails a thorough re-inscription of the person by adopting an Analogical logic. As the adherent articulates in her musings, the integrity of the reinscribed person does not depend on the intake of extrinsic medicinal substances or the reception of exogenous healing interventions – 'one can only rely on oneself'.

Yin-Xian's involuted statement demands further extrication. Rather than designating *qi* as a form of energy (*neng liang* 能量) in accordance with the prevailing position in TCM, Yin-Xian maintains that *qi* is a form of 'information' (*xin xi* 信息) that 'cannot be quantified' (*bu ke liang hua* 不可量化) nor 'grasped on a materialist level' (*cong wu zhi ceng mian li jie* 从物质层面理解). Hence, when Yin-Xian speaks of 'healing in our tradition' as a form of 'communication' or a form of information exchange, he means by this an interaction of the immaterial *qi* across the boundaries of the material bodies. In Yin-Xian's explication, illness stems from a disharmony in the functional balance of the immaterial *qi*, which animates the human entity. Healing depends on the restoration of the harmonious flow of *qi*. This restoration can be aided through the Finger Needle Therapy, which is a form of communication evoking the mechanism of resonance (non-causal influence from a distance). In the Finger Needle Therapy, through her 'sincere intentions' or 'loving compassion', the healer with greater *gong fu* transmits her more harmonious *qi* to the recipient suffering from the disharmony of *qi*. However, such extrinsic intervention is seen as at best limited. The most important means of restoring health is done through embodied *xiuxing*.

Herein lies the Wu-Wei healing programme's subtle but decisive departure from the state-espoused TCM. While the two formations of 'Chinese medicine' ostensibly agree on the interpretation of symptoms and identification of aetiological factors, the Wu-Wei healing practice differs from the TCM in privileging *autogenous* processes over exogenous interventions. Wu-Wei members come to see *xiuxing* activities as taking precedence over the ingestion of medical substances (biomedical and otherwise) and the reception of medical interventions (Wu-Wei and otherwise). Persistent practice of *xiuxing* is understood to have direct, fundamental, and lasting

healing impact compared to resorting to any extrinsic methods. This view is possible and persuasive only when grounded in the Analogical ontology that informs the Wu-Wei formation of ‘China’s Chinese medicine’, in contrast to the prevailing Naturalist ontology that informs (and supposedly constrains) the TCM healing practices. The Wu-Wei healing programme, in short, entails re-conceptualising the premise of health and the person in the Analogical Mode.

3.3 Schematising Citizen-State Coopetition: *Qigong* and Wu-Wei

Deploying an Analogical conception of human-world relations and a non-materialist conception of health, the Wu-Wei healing programme repurposes forms of autochthonous knowledge-practice (inextricably associated with China’s indigenous Daoist tradition) to provide an alternative pathway towards socio-somatic integrity. However, this grassroots organisation is far from the only group that repurposes esoteric forms of knowledge-practice embedded in China’s social fabric. Throughout the history of the PRC, a variety of state and grassroots actors have coopeted in another discursive field known as *qigong*, a popular regimen with which Wu-Wei healing shares conceptual and practical affinities. A versatile assemblage that at its core encompassed sitting meditation, calisthenics, visualisation, and breathing techniques, *qigong* as a socially productive but ontologically ambivalent category witnessed dramatic rise and fall. In what follows I briefly summarise this complex story, as the case of *qigong* provides rich material for elaborating on the analytic of citizen-state coopetition.

The History of *Qigong*

As Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer demonstrate, the putatively ‘traditional’ *qigong* is a decidedly modern category born from CCP’s quest for public health provision during the Chinese Communist Revolution (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011; Palmer 2003, 2009). Defined as ‘the art of mastering one’s breath’, *qigong* emerged in the late 1940s via CCP-led secularisation and scientisation of Daoist esoteric practices, a process that took place in a contingent search for ‘economical solutions to the lack of modern medical facilities’ (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011, pp. 119-121). Led by party cadre Liu Guizhen (刘贵珍), a CCP clinical team working in the Huabei ‘liberated area’ devised a prototypical form of *qigong* building on breathing training and standing meditation taught by Daoist folk healer Liu Duzhou (刘渡舟) (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011, p. 120; Palmer 2003, pp. 82-83). As Palmer shows, only after 1949 did *qigong* become a generally-used term in Chinese medical, scientific, and popular discourse. Since then, this single category was

progressively expanded to contain ‘all Chinese gymnastic, meditation, visualization and breathing techniques, to which, over the years, were added martial arts, performance, trance, divination, charismatic healing, and talismanic techniques, as well as the study of paranormal phenomena, UFOs, and the *Book of Changes (Yijing)*’ (Palmer 2003, p. 80).

In the 1950s, *qigong* became a formal discipline of the newly institutionalised TCM, ranked alongside pharmacology, acupuncture, and massage (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011, p. 120). During the Great Leap Forward, *qigong* saw rapid expansion, given its roots in Chinese popular culture, its scientific materialist theoretical underpinning, and its cheap and easy transmission (ibid.). Palmer observes, ‘there was a profound affinity between qigong, which aims to heal through pure mental effort, and the Great Leap Forward, which promised to propel China to utopia through the simple effect of collective willpower’ (2003, p. 84). Nevertheless, *qigong* abruptly fell from favour in 1964-1965, when architects of the Cultural Revolution decided that it epitomised ‘feudal superstition’ rather than the revolutionary moral will. Yet, since the late 1970s, *qigong* re-emerged as a viable domain of social actions, arresting the interest of grassroots-level practitioners as well as high-level CCP officials (Palmer, 2003; Liu, Xiao, 2019).

Significantly, during this second wave of ‘qigong fever’ (Palmer, 2007), this invented tradition became revamped as a marker of ‘Chinese-style modernisation’ and a discipline of ‘Somatic Science’ superior to Western material sciences (Otehode, 2009, pp. 260-261; Goossaert and Palmer, 2011, pp. 306-307). In 1982, rocket scientist and key architect of China’s nuclear weapons project, Qian Xuesen (钱学森), personally petitioned incumbent Premier Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) to authorise and underwrite the new research area of ‘Qigong Science’ (Palmer 2003, pp. 85-86). The coalescence of the Chinese scientific community and the party-state over the *qigong* project culminated in the foundation of the semi-official China Qigong Science Association in 1986, whose vision was to expand the frontier of science globally by integrating *qigong*, TCM, and material sciences under the aegis of Marxism (ibid., p. 88). Parallel to *qigong*’s elite endorsement, numerous folk *qigong* masters emerged throughout the 1980s, widely practising un-mediated charismatic healing and attracting over sixty million regular followers (Liu Xiao, 2019).

Qigong’s second surge of popularity in the 1980s, however, was overshadowed by its spectacular demise. In the 1990s, with the loosening of ideological control and the acceleration of market restructuring, this putative emblem of Chinese socialist modernity morphed into diffuse networks of popular healing and para-religious movements which progressively threatened the

state's moral-political authority. The Falungong (FLG) movement proved to be the most radical case. Originally identified by the state as a form of *qigong* healing practice, FLG (literally 'Dharma-wheel *qigong*') increasingly shifted focus to the cultivation and dissemination of moral purity, seen to be widely lacking in contemporary society (Madsen, 2000, p. 244). The movement systematically redirected participants' attention from enhancing bodily capacities to critiquing and addressing the moral corruption prevalent in post-Mao society; it thus transmuted into a highly organised, politically active network of moralising state dissidents (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011, p. 307). Compared to earlier forms of *qigong*, which promised a reconciliation of the past and the present, 'tradition' and 'modernity' in this world, FLG professed the apocalyptic end of the world and located salvation in an otherworldly paradise (Palmer, 2003, p. 100). Goaded by an idiosyncratic soteriology, FLG members became unapologetically activist and transgressive, openly combatting any party-state criticism with organised demonstrations (ibid.). FLG's periodic mass protests in front of government and other official spaces culminated in the spectacular 1999 silent protest outside Zhongnanhai, the state official compounds in the heart of Beijing, which involved over 10,000 followers (Lai, 2005, pp. 50-52). This event was perceived as a frontal assault on the CCP-instituted moral-political order and precipitated the state crackdown on FLG under the charge of 'evil cult', alongside other organised *qigong* groups (Madsen, 2000, p. 243).

Schematising Citizen-State Coopetition

Drawing on the complex citizen-state interrelations that unfolded in the now-defunct discursive field of *qigong*, and ones that continue to unfold in today's 'Chinese medicine' and 'Chinese Traditional Culture' as seen in the Wu-Wei story, I discern the following constitutive elements to what I have termed citizen-state coopetition. Given the limited ethnographic materials analysed in the space of this chapter, I must emphasise that while I think the analytic of citizen-state coopetition has conceptual worth beyond the context of health and healing in the PRC, the following elements are context-specific:

- **Inauguration:** Party-state actors identify a politically productive knowledge-practice embedded in the native social fabric, which is significantly underpinned by Analogism. This knowledge-practice is promptly reinscribed with a Naturalist materialist valence and redeployed as an emblem of Chinese modernity. In so doing, party-state actors inaugurate a (socially productive but ontologically ambivalent) discursive field in which grassroots

actors may legitimately operate. The discursive fields of ‘*qigong*’, ‘Chinese medicine’, and ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ came into being through this process.

- **Reformulation:** Grassroots actors interpret the prescriptions of the party-state and reformulate their own projects in line with the official vision, while maintaining a degree of autonomy over how they navigate the authoritatively sanctioned discursive field. Reformulation frequently culminates in departure from (and, sometimes, subversion of) party-state injunctions. In the case of *qigong*, reformulation at the grassroots level involved smuggling charismatic healing and avowedly Analogical sensibilities back into the discursive field inaugurated through a Naturalist reinscription.
- **Co-elaboration:** In the discursive fields wherein party-state and grassroots actors engage in coopetition, outright rupture is desirable to neither. This is because activities taking place in a socially productive but ontologically ambivalent arena are of instrumental value to both parties. It is in the interests of both parties to co-elaborate variegated practices, moral visions, and ontological postulates into a putatively coherent whole, despite confronting staggering internal contradictions. However, underneath an ostensibly united front, party-state and grassroots actors compete for social, political, and moral influence (often in indirect ways and through everyday processes).
- **Hermeneutic Contest:** The most crucial element of coopetition is the contestation over the interpretations of the discursive fields and the knowledge-practices contained within. In *qigong*, party-state actors variously sought to interpret *qigong* practices as indexical of the revolutionary will and ‘Somatic Science’, while some grassroots actors (FLG in particular) worked to interpret *qigong* practices as vehicles of social critique and even other-worldly salvation. Crucially, party-state and grassroots coopetitors did not dispute the validity of these practices in strengthening the physical body; they disputed *how* to interpret the efficacy of these practices harvested from the obscure past, and how such differing interpretations at the unstable present could herald drastically different futures. In this way, the hermeneutic contest often concerns matters of ontology; that is, ‘systems of the properties of existing beings’ that ‘serve as a point of reference for contrasting forms of cosmologies, models of social links, and theories of identity and alterity’ (Descola, 2013, p. 121).

- **Deal-breaker:** The limit of coopetition is challenging party-state political-moral authority. Unsurprisingly, citizen-state coopetition takes place within the threshold of permissibility defined by the party-state; grassroots actors are not to challenge the party-state as the ultimate holder of political-moral authority in the PRC. In *qigong*, once this boundary was crossed (as in the case of the FLG), the party-state dismantled the discursive field of *qigong* as a legitimate arena for social action, and citizen-state coopetition ceased to be possible therein.

The Wu-Wei School: Coda

The Wu-Wei network operates in the wake of the intense citizen-state coopetition within the discursive field of *qigong*, between the party-state with its uncompromising scientific-materialist eschatology and grassroots-level actors with their obstinate Analogical allegiances. However, in the daily experiences at the retreats, signs of the recent vicissitudes are conspicuously absent. Despite the frequent invocations of *qi* and *gong* as crucial notions, ‘*qigong*’ is never mentioned. This lacuna bewildered me for a long time, until a moment in December 2018 which offered me a rare glimpse into *qigong*’s legacy in the Wu-Wei network.

On a December afternoon in 2018, Tian-Yi and I were driving slowly in rush-hour traffic. We had paid a visit to another adherent family in his home city and were now engaged in a long discussion over the healing power of the Wu-Wei regimen. Twirling a string in my fingers, I mused out loud: ‘We’ve talked so much about *qi* in the retreat as well as here at home. Is the *xixing* people do via the School related to *qigong* at all?’

Tian-Yi gave me a meaningful glance from behind the steering wheel. ‘I’d say what we practise is exactly a form of *qigong*. But that name is now rotten (*chou le* 臭了). That’s why the Master never mentions the word. But the name doesn’t matter. What matters is the content.’

With an air of insouciance, Tian-Yi yawned and switched on the radio. Soft jazz filled the space.

