The Park Pass:
Peopling and Civilizing
a New Old Beijing

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The gates of Beijing’s famous parks open at daybreak. The largest crowds of park visitors stream through them between 5:00 and 8:00 a.m., a bit later in the coldest winter months. Though the gatehouses where admission tickets are collected are usually staffed at these hours, ticket sellers and ticket takers have little to do. Almost everyone going through the gates at these early hours has an annual park pass. In any case, no one bothers to check passes or tickets until later, when Chinese tourists and foreigners start showing up. The large numbers of Beijing residents who arrive at the parks so early are only partly from the surrounding neighborhoods; the earliest runs of buses serving the parks also bring numerous park visitors, some of them from remote suburbs.¹

Inside the parks at these hours, all is motion. Walkers, joggers, practitioners of taijiquan (tai chi), dancers, dog walkers, and calisthenics enthusiasts stake out their spaces and fill them to overflowing. Usually the only islands of stillness are small groups of stationary qigong adepts, focused on a more interior dynamic but active nevertheless. Later in the day these spaces will be shared by strollers enjoying the beauties of the park as well as by singing groups, dancing classes, handicap makers, water calligraphers, kite flyers, amateur opera performers, and photographers using the park as a well-groomed backdrop.

Foreign visitors to China’s cities are unfailingly impressed with the particular charm of this form of public life. But the exact nature of this “charm” has proven

¹. This discussion centers on parks in central Beijing and is based on field research in Beihai Park, Coal Hill Park, and Purple Bamboo Park and around the Houhai and Xihai lakes. Suburban parks such as the Summer Palace, the Yuanming Yuan, and Fragrant Hills Park are also important to city dwellers.
hard to articulate. Pankaj Mishra, commenting in the *London Review of Books*, notes the phenomenon in a useful way, since he contextualizes it within a broad historical vision:

There are reminders throughout the country, often far from the glittering malls, of a complex relationship between the revolutionary past and aggressively capitalist present. This is evident not only in the commemoration of Mao on T-shirts and posters, or the reverence with which villagers hoping to meet with justice at central government headquarters in Beijing speak of their departed leader. The signs are also there in the still widely prevalent “culture of the masses,” reflected in the sight of the middle-aged and elderly dancing unselfconsciously in public parks and on pavements, or the groups of old people singing revolutionary songs at memorial museums everywhere.2

Mishra’s comments suggest why these uses of public space are particularly intriguing: first, park life offers “reminders” of a revolutionary past despite the “aggressively capitalist” changes of the reform period. Second, we get the impression that China “still” has “masses” and that they might have a particular culture of their own. And third, more intimately but no less significantly, Mishra believes that the “middle-aged and elderly” who fill the parks dance “unselfconsciously,” not embarrassed to display their sometimes inept, markedly aging, not particularly exemplary bodies enjoying themselves in a public place.3

Mishra’s observations invite reflection on the class or social movement character of these gatherings of people engaged in apparently private enjoyments. Is exercising and pursuing hobbies in the public parks a continuation of the collective mobilizations of Maoism?4 Does it still make the personal political? Or does it privatize and personalize the culture of the masses to the point of a thorough depoliticization? Do these gatherings in public speak of something like revolution; or are they, in their disciplined docility, indicative of permanently silenced popular voices?

3. Park users often give enjoyment (*zhaole*) and happiness (*kuaile*) as reasons for their exercise and self-cultivation routines. This observation opens a large issue explored more fully in a book I am writing with Qicheng Zhang.
Middle-aged and elderly park users, with whom I have spoken often in the course of my ethnographic research on “life-nurturing” practices, do not consider themselves to be politically resistant or rebellious. They do, however, assert the value of the collective (even if in this market-centered age it comes together only for calisthenics) and lament the decline of Maoist morality and selflessness (fig. 1). The informal choral groups noticed by Mishra sing revolutionary songs with a fervor that both recalls and gives new life to the collective action of decades ago. Neighborhood organizers of dance lessons and calligraphy clubs refer to themselves as activists and use a Maoist language of service to the people to explain their efforts. This mobilization is usually referred to as a “fad” or “fever” for life nurturance, and it has been noticed as a feature of public life since the

