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An Enchanted Modern: Urban Cultivation in Shanghai

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Abstract

China is in the midst of the fastest and largest process of urbanisation in history. Alongside the dynamism of the region's hyperdense cities, however, are alarming levels of air pollution, recurrent stories of toxic food, contaminated waterways and intensifying popular protests concerning polluting factories and plants. Issues surrounding a sustainable urban ecology have thus become paramount in the construction of Asia's metropolitan future. This paper, which focuses particularly on the Shanghai region, suggests that the ideas and practices of "cultivation" might be of value in the creation and imagination of a future ecological metropolis. We examine self-cultivation concretely, as a set of situated embodied practices in specific places and specific historical conditions. We also explore the abstract conceptual idea, by looking at how the modern philosopher Mou Zongsan articulated the idea of "cultivation" as a guide for life. Ultimately, we are interested in how the embodied cultural practices of cultivation can be harnessed as a strategy of re-enchantment, with the power to reconfigure urban nature in the Chinese megacity of the 21st century.

Keywords: cultivation, Shanghai, modernity, practice, urbanism

1. An enchanted modern: urban cultivation

At 8am in Shanghai's Nanjing Road, the giant commercial metropolis pulses with the frenzied congestion of early morning rush hour. In a central park right outside Jing'an Temple, an altogether different urban rhythm greets the day. Inside Jing'an Park the city is alive with the practice of ritual. At the front of the central axis, where the park meets the road, half-faded Chinese charac-

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ters are melting in the sun; these are the traces left by the water calligrapher, who has already been and gone.[1] A few paces in, in the shade of a garden pavilion (*ting* 停), an elderly couple vigorously rub their ear lobes to awaken the *qi* (氣) vital energy. All along the winding path and spreading around its central pond, several other park users – by themselves, with their teachers or in groups – practise all forms of *wushu* (武術), martial arts.[2] Some stand around a tape recorder as the voice calls out the moves, others await instruction from their masters who are practising in front of them. Some remain standing still, opening their hands to the sky or placing them on a point below the navel known as *dantian* (丹田 or "elixir field"), regarded as the root of the body's *qi*.[3]

Not far from Jing'an Temple, another one of the city's downtown parks awakens to its daily practices. At Fuxing Park, a verdant enclave located in the former French Concession, early morning *wushu* practitioners are accompanied by a host of pet owners who lovingly bring their birds out for an airing. They hang their cages on a cluster of branches, while they gather below for a chat and listen to the birds' songs. Later on, choir members assemble to belt out old propaganda songs from their youth; musicians hide in the bushes to practise their scales; dancers congregate at both dawn and dusk to tap, swing and waltz amongst the trees. The afternoon brings kite-fliers, card-players and tea-drinkers, as well as the old men who skilfully manipulate diabolos, swinging them back and forth, catching them in the air and circling them around their bodies like a hula hoop.[4]

While these activities may look like mere forms of entertainment taking place in a global secular city, we want to suggest, instead, that they be treated as the everyday ritual practices of an enchanted modernity. In Maoist China, the political rituals of mass mobilisation went a long way toward suppressing and replacing religious rituals.[5] In recent years, however, there has been a strong growth of religious practices concerned with individual lives, hopes and wishes, and a growing interest in nature and the environment. In cities, there is a great and varied religious life. Religious traditions and new religions have also become the focus of cultural, tourism and heritage projects.[6] Taken together, this contemporary religious renewal suggests that, alongside the top-

1 On water calligraphy see Zito 2014.

2 On the genealogy of the Chinese martial arts see Shahar 2008.

3 The representation of the Chinese body has been the subject of many studies. Angela Zito, Tani Barlow, Judith Farquhar, Eva Kit Wah Man and Ari Larissa Heinrich, in particular, have focused on several distinct aspects, namely, aesthetics, ethics, politics, sexuality, genre, biopolitics. On the birth of modern *qigong*, see for example Kohn 2002, Penny 1993 and Palmer 2007. On the institutionalisation of Chinese medicine see Croizier 1968. For the meaning of these terms and related practices see Yokota 2014. For Daoist-inspired practices in modern China see Liu 2004.

4 These brief descriptions are based on the authors' ethnographic notes taken during several visits to the parks in downtown Shanghai during winter and spring of 2018.

5 For a sociological account of the Red Guard Movement, see Walder 2009.

6 For recent changes in the religious landscape of China see for example Chau 2005 and Tarocco 2019.

down planning and engineering of the modern metropolis, there are growing processes of re-enchantment, in which the traditions of cultivation play an important part.