Shortly after the polemic against *qigong* and the official demolition of this discursive field, in the late 1990s a new arena of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ was inaugurated. This time, the party-state focus has been a project of rhetorical moralisation, with the vagaries of ‘Somatic Science’

buried deep in the *qigong* wreckage. However, as I have argued, ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ is an equally productive and polyvalent discursive field; it is inhabited by a host of complex desires emanating from official and grassroots levels, desires which intimate divergent ontological commitments as well as political-moral visions. The Wu-Wei School, operating in the wake and in the shadow of *qigong*, carefully maintains a productive coepetition with the party-state in the newly-inaugurated discursive field of CTC. These grassroots actors do so by overtly partaking in the co-elaboration of the validity and the force of ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ (and its discursive affine of ‘Chinese medicine’), while subtly and sophisticatedly disputing *ways of interpreting* such validity and force.

Conclusion

Socio-political life in the PRC entails complex deliberation, manoeuvring, and coalescence across the levels of the party-state and the grassroots. This is what I seek to capture by *citizen-state coepetition*. Through this brief exposition on the practical and discursive formation of Wu-Wei healing, contextualised against the history of *qigong*, I hope to have demonstrated that the state-citizen interrelation in the PRC is far more intricate than what is warranted by a zero-sum game of domination and resistance.

Sweeping Naturalist reinscriptions of autochthonous Analogism have fundamentally underpinned the social realities of contemporary China. Despite the recent directive to revive ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ nationwide, the party-state continues to inscribe, index, and influence its citizen-subjects via a Naturalist ontology centred on scientific materialism. In contrast, those who are involved with the Wu-Wei School, in varied ways and to varying extents, come to mediate their relationship with the world via a non-materialist Analogical ontology—an uncanny doppelgänger to the version of CTC promoted by the party-state. While ostensibly in line with the party-state injunctions, the ways of being, living, and healing that Wu-Wei participants seek to enact are radically different on the ontological level. I have contended that, in the wake of ‘*qigong*’ and parallel to ‘Chinese medicine’, ‘Chinese Traditional Culture’ constitutes a discursive field in which the party-state and citizens engage in continued coepetition, the outcome of such complex interaction is far from certain.

In the context of contemporary China, where the citizen-subject’s desires cannot be easily extricated from the party-state’s prescriptions, the Wu-Wei ethnography sheds light on the layers

of polyphony underlying an ostensibly unified theme. As Talal Asad compellingly argues in relation to the anthropological study of Islam, any representation of tradition is contestable, inflected by and contingent upon actors' particular historical positions. The shape of such contestation, furthermore, will be determined 'not only by the powers and knowledges each side deploys, but the collective life to which they aspire—or to whose survival they are quite indifferent' (2009 [1986], p. 24). In the PRC, the collective life to which the party-state and the grassroots actors aspire is far from uniform. Drawing on rich resources from the past, through protracted and arduous competition in an unstable present, the state and citizens co-explore and co-elaborate the possibilities and impossibilities for their shared future.

Chapter Five

‘Recreational Asceticism’ via the Wu-Wei School: Ethical Strivings of the ‘Ordinary Chinese Folks’

吾生也有涯，而知也无涯。

以有涯随无涯，殆已；

已而为知者，殆而已矣。

为善无近名，为恶无近刑。

缘督以为经，可以保身，可以全生，可以养亲，可以尽年。

— 庄子 | 养生主

Life is finite, and yet learning is infinite.

Using the finite to follow the infinite is perilous.

Persevering despite having grasped this is even more perilous.

If you do good, avoid fame. If you do bad, avoid punishment.

Follow the middle way and you can protect yourself, complete your life, raise your family, and finish your years.¹⁰⁶

— *The Zhuang Zi* | Yang Sheng
Zhu

¹⁰⁶ This translation is modified from the version by Ivanhoe and Van Norden (2001, p. 224).

Introduction: Serene Imperfection?

Some recent anthropological studies of ethical life have underscored the consistently less-than-perfect outcomes of elaborate prescriptive projects for attaining ethical perfection (Beeker and Kloos, 2018; Fahy, 2017; Laidlaw, 1995; Laidlaw and Mair, 2019; Marsden, 2005; Robbins, 2004; Schielke, 2009a, 2009b; Louw, 2018).¹⁰⁷ Theorists further observe how the incomplete inhabitation of ethical ideals and the imperfect reconciliation of conflicting values engender deep pain and remorse for many ethical aspirants. Samuli Schielke, notably, articulates the aporia confronting young Egyptian men, who falter in choreographing the exigencies of religion, romantic love, respect of parents, and self-realisation (2009b, pp. 165-175). The complex ethical reasoning required to manage these incompatible commitments, Schielke notes,

is not only about making a practical decision and weighing the different elements and requirements of a situation; it is about deciding, in a moment, who you want to be [...] And yet it does not mean that the other ways of being would be then dropped in favor of the one chosen—they remain part of one’s personality and wishes, and at times they prevail [...] these are always painful decisions, and they leave people remorseful in different ways (ibid., p. 171).

Documenting Uzbek Naqshbandiyya Sufi aspirants’ struggles to re-embrace Islam in the post-Soviet society, Maria Louw echoes Schielke’s remarks on the bitterness of ethical remorse, which she captures through the notion of ‘haunting’. For Louw, haunting designates the ‘seething presence’ of alternative moral persons one could have become, or ‘the moral potential in all that which is discarded in the search for moral perfection’ (2018, p. 90). In contrast, notable among Wu-Wei School participants is the absence of such devastating emotional effects associated with the ‘haunting’ of unrealised ‘moral potential’. Instead, there is a conspicuous lack of such ‘moral torment’ (Robbins, 2004), despite members’ awareness of their conflictual desires and inability to attain the ‘union with the Dao’ through enacting the *xiuxing* regimen. What are we to make of Wu-Wei participants’ relative ease in navigating, in Louw’s words, ‘life’s insurmountable value conflicts’ (2018, p. 88)? How shall we explicate marked acceptance of these aspirants when faced with imperfect realisations of professed ethical ideals?

¹⁰⁷ A number of these arguments are formulated as a critique of Saba Mahmood’s (2005) and Charles Hirschkind’s (2006) influential work on the popular Reformist piety movements in urban Cairo, deemed having unduly emphasised the consistency and coherence of ethical experiences. I shall not rehearse this well-established critique. See Schielke (2009a; 2009b) and Laidlaw (2014, pp. 167-173) for detailed discussions.

In this chapter, I shall argue that the general lack of moral torment observed among the Wu-Wei participants stems from a distinctive mode of ethical striving, which is rooted in their ethical reasoning as ‘ordinary folks’ and mediated by the socio-political forces palpable in their life-worlds. In what follows, I analyse how those who partake in the Wu-Wei project navigate and narrativise a set of conflictual desires in the context of *xiuxing*, underscoring a common absence of moral torment when faced with inconsistencies or imperfections. I then propose the analytic of ‘recreational asceticism’ to describe their distinctive form of ethical striving. I anchor this concept in participants’ shared self-perception as ‘hobbyists’ (*ai hao zhe* 爱好者) of *xiuxing*, ‘traditional culture’ (*chuan tong wen hua* 传统文化), or ‘national studies’ (*guo xue* 国学). After delineating the vectors that structure the field of recreational asceticism, I conclude by analysing how it dovetails with what I call an emergent ‘psychologising-atomising governmentality’ in urban China. My objective is to underscore both the reflexivity and sagacity of these middle-class citizens undertaking *xiuxing* as well as the intensification and interiorisation of the party-state power at the site of the self.

1. Divided Desires: Between Escaping and Embedding

In the introduction to *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person*, Arthur Kleinman and co-authors articulate the rise of a new subjectivity,¹⁰⁸ in consonance with the party-state’s sweeping institution of ‘individualization’ as a developmental strategy since the 1980s (2011, p. 15, see also Yan, 2009a). This new ‘enterprising and desiring self’ (Kleinman et al. 2011, p. 15), seen as an autonomous social actor engaged in fierce competition and pursuing instant gratification, is nonetheless characterised by a deep dividedness. As the authors contend, the contemporary middle-class Chinese self is pulled apart by a host of ‘dividers’. Chief among these polarities are a) the self-enterprising individual *against* the loyal constituent of the party-state; and b) the ethical visionary, aspiring to forge a better society via personal efforts, *against* the burdened citizen, weighed down by workplace stress, child and elder care responsibilities, and resource scarcity (2011, p. 26). Pooling rich ethnographic evidence across urban and rural contexts, the authors suggest viewing the new moral person via an ‘anti-heroic model’ (ibid.), wherein actors’ ethical aspirations (both for the self and the larger society) are constantly reconciled with the pressures of survival.

¹⁰⁸ I follow Das and Kleinman’s definition of subjectivity as ‘the felt interior experience of the person that includes his or her positions in a field of relational power’ (2000, p. 1); the emphasis this formulation places on the embroilment of interiorities and situated socio-political environments is apposite for parsing forms of ethical striving in the context of the contemporary PRC.

The ‘dividedness’ observed by Kleinman and co-authors finds reverberations across the Wu-Wei experiences. *Xinxing* conducted via the Wu-Wei School, for both organisers and adherents, is marked by a sustained tension between desires that I describe as ‘embedding’ and ‘escaping’. As we shall see, these polarising tendencies are frequently encoded in the phrases of ‘within the system’ (*ti zhi nei* 体制内) versus ‘outside the system’ (*ti zhi wai* 体制外). Importantly, such encoding must be contextualised within the CCP’s distinctive ‘governing culture’ (Kipnis, 2008), which has long prized social reinvention via citizen-subjects’ personal reinventions. In chapter one, I argued that the CCP currently promulgates set of self-reform imperatives, through which citizen-subjects would come to embody the multiple coordinates of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’:

- high quality (*gao su zhi* 高素质) citizen bodies and conducts;¹⁰⁹
- domestic and international competitiveness;
- continued material success;
- socialist core values;¹¹⁰
- selected moral values gleaned from early Chinese thought;
- national-civilisational pride and party-loving patriotism.

The divided desires observable among the Wu-Wei participants, I suggest, arise from these middle-class citizens’ situatedness at the crossroads of two countervailing orientations:

- a) Desires to escape the normativity of contemporary Chinese society, where non-conformity to the party-state’s sociohistorical vision becomes increasingly challenging on the personal level;
- b) Desires to embed in the party-state system and partake in the normative ‘success’ set forth for citizen-subjects, where embodiment of the party-state prescription for self-reform engenders palpable benefits.

Figure 14 is a schematic representation of the interlinked spheres across which Wu-Wei members’ ‘divided desires’ unfold. A close examination of participants’ behaviours and narrativisations reveals their entanglement in a complex force field. These middle-class citizens’ seemingly self-regarding ethical pursuits are infiltrated and warped by influences from their situated social, political, and aspirational environment, their desires caught between polarising tendencies to escape and to embed.

¹⁰⁹ A discourse that binds together personal improvement, national rejuvenation, and economic development (see Anagnost 2004, 2008; Kipnis, 2006; Kuan, 2014), which I discuss in the following section.

¹¹⁰ A set of official interpretations of the morality of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ promoted at the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012. These include the national values of ‘prosperity’, ‘democracy’, ‘civility’ and ‘harmony’; the social values of ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’ and the ‘rule of law’; and the individual values of ‘patriotism’, ‘dedication’, ‘integrity’ and ‘friendship’ (Xi, 2014, p.424; Gow, 2017).



Figure 14: Divided desires observed at the Wu-Wei network (author's illustration)

1.1 Ascetic Rigour or Aesthetic Delight?

The first set of divided desires may be mapped onto the polarities of ‘asceticism’ and ‘aestheticism’. Many Wu-Wei members deem their *xiuxing* activities as epitomising ascetic rigour; such opinions are crystallised – rather unexpectedly – in contradistinction to state-supervised Daoist and Buddhist monastic establishments. The Wu-Wei network ascribes to a lineage of mystical Daoist ascetics, collectively known as the ‘Lineage of Hidden Immortals’ (*yin xian pai* 隐仙派), who abandoned the ‘red dust’ (*hong chen* 红尘) of the ordinary world in pursuit of union with the Dao. Chief among these figures were the famed (purported) residents of the Wu-Dang mountains: Chen Tuan (陈抟), Huo Long (火龙), and Zhang San Feng (张三丰). Despite the variegated and often contradictory biographical reports, Wu-Wei organisers insist that these mystical ascetics achieved extraordinary clairvoyance and physical prowess by leading secluded lives and practising severe physical-spiritual discipline in the Wu-Dang mountains. Master Yin-Xian, the Wu-Wei School founder, claims that the very reason to establish a farmhouse-retreat centre in an unfrequented

valley in Wu-Dang is to emulate and indeed establish cross-temporal resonance¹¹¹ with these bygone sages. Discursively, therefore, the Wu-Wei network upholds the values of ascetic rigour. Adherents often emphasised to me how *xiuxing* via the Wu-Wei School constituted a form of ‘minority pursuit’ (*xiao zhong zhui qiu* 小众追求), which requires psychological (if not physical) distancing from ‘mainstream society’ (*zhu liu she hui* 主流社会). This orientation appears congruent with the ethical stipulations of historical forms of Daoist asceticism. As Stephen Eskildsen details, early Daoist ascetics (3rd to 6th centuries CE) were known to have practised severe forms of austerities, including celibacy, fasting, wilderness seclusion, and sleep-avoidance, in order to augment physical strength and longevity (Eskildsen, 1998).