5. Observations and quotations from interviews and conversations in this article are drawn from a research project on “life-nurturing” practices in modern Beijing. Qicheng Zhang of the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine is coinvestigator in this project. In 2003 we and a small group of graduate students performed a survey of two hundred residents of Beijing’s West City District, then conducted thirty-six intensive interviews with a selection of those surveyed. Special thanks are due to Qiu Hao, Luo Hao, Wang Minghao, Yu Hong, and Lai Lili.
The inner-city population of Beijing’s aging residents may be on the move just for fun, but we should not forget that this generation, veterans of the continuing revolution of Maoism, are experts at making politics out of the personal, and vice versa. Nationalism and the socialist collective are, as it were, in their bones.

In this discussion I examine the uses and meanings of the park pass, an identity card that in its very form and ubiquity recalls the highly politicized personal paperwork (shenfen) in which inherited class identity, the fundamental element of Maoist class struggle, was once recorded for all to see. The park pass, a mark of the individual citizen bearing rights accorded by the polity, seems to be an innocent repository of pure market value in the context of China’s capitalist reforms. But in practice it condenses a number of attitudes and habits characteristic of this city and its population. As such, this humble object opens a window onto a continuation of “commitment politics” in Chinese postsocialism, signaling both resistance to consumer regimes and acceptance of the broad national goals posited by the socialist state. One of these goals, of course, has been the successful and creditable hosting of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Perhaps especially in this first decade of the new millennium, then, the city of Beijing is a highly charged space. The life that fills its outdoor spaces, the people who assert their collective claims over its parks and vacant lots, is nurtured and deliberate. Like much that is practical, however, it is not theorized.

It is not even presented as a spectacle. The unselfconsciousness Mishra found in the dancers he described invites a certain reflection for the foreign observer. If this is a performance, where is the audience, and who is passing the hat? Where is that sense of physical embarrassment we have come to see as proper to the elderly? What happens to the tendency of the aged to stand on dignity, given that so many of them don’t know the dance step and are always just practicing? Above all, tourists strolling through Beijing’s parks have a feeling that some rather personal, markedly bodily activities have here been made public and collectively pursued in a very deliberate way, without embarrassment. The personal is made public.

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7. A 1993 film directed by Ning Ying, *For Fun (Zhao Le)*, provides an analysis of the micropolitics of space and place in contemporary Beijing that is quite parallel to that developed in this article.

public: the most natural and simple pleasures claim, en masse, the city’s space and
time and give it cultural form.9

In what follows I take up, in an ethnographic mode, practices of city life that
converge on public parks. Focusing on the uses, significance, and powers of the
annual park pass, I demonstrate some ways in which the most mundane “routines
and rituals” of state articulate in practice with both a spatial and a nationalist
politics of the people.10 This is not a politics of rebellion or resistance; rather, it
advances a compliant civilizational nationalism with deep roots in China’s revo-
lutionary twentieth century. It displays a particular sensitivity to the history of
spaces in the city and to the forms of ownership and control to which such spaces
can be subjected. I suggest that in the Chinese historical context even this quiet-
ist form of action must be appreciated for its political significance. To under-
stand the daily enjoyments of ordinary city residents as a continuation of China’s
revolutionary century, as Mishra has, is to acknowledge the voices and the public
activism of many whose forms of political communication are usually ignored,
or even denounced as passive. But a more generous definition of the political, one
that does not presume liberal democracy as its natural setting or emancipation
as its aim, can show how even compliance works on the dispositions of power in
public.