Figure 1: Wushu practitioners in Jing'an Park (Anna Greenspan, 2016)

In this paper, which focuses particularly on the Shanghai region in China, we explore the continued relevance of notions and practices of self-cultivation in the urban Sinosphere and suggest that they might be of value in the imagination of a future ecological metropolis. We articulate the concepts and practices of urban cultivation by focusing on three main areas. First, we examine self-cultivation concretely, as a set of situated embodied practices in specific places and specific historical conditions. We examine the embodied practices of self-cultivation as understood in Daoist and medical traditions that are still influential today. By treating the body as a site composed by the flow and blockages of *qi*, Daoist inner alchemists cultivate a microcosmic attunement to the constitutive force within Chinese cosmology. Second, we look at self-cultivation in the context of the writings of the influential philosopher Mou Zongsan (牟宗三, 1909–1995). As did other leading Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century, Mou sought to place historical Chinese cultural forms within the discourse of modernity rather than attribute the rise in the world of "modern" forms to Western powers alone. In contrast to the

Chinese discourse of modernisation embraced by the culture of the May Fourth Movement, Mou viewed the ethics of cultivation as a critical contribution to modern times. Third, we explore some physical spaces of cultivation, namely the gardens of the Jiangnan region (江 南, lit. "south of the river"). Jiangnan extends from the large metropolitan areas of Shanghai and Nanjing to the older urban centres of Suzhou, Hangzhou, Wuxi and Ningbo, all of which abound with urban gardens. The cultivation of the garden – its landscaped spaces, trees, rocks, waterways and pavilions – complicates the notion that nature in its ideal state is wild, unspoilt and opposed to cultural construction. Rather, in viewing nature (including human nature) as improved or enhanced by cultivation, the ethic embodied in the gardens of Southern China offers new ways of imagining the nature of cities. In the end, we turn from the urban gardens of Jiangnan to consider the modern urban park, focusing in particular on Shanghai's most central park in Jing'an district. While it is generally regarded as a public area shaped by the forces of secular modernity, the everyday rituals in Jing'an Park can also be seen as a form of religious re-enchantment attuned to Buddhist soteriologies and spaces of cultivation. The reanimation of the "buddhascapes" of modern Shanghai, we conclude, opens up new ways of conceptualising Chinese modernity and its approach to urban nature.

Our paper stems out of a larger research project, which questions the progressive temporal underpinnings of modernity in China. It excavates an alternative undercurrent, which challenges the divide between humans and nonhumans, nature and culture. Navigating between these dichotomies, it diffuses rigid categories into a "natureculture" (Haraway 2003) that is bound together in a web of reciprocal influence.[7] In order to do this, we engage from a philosophical, aesthetic and historical perspective with notions of self-cultivation and the disciplines of the "cultivation of life" (*yangsheng* 養生). We look at self-cultivation as a conceptual ideal and as a set of situated embodied cultural practices, which have been enabled by specific places and specific historical conditions and which are now harnessed in urban daily life. *Yangsheng*, a rich and multifaceted tradition, is alive and well in the everyday life of contemporary Chinese cities (see also Zito 2014 and Farquhar 2005). Our project examines the work of cultivation in several case studies that envision the nature of the future metropolis. We will look at urban farming and architecture; in particular the new urbanism project "Edible Cities". We will also analyse artistic practices that engage with self-cultivation, including those of Hong Lei 洪磊 and Zheng Bo 鄭波.[8] Hong Lei revisits the aesthetics of garden stones in his haunting black-and-white photographs *Taihu Stones* (太湖石, 2006). Zheng, meanwhile, inspired by the Neoconfucian thinker Wang Yangming and his

7 Our views on cultural conceptions of nature have been especially influenced by Nash 2014 and Elvin 2010.

8 For Zheng Bo's practices see http://zhengbo.org/index.html; for Hong Lei see http://www.chambersfineart.com/artists/hong-lei/cv?view=slider#13 (accessed June 2019).

practice of *gewu zhizhi* (格物致知, literally "to obtain knowledge by investigating the nature of things"), makes art that involves living with and learning from plants. Crucially, in his continuing engagement with Shanghai, Zheng's projects have been particularly focused on weeds. Perhaps, he provocatively suggests, it is the non-cultivated that can guide us towards the novel urban "gardens" of today.