Surprisingly, according to my interlocutors, sincere and rigorous forms of *xiuxing* are extremely rare in contemporary religious orders. Wu-Wei members have repeatedly expressed concern over the ‘corruption’ (*fu bai* 腐败) of various Daoist and Buddhist monastic orders, citing anecdotal encounters with monks sporting fancy cars and gold necklaces. They moreover question whether these religious professionals working in state-supervised ‘religious work units’ (*zong jiao dan wei* 宗教单位) truly practise *xiuxing*. Once at the Lu-Gu Lake retreat centre, for example, an interlocutor shared the following remarks:

In Beijing, there are allegedly a hundred thousand Rinpoche¹¹² (*shi wan ge ren bo qie* 十万个仁波切). Ten thousand, oh heavens! It is indeed very easy to ‘become’ a Rinpoche these days. You can simply buy a robe and don yourself. But can you abide by all the precepts and *xiuxing* accordingly? If you cannot *xiuxing* by the precepts while still teaching sutras for money, I would call this a blasphemy (*xie du* 亵渎).

Such views on monastic degeneracy closely resemble perspectives held by Palmer and Siegler’s main interlocutors at Mount Hua, who avowed their concerns over the ‘poor spiritual atmosphere’ of a major Daoist temple (where some of them had held important leadership positions) and, more generally, the ‘increasingly lax’ monastic discipline in state-supervised religious work units (2017, pp. 330-336). For many of my interlocutors, a general misgiving towards the bureaucratic-monastic establishment drove them to seek out a small, grassroots-level organisation like the Wu-Wei School, led by self-identified ‘a-religious personage’ (*fei zong jiao ren shi* 非宗教人士).

¹¹¹ An unmediated mode of influence founded in the Analogical ontology that underpins the Wu-Wei theoretical enterprise, which I describe in detail in chapter four.

¹¹² Rinpoche designate Tibetan Buddhist ascetics who are considered reincarnations of former ascetics.

Wu-Wei participants' shared view that ascetic rigour can only be found outside the monastic establishment, I suggest, is intricately entwined with a deep-rooted anti-clericalism that evolved in tandem with China's modernisation project. In *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, Peter Van der Veer argues that popular perceptions of clerics as sources of 'sexual debauchery' and fruitless violence gained prominence in the late nineteenth century, when modernisers of diverse persuasions (nationalists, communists, and even reformist religious thinkers) grappled with imported ideas of scientism and rationalism, and eventually made them central to China's anti-colonial state building (2013, pp. 148-151). After 1949, with its foundational commitment to social evolutionism and materialism, the CCP further denounced the nefarious category of superstition (*mi xin* 迷信), or 'false beliefs'. This project reterritorialised indigenous ritual and liturgical activities into the domain of 'false knowledge', construing these folk activities as a tool through which the ruling elites kept the masses ignorant and therefore needing eradication (ibid., pp. 138-139). The early decades of the PRC saw the combination of anti-superstition, anti-clerical, and anti-feudalism campaigns, intensifying processes already under way during the late imperial and Republican regimes (ibid., p. 151). While the systematic extermination of clergy ended with the post-1978 liberalisation of the religious field, a century of destruction of religious infrastructure and the comprehensive penetration of the state into monastic organisations shattered lineages of religious teaching, leaving clerics within the state-controlled religious system with only fragmented knowledge (ibid., pp. 152-157). The Wu-Wei members' scepticism towards monastics and their ascetic commitments, therefore, also speaks to the effects of these severe disruptions, and the significant role lay people have come to play in the articulation and transmission of forms of esoteric knowledge once reserved to the clergy.

Yin-Xian consciously styles himself as a modern-day ascetic, whose life is modelled on the 'original' (*yuan ben de* 原本的) teachings of bygone 'sages' (*sheng xian* 圣贤); he proudly claims to 'inherit and propagate' (*chuan cheng* 传承) the form of asceticism propounded by the 'forefathers' (*lao zu* 老祖) of the 'School of Hidden Immortals'. The foremost ascetic precepts Yin-Xian champions are found in a famed octet that concludes chapter nineteen of the *Dao De Jing*: 'Manifest plainness. Embrace simplicity. Diminish selfishness. Rarefy desires.'¹¹³ Importantly, Yin-Xian argues that for 'ordinary people' (*pu tong ren* 普通人) like himself and his followers, this elusive ethical guidance may be crystallised into one teaching, 'frugality' (*jie jian* 节俭).

¹¹³ 'jian su bao pu, shao si gua yu' 见素抱朴，少私寡欲. My translation is modified and adapted from Ivanhoe and Van Norden's edition, which rendered the text thusly, 'Manifest plainness. Embrace simplicity. Do not think just of yourself. Make few your desires' (2001, pp. 171-172).

During the two winters I've spent alongside Yin-Xian (2018 and 2019), he wore a faded, decade-old black winter coat with a visible patch on the upper back (see Figure 9, chapter three). When a visitor complimented the Wu-Wei founder on his virtuous thrift, Yin-Xian replied, 'My generation had very little access to material goods. It's just a lasting habit. The sages of classical ages would equally emphasise the virtue (*mei de* 美德) of frugality.' In many ways, Yin-Xian lived and breathed frugality. He never shopped for new clothes; he ate anything that was put in front of him, sometimes substituting lunch with a bland barley paste; and he conserved water and electricity to the utmost, advocating for 'environmentalism' (*huan bao zhu yi* 环保主义). Many adherents commented to me how struck they were by the simplicity of Yin-Xian's daily life, and how rare and refreshing it was to be in the presence of a 'true' *xiuxing* master who is so 'anti-materialist' (*bu wu zhi* 不物质). Some even compared his lifestyle of *xiuxing* and teaching 'outside the system' to that of the Buddha and Confucius, both of whom are deemed as having promoted simple, sincere, anti-systemic ethical striving at their respective times. A middle-aged manager described his sentiments hyperbolically: 'If every person lived like the master, meditating for one third of the day, eating two simple meals, studying and teaching during the rest of waking hours, we would have already achieved world peace and probably reversed global warming (*quan qiu bian nuan* 全球变暖).'

Seen from this angle, the Wu-Wei organisers and participants appear to uphold desires towards 'true asceticism', conceptualised against the laxity supposedly found within state-supervised, bureaucratised monastic establishments (see also Palmer and Siegler, 2017, pp. 330-335). However, my ethnographic observations revealed that the lived reality of the Wu-Wei School was not as neat as Yin-Xian and others may have wished to admit. The desires towards 'aestheticism' pervade Wu-Wei members' ethical imaginaries. Alongside his virtuous frugality and a professed anti-materialism, Yin-Xian's lived reality of *xiuxing* is (more subtly) marked by other equally indelible influences – in particular, tastes and habits instilled during a long-career in journalism, which culminated in his position as the vice-editor-in-chief of a provincial newspaper, working alongside party cadres and interacting regularly with local elites.¹¹⁴ To Yin-Xian, committed *xiuxing* necessitates a certain aesthetics (*mei gan* 美感), which structure the affective environment of the ethical aspirant. Located in places some adherents refer to as 'Shangri-la' (*shi wai tao yuan* 世外桃源), the two Wu-Wei retreat centres reflect detailed attention to the beauty of

¹¹⁴ As I describe in chapter one, the Wu-Wei network was founded by Yin-Xian after his retirement and subsequent relocation to the Wu-Dang mountains for concentrated *xiuxing* and teaching.

form. The Lu-Gu Lake Guesthouse boasts rustic log furniture and cool coloured textile furnishings, which assistant-teacher Fang-Hua proudly named ‘Yunnan-Scandinavian style’. The Wu-Dang Centre, whose refurbishment was overseen by Yin-Xian himself, features Chinese neoclassical décor. The modest façade of the farmhouse belies the antique teaware, exquisite wooden sliding doors, brick fireplace, and mahogany wooden armchairs.

Yin-Xian refrains from most worldly dealings, and the assistant-disciples make sure everyday life runs smoothly in the retreat centres – in a way that could hardly be described as ‘plain’ and ‘simple’. At the Wu-Dang centre, assistants do much of their shopping for groceries and daily necessities on the national favourite e-commerce website taobao.com. These goods are first shipped to a convenience store at the foot of the mountains. Around once a week, a driver collects packages for the school and delivers them up the mountains for a fee of 50 RMB.¹¹⁵ Items incessantly reach the retreat centre in an olive-coloured truck, ranging from an impressive self-assembled pavilion and electric pressure cookers to imported Russian multigrain flour and organic apples. The driver usually leaves the centre with two or three parcels of sheets and duvets, which are to be cleaned at the laundry store in town and returned with the next batch of goods. In addition, as a matter of courtesy, visiting members bring quality food or tea gifts, often in entire suitcases or duffle bags. Yin-Xian never fails to show his delight in these small material enjoyments, seemingly unencumbered by his commitment to frugality.

Adherents, while unanimously extolling the master’s exemplary ascetic rigour, also enthusiastically praise the aesthetics (and relative comfort) of the Wu-Wei retreats’ facilities, which they consider to resonate with the beauty of the natural environment. For most of them, the aesthetic delight and relative comfort of the Wu-Wei retreats seem to provide additional attraction.¹¹⁶ A middle-aged financier put it this way: ‘Thankfully we are in an era where *xiuxing* can be done in comfort (*xin xing ye ke yi shu fu di xiu* 修行也可以舒服地修).’ A young white-collar worker from Shanghai, on the other hand, exclaimed with joy upon entering the shared bathroom at the Wu-Dang centre, ‘Gosh! There’s a western toilet and a water heater!’ Once, in the Lu-Gu Lake retreat centre, a seasoned *xiuxing* retreat-goer confidently imparted to his fellow participants: ‘Out of the retreats I’ve been to around the country, the Wu-Wei ones probably have the best conditions (*tiao jian zui hao* 条件最好). [These venues are] suitable for ordinary people like us (*shi*

¹¹⁵ Equivalent to £5.63 at the CNY/GBP exchange rate on 19 September 2021.

¹¹⁶ As noted previously, apart from local residents who receive pro bono teaching or healing at the Wu-Dang and Lu-Gu Lake facilities, most Wu-Wei participants are from middle-class to upper-middle-class urban backgrounds.

he xiang zan zhe yang de pu tong ren 适合像咱这样的普通人).’ The notion of ‘ordinary people’ is significant in the form of ethical striving encountered at the Wu-Wei School, to which I will return later in the chapter. For now, it suffices to note the ways in which asceticism and aestheticism constitute two polarities that animate Wu-Wei organisers and participants’ divided desires. The tension between ascetic rigour and aesthetic delight is moreover mediated by a shared preference for a certain degree of material enjoyment; this preference for material enjoyment, in turn, becomes another pole that contrasts with the supra-material enjoyment promised by *xiuxing*.



Figure 15: The modest exterior of the Wu-Dang retreat centre



Figure 16: Antique teaware at the Wu-Dang retreat centre



Figure 17: Adherent quarters inside the Wu-Dang retreat centre

Photo removed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

Figure 4 Assistant-teacher Fu-Yi boiling tea at the brick fireplace in the Wu-Dang retreat centre

Photo removed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

Figure 19: Students from a local martial arts school practising recitation of the *Book of Changes* under the self-assembled pavilion, led by assistant-teacher Gao-Chen

1.2 The ‘True World’ or the ‘Real World’?

The second set of divided desires revolve around supra-material enjoyment versus material enjoyment, which is aptly captured in adherent Na-Na’s formulations of ‘the true world’ (*zhen shi shi jie* 真实世界) and ‘the real world’ (*xian shi shi jie* 现实世界). I first met Na-Na during my preliminary fieldwork at the Wu-Dang centre in December 2017, which coincided with her fifth retreat since coming into contact with Yin-Xian in October 2016. Na-Na arrived at the centre shortly after dark with a truckload of goods for Yin-Xian and others, an impressive spread ranging from chocolate and pastries to home clothes and aprons. Na-Na had a small stature, delicate features, and exuberant facial expressions. Descending from the olive-coloured truck, she practically jumped onto Yin-Xian and gave him an enthusiastic embrace, much to everyone else’s surprise.

Quite a character from the moment of arrival, Na-Na walked around the centre in bright pink pyjamas. In our first couple of exchanges, she made sure that I knew a few things about her: she'd quit her education after primary school and started paid work (*da gong* 打工) as a teenager; she owned half a dozen apartments in a major coastal city in the northeast; yachting and tea ceremony were among her favourite hobbies; and, now in her early thirties, she'd already retired. While often acting in ways that flagrantly defied the (unspoken) behavioural norm of the retreats¹¹⁷, Na-Na has nonetheless remained among the most committed followers of the Wu-Wei network, practising the *xinxing* regimen with devotion and rigour.