Movement after Maoism

The first person who ever showed me a park pass was an old man, walking slowly
with a cane in the huge Temple of Heaven park in the winter of 2001. I asked
him how often he came to the park, and he said, “About once a week. But that’s

9. This article originated in a 2006 American Anthropological Association panel organized in
tribute to Nancy Munn. The influence of Munn’s recent work on the history of Manhattan and Cen-
tral Park, her concern with spatiotemporalization, and her respect for the powers of objects all inform
my argument here. See Munn, The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in
a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992); and Munn,
“The ‘Becoming-Past’ of Places: Spacetime and Memory in Nineteenth-Century, Pre–Civil War

10. Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural
Revolution (New York: Blackwell, 1985), 1–13. On the politics of space, see, e.g., the articles in
Jonathan Boyarin, ed., Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 1994). For struggles over space in China, see Stephan Feuchtwang, ed., Making
Place: State Projects, Globalisation, and Local Responses in China (London: UCL Press, 2004);
York: Routledge, 2006); and Li Zhang, Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and
Social Networks within China’s Floating Population (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press,
2001).
because on the other days I go to other parks—Purple Bamboo, the Summer Palace, Chaoyang, Ditan, Coal Hill, all of them.” Then he pulled out his park pass to show me, happy to explain that for 50 RMB a year (US$6.25 then) he received unlimited free admission to twelve major parks in the city. When I asked whether that was a high price, he said, “Oh, no, it’s cheap for me.” He volunteered that he lived on a railroad pension of 200 RMB a month (US$25.00); thus a much bigger expense for him was his monthly bus pass, which (at about 45 RMB, or US$5.60 per month) enabled him to get to all these far-flung parks. His story raises questions: why did he invest so much of his meager resources to traveling all over the city—lame as he was—to walk in public parks? Was his home neighborhood so very grim and unwelcoming? What are we to make of his cheerful and positive view of this part of his life, his presentation of the park pass as a sort of guarantee of enjoyment and even freedom? What historically particular problems are addressed by this kind of leisurely and legal mobility in public?

For some theorists of politics and of contemporary Chinese political life, users of the city parks would be more readily seen as part of the apolitical or antipolitical problem in a state widely thought of as totalitarian. Chinese intellectuals, and other educated urbanites, tend to denounce “peasants” and the common people as “like sheep,” passive and requiring strong leadership (such as that of the Chinese Communist Party or local bosses) if they are to act. Similarly, the exercisers, meditators, hobbyists, and strollers who are the subject of this article are readily understandable as subjects of a new, “depoliticized” regime of governmentality, and the park pass could be seen as a form of population regulation of the “bread and circuses” sort.11

It is hard to find in this sort of popular practice anything that is oppositional to the state, and many definitions of the political require such an element of resistance.12 Further, some influential writers on Chinese modernity cling to a notion of politics that privileges the “intellectually inventive” action of those who enjoy access to a public sphere of open debate. Wang Hui, for example, subscribes to a narrow view of the political and imagines explicit public debate as essential to it.13


Thus he argues that the past few decades have seen a significant depoliticization both in China and worldwide, as there has been a decline in political party diversity and an alarming naturalization of the technocratic state. Yet Wang concludes one of his essays on depoliticization with a call for “a redefinition of the boundaries of politics itself.”

Arguments of this sort are rather narrower than the broader vision of “new social movements” offered by Jürgen Habermas in 1981: “The new conflicts are not sparked by problems of distribution but concern the grammar of forms of life.” Habermas speaks of “counter-institutions developed from within the life-world” and notes that capitalist firms and mass parties “differentiate and distance those spheres in which alone personal and collective identities could be formed as the environment of the system.” He concludes by asserting the “polemical significance of the new resistance and retreat movements which are reacting to the colonization of the life-world.” Though in this short article Habermas deploys the notion of public sphere in his usual way, he nevertheless offers an expansive appreciation of popular movements and practical polemics that might make it possible to move beyond state- or party-oriented notions of politics.

A recent study of Chinese history and social movements focuses even more helpfully on this problem of the political. Michael Dutton’s *Policing Chinese Politics* agrees with many other scholars that Chinese public life has seen a depoliticization, but with a difference. He develops a notion of the political drawn both from Carl Schmitt and from the first political essay of Mao Zedong, “Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society.” In this work, published in 1926, Mao echoes the famous Schmittian dictum that distinguishing between friends and enemies is the key political process, though Mao called this difference “the primary question of revolution.” Surveying a rich documentary history of China’s public security bureaus, Dutton’s study demonstrates that the chairman’s friend-enemy distinction had its vicissitudes, but for the fifty years that Mao led the revolutionary process it dominated politics. Communist Party sovereignty constantly shored itself up with new exclusions and diverse forms of scapegoating; class struggle became second nature.