Figure 2: The artist Zheng Bo (by courtesy of Zheng Bo, 2018)

2. Shanghai

With a population of more than 25 million, Shanghai is one of the largest municipalities in the world. It is also at the forefront of the most intense process of urbanisation in history.[9] The city's ongoing monumental transformation – the construction of almost twenty new subway lines, dozens of museums, skyscrapers, bridges and roads – is occurring in conjunction with an increasing mobilisation around environmental concerns. Alarming levels of air pollution, recurrent stories of toxic food and water, and predictions of serious flooding have all ensured that questions of a sustainable urban ecology have become

9 For a recent survey of Shanghai as a global city see Wasserstrom 2012, and the monumental multivolume history of Shanghai (Shanghai Tongshi 1999).

paramount in the construction of China's new cities. In the past two decades, Shanghai has sought to address these concerns by building a vast public transport system and embarking on a series of ambitious projects to clean the waterways. In keeping with its status as "National Garden City", it has continued to expand its green spaces. The Shanghai Master Plan (2017–2035) has outlined strategies for a "sponge city", to mitigate the impact of climate change.[10] Much of the discourse surrounding these modernising projects still appears to draw upon models of environmentalism based on the conception of an externalised nature. This is manifest both in the presupposition that nature can be managed and controlled by planning and infrastructure and, alternatively, in the myth of an untrammelled nature that exists in opposition to the culture of modern urban life.

It would be a mistake to think that these ecological assumptions can simply be explained away as problematic Western imports. The idea of nature as an object of cultural control is also found in the philosophies and ecologies of the Chinese world. Ruthless human interventions are part of the Chinese historical record as much as they are part of the European one. According to Mark Elvin, a certain amount of environmental degradation already took place between the tenth and fourteenth century in the context of remarkable advancement in agricultural productivity, urbanisation and mechanisation. The destruction of forests, soils and wildlife habitats reached its nadir during the population explosion of the late-imperial period, especially in the most technically advanced regions of the country (Elvin 2004: 6–7). Here, then, we are not postulating that certain specific Chinese ideas and perceptions of the natural environment can be considered a critical factor in explaining how the Chinese have actually used the resources of nature. Recognising these historical complexities, our project does not naively advocate for a return to a romanticised past.

Robert Weller confirms this scepticism towards an inherent ahistorical ecological sensitivity. He notes that both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan in the post-war period echoed Japan under the Meiji restoration of the late 19th century in that they adhered strictly to a purely utilitarian approach to the natural environment in the name of economic progress. They were indifferent to the destruction of nature by the process of industrialisation. A hallmark of the Meiji regime, this attitude also characterised both the nationalist and communist governments of China throughout the twentieth century. The slogans Maoists used to promote large-scale highly invasive infrastructure, including giant dams, best encapsulate this mentality: "Man Must Conquer Nature" and "Battling with Nature is Boundless Joy". Policy makers did not

10 See planning documents provided by the Shanghai Municipal People's Government, Shanghai Scientific and Technical Publishers, 2017. For a study on how the imagination of Shanghai contributes to reshaping our collective human futures see Greenspan 2014.

show any signs of an environmental consciousness or sensitivity to the fundamental importance of nature, Weller argues, before the middle of the 1980s. It is only then that China and Taiwan witness the creation of national parks and the rise of so-called "nature tourism".[11]

3. Embodied practices

Nevertheless, embodied practice survives. In imperial times, salvation, transcendence, longevity and the creation of an immortal body were for centuries key to practices and discourses of self-cultivation (*xiulian* 修煉, but also *xiuxing* 修行 or "individual cultivation"). The term *xiushen* 修身 refers specifically to cultivating the body in the sense of cultivating one's entire person. In Daoist inner alchemy, "nature", as it extends to the body, is the primary subject of cultivation (Pregadio 2005, Yokota 2014). In his book *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (2002), Shigehisa Kuriyama brings to our attention two images of the human body, one taken by the medical text *Routes of the Fourteen Meridians and their Functions* (*Shisijing fahui* 十四經發揮, 1341) by Hua Shou 滑壽, a Chinese physician, and the second taken by Vesalius's[12] *Fabrica* (1543). The striking distinction between a body marked by muscular structure versus one governed by the points of acupuncture that trace the flow of *qi* vividly demonstrates the difference in the perception of the human body between these two medical practices and their attending cosmologies.