Na-Na had become part of the Wu-Wei network following a 'psychological crisis' (*xin li wei ji* 心理危机). Before turning 30, she had already reached the position of subsidiary general manager of an international trade company that exported clothing accessories to central Europe. Nevertheless, early career success and material security failed to bring Na-Na happiness. She found herself descending into a spiral of despair and developing suicidal tendencies. Na-Na recollected in our first interview in 2017: 'What was the point of life? I didn't know. I just knew that it certainly wasn't about making myself live more comfortably. Before long, I was diagnosed with severe depression (*zhong du yi yu zheng* 重度抑郁症). I felt that everything I had been doing was worthless and unbearable.'

In 2014, when the board of her company notified Na-Na of a promotion to an executive position at the headquarters, she replied with her resignation. Having spent a few years searching for various ways to address her 'psychological crisis', she stumbled upon the Wu-Wei network through a friend. Na-Na vividly remembered the day when she first met Yin-Xian. She arrived at Yin-Xian's old quarters around noon, when the master was just heading out for his habitual mountain jog. They chatted only for a couple minutes. Yin-Xian then left Na-Na a copy of his first book on the Wu-Wei theoretical system and left. Na-Na stood in the small room and flipped through the pages. She understood absolutely nothing. 'But that didn't matter', Na-Na reminisced,

What really left an impression on me was the master's state of being (*zhuang tai* 状态) that I glimpsed within those short few minutes. He looked so healthy (*hao jian kang* 好健康) and utterly at ease (*hao zi zai* 好自在) – so different from those people around me in business. Something moved in my heart. I knew that was what I wanted: *living with ease, lightness, and freedom* (*zi zai, qing song, zi you di huo zhe* 自在、轻松、自由地活着 [emphasis added]).

¹¹⁷ As seen in chapter two, the Wu-Wei organisers insist upon not instituting normative behavioural expectations so that retreat participants may autogenously grasp the value of spontaneity.

There, for fortuitous reasons, Na-Na committed herself to living by Yin-Xian's example. As she saw it, participating in the network and undertaking *xiuxing* precipitated a total shift in her life, which she summarised thusly:

Now, through learning *xiuxing* and traditional culture, I found the true world. In this true world, there is no dualism (*mei you er yuan dui li* 没有二元对立), there is no differentiation between me and not-me (*mei you wo he fei wo de que bie* 没有我和非我的区别). [...] I feel rich and contented (*fu zu de* 富足的) through and through. I am beyond all the demands of the real world.

In this account, Na-Na distinguished two worlds which she has inhabited: a) the 'real world', where she achieves enviable success but could not find meaning; and b) the 'true world', where she feels 'rich and contented throughout'. The entrance into the 'true world' via *xiuxing* has exerted a pivotal influence on her sense of wellbeing. Na-Na became aware that 'what she wanted' comprised the supra-material enjoyment of 'living with ease, lightness, and freedom'. A similar narrative of pursuing *xiuxing* to satisfy the subjective needs of the 'inner self' (*nei zai zi wo* 内在自我) is found across the accounts of almost every adherent, a key point which I shall expand on in the final section concerning 'recreational asceticism'.

Nevertheless, despite her compelling narrative of total transformation, Na-Na's lived experience did not resemble a neat conversion. Her professed contentment with the 'true world' notwithstanding, Nana continued to build her wealth and enjoy the benefits of her success in the 'real world'. In between *xiuxing* activities at the retreats, Nana was often found checking her stock market platform, even at times discussing the prospects of certain industries and firms with Yin-Xian, hoping to benefit from his sharpened clairvoyance (as well as extensive 'worldly' experiences). While away from the centres, she sometimes posts her travel photos on the Wu-Wei General WeChat group,¹¹⁸ triggering envious reactions: 'Wow Na-Na! Swanning off again (*you xiao sa qu la* 又潇洒去啦)!' Notably, while diligently patrolling the virtual space and ridding it of any advertisements on the grounds of ethical propriety (that this group is for the sole purpose of 'exchanging information on *xiuxing*' (*jiao liu xiu xing xin xi* 交流修行信息)), none of the assistant-teachers disapproved of Na-Na's photo updates, usually responding with a 'thumbs-up' or roses. Despite discursively upholding the superiority of the 'true world', Wu-Wei adherents and organisers continue to construe selected forms of 'real world' experiences as desirable, betraying their embroilment within the socio-political order from which they seek to escape.

¹¹⁸ In addition to this, there are a handful of WeChat groups demarcated by geographical region and a small 30-member group of committed followers.

1.3 Freedom from ‘the System’ or Success within ‘the System’?

A further set of divided desires revolves around freedom from ‘the system’ and success within ‘the system’, a tension discernible in Na-Na’s experience and exemplified by Ling-Yü’s personal history. I first met Ling-Yü along with her husband Chen-Feng in the Wu-Dang retreat centre in November 2018. In her early thirties, Ling-Yü is a civil servant (*gong wu yuan* 公务员) based in northern China; this is a coveted post offering lifelong job security, good income and high social status, and only attainable through passing the arduous national civil servant examination. Ling-Yü appears to be a walking embodiment of normative success: a girl born and raised in a small town in Central China, with a desirable job, a loving husband, a two-bedroom apartment in a metropolis, and a master’s degree in Chinese Philosophy obtained from a prestigious university in Wuhan. Nevertheless, as she puts it, she has struggled with ‘a black hole inside that was devouring (*tun shi* 吞噬) [her]’. Since her final year of high school, Ling-Yü has been living under the crushing weight of what she described as ‘severe depression’ (*zhong du yi yu zheng* 重度抑郁症); she retrospectively chose this psychologised description despite not having received a formal biomedical diagnosis, a phenomenon to which I will return later in the chapter. Ling-Yü ascribes her afflictions to ‘an antagonistic mentality’ (*ni fan xin li* 逆反心理) towards ‘the system’ (*ti zhi* 体制):

In high school, I resented the institution of the university entrance test (*gao kao ti zhi* 高考体制). Then, when I was at the university, despite being very busy with my studies and activities, I felt emptier (*kong xu* 空虚) and more afflicted (*tong ku* 痛苦) with each passing day. There was a black hole inside that was devouring me. It was like I was building a house from a rotten foundation. Finally, it collapsed.

In 2008, during her third year of undergraduate studies in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (*dui wai han yu* 对外汉语), Ling-Yü chanced upon the first ‘traditional culture school’ (*chuan tong wen hua xue tang* 传统文化学堂) in her life, founded by a professor at her university. With her best friend and boyfriend at the time, Ling-Yü attended lectures on the *Dao De Jing*. Having never come across Daoist philosophy, this experience triggered a dramatic change in her life. Ling-Yü said that she was ‘bewitched’ (*zhuo mo* 着魔) by the professor’s teaching:

His interpretation of the *Dao De Jing* was highly orientated towards individualism (*fei chang chong shang ge ren zhu yi* 非常崇尚个人主义) and very inflammatory (*you shan dong xing de* 有煽动性的). [...] Having had barely any experience with traditional culture and lacking real-

life experience, I didn't have any capacity for discernment (*bian shi neng li* 辨识能力). I only knew that his teaching made me feel super gratified (*te bie shuang* 特别爽).

According to Ling-Yü, the professor incited her to 'magnify' (*fang da* 放大) her discontent towards exam-oriented education, towards her parents, and towards 'the system'. Steeped in this radical 'individualism', her repressed feelings found a 'violent release' (*meng lie de shi fang* 猛烈的释放). She 'declared war on her parents' (*xiang fu mu xuan zhan* 向父母宣战), refused to follow through on the plan of 'entering the system for work' (*qu ti zhi nei gong zuo* 去体制内工作) set by her parents, and only wanted to work for that traditional culture school. This rebellion continued for four years, throughout Ling-Yü's master's studies.

Had she not been turned down by the traditional culture school after her internship in 2012, Ling-Yü reminisced with amusement, she would probably have ended up breaking ties with her parents and everything she hated about 'the system'. Though laughing about the rejection, Ling-Yü conceded that the consequences were devastating at the moment, 'a total heart break' (*xin dou sui le* 心都碎了). Seeking to heal her afflicted heart, Ling-Yü came across a Chinese medicine practitioner (*zhong yi* 中医) who 'not only treated her body but also changed her outlook on life' (*ren sheng guan* 人生观). Similar to Yin-Xian, this doctor was a self-taught expert in 'traditional culture'. While pursuing treatment, Ling-Yü was exposed to a set of completely different values, focused on 'virtue' (*de xing* 德行) and 'filiality' (*xiao* 孝). She then realised with horror how terribly wrong she had been.

'For four years', Ling-Yü mournfully recalled, 'I treated my parents like enemies, like the obstacles to my freedom (*wo zi you de zu ai* 我自由的阻碍). I imputed the cause of my suffering to my parents, seeing them as standing between me and what I wanted.' With the guidance of the Chinese medicine doctor, Ling-Yü mustered the courage to 'reconcile' (*he jie* 和解) with her parents. She eventually took the civil service exam as planned and entered 'the system' following her parents' wishes. Ling-Yü emphasised that 'going down the crooked way' (*zou wai dao* 走歪道) at the university made her appreciate how the field of traditional culture is a 'jumble of fish and dragons' (*yu long hun za* 鱼龙混杂). 'We [as a society] are groping our way forward (*mo suo zhong qian jin* 摸索中前进),' she remarked. 'Many people involved in the traditional culture revival may have good intentions. However, if they did not reach a certain level of attainment in *xiuxing*, they could easily mislead and harm their followers.'

Between 2012 and 2018, Ling-Yü eased herself into a life ‘within the system’ but continued to explore ways to keep her depressive tendencies at bay. She looked at a couple more traditional culture schools (*xue tang* 学堂), attended psychology salons (*xin li xue sha long* 心理学沙龙), dabbled in the increasingly popular family constellation therapy (*jia ting xi tong pai lie* 家庭系统排列) (see Pritzker and Duncan, 2019). However, her overwhelming impression was that the grassroots-level institutions she came across were often ‘playing tricks’ (*wan hua yang* 玩花样) and ‘lacked substance’ (*que fa shi zhi* 缺乏实质). For this reason, when she initially visited the Wu-Wei Wu-Dang retreat in spring 2018 following the suggestion of a friend, Ling-Yü was fully on her guard:

Even though my friend promised that this teacher had real capacities (*zhen ben shi* 真本事), I still felt very sceptical. Having seen so many similar institutions that played tricks, I felt the need to be vigilant. The day when we first arrived, the master had tea with us and just chatted about this and that. It felt entirely ordinary (*ben ping chang* 很平常), nothing good, nothing bad. But in the evening, when we attended a seminar, I felt blown away (*zhen zhu le* 震住了). So many years of dabbling in *xiuxing* has lent me a bit of discernment. The way the master focused on the teaching of virtue, emphasising love (*ai* 爱) and filiality (*xiao* 孝), rather than individualistic things, convinced me that he had true knowledge (*zhen zhi shi* 真知识). I felt so comfortable (*shu fu* 舒服) at the retreat to the point that I didn’t want to leave.

Ling-Yü grudgingly dragged herself back to work. Having taken a serious interest in ancient philosophy and *xiuxing* for over a decade, but rarely encountering a regimen and teacher of whom she fully approved, Ling-Yü was deeply struck by the chance encounter with Yin-Xian and the Wu-Wei network. She also ‘fell in love’ with the Wu-Dang mountains and the tranquillity of the valley where the retreat centre sits. Before long, she was anxious to get back:

Civil servants don’t have a lot of holidays. But I’m a pretty wilful (*ren xing* 任性) person, so I racked my brains (*jiao jin nao zhi* 绞尽脑汁) to find ways to get days off. Our work unit had a policy that people who donated blood (*xian xue* 献血) can take a few days off, so that’s exactly what I did in May – can you imagine [laughs] – I donated blood in order to skip work and come to the retreat! But who cares? I’ve not felt this free (*zi you* 自由) or happy (*kuai le* 快乐) in a long while.

Ling-Yü burst into laughter as she recounted her story. This life history interview took place during her third visit to the Wu-Dang centre in late November 2018. She appeared to relish every moment in the retreat, despite the gnawing cold, the power outages, and the frozen water pipes that compelled us to collect all our water from the stream in the valley. Ambling along the mountain paths in her free time and skipping like a child, she also memorised the *Dao De Jing* in a little over a week. Her husband Chen-Feng had also recently quit his job as a director of product management at a public listed company. Wishing for a wholesale life change (which I will describe in section 3.1), Chen-Feng applied for a one-year disciple-assistantship with Yin-Xian starting in January 2019 and was warmly welcomed to the team. Ling-Yü hinted that she might do the same later, finding her job ‘in the system’ increasingly dull compared to a life of *xiuxing* and running retreats. Yin-Xian was delighted at the prospect of recruiting two successful and well-educated young people into his growing team of committed disciples. He repeatedly expressed to me that young people were the future of a small, fledgling grassroots-level organisation like this. Indeed, when Yin-Xian left the Wu-Dang mountains for his customary teach-out week in Changsha in January 2019, he was followed by half a dozen university-educated long-term disciples, eliciting much praise from his local students.

