Farquhar, Judith and Zhang Qicheng

Ten Thousand Things is situated in-between several dimensions: disciplinarly in-between anthropology and philosophy, metageographically in-between the East and the West, and temporally in-between far distant time zones, namely, of the time of the writing of the classical texts and this modern, or post-modern, era. In the book, the two authors, Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang, from anthropology and philosophy, respectively, collaborate on the theme of nurturing life, or *yangsheng* 養生, a tradition that is a couple of thousand years old but is actively practiced as a ‘living tradition’ (p. 28) in contemporary China. Farquhar’s anthropological engagement with contemporary China, mundane life, and Chinese medicine in previous studies is synergized by Zhang’s deep interest in the foundational texts of East Asian medicine and philosophy, such as the *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon* (*Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經) and the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), which creates an efficacious window to contemplate the fundamental quality of humanity, ‘life’. Their innovative dialogue is bridged, as elaborated in Chapter four, by the fact that ‘life’ is the essential question of both anthropology and philosophy.

This co-authored work by an American anthropologist and a Chinese philosopher is not only complementary and collaborative but also comparative and experimental. In their novel collaboration, Farquhar and Zhang translate and negotiate the meanings of life between the epistemological and cultural terrains of the East and the West. The in-betweenness of the book is particularly visible in the authors’ illumination of the issue of ‘tradition’, which originated in ancient times but is realized in contemporary bodies through practice. With this positioning of in-betweenness, this book articulates that ‘the fundamental multiplicity of life cannot be reduced to abstract essences such as “the body,” “experience,” or an essentialized “Chinese culture”’ (p. 280).

Chapter one, entitled City Life, contextualizes the entire book with ethnographic descriptions of various *yangsheng* practices in Beijing, including calisthenics, *taiji quan* 太極拳, water-calligraphy, and shouting *qigong* 氣功, to name only a few. This chapter presents the city space of twenty-first century Beijing—around the 2008 Olympic Games—with a delineation of flamboyantly diverse *yangsheng* practices that makes ‘the specificity and historicity of the Chinese and Beijing urban arenas … especially visible’ (p. 52). Following the authors’ keen ethnographic eyes that capture ‘the emergent quality of life nurturance activities’ (p. 77) flowering in the space of Beijing, readers realize that an understanding of the meaning of *yangsheng* can be gained properly by
verbs rather than nouns, and that the city—the place for life—is populated with practices of bodies and their consequential embodiments.

Chapter two analyses two significant contexts of contemporary yangsheng practice in China: the privatization of health care and the surge of health-advice books in the transient social and medical milieu. This chapter discusses the Foucauldian biopolitical issues associated with health discourses in the new precarious health care contexts. However, with an in-depth interpretation of health books derived from the East Asian tradition—in particular the Huangdi neijing—the authors articulate the points of discussion beyond biopolitics. In the East Asian interaction of traditional knowledge and contemporary practice, ‘bodily experience’ matters. Since it contributes to a ‘self-consciously crafted’ life (p. 166), expert knowledge of yangsheng, rather than being imposed on life as a modern knowledge-power confluence, is ‘not only needed, but desirable’ (pp. 166–167). This interpretation amounts to the book’s significant theoretical contribution; it illustrates a relevant application of notions, coined in the Western contexts, to non-Western societies.

Chapter three provides a series of interviews with Beijingers and the two authors’ interpretation of them. The 14 interview excerpts, and following interpretations, constitute a mosaic of nurturing life in contemporary Beijing. What makes this chapter’s mosaic structure even more mosaic-like is the two authors’ separate interpretations of the interviews—indicated by JF (Judith Farquhar) and ZQC (Zhang Qicheng). The result of this experimental co-authoring is unexpectedly meaningful. While JF’s anthropological interpretation gains philosophical depth with ZQC’s interpretation; conversely, ZQC’s emphasis on East Asian cosmology and philosophy is vitalized by JF’s ethnographic description. The gathering of the mosaic pieces, at the end of the chapter, illuminates that ‘[t]he intentions toward health, pleasure, and calm reported by… interviewees are propensities that give form to the dispositions of bodies and selves, the routines of families, the sociality of neighbors’ (p. 237).

Chapter four illustrates the potential of the collaboration between philosophy and anthropology. The chapter combines an essay Zhang wrote on ‘life’ with Farquhar’s interpretation of it. Zhang philosophically interprets the meaning of life citing East Asian classics in Daoism, Confucianism, and medicine while Farquhar, standing in the anthropological position between cultures, interprets Zhang’s interpretation. These layered interpretations by a Chinese philosopher and an American anthropologist make the East Asian meanings of life successfully travel from ancient to contemporary time and from the East to the West. They articulate that life forms in this qi-transforming, transient world are irreducibly multiple, and that ‘meanings of life’ are inevitably ‘local, momentary, empirical’ (p. 276), which generate multiples meanings.