Throughout his book, Kuriyama eloquently shows that one of the main reasons for this difference was that, in their understanding of the human body, Western physicians typically used a zoological model, where Chinese doctors looked instead to the world of plants. "Greek anatomy, we know, revolved around animals: not only were they the victim of most dissections, but the very idea of dissection owed much to curiosity about their organizing logic. A major inspiration for inquiry into musculature, moreover, was the desire to illuminate the secrets of animation, to clarify the wonderful capacity for self-movement which made animals, including human animals, distinct from plants" (Kuriyama 2002: 191). The Chinese science of the body, on the other hand, is rooted in an agricultural system that "has always been lopsided in favor of grain production, with animal husbandry playing a subsidiary role" (ibid.: 187). The world of vegetation rather than nonhuman animals was the preferred model for an understanding of embodiment. This vegetative per-

11 See Weller 2004: 2–12, 49–53, 64–101. On Japan see Morris-Suzuki 1991.

12 Andreas van Wessel, or Vesalius, was a Flemish anatomist and author of the famous text *De humani corporis fabrica* (*On the Fabric of the Human Body*).

spective offers a more diffuse and porous conception of corporeality, one which is not based on the rigid distinctions between organs and body parts. The genius of plants, as biologist Stefano Mancuso has written, offers a model of sensitivities and intelligence that is flat and distributed, rather than specialised and centralised (Mancuso 2017). Chinese religious practitioners had a practical orientation to their embodiment, engaging with a variety of techniques in their search for individual salvation, health and longevity. By the tenth century, their practices included meditation practices, breathing methods, ingestion of herbal and other drugs, a large variety of ritual or divinatory practices, as well as the sets of gymnastics and bodily postures known as *daoyin* (導引). Among these methods, we also find the breathing practices and alchemy known in the Daoist tradition as *waidan* (外丹 external alchemy, lit. "external elixir") and *neidan* 內丹 (internal alchemy, lit. "internal elixir"). After the Song period (960–1279), Neidan became influential outside Daoism, and in the late-imperial period, it was integrated into various aspects of Chinese culture.[13]

Both medical and Daoist texts keenly explore the basic constituents of the macrocosm and the microcosm. All natural phenomena are seen as a reverberation of *qi*, the underlying constitutive force within Chinese cosmology. *Qi* is at the centre of Chinese cosmologies and epistemologies of the body and its natural surroundings from the very beginning, and in a systematic way since the third century BCE. The body is understood as a physiological entity made up of the triad *qi*, *shen* (神, a manifestation of the "spirits") and *jing* (精, "essences", which may also refer to the refined *qi*). Other key terms include the dynamics of *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽) and the theory of the "five phases" (*wu xing* 五行, namely water, fire, metal, wood and earth). *Dao* (道, lit. "way") and *li* (理 or "pattern, principle") are two other key concepts. This system, in its several historical variants and reconfigurations, combines both material and metaphysical concerns. It compounds ideas on the body (*ti* 體), the "heart-mind" (*xin* 心), and the realm in which human beings exist (Pregadio 2005, Yokota 2014, Elvin 2010). The term used today as an equivalent of the English word "nature" is the older term *ziran* (自然; "that which is so of itself").

Importantly, nature is treated as humans' greater self. Historically, tombs, temples and cities were sited in relation to waters and mountains and according to the position of the sun. These geomantic practices (*fengshui* 風水) were systematised and aligned with official cosmology. Xun Liu argues in his *Daoist Modern*, a study of the already metropolitan city of Shanghai during the Republican era (1912–1949), that the Daoist inner alchemy revival movement actively participated in China's path of modernisation. Practitioners infused cultivation toward immortality with issues pertinent to their identity as Chi-

13 For Daoist ideas and practices of internal alchemy see Yokota 2014 and Pregadio 2005. For Chinese medicine see Hsu 2008; for Daoism in modern China see Liu 2009 and Chen 1995.

nese urban elites of their time. Thanks to their efforts, Daoist cultivation methods continue to be of relevance for the rest of the Chinese society (Liu 2009).

4. Alternative modernities

In the early twentieth century, the merits of cultivation were spread not only through embodied practices but also through philosophical discourse. Mou Zongsan's Buddhist-inspired New Confucianism sees conceptions of cultivation as a critical contribution to the modern thought of Immanuel Kant. His writings contain one of the most conceptually rich articulations of the concept of self-cultivation in modern times. Mou roots his ideas in a Chinese philosophical lineage – which he himself constructs – that maintains that access to the world beyond appearances, to "things as they are in themselves" is possible through practice. He elaborates this philosophical project through an engagement with transcendental philosophy. Mou translated all three of Kant's critiques, an enormously complex exercise that drove him to think through and borrow from Confucian, Daoist and, most of all, Buddhist doctrine and terminology. His response to Kant, whom he placed at the "climax of Western philosophy" (Billioud 2012: 9) was to posit a conception of human reason that went beyond transcendental limits and opened up to an exterior plane. Crucially, this access to a realm outside the boundaries of the subject occurred not through faith, as it did for Kant, but instead, through embodied practice. "The nexus of Mou Zongsan's philosophy," contends Sebastien Billioud "is the affirmation of a possible practical knowledge of the noumenal world. [… In] his vertical philosophical system," he explains, "the underlying ideal is the possibility of becoming a sage (in Confucianism), a Buddha (in Buddhism), or a divine being (in Daoism). Such an ideal is attainable by everyone through practice" (Billioud 2012: 56).