However, having spent almost an entire month alongside Yin-Xian, travelling from Wu-Dang via Changsha to the winter base of Lu-Gu Lake, Chen-Feng quite abruptly broke off and left the network at the end of January 2019. Ling-Yü also did not show up since early January 2019. I did not encounter the couple again until June 2019, when I paid a visit to their home city. Ling-Yü and Chen-Feng enthusiastically welcomed me to their home, a carefully refurbished apartment in a modest ’80s residential complex. Over a hearty home-cooked vegan meal, I broached the topic of the forgone project to become Wu-Wei disciples and pursue a life away from ‘the system’. The couple, evidently having anticipated my undue curiosity, exchanged a knowing glance. ‘Well, it really wasn’t all that complicated.’ Ling-Yü took a sip of home-made plum wine,

I got promoted to the position of vice section chief (*fu ke zhang* 副科长) shortly after the New Year. It was such unexpected news. Many people of my family are civil servants back in our small town. Being promoted to a vice section chief at the age of thirty-two is unheard of. Chen-Feng is still in career transition, plus we have a huge mortgage to pay off, so we just changed plans. *Ordinary people have to act with affordances* (*pu tong ren de shun shi er wei* 普通人得顺势而为). [emphasis added] Plus, even the master approved, saying that ‘true *xiuxing* takes place in the ordinary world’ (*zhen zheng de xiu xing zai chen shi jian* 真正的修行在尘世间).

Ling-Yü's story is paradigmatic of the ways in which Wu-Wei participants navigate the divided desires to break free of 'the system' and to succeed within 'the system'. Ling-Yü chose to retreat into the safety afforded by 'the system', despite having problematised and, at times, resisted its centripetal force for over a decade. Meanwhile, others – such as assistant-teachers Fu-Yi and Gao-Chen, a young couple now in their third year of full-time disciple-assistantship who gave birth to a baby girl in late 2020 – chose to escape the normativity of the 'system' more completely. Despite variations in personal choices, those who are involved in the Wu-Wei network (from organisers to participants) are nonetheless inextricably embroiled in contemporary Chinese society, caught up in its ineluctable pressures and constraints. Ling-Yü's experience and narrative, however, reveal a crucial way in which these middle-class Chinese citizens negotiate their divided desires, pulled taut between the polarities of escaping and embedding. This is encapsulated in her remark that 'ordinary people have to act with affordances'.

2. The 'Reflective Manoeuvre' and an 'Anti-Heroic Subjectivity'

2.1 Reflective Manoeuvre: Ethical Action as a *Tango* with the Encompassing Structure

In chapter three, I proposed the notion of 'reflective manoeuvre' to capture the prominent mode of ethical action observed among Wu-Wei School participants. Specifically, reflective manoeuvre describes an actor's evaluative rearrangement of her positionality, vis-à-vis influences, relations, opportunities, and obstacles present in the situated environment. She accomplishes this without yielding her subjective views or becoming 'interpellated' and 'subjectified' by enveloping socio-political forces. Through this mode of ethical action, ordinary middle-class Chinese citizens *tango with* – rather than *battle against* – the encompassing structure. Such acts of deliberate accommodation, furthermore, entail sophisticated ethical reasonings. In chapter three, I delineated a first pillar of ethical reasoning underpinning the reflective manoeuvre via a case study of Steiner art teacher Tao-Yao: since becoming a mother, she has adopted a 'more tolerant' attitude toward gender hierarchies and other hegemonic ideals she once wished to 'tear into pieces'. Tao-Yao summarised her ethical reasoning using the well-worn aphorism *jian rong bing bao* (兼容并包), literally 'include anything and everything', which I render contextually as 'embrace through accommodation'. In this chapter, I further develop the concept of reflective manoeuvre by delineating a second pillar of ethical reasoning, which adherent Ling-Yü captures via the adage of *shun shi er wei* (顺势而为), literally 'acting with *shi*'; I translate this contextually as 'acting with affordances'.

Let me take this opportunity to 1) clarify what acting with affordances entails, and 2) expand on the notion of reflective manoeuvre. My analysis hinges on the concept of *shi* (勢), a notion that originated in ancient China but which has received little anthropological attention prior to Teresa Kuan's recent engagement. In her analysis of the life management strategies of Chinese middle-class mothers, Kuan draws on the notion of *shi* as elaborated in early Chinese thought, which she renders as 'propensity', 'tendency', or 'potential born of disposition' (2015, p. 21, p. 114). Building on this linchpin, Kuan coins the 'art of disposition' to describe how middle-class mothers in Kunming 'exercise discernment' and 'identify opportunities for taking initiative and managing tendencies' in the apparently 'banal, conformist, and opportunistic' acts of everyday parenting (ibid. p. 24). In the Wu-Wei context, I would like to suggest a further possibility to interpret the notion of *shi*: affordances.

In making this theoretical translation, I draw on James Gibson's original formulation of 'affordances' in the psychology of visual perception and Webb Keane's transduction of this notion into the study of ethical life. Investigating animals-environment relations, Gibson (1977; 1979) coined the notion of 'affordances' to describe the 'action possibilities' the situated environment offers to a perceiving subject (primarily animals but also humans). In the Gibsonian formulation, the 'environment' is understood in a strictly physical, materialist valence. To conceptualise '*shi*' as 'affordances', I suggest, entails a decoupling of the 'environment' from this original materialist underpinning. This requires reckoning with the non-materialist Analogical ontology that runs through early Chinese thought and continues to pervade ordinary Chinese people's worldview and lived experiences today (see chapter four). Specifically, the environment ought to be treated as an interfusion of material substances as well as non-material influences, a dynamic assemblage that constitutes and conditions the human subject along with her physical surroundings.

Webb Keane's extension of Gibson's theory into the anthropology of ethics is pivotal to my argument here, in two ways. First, Keane's formulation of 'ethical affordances' hinges on a view that affordances are not unique to human encounters with physical objects but are instead ubiquitous to human phenomenological experiences (2015, pp. 37-32). He defines 'ethical affordances' as 'the opportunities that any experiences might offer as people evaluate themselves, other persons, and their circumstances' (ibid., p. 31). Secondly, Keane emphasises, following Gibson, that affordances are properties that 'invite' reflections rather than 'induce' actions: 'What is crucial here is the fact of (mere) potentiality: a chair may invite you to sit, but it does not *determine* that you will sit' (ibid., p. 28, emphasis in the original). In so doing, Keane draws attention to the

inevitably evaluative qualities of human ethical actors; he recognises the ubiquity of factual constraints while underscoring the limits of causality in determining human strivings.

Building on Keane's intervention, I suggest that, for the ethical subject who acts with affordances, the situated environment is often seen in an open-ended and dynamic manner; structural constraints and presently inhibitions are seen as part of the ever-shifting 'force of otherness' (Kuan, 2016, p. 24), which *invites* the ethical subject's evaluative assessment and shapes the field of possible actions, while never fully dictating her complex trajectory.

Moreover, while the reflective manoeuvre¹¹⁹ shares a structural resemblance with what Kuan terms the art of disposition, the reflective manoeuvre is distinguished by a *non-conformist* dimension, animated by the open-ended ethical reasoning of acting with affordances. Whereas Kuan's interlocutors deploy the art of disposition to foster their children's success within the parameters set out by the party-state, Wu-Wei participants engage in the reflective manoeuvre to negotiate the conflicting demands issued from their divided desires: desires to embed, and flourish in the PRC's fiercely competitive landscape, and desires to escape, and break away from 'the system'. The outcome of the reflective manoeuvre is often more intricate than a neat dichotomy between submission and rebellion; the ethical actor may continue to entertain her non-conformist views while anticipating the next opportunity to ameliorate her relative standing.

Yin-Xian's advice to Ling-Yü and Chen-Feng that 'true *xiuxing* takes place in the ordinary world', which he has imparted to most adherents, is illustrative here. In approving the young couple's choice to 'act with affordances', he also implies that they do not have to consider the foregone discipleship a failure and an irrevocable breach in their ethical aspirations; rather, they can explore ways to pursue 'true *xiuxing*' in the 'ordinary world'. Indeed, Ling-Yü continued to meditate and listen to audiobooks of ancient texts on her two-hour daily commute to work. Meanwhile, Chen-Feng deepened his study of the *Book of Changes* and developed a keen interest in the derivative discipline of divinations. This case study elucidates how Wu-Wei organisers and adherents, with a mutual recognition as embedded subjects swept up in the forces of the 'ordinary world', act with the affordances that contingently arise in 'ordinary people's' lives. Meanwhile, they *leave open* the possibility for rearranging their positionalities vis-à-vis future affordances. Reflective manoeuvre, which presupposes ethical striving as embroiled with (rather than set apart from) the

¹¹⁹ Defined as an actor's evaluative rearrangement of her positionality vis-à-vis influences, relations, opportunities, and obstacles present in the situated environment.

exigencies and contradictions of an ordinary life, relieves the imperfect aspirants of painful remorse. This mode of ethical action goes hand in hand with what I call an ‘anti-heroic subjectivity’ shared by Wu-Wei participants, in consonance with Kleinman et al.’s conception of the ‘anti-heroic model’ of existence, wherein actors’ ethical aspirations (both for the self and the larger society) are constantly reconciled with the pressures of survival (2011, p. 26). Let me turn to Tian-Yi’s story for an illustration.

2.2 Chosen Imperfection: The Anti-Heroic Subjectivity of the ‘Ordinary Chinese Folks’

Despite Wu-Wei organisers’ assertion that the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* regimen is congruous with an urban family life, and despite most adherents’ diligent uptake at the retreat centres, my research visits to fourteen participant families across five cities revealed that compliance failure is rampant at home. Remarkably, the Wu-Wei participants I visited assuredly explained that *xiuxing* at home, despite one’s best effort, is bound to be imperfect given the constraints of ‘real life’ and their own shortcomings as ‘ordinary people’. The notion of ‘acting with affordances’, or the action possibilities afforded by family and professional life, was again brought up in our conversations. In adapting the Wu-Wei regimen into diverse configurations of ‘life in the real world’, adherents appeared to embrace the imperfection of their situated environment and themselves, and actively crafted their version of the imperfect *xiuxing* without cynicism or questioning the legitimacy of the regimen. Let me turn to my research visit with Tian-Yi’s family for an illustration.

Tian-Yi’s alarm sounded at 4:30 am. He quietly settled into his meditation seat next to his wife, who was still fast asleep. In a little over an hour, he had finished his morning sitting meditation practice, just as his 15-year-old daughter Yi-Ren grudgingly lifted herself out of bed. At 6am, I wrapped up my own practice in the guest room and joined Tian-Yi in preparing breakfast for Yi-Ren. Having devoured a bowl of noodles, Yi-Ren flung herself into her school uniform and, bleary-eyed and yawning, set off for school. Facing the mounting pressure of the high school entrance examination, the girl appeared perpetually exhausted. Shortly after, Tian-Yi and I left the cluttered flat. The city was already bustling with life at 7am. We crossed a few busy roads to reach the neighbourhood park, where Tian-Yi carried out his 7km to 10km daily vigorous walking practice. He steadily picked up the rhythm as we merged into the stream of joggers and speed-walkers circling the 1,200m loop. I had to make an effort to keep up with him. An ankylosing spondylitis patient in his fifties, Tian-Yi’s blistering pace surprised me.

We returned to the apartment drenched in sweat. After a shower and a quick breakfast, Tian-Yi opened his laptop, transitioning from a *xiuxing* practitioner into a busy freelance accountant. Having made a handful of phone calls and worked across a string of Excel spreadsheets, Tian-Yi left his workstation in the living room to prepare lunch for Yi-Ren. ‘Right now, my day revolves around my daughter. My wife’s in sales and doesn’t have as much flexibility as I do, so I’ve become a ‘supermanny’ (*chao ji nai ba* 超级奶爸).’ Tian-Yi shrugged his shoulder while putting on an apron. ‘Making her breakfast, doing grocery shopping, preparing lunch for 12:30pm on the dot, waiting for her to come back after 9:30pm. My work and *xiuxing* come in the interval of parenting. A day goes by in the blink of an eye.’

‘I’m amazed by how you manage to keep up with the *xiuxing* regimen despite all that you have to do. How do you find the motivation?’ I asked.

‘To tell the truth, I find it hard to keep going without it. Like many of our fellow *xiuxing* companions (*tong xiu* 同修), I guess I’m trying to reach [a state of] *xiao yao you* (逍遥游) despite all the obligations.’

Tian-Yi is a devoted Wu-Wei member, whom I introduced in chapter four. During my research visit to his home in a southern Chinese city in December 2018, Tian-Yi invoked the Daoist ethical ideal of *xiao yao you* – commonly translated as ‘free and easy wondering’ (Ivanhoe, 2013, p. 270) – to describe the ‘moral engine’ driving his *xiuxing* (Mattingly et al., 2018). His remark, resonating with Na-Na’s and Ling-Yü’s testimonies, epitomised a shared dimension of Wu-Wei participants’ conceptions of their ethical projects. Regardless of the diverse and often immediate motivations that initially brought people to the network, such as health challenges, ‘psychological crises’, relationship problems, and parenting concerns, Wu-Wei members have variously expressed the *desire for* and *delight in* experiences of ‘freedom’, which are seen as enabled and sustained by the daily *xiuxing* activities. This widely held belief, furthermore, coheres with founder Yin-Xian’s vision to propagate a set of *xiuxing* practices thoroughly congruent with ‘everyday life’ (*ri chang sheng huo* 日常生活). This will enable ‘a-religious *xiuxing* practitioners’ (*fei zong jiao xiu xing ren* 非宗教修行人) to attain a ‘new state of existence’ (*xin de sheng ming jing jie* 新的生命境界). Marked by a heightened attunement with the Dao, this ‘new state of existence’ promises practitioners extraordinary vitality and efficacy, while allowing them to continue acting as contributing members of the contemporary Chinese society (see chapters two and four).