> Confucian moral cultivation (*xiuyang* 修養) is practice; Daoist cultivation (*xiulian* 修煉) is practice; Buddhist precept, concentration, and wisdom (*jie ding hui* 戒定慧) is practice […] Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism […] affirm practice as a way of becoming divine (*chengshen* 成神). (Mou 2014: 77)

Mou maintains that practical reason lies in the domain of morality. "China's Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism," he writes "all emphasize moving through practice to reach the highest good" (Mou 2014: 94). For him, morality is not determined as a universal law. Instead, it is best understood as an ethic or even an aesthetic. Practice culminates in the ideal of cultivation. "The cornerstone of Mou's moral metaphysics (which – let us repeat – is a practical and moral approach of the universe's ultimate reality)," concurs Billioud, "is

gongfu" (or the practice of self-cultivation) (Billioud 2012: 197). Like Michel Foucault's notion of the "art of life",[14] a philosophy of cultivation views thought not merely as a means of understanding the world, but as instead offering guidance on "a way to live". Cultivation does not promise theoretical knowledge. It does not represent the world. As a form of practical rather than cognitive knowledge, "*gongfu* focuses on 'life' 生命 (i.e. self-cultivation and self-transformation) rather than on 'nature' 自然 (i.e. knowledge of the world)" (Billioud 2012: 10). Mou calls this *shengming de xuewen* 生命的學問 or "existential learning", explains Clower, and contends that its fundamental concern is "how to regulate our lives, conduct our lives, and settle our lives" (Clower 2014: 9).

Mou Zongsan's new Confucianism was an important part of the countercurrent to the radical progressivism that has tended to dominate the intellectual life of modern China (Furth 1976, Makeham 2003). Yet, calling upon the philosophy of cultivation was in no way meant as an attempt to flee from the modern world. Rather, in the Chinese ideal of practice, and from the vantage point of the luxuriant urban parks of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Mou saw the possibilities of regenerating and reworking traditions that might usher in an alternative modernity.

5. From gardens to city parks: urban garden as practice

Practices of cultivation are rooted in, and inspired by, particular locales. In urban settings the primary site is the garden. Gardens have been cultivated as places of practice from at least as early as the late Ming period. Literati life centred on the garden as the locus of self-cultivation; a place that was particularly conducive to elite sociality, composing and reading poetry, playing and listening to music, drinking tea and entertaining friends. In his book *The Chinese Garden*, Joseph Wang quotes at length from the Qing scholar Chen Haozi 陈浩子 (born around 1612/1615) whose text *Huajing* (花鏡 or "Mirror of Flowers") records in exquisite detail daily life as it unfolds in each of the garden's different seasons. Wang calls it an "autobiography of a leisurely life". Here is Chen's account of a typical summer's day:

> Summer
>
> As soon as I got up early in the morning, I put on a lotus-leaf quilt as clothing and breathed the moist fresh air of the blossoming trees, at the same time singing and reciting verses of poetry as a way to teach the parrot to speak. During late morning, I casually read parts of Laozi and Zhuangzi, or practiced brush strokes patterned after famous calligraphers in the past. At noon, I took off my headscarf, hung it up over a cliff, and

14 See Foucault 1997 and Davidson 1994.

> then sat around a bamboo couch with close friends to discuss the scholarly work of *Qixie* and *Shanhai jing*. When tired, I took a nap and enjoyed a good dream. Thereafter, we had coconut and other fruit as snack and lotus flower wine as beverage. After taking a bath in the evening, I went boating and fishing amongst the wine-lined winding rivulet. (Chen Haozi in Wang 1998: 24)

This sense of a cultivated life within the garden structures all aspects of the physical landscape and guides the conception of nature that the garden is meant to evoke. In the introduction to her book *The Chinese Garden*, Maggie Keswick writes about radically differing cultural attitudes to lawns. In the West, she argues, the lawn functions as a "formalized representation of grassy meadows" that has behind it "the weight of the whole pastoral tradition" (Keswick 2003: 28). For Chinese rice growers, on the other hand, pastureland can only suggest the nomadic cattle raiser, the uncultivated barbarian. She tells of an educated Chinese gentleman visiting Europe in the 1920s who commented in amazement on a "mown and bordered lawn, which, while no doubt of interest to a cow, offers nothing to the intellect of a human being" (Keswick 2003: 28). The making of a garden can be seen as a form of practice that is based on the principle that nature is improved and enhanced by cultivation. Chinese gardens celebrate the mutual involvement of nature and culture, with bridges crossing streams, pagodas emerging from bamboo thickets and calligraphy decorating ornamental stones. The human element is integral to the garden, which is made for its visitors and organised in terms of the paths that traverse it. "The English," writes Keswick, "'plant' a garden, the Chinese 'build' one."[15]