At the beginning of my research visit to Tian-Yi's (the first of fourteen home visits I conducted between 2018 and 2019), the Wu-Wei vision to *xiuxing* in the flurry of the 'ordinary world' appeared persuasive; Tian-Yi seemed remarkably consistent with his regimen, adroitly interlacing *xiuxing* activities with work obligations and family duties. However, it soon occurred to me that something was missing. In chapter four, I described in detail how a Wu-Wei participant's attunement with the Dao is premised on the daily practice of a five-pronged regimen, comprising rigorous walking, vigilance over one's deportment, sitting meditation, recitation, and textual learning. Through a mode of influence known as 'correlative resonance', the practitioner is expected to achieve greater functional balance across five ontological domains (known as Five Phases) set in one-to-one correlation to the five embodied activities, thereby significantly improving their existential state. However, five days into my visit, I never caught a glimpse of Tian-Yi practising recitation or textual learning.

Towards the end of my stay, sitting in the living room for a semi-structured interview, I raised the question as politely as possible: 'Is there a reason why you are intermitting some of the *xiuxing* activities like the recitation?' Tian-Yi widened his eyes and then burst out laughing,

Gosh Liang-Liang, I thought you knew this, I detest the recitation practice! Of course, I couldn't possibly say this in the [Wu-Dang] centre when we were both over there back in March [2018], but to recite a bunch of texts I hardly understand in the terrible slow pace set by the master – and twice every day – was like torture!

I retorted in jest,

Wow, I couldn't have guessed! After all, Master Yin-Xian has always praised you as a model student (*mo fan xue sheng* 模范学生). And given how enthusiastically you've been promoting the regimen and the Wu-Wei teaching to others, and how you've emphasised *xiuxing* has brought lasting improvement to your health, I had no idea you were secretly slacking off.

Tian-Yi winked,

You can't take away my badge of honour just because I don't follow through the entire regimen at home. After all, I still do three rounds of sitting meditation a day and persevere with my vigorous walking, all the while being mindful of my deportment and doing textual studies diligently, if not every day. I'd say I'm still among the top percentage.

'How often do you think people follow through the entire thing at home?' I asked.

'Oh, never,' Tian-Yi replied confidently,

Over the past couple of years, I've done my own research with a number of veteran students (*lao xue yuan* 老学员) and found that literally no one follows through the regimen at home. People had parents and children to look after, also had jobs and other sources of pressure (*ya li* 压力). Most people pick and choose from the five activities, and even the master has said to me that keeping one going is good enough. Of course, doing the full regimen would probably give you more benefits, but I feel okay with where I am.'

He then descended into a contemplative mood,

I guess this is just how it works for ordinary Chinese folks (*zhong guo lao bai xing* 中国老百姓). Many of us want to live in ways that are freer and easier (*huo de geng zi you zi zai xie* 活得更自由自在些). We are willing to try many things [for this goal], but we are also held back by many other things. A fine thing it is to live fully by our traditional culture, but in reality, hardly doable (*ben nan zuo dao* 很难做到). Yet, people like me and our *xinxing* companions still want to give it a go, even knowing there's no way to become actually one with the heaven (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一).

Tian-Yi concluded with a remark that was to echo throughout my conversations with different Wu-Wei participants: 'Despite reading the book of saints, we are still no saints but a bunch of ordinary people.'¹²⁰ Now, what do you fancy for dinner? Charcoal grilled fish?

Tian-Yi's testimony powerfully illustrates what I have termed the anti-heroic subjectivity, which pivots on an acute awareness of structural constraints placed upon 'ordinary people', a candid appraisal of their own short-comings that set them apart from the 'saints', and a keen willingness to engage in the open-ended ethical action of reflective manoeuvre. Choosing to practise imperfect *xinxing*, while fulfilling his responsibilities associated with an urban middle-class life, Tian-Yi reconciles a sincere ethical aspiration to 'live more freely' with a practical imperative to confront the 'pressure' of the situated society. The anti-heroic subjectivity, I suggest, allows Tian-Yi to pursue his serious but incomplete regimen without 'moral torment' (Robbins, 2004), despite knowing that 'there is no way to become actually one with the heaven'. Tian-Yi's and Ling-Yü's experiences illustrate how middle-class ethical aspirants encountered via the Wu-Wei network *tango with* the affordances of their situated socio-political environment; their dance is accompanied by a marked absence of any ambition for ethical perfection. Having delineated how the ethical strivings of Wu-Wei participants diverge from forms of ethical life observed in contexts such as

¹²⁰ The original: 'ji bian du zhe sheng xian shu, wo men bu shi sheng ren, zhi shi xie pu tong ren 即便读着圣贤书，我们也不是圣人，只是些普通人'.

Islam reformist movements, I propose in what follows an analytic for comparing ethical strivings that share affinity with the Wu-Wei experiences.

3. 'Recreational Asceticism' and a Psychologising-Atomising Governmentality

3.1 Recreational Asceticism: Ethical Striving to Propitiate the Perceiving-Evaluative Self?

In this section, I develop the analytic of recreational asceticism to describe a prevalent form of ethical striving seen amongst (but not unique to) Wu-Wei *xinxiang* participants. The coordinates defining the field of recreational asceticism, as instantiated by the Wu-Wei context, include:

- a) Actors' conception of ethical striving as having a 'non-vocational' nature:

In the Wu-Wei context, most participants see *xinxiang* as one among several projects pursued in an urban middle-class life in the contemporary PRC, rather than an overarching life project of paramount importance.

- b) Actors' construal of ethical striving as a means to realise a set of primarily self-oriented values:

In the Wu-Wei context, many participants see *xinxiang* as a vehicle to attain subjectively-felt qualities such as health, happiness, and freedom, despite the organisers' (and a small number of participants') sociocentric discourse that binds personal *xinxiang* efforts with the future of the polity (see chapters two and three).

- c) Actors' assignment of the ultimate ethical authority to the perceiving-evaluative self:

In the Wu-Wei context, many participants harness ethical resources (regimens, courses, teachers) to serve the perceiving-evaluative self; each individual self is seen as possessing a unique system of ethical valuation, therefore holding the ultimate evaluative authority.

- d) Actors' engagement in a flexible mode of ethical action underpinned by reflexivity and pragmatism:

In the Wu-Wei context, organisers and participants engage in the open-ended ethical action of reflective manoeuvre. Deploying a system of ethical reasoning underpinned by a common self-conception as 'ordinary people' confronted by manifold constraints, they work to evaluatively rearrange their positionalities relative to the influences, relations, opportunities, and obstacles that contingently arise in their situated environment.

My use of 'recreational' underscores the qualitative difference between this form of ethical striving and others premised on strict and exclusive subscription to a prescriptive regime (often founded in a form of soteriology and embedded in religious traditions), which exerts a commanding influence over all aspects of the acting subject's existence, ethical and beyond. Recreational asceticism, in contrast, is a thoroughgoing this-worldly effort aimed at enhancing present lived experiences; the recreational ascetic may voluntarily modify and combine diverse regimens and technologies in pursuit of objectives that she herself (as opposed to external authorities) establishes and validates. In what follows, I elaborate on some lived experiences of recreational asceticism, and then observe how the Wu-Wei instantiation of recreational asceticism coalesces with an emergent form of psychologising-atomising governmentality in the PRC.¹²¹ My observation builds on Yan Yunxiang's insight that processes of 'individualization' unfolding in the PRC are characterised by "the compulsory pursuit of 'a life of one's own' and the lack of genuine individuality", as well as 'the internalization or psychologicalization of risks due to the precarious freedoms and uncertainties that the individual is facing' (2010, p. 506). My analysis follows Yan in emphasising a *dimensional shift* in CCP power. This dimensional shift potentially leads to the intensification, rather than abatement, of party-state intervention at the site of the self.

Since my initial interactions with Wu-Wei School participants in early 2017, I have frequently heard members describe themselves as 'hobbyists' (*ai hao zhe* 爱好者). During my first conversation with Yin-Xian's assistant-disciple Si-Nian in December 2017, she volunteered that the common denominator of Wu-Wei followers is that they are 'traditional culture hobbyists' (*chuan tong wen hua ai hao zhe* 传统文化爱好者). Similarly, assistant-disciple Fu-Yi shared that she

¹²¹ What I call the 'psychologising-atomising' governmentality is in no way rolled out uniformly across the country; in this chapter I will content myself with analysis of some instantiations observed in the experiences of the urban dwellers whom I encountered via the Wu-Wei School.

has long cherished a hobby (*ai hao* 爱好) for ‘traditional culture’ since studying tourism management at university, despite nobody else in her cohort possessing even a modicum of interest. Founder Yin-Xian also routinely described himself as a ‘traditional culture hobbyist since childhood’ (*zi you shi chuan tong wen hua ai hao zhe* 自幼是传统文化爱好者) in interviews, seminars, and informal interactions with adherents.

Adherent Chen-Feng, most valuably, offered a remarkable reflection on his journey as a ‘*xiuxing* hobbyist’ (*xiu xing ai hao zhe* 修行爱好者) in an interview conducted at the Wu-Dang centre in December 2018. Chen-Feng’s narrative is paradigmatic among the over forty Wu-Wei participants who shared their life history with me during fieldwork. In the analysis that follows, therefore, I shall delineate how Chen-Feng interlaces the experience of trying out a dizzying array of *xiuxing* regimens with a Sisyphean search for ‘happiness’ (*kuai le* 快乐); he articulates this search as a quest to break out of an ‘iron house’ (*tie wu zi* 铁屋子) constructed by ‘others’ expectations’ (*bie ren de qi wang* 别人的期望).

A software engineer by training, Chen-Feng had just turned thirty-one at the time of this interview. He grew up in an industrial city in north-eastern China, where a trend of downsizing state-owned enterprises (SOE) and a net outflow of population rendered the place increasingly ‘lifeless’ (*mei sheng qi* 没生气) during his adolescence. Chen-Feng explained that he became a ‘*xiuxing* hobbyist’ owing to a long-standing puzzlement:

I had been asking a fundamental question (*gen ben de wen ti* 根本的问题) since I was very young: Why can’t humans and all beings exist in harmony? Why are there conflicts everywhere? My parents fought a lot when I was little. I saw their fights through my eyes and felt the pain in my heart. Sometimes, after a big fight, I sat among piles of broken glass in the pitch-black room, fearing and thinking: Why can’t people live in harmony? Why can’t they be at peace? Why can’t they be happy? Why do people who love each other have to hurt one another? I took this question with me as I moved forward in life, without really being able to resolve it.

One evening in 2011, a few years after graduating from university, Chen-Feng chanced upon a new friend on an online forum, whom he retrospectively recognised as a *xiuxing* practitioner (*xiu xing ren* 修行人). A student of Buddhist Dharma (*xue fo ren shi* 学佛人士), this new friend told Chen-Feng that ‘there was a path that’s apart from this material world (*wu zhi shi jie* 物质世界), or this world rife with conflicts (*chong man dou zheng de shi jie* 充满斗争的世界)’. Chen-Feng knew

instinctively that this path was what he had long yearned for and what he must pursue. He quickly ‘became immersed (*pao zai* 泡在) in the circle of traditional culture and *xiuxing*’, and commenced his life of a ‘*xiuxing* hobbyist’.

As a ‘*xiuxing* hobbyist’, Chen-Feng considered himself both very serious and open-minded. He frequented Buddhist temples and participated in short-term *xiuxing* retreats (*duan qi xiu xing* 短期修行). In 2012, he became a lay Buddhist adherent (*ju shi* 居士) at the famed Xi Yuan Temple (*xi yuan si* 西园寺) of Suzhou. He was in touch with a lot of organisations in ‘the field of the heart and spirit’ (*xin ling ling yu* 心灵领域) and ‘the field of *xiuxing*’ (*xiu xing ling yu* 修行领域).

‘I punched my attendance card (*da ka* 打卡) with Christianity, Islam, a host of alternative therapy groups, and basically all sects of Buddhism – Chan Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, Vinaya Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism, you name it,’ Chen-Feng recalled while counting with his fingers. Despite using the slang term ‘card punching’, he did not intend this exposition to be a joke. Having steeped himself in variegated *xiuxing* regimens, Chen-Feng noticed a seismic shift in his life. He described this transformation with the image of an ‘iron house,’ in which an exit door suddenly appeared:

The more I went around to *xiuxing* (*dao chu xiu xing* 到处修行), the more I felt that an exit door suddenly appeared in the iron house in which I had been living. [...] I had been on an orbit that was not formed by my own volition (*yi zhi* 意志) but by other’s expectations – those of my family, of the school, of the company, of the colleagues, of the society. I feel like I’ve always been walking on a path dictated (*zhu zai* 主宰) by other people. Growing up, I’ve been told that if I did not follow this path, I’d be miserable. [...] The world might appear immense, but I always felt like I could touch its boundaries. The boundaries are the expectations and limitations others have imposed on me. They make up the lightless iron house that imprisoned (*qiu jin* 囚禁) me, which slowly moved forward on a predetermined trajectory with predictable speed.

In these poignant statements, Chen-Feng employed the powerful imagery of a ‘lightless iron house’ to depict the stifling sense of inhibition he experienced throughout his early life, issued from the ‘expectations of others’ ranging from his family to the larger society. To Chen-Feng, exploring a range of *xiuxing* regimens allowed for the apparition of a door within the ‘iron house’, inside of which he had been hitherto ‘imprisoned’.

Following this reminiscence, however, Chen-Feng unexpectedly explained how he had ‘resisted the iron house’ via a completely different route, prior to (and coeval with) *xiuxing*: video games (*da you xi* 打游戏). He drew a surprising relationship between gaming and *xiuxing*, as both pursuits promised ‘happiness’. In his teenage years, Chen-Feng started gaming ‘as a pure act of recreation (*yu le* 娱乐)’, but gradually he began to see that his life was ‘either in the games or in the other’s expectations.’¹²² ‘Recreation’ and ‘expectations’ staged a perennial war in Chen-Feng’s life; gaming became his ‘resistance to the world’s expectations’. Then, in July 2018, the accumulated pressure from living in the ‘iron house’ erupted. Chen-Feng resigned from his high-paying position as director of product management and began to ‘play [games] in a retaliatory manner’ (*bao fu xing di wan* 报复性地玩). He felt as if he could not stop playing, even when he was exhausted and on the verge of collapse. He would give in to the world’s expectations if he stopped. The ‘retaliation’ went on for two months. Then, on a crisp autumn day in October 2018, Chen-Feng suddenly snapped out of that state of mind:

I was supposed to be looking for happiness by playing games, but was I truly happy? No, I was tired, I was exhausted, I was feeling so sick of myself. I switched off my computer and went to sleep. When I finally woke up, I began to ponder how the means through which I sought happiness seemed to have completely backfired (*bei dao er chi* 背道而驰). There were so many instances. Whether in trying to make money, to frantically play games, or to punch cards with gazillions of *xiuxing* groups, I thought I was trying to pursue happiness, but it never graced me. I came to see that I had completely misunderstood the meaning of happiness and the path towards it.

After this revelatory experience, Chen-Feng decided to commit himself to a one-year discipleship at the Wu-Wei network, having already visited the Wu-Dang retreat centre twice with his wife Ling-Yü and developed a deep appreciation of Yin-Xian’s teaching. Notably, in his reflections, Chen-Feng related money making and frantic gaming to *xiuxing*: all three worked as commensurable means to ‘happiness’ and qualitatively interchangeable ways to ‘resist the iron house’. This conception suggests his outlook on ‘*xiuxing*’ is informed by pragmatism and entrenched in a this-worldly paradigm: *xiuxing* is seen as a potential solution (among others) to a perceived problem, viz. the (subjectively felt) tyranny of ‘the iron house’. Chen-Feng’s history of attempting to resist ‘others’ expectations’, I suggest, may be read as a long-lasting reflective manoeuvre to escape the normative pressure he encountered growing up as a middle-class only

¹²² ‘*bu shi zai you xi li jiu shi zai bie ren de qi wang li*’ 不是在游戏里就是在别人的期望里

child.¹²³ Chen-Feng is acutely aware of the influences, opportunities, and obstacles present in his situated environment, and has actively rearranged his positionality vis-à-vis the manifold affordances in pursuit of the happiness he seeks. In this process, despite appearing to tread the narrow path imposed upon him, Chen-Feng neither yielded his subjective views nor became subjectivised by the repeated ‘interpellation’ of ‘other’s expectations’. On the contrary, he continued to explore (drastically different) opportunities to advance his personal objective. Becoming a ‘*xiuxing* hobbyist’ constituted one of several ways in which he sought to realise the self-oriented value of ‘happiness’.

Chen-Feng’s personal history elucidates how reflective manoeuvre constitutes an act of deliberate accommodation rather than passive acquiescence. However, his testimony equally illuminates the complex entanglement between his subjective desires and the enveloping structure. Towards the end of the interview, while conceding that he still didn’t quite understand what constitutes ‘real happiness’, Chen-Feng volunteered his working definition of happiness: ‘an entirely internalised state independent of any external condition.’¹²⁴ This definition is both atomising and interiorising; it is predicated on a view of a perceiving-evaluative self, with a unique system of ethical valuation, as the holder of the ultimate evaluative authority. Departing from this vantage point, Chen-Feng’s appraisal of and allegiance to any regimen of ethical striving becomes contingent upon his reflective evaluation of how it serves his personal quest for happiness. Further to this, as a form of ethical striving, recreational asceticism coheres with the ‘enterprising and desiring self’ that gained relevance in consonance with the party-state’s sweeping individualisation developmental strategy since the 1980s (Kleinman et al., 2011). Regardless of the sincerity of their will and seriousness of their efforts, ‘*xiuxing* hobbyists’ like Chen-Feng, Na-Na, Ling-Yü, and Tian-Yi see their participation in any ethical project as secondary to their private pursuit of ‘entirely interiorised states’, be they ‘happiness’, ‘ease’, ‘lightness’, ‘freedom’, ‘health’ or other subjectively-held intangible goods. They harness ethical resources (regimens, courses, teachers) to propitiate the perceiving-evaluative self rather than external authorities. Here, ethical actors’ constant reflective evaluation of their ‘interiorised states’ constitutes both the ‘moral engine’ (Mattingly et al., 2018) and the validation mechanism of their ethical striving.

¹²³ This developmental context may have been a sociological factor which contributed to his sense of inhibition and being weighed down by other’s expectations; as I didn’t directly research this matter, however, this can only be a speculative remark.

¹²⁴ ‘*yi zhong bu yi lai ren he wai zai tiao jian, wan quan nei hua de zhuang tai*’ 一种不依赖任何外在条件，完全内化的状态

The framework of recreational asceticism helps to explain why, when Ling-Yü received her unexpected promotion to the vice section-chief, the couple immediately forfeited the one-year assistant-discipleship. Once the influences, relations, opportunities, and obstacles in the situated environment had been shuffled, Ling-Yü and Chen-Feng swiftly rearranged their positionalities to ameliorate their relative standing vis-à-vis the privately held objective: ‘happiness’ (now seen as more likely promised by a life ‘within the system’ than breaking free from it). Nevertheless, they did not abandon *xiuxing* altogether. Upholding Yin-Xian’s teaching that ‘true *xiuxing* takes place in the ordinary world’, the couple reduced the relative weighting assigned to *xiuxing* among the multiple constituent projects of their ‘ordinary life’ (see section 1.3). This case study suggests the *open-ended* and *flexible* orientation adopted by these recreational ascetics, which finds resonance across Wu-Wei adherents and organisers’ experiences.

Yin-Xian significantly remarked on a separate occasion when reflecting upon his own journey as a ‘traditional culture hobbyist since childhood’:

One never knows how times (*shí* 时) and affordances (*shì* 势) might change. For that matter, I met my first Daoist master in my twenties while working in a factory but didn’t manage to keep up his *xiuxing* regimen in the end. It was not until in my forties I found that the time and affordances were right for this [doing and teaching *xiuxing* fulltime]. But there’s nothing wrong with this because it’s never good to act against times and affordances (*nǐ shí shì er wéi* 逆时势而为).

By contingently moving into the Wu-Dang mountains for *xiuxing* after retirement, setting up the Wu-Wei School upon the requests of his growing followers, pursuing rigorous yet ‘aestheticised’ asceticism while teaching adherents that ‘true *xiuxing* takes place in the ordinary world’, Yin-Xian is also engaged in the reflective manoeuvre. Acting with changing ‘times’ and ‘affordances’, the Wu-Wei founder conducts his ethical enterprise with deliberation and flexibility, agilely adapting to contingent occurrences within his immediate environment and beyond.

The framework of recreational asceticism also helps to elucidate why Tian-Yi felt free to pick and choose *xiuxing* activities at home and remained unperturbed by what could have been construed as a ‘compliance failure’ (see section 2). Conceiving of himself and fellow network members as ‘ordinary Chinese folks’ wanting to ‘live more freely’ but also ‘held back by other things’, Tian-Yi legitimised his contingent choice while persevering in (his customised version of) the Wu-Wei regimen. In 2021, Tian-Yi is still diligently practising *xiuxing* at home and actively participating in the various Wu-Wei WeChat groups. He envisages that in a couple of years, once

Yi-Ren has left home for university and if the network is still running, he might spend more time helping out the network—provided that his wife finds this acceptable. ‘The master’s ideas soar in the cloud (*zai yun duan shang* 在云端上), though I am pretty good at down-to-earth project management things. I think we’d make a great team. Of course, we’ll see if the master thinks so too!’ Tian-Yi once cheerfully said in a conversation. Like his *xiuxing* master and fellow *xiuxing* companions, Tian-Yi is acting with affordances: always looking out for opportunities to ameliorate his relative standing vis-à-vis his subjectively held objectives, neither anticipating a perfect resolution nor relinquishing his quest altogether. The ethnography at hand elucidates the ways in which these Chinese middle-class citizens persist in the reflective manoeuvre, despite confronting structural constraints and their own divided desires. They mobilise sophisticated ethical reasoning that rests upon the two pillars of acting with affordances and embracing through accommodation, while conceptualising themselves as ‘ordinary’ and thus enmeshed in the challenges confronting ordinary people.

3.2 Behind Recreational Asceticism: An Emergent ‘Psychologising-Atomising’ Governmentality in the Urban PRC

In this final section, I shall broaden my ethnographic analysis by situating the Wu-Wei form of recreational asceticism in a wider social and political context. Let me underscore that for the Wu-Wei recreational ascetic, the self is deemed the holder of the ultimate evaluative authority rather than any external body, such as a religious order, a sectarian group, or a *xiuxing* specialist. The perceiving-evaluative self is tasked with discernment among different ethical regimes and simultaneously (by virtue of its role as adjudicator) absolved of the obligation to adhere faithfully to any particular system. This feature of the Wu-Wei recreational asceticism appears to be intimately related to what some scholars have described as a process of ‘individualisation’ unfolding across multiple registers of Chinese social life (Alpermann, 2011; Hansen and Svarverud, 2010; Kipnis, 2012; Kleinman et al., 2011; Ong and Zhang, 2008; Rofel, 2007; Yan 2009a; 2010). In what follows, I reflect on the subtle ways in which this mode of ethical striving coalesces with an emergent form of psychologising-atomising governmentality¹²⁵ visible in some urban Chinese contexts. To do this, I build on anthropologist Jie Yang’s work (2015; 2017; 2018) that articulates

¹²⁵ I use governmentality in accordance with Foucault’s original formulation (1994, p. 237), as the ‘conduct of conduct’ (*conduire des conduites*) which, through historically specific combination of ‘rationalities’ and ‘technologies’, attempts to influence and shape subjectivities, desires, and behaviours in seemingly non-coercive manners. As a mode of power exercise, governmentality hinges upon people’s abilities to reflect and evaluate, self-govern, and self-actualise.

the party-state's recent mobilisation of psychological discourse, comparing her expositions with the Wu-Wei ethnography.

For Yang, the rapid popularisation of psychological discourses and diverse self-help technologies (since the turn of the twenty-first century) is not simply attributable to a dispersion of 'Western' popular psychology into the Chinese context; instead, the 'psycho-boom' in China derives from the party-state's 'strategic propagation' of a form of reasoning that uses private, psychological rhetoric to make sense of conditions and experiences with social and structural origins (2018).¹²⁶ Crucially, Yang suggests that what distinguishes the party-state approach to therapeutic governance from its Western counterpart, which relies on the intervention of highly specialised professionals of the 'psy-' disciplines¹²⁷ (see Rose, 1996), is the *devolution* of expert power. By de-emphasising 'psy-' expertise, encouraging 'informal diagnosis', and mobilising an amalgamation of healing practices with both local and foreign provenances, the Chinese model of therapeutic governance enables ordinary citizen-subjects to freely 'diagnose' themselves and others, and 'trade in psychological terms' (Yang, 2018, p. 607). The general dispersion of psychological knowledge, however, reduces complex socio-political issues to an inwardly focused discourse of 'mental health management' (ibid., p. 598). It further contributes to the atomisation of citizen-subjects, especially those situated at structurally disadvantaged locations.