The ideal of self-cultivation that is rooted in the construction of a garden is, as Joseph Wang notes, recorded in a variety of texts that outline the principles for the garden practitioner. Shen Fu (沈復 1708–1808) writes of the "art of deception" in garden design in his *Fusheng Liuji* (浮生六級 "Six Chapters of a Floating Life"), in the chapter entitled "The Little Pleasures of Life". Early 17th-century Qi Biaojia likens his practice as a gardener to a physician, general and painter rolled into one. He advises adding to space when it seems too empty, subtracting when it seems too full, levelling it when it seems too uneven, creating bends and unevenness when it seems too flat. "It is like a good doctor in the field curing a patient, using both nourishing and excitative medicines, or like a good general in the field, using both normal and surprise tactics," he writes. "Again, it is like a master painter at his work, not allowing a single dead stroke" (Qi Biaojia in Wang 1994: 35).

In the garden, culture and nature are seen as "naturally" interwoven. Architecture in the shape of the pavilion (*ting*), which serves to frame and focus

15 Keswick's cultural opposition is perhaps too facile. One might argue that there are plenty of "built gardens" in the European context. Nevertheless, the contrast between a garden based on a romantic ideal of an untrammelled nature that is reproduced in an urban setting versus the cultivated aesthetic of the Jiangnan garden is a powerful one.

nature, as well as offer a shelter and resting place, is an essential part of garden design. In the classical gardens of the Jiangnan region, pavilions dot the landscape – they are designed and placed so as to maximise meditation on a site that is particularly admired: a lake, the moon, the mountains. Keswick quotes the saying: "Once a place has a *ting* we can say we have a garden" (Keswick 2003: 132). Gardens are given a name and the most valued spaces are typically marked by calligraphic written interventions. "For the scholar-gardener, his most cherished goal was to be able to use his creation as a vehicle to embody and convey to beholders a specific set of *shi qing hua yi* (詩情畫意, literally "poetic sentiments and artistic conceptions", Wang 1994: 45). This sense of gardens as both an inspiration and a site for artistic creation appears also in the intimate relationship between gardens and landscape paintings. As a practice of self-cultivation, leisurely enjoyment of culture amongst the rocks, trees and plants is itself a highest good. Thus, the urban "gardenscapes" reveal the specific relation between urban nature and cultivation of Jiangnan cities, from Suzhou to Shanghai.

In the contemporary city, leisurely enjoyment of urban green space has largely shifted from private gardens to public parks. For those outside the scholar elites, this transition has resulted in greater access to urban nature. This transformation, however, has also occurred in conjunction with an ideology of secularisation. In his essay, "From Imperial Gardens to Public Parks: The Transformation of Urban Space in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing", Mingzheng Shi traces the genealogy of the public park in China. He shows how the creation of public spaces was part of a secularising dynamic through which older religious sites were appropriated in the creation of the modern city. "The concept of the public park, where common people can go for relaxation and recreation," he writes, "is purely Western and modern" (Shi 1998: 225). The early twentieth century public park movement drew on modern secular notions of leisure and entertainment to construct the notion of a park as an area "set aside for recreation, education, or for the preservation and enjoyment of natural beauty" (ibid.: 225). The Republican government embraced parks as a strategy of modernisation. "Since public parks were something modern cities had," he writes, "China should also have them" (Shi 1998: 232).

During the Qing Dynasty, Beijing had a number of imperial gardens, but all were reserved for the ruling Manchu class. The inner city spaces open to visitors were situated around temples. These were popular during regularly held temple fairs that bustled with markets, amusements and entertainment. The transformation of the sacred spaces devoted to city gods and ancestral and local deities into the modern *gongyuan* (公园) was "filtered through Meiji Japan, which incorporated it from the West for town and city planning" (Shi 1998: 226) Evidence of this lineage is written into the language. Although the Chinese

term *gongyuan* had existed in the classical Chinese lexicon, it actually referred to official gardens or land owned by the government – something altogether quite different from the Western notion of the park as a public space. In Meiji Japan, however, the character compound *gongyuan* was borrowed by the Japanese to translate the modern European term "public park", implying public access and even public ownership and was subsequently re-introduced into the modern Chinese lexicon. By incorporating gongyuan into the city space, the modernising government, argues Shi, was attempting to create a new sense of urban identity and promote "people's health and ethics" in order to "reform the lifestyles of urban residents" (ibid.: 232).[16]

6. Disenchantment?

This transformation of the city's green spaces is motivated by a cluster of ideas linking secularisation, mechanism and modernity, which was famously described by Max Weber as the "disenchantment of the world". The modern city – where people "exercise" rather than engage in ritual practice, and where public parks replaced temples and gardens – is constructed as an external environment that has been stripped of magic and "disenchanted of its gods and demons" (Weber 2013: 290). In place of a magical atmosphere, modernity constructs a rational, intellectualised cosmos, which, for the first time, is capable of being measured, quantified and understood.

Charles Taylor builds on these Weberian ideas in his work *A Secular Age*. For Taylor, the great distinction between modern times and that of our ancestors of five hundred years ago "is that they lived in an 'enchanted' world, and we do not" (Taylor 2008). He explores this distinction by way of a shift from what he calls a "porous self" in which "the line between personal agency and impersonal force was not clearly drawn" (ibid.) to a "buffered" self in which thoughts, feelings and meanings occur within us. In the enchanted world, spirits and other external nonhuman agencies impacted us from the outside, bringing meaning to the world. Modern secularisation banishes these entities, leaving us alone in a passive world of mechanistic matter, or nature, that is firmly under our control.

Recent scholarship, however, has questioned the narrative of modern secularisation. Media scholars, for example, have shown that the emergence of electric technology is deeply intertwined with the occult revival of the late nineteenth century.[17] In his book *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, Jason A. Josephson-Storm goes

16 See also Chen 1995 and Brownell 1995.

17 See Sconce 2000 and Stolow 2013.

so far as to challenge the idea that modernity is based on a disenchanted nature by arguing that disenchantment is itself a myth, which arose within a profoundly magical milieu (Josephson-Storm 2017). Most critical, for us, are the feminist "new materialists" who counter "Weber's disenchantment tale".[18] Jane Bennett makes a powerful case for an "enchanted materialism", which rejects the distinction between passive matter and vital life. By remaining attuned to the "liveliness of nonhuman matter" this philosophical orientation leaves room for a "state of wonder" and "an element of surprise". A conception of modernity, which "is always already filled with lively and enchanting, albeit non-purposive forces", Bennett argues, allows for "a contemporary world sprinkled with natural and cultural sites that have the power to 'enchant'" (Bennett 2013: 3). For Bennett this "mood of enchantment" has profound implications for an ethical life. "The very characterization of the world as disenchanted," she warns, "ignores and then discourages affective attachment to that world" (Bennett 2001: 3).

7. Chinese cities between enchantment and disenchantment

In the contemporary urban Sinosphere one can witness the continued relevance of self-cultivation. Public parks, for instance, are intended as secular spaces devoid of any enchantment. Celebrated as strategic spaces to "green the city", they are offered to citizens as places to exercise and relax with family and friends. And yet, if one looks closer, ideas related to self-cultivation shape the lives of many park users. If one visits gardens and parks in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong or Taipei during the early morning hours, one will always encounter groups of people practicing *taijiquan* or *qigong* – in the hope of improving their health, increasing their mental and physical powers and attaining to higher spiritual states. Singing, dancing, calligraphy, photography, keeping birds and fish, playing musical instruments, as well as diet and nutrition, constitute some of the practices of today's *yangsheng*. "In Beijing nowadays one sees life being cultivated wherever there is a little open space," write Farquhar and Zhang (2005: 306). Farquhar and Zhang are interested in the ways in which these everyday practices operate at a "micropolitical" level to "craft non-confrontational responses" to the power of the State. In this, they are also attentive to the "pleasures offered by *yangsheng*". In the play and friendships of practitioners, they see novel formations of civil society "emerging in the parks and vacant lots where yangsheng takes place" (Farquhar / Zhang 2005: 313). This collective culture is not directed by the politics of resistance, but is focused instead on the "collective crafting of the good life".

18 For more on New Materialism see Coole / Frost 2010.

In her documentary *Writing on Water*, Angela Zito records a group of seniors who gather in a park to practice the art and ethic of water calligraphy. In her ethnographic reflections, Zito writes of the park as a "third place", a space that is "not fundamentally organized by the state, family obligations, or new commodified forms of work and consumption" (Zito 2014: 13). Instead, the community that gathers to write in the park transforms the secular space by opening a space for the sacred. With joy, humour, beauty and enchantment, they embody a "*gongfu*, or a *yangsheng* (life cultivation) practice". Such practices, writes Zito, "entail a politics, whether they seem to or not: the art and politics of the everyday" (Zito 2014: 19).