Yang offers a telling illustration in her 2015 monograph, which investigates state-coordinated counselling services targeting unemployed former state-owned enterprise (SOE) workers in Beijing. She describes how the party-state has intensified the control of so-called 'idle and loose people' (a new political category created by economic restructuring) through a highly 'individualising' regime of intervention. This new governing practice meticulously appropriates imported psychological apparatuses, as well as retooling socialist-era political technology of 'thought work' and 'discourse of the heart' (2015, pp. 199-212). Through her analysis, Yang contends that the party-state pre-empts potential social unrest by simultaneously dissolving the responsibilities of the state and heightening the responsibilities of the individual citizen. She writes,

The therapeutic strategy reveals the flexibility and intensification of control by the Chinese state. *Psychologization as it is implemented in China is not about the psyche but about the application of the Chinese notion of the heart, an all-encompassing concept that includes not only emotion and cognition*

¹²⁶ See Thomas Matza's 2018 monograph for a comparative perspective on the complex interaction between psychological counselling, ethical strivings, and precarious socioeconomic transitions in the post-Soviet Saint Petersburg.

¹²⁷ These, for Rose, include psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis.

but also morality and virtue. Chinese psychologists adopt an embodied, holistic approach to mental problems that seeks to regulate people's behaviour, desires, and hidden capacities in order to harness their potential in the service of the state. This strategy came into being to deflect attention away from the state's inability to provide its people with adequate resources; instead, the state attempts to mobilize individuals to become responsible, entrepreneurial, productive subjects in the market economy (2015, p. 208, emphasis added).

Evidently, those participating in the Wu-Wei network belong to an entirely different and much more advantaged social group than former SOE workers targeted by state counselling programmes. However, the thread that connects these two otherwise distinct contexts is the attribution of responsibility. In both cases, the individual citizen-subject is discursively being responsabilised and responsabilising herself to lead a happy, fulfilling life; this is understood in an overwhelmingly psychologised and interiorised valence. Most Wu-Wei participants I spoke to locate the primary motivation to *xiuxing* in experiences of interiorised suffering. They consistently expressed this suffering in psychologised terms, whether or not they had been diagnosed by psychological professionals (recall, for instance, Ling-Yü's self-description as a patient of 'severe depression' despite not having sought a biomedical diagnosis). To address these psychologised problems, most adherents have tried out a dizzying array of regimens (explicitly bound up with *xiuxing* or care for the 'heart' and the 'spirit'), all promising to bring about their desired 'interiorised states'. Chen-Feng tellingly described this eclectic approach as 'punching attendance cards' with organisations 'in the field of the heart and the spirit' and 'the field of *xiuxing*'. The common avenues explored by Wu-Wei participants I spoke to included organised religions, forms of Chinese medicines, diverse forms of psychological counselling, physical-spiritual regimens, and various alternative therapy groups. This corroborates Yang's finding that the 'psychologization' of governance is conducted via channels as diverse as 'national studies' or 'traditional culture' institutes, positive psychology training (*pei xun* 培训) workshops, TV programmes, and clinical mental health services (2017).

Furthermore, like the state counselling programmes, the Wu-Wei *xiuxing* programme focuses intensely on matters of the 'heart', which Yang incisively defines as 'an all-encompassing concept that includes not only emotion and cognition but also morality and virtue' (2015, p. 208). This conception of the 'heart' is epitomised by the ethical pedagogy and discourses encountered at the Wu-Wei retreats. In my detailed analysis of this in chapter two, I underscored how the Wu-Wei rhetoric of turning 'selfish individuals' into 'superior persons responsible for harmonising the

heaven and the earth' located the motor for social change within each individual 'heart'. The social problems diagnosed by the Wu-Wei ethical teachers were invariably attributed to 'the atrophy of the ability to love', a 'heart ailment' (*xin bing* 心病) that developed coeval with the 'materialism' (*wu zhi zhu yi* 物质主义) and 'alienation' (*yi hua* 异化) intrinsic to market liberalisation. Through 'sprouting the capacity to love', aided by the individual's heightened affectivity, Wu-Wei participants are able to simultaneously repair their own internal sufferings and the social problems plaguing contemporary society.

The theory of social change inhering within the Wu-Wei 'heart' pedagogy bears an uncanny resemblance to the perspective propounded by the state counselling services; for both programmes, the locus of positive social change and the source of personal fulfilment are found within the 'heart' of the individual citizen-subjects. Despite issuing from diametrically opposed structural positions (one from 'within the system', the other from 'outside the system'), both pedagogical programmes partake in the emergent form of psychologising-atomising governmentality. This form of governmentality generates self-reliant subjects who willingly and (often) unwittingly strive to meet the agenda and interests set forth by the party-state; they learn to explain diverse personal predicaments via a psychological discourse that pathologises and atomises the self, without necessarily questioning the extra-psychological forces that engender these predicaments in the first place. The psychologising-atomising governmentality, therefore, 'inherits and propagates' the Chinese Communist Revolution's ambition to 'remould the mind, psychology, and even character of individuals' (Cheng 2009, p. 3). The contemporary PRC governing culture (Kipnis, 2008) modulates to a new key by actively de-emphasising the party-state's responsibility in citizens' subjectivity (trans)formation. Nevertheless, underlying the 'individualisation' processes remains the CCP's obstinate commitment to 'mass politics' and visions of a 'pedagogical state' (see Cheek, 2019).

Palmer and Winiger's excellent political anthropological analysis (2019) is instructive here. They suggest that the CCP's current governing focus can be interpreted as a project to nurture 'compliant individual autonomy': to 'enhance the autonomy of the subjects while guiding them toward the realization of the collective goals it set for the population' (ibid., p. 5). What will issue from citizen-subjects' encounters with the intensifying, interiorising party-state power at the site of the self remains to be seen. However, as my analysis shows, grassroots *xiuxing* organisations such as the Wu-Wei network does not promise a revolutionary alternative; instead, they suggest

the possibility of magnifying the normative responsibilities imputed to the atomised citizen-subject, coalescing with the party-state directive in subtle yet profound ways.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I developed the notion of the reflective manoeuvre as a mode of ethical action discernible among the middle-class Chinese ethical aspirants encountered via the Wu-Wei network. Building on this concept and paying special attention to participants' self-conception as 'ordinary folks' and '*xiuxing* hobbyists', I proposed the analytic of recreational asceticism to capture this distinctive (but in no ways unique) form of ethical striving. I ended my discussion with some observations on how the Wu-Wei version of recreational asceticism unexpectedly converges with an emergent form of psychologising-atomising governmentality. This coalescence complicates the ways in which we might perceive Wu-Wei participants' ethical strivings vis-à-vis the encompassing structure, despite their remarkable sagacity and agile pragmatism. It moreover prompts further reflections on the 'individualisation' processes unfolding within the contemporary PRC, which I suggest may paradoxically correlate to an intensification of party-state power on the site of the self.

I will take this opportunity to emphasise the need to fine-tune fundamental assumptions anthropologists bring to their analyses of Chinese social life. Some influential studies have described the party-state's individualising gaze as a corollary of the neoliberalisation of socialist governance (e.g. Anagnost, 2004, 2008; Ong and Zhang, 2008; Yan, H., 2003) or a decisive transition from 'hard' Leninist social engineering to 'soft' neoliberal biopolitics (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Greenhalgh, 2010). The 'neo-liberalisation' thesis, however, risks overtly or implicitly locating the ongoing socio-political transformations in China in a world-historical metanarrative. In the PRC (and beyond), local forms of governing cultures are often ideologically and historically removed from the so-called 'neoliberalism', despite sharing superficial resemblances in particular governing practices (see Kipnis, 2008 for an excellent analysis); when a globalising perspective is taken, such specificities are lost. Across the ethnographic chapters, I traced the complex genealogies and rationalities underlying a number of key party-state directives that could otherwise erroneously be glossed as 'neoliberal', including the aforementioned psychologising-atomising governmentality. With this in mind, I now turn toward some final reflections on the unstable valences of *xiuxing* in relation to the entwined ethical-political life in the PRC.

Conclusion

The Province of Reflective Freedom

This dissertation explored the social life of *xiuxing* unfolding via a private, grassroots-level organisation for its transmission in the contemporary PRC, a political order distinguished by a protean but pertinacious project of citizenry reform. I approached the polyvalent, highly transferable, and intensely generative notion of *xiuxing* as a keyword in the sense given by Raymond Williams (1983, p. xxvii). Treating *xiuxing* as an ethnographic concept without pre-emptively demarcating the boundaries of its discursive field, I tried to trace the chains of associations and networks of events activated when my interlocutors contingently coalesce and co-elaborate the signification of *xiuxing* in their lifeworlds.

This exploration rested upon the theoretical postulate that the ethical subject is simultaneously a socio-historically located political subject; her ethical pursuits are contoured by the forces of the enveloping political order, and may also seek to exert influences upon that very order. My suggestion has been that focused considerations of how political life exert pressure on ethical life, and vice versa, may help to move social theory away from the snares of determinism and voluntarism. Such considerations, furthermore, may help to eschew the pitfall of holism.

‘In different religious (and non-religious) contexts,’ Amira Mittermaier writes, ‘humans act and are simultaneously acted upon’ (2012, p. 259). My analysis of *xiuxing* via the Wu-Wei School proceeded from this simple observation. I explored the complex interplay of influences, issuing both from the ethical actor and the *Elswhere*, which give shape to historically-specific forms of ethical action. For the people I encountered through the Wu-Wei School, such influences are eminently associated with their situatedness within a distinct political order, one which stresses the perfectibility of the person and the political exigencies of self-reform. For these predominantly urban, middle-class citizens, *xiuxing* amounts to a multilayered mode of social action for mediating the manifold relationships that structure their lives; chief among these relationships are their relationships with themselves and their relationships with the party-state. To elucidate their sagacious exercises of reflective freedom (Laidlaw, 2013) – that is, freedom exercised *within* and *in relation to* structures of power – I developed a set of ethnographically-founded conceptual tools.

Through the notion of reflective manoeuvre, I sought to capture a mode of ethical action observed among Wu-Wei School participants (and discernible in other areas of PRC social life). The reflective manoeuvre describes an actor's continuous evaluative rearrangement of her positionality, vis-à-vis the ever-shifting configuration of relationships, influences, opportunities, and obstacles in which she finds herself and those whom she wishes to affect. This sophisticated ethical action rests upon two pillars of ethical reasoning: embrace through accommodation and act with affordances. The reflective manoeuvre sheds light on the labile, indeterminate province of social life in a context that features prominent, hardening structures. It enables a better appreciation of how the ever-shifting 'force of otherness' (Kuan, 2015, p. 24) invites the ethical subject's evaluative assessment and shapes the field of possible actions, while never fully dictating her complex trajectory.

The reflective manoeuvre, with its innate dynamism, echoes the notion of the scalable self. This concept captures the vital principle inhering in a historically-rooted view of the viable social person-cum-political subject: the potential of exerting scalable and expandable influences. Drawing on the discussions of the Wu-Wei theoretical underpinnings and Philippe Descola's (2013) theories of ontologies, I posit that the efficacy of the scalable self cannot be extricated from the prevalence and persuasiveness of the Analogical view of person-world relation in the context of the PRC. The parents and educators who endeavour to foster children's affectivity through the Wu-Wei/Steiner nexus explicitly partake in this Analogical view. The persistence with which the party-state has pursued citizenry reform might too be explained via the endurance of an Analogical conception. Whether acting from China's educative marginality or the party-state centre of power, actors recognise and act upon the replicability of macrocosmic patterns on the microcosmic level. Fundamentally, order must be maintained across interrelated scales for governance to prosper – whether in the governance of a life or the governance of a state; influences emanating from singular persons can erupt into torrential forces – whether in shaping the microenvironment of a family or transforming the macroenvironment of a society.

This tension and interdependence – seen as inherent to the relationship between the political subject and the state – is encapsulated in a well-worn aphorism, dating at least to the Warring States period and still widely invoked today. It perhaps finds its most elegant form in the

ancient philosophical text, the *Xunzi*: ‘The lord is the boat. The common people are the water. The water can support the boat. The water can also overturn the boat’ (*Xunzi*, p. 171).¹²⁸

The notion of citizen-state cooptation which I developed in the context of health and healing seeks to shed light on the continued existence of such dynamic. This concept helps to shift the analytical perspective from a zero-sum game of dominance-resistance to a more open-ended and unstable terrain of cooperation-competition. It moreover underscores creative manoeuvres that unfold in arenas akin to what Yael Navaro understands as ‘interstices’ in the context of southern Turkey: ‘the gaps, creaks, and crevices not entirely smothered by the bombastic politics at play nor flattened by the conflicting governmentalities in the region’ (2017, p. 211).

In this light, the perfectly imperfect ethical striving which I capture via recreational asceticism should not be read as simple resignation, but a form of deliberate, patient accommodation vis-à-vis a lifeworld animated by the constantly renegotiating flows of fluidity and viscosity. While recreational asceticism doesn’t enable a complete escape from the normativity of the contemporary PRC society, it nurtures the intermediate space between the polarities of escaping and embedding. That space, I suggest, is the province of reflective freedom.

¹²⁸ The original: ‘*jun zhe, zhou ye; shu ren zhe, shui ye, shui ze zai zhou, shui ze fu zhou* 君者，舟也；庶人者，水也。水则载舟，水则覆舟’.

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