Ethnographic evidence suggests that Chinese embodied traditions still involve, in some way or another, harnessing the cosmic powers of *qi*. From martial arts to *taijiquan* and *qigong*, and even acupuncture and herbal therapies, today's practices are based on a common set of ideas about the cosmos and the human body, one that does not postulate a clear dichotomy between the mind and the body. Crucially, we view cultivating, nurturing, but also managing and disciplining the body, as widespread forms of urban religious practice. For a committed practitioner, the signs of religious accomplishments are typically considered to be health, longevity and the ability to effortlessly perform extraordinary feats. During the so-called *qigong re* or "*qigong* fever" of the 1980s and 90s, many masters imparted their knowledge in the urban parks of Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu and many other cities.

Practitioners look for the positive effects of practice on their health. Every morning Jing'an Park in Shanghai's city centre is enlivened by this same culture of embodied practice. Like the city itself, it has for decades been subjected to a relentless process of secularisation. Importantly, however, as with other urban parks of contemporary China, it sits on land long regarded as numinous.[19] The origin of the numinosity and efficacy of Jing'an Temple can be traced back to around the third century CE and to an association with a spring named by local people "the bubbling well", or "the eye of the sea". Local people believed that the well would never dry up and thought that it was directly connected to the sea. During the period of the Republic during the 1920s, a time of religious activism that witnessed the proliferation of Buddhist-inspired activities, practitioners strongly took hold of this numinous core, thereby contributing to shaping this part of Shanghai. The Chinese Buddhist Association (中國佛教會), established in 1929, was headquartered in close proximity to Jing'an Temple, within the substantial grounds of the four-acre "Enlightenment Garden" (覺園). Many other groups used these gardens, including the Shanghai Buddhist Pure Karma Association, the Bodhi Study Society and the Buddha's Voice Radio.

19 There are many studies on Chinese sacred and numinous sites. See for example James Robson, *Power of Place: The Religious Landscape of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue 南嶽) in Medieval China*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center 2009. For Jing'an see Tarocco 2015.

Also nearby was perhaps the most aspirational and visionary garden of Shanghai, the Aili Gardens (愛麗園). The garden was destroyed and yet its memory lingers on in the landscaping practices of many contemporary sites, particularly in Taiwan.[20] Aili Garden extended for over 171 *mu* (about 11 hectares) and contained eight "scenic spots" of Buddhist inspiration, pavilions, pagodas, a stone boat, a Buddhist temple, a theatre, an artificial stream, a lake and several ponds. It combined the setting of the traditional scholar's landscape garden with an array of Buddhist-inspired modern facilities. The Bubbling Well Road Cemetery, a graveyard for Shanghai residents opened in 1898, was also located in this area and was subsequently destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

To a certain extent, one can view the creation of Jing'an Park as an attempt to mitigate the desecration and to counter its ominous potential through the magical efficacy of the cultivated spaces of Jing'an Temple (see Tarocco 2015). One should bear in mind that the Chinese belief in "efficacy" (靈 *ling*), the powers attributed to spiritual entities, is predicated on deep-seated fears that the dead are able to interfere with the living and not only in friendly ways. Spirits harbouring a vengeance will often try to do harm, inflicting illness and disaster upon the living.[21] Ultimately, the embodied cultural practices of cultivation involve deep engagement, beyond the shell of the interiorised modern subject, with unseen forces that come from outside – whether as ghosts or spirits, *qi*, the noumenon or nature as manifest in the garden.[22] We contend that the creative practices of cultivation are part of a deep undercurrent of enchanted modernity, which may have the power to forge new, alternative relations between nature and culture, external landscape and embodied interior, urban future and traditional past. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries the embodied cultural practices of cultivation are continuously harnessed as a strategy of re-enchantment. Today, they reflect the deep and lively cultural concerns of China's contemporaneity and open up the possibility of reconfiguring urban nature and the megacities of the Chinese world.

20 One can look for instance at the gardens of the Dharma Drum complex outside Taipei.

21 See for instance the essays in Watson / Rawski 1988; see also Hansen 1990 and Glahn 2003.

22 Mou's work on cultivation echoes the writings of Michel Foucault, who called for a return to thinking as a practice in the "art of life". See Foucault 1997 and Davidson 1994.

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