17. Dutton translates this first passage of Mao’s first officially published essay as “Who are our enemies, who are our friends? That is the question germane to the revolution” (Policing, 3). But the statement is stronger than his translation acknowledges.
For several generations of Chinese people between the 1940s and the 1980s (not just party members, not just youth, not just mobilized workers, peasants, and soldiers), a sense of the political pervaded everyday life. There was almost no private space unreached by explicit concerns with class, privilege, differentials of power, and ideologically driven reflection on thoughts and desires. Dutton is not alone in exploring the characteristics of this “commitment politics,” which he sees as dispositions of power that “require more than the disciplining of the body; they require its passionate involvement.” Characterizing the nature of the political after an extraordinary Maoist hegemony is a minor industry in contemporary studies of China. But Dutton draws on his police archive to suggest that reform-era “socialism with Chinese characteristics” finally, in the 1980s, put an end to an obsessive Maoist anxiety about friends and enemies, the proper and the excluded. As Dengist policy moved China from the revolutionary to the utilitarian, from the utopian to the managerial, market relations replaced political struggle, and an increasingly hegemonic logic of contract depoliticized Chinese society.

In the contemporary Chinese situation, depoliticized but still committed actors in their daily practice act on a political habitus inculcated several decades ago but not yet really forgotten. Though everyday life has significantly privatized, Beijingers once steeped in collective mobilization still go out to be active in groups. Though it now seems as if every aspect of Chinese culture has been packaged for easy sale in a consumerist world, hobbyists and exercisers in the park avoid spending money or offering any product or service for sale. Between Maoism and the market, life-nurturing uses of public space propose, in a practical manner, an activism that, as Mishra perceived, maintains “a complex relationship between the revolutionary past and aggressively capitalist present.”

Park practice is thus a specific rather than a universal form of politics, working in and on its own space-time or lifeworld and making bodies and sites the

privileged and memorous terrain of action. Herein I see the action of “the (new) masses” to claim rights over and take possession of the public spaces in Beijing, so tightly controlled by the city and the state, as a form of peopling the city. The political disposition of bodies in public has a long history in China. In other words, the very concept of “the people” and “the masses” has long evoked politics and been linked to national culture in China.\(^{21}\)

The modern and revolutionary Chinese state was quite self-consciously peopled and civilized in an evolution that culminated in the short list of model operas and the other authorized literatures of the Cultural Revolution period (1966–76). Now, with Maoism apparently banished from public life and all manner of popular cultural forms available as sometimes high-priced commodities, the people appear to be transforming into a nation of consumers.\(^{22}\) Yet as I show in this discussion, Beijing residents are still capable of mobilizing as the people and finding enjoyment with minimal involvement in commodity regimes. This is a quiet politics, but one that challenges our statist definitions and our backward-looking critiques of “depoliticization.” Rather than denounce the collective activity of an uncritical mainstream as compliant and quietist, and therefore not political at all, we should seek in the ordinary action of the people a form of collective assertion that creates a political space.

**The Park Pass**

The public parks in Beijing have been undergoing a face-lift. As part of a long-standing “greening” policy, accelerated since 2001 as a function of the state’s promise to build a “new Beijing” for the 2008 Olympics, the former imperial enclaves of Beihai, Coal Hill, the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, and the Fragrant Hills, among other green spaces, have been replanted, repaved, and beautified. Renovation work goes on daily amid crowds of park visitors. Among the tourists admiring freshly repainted pavilions and taking snapshots in front of seasonally sculpted flower beds, or boating on the lakes and filing through small educational displays, are ordinary city dwellers who, unlike onetime visitors, use the parks mainly as part of their daily or weekly routines (fig. 2). These locals come back again and again to join choral singing, crocheting, or folk dancing groups; to jog or practice taiji, calisthenics, or qigong; to exercise their pet birds or walk their dogs; and, perhaps most of all, to see friends. Strolling in the park,

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\(^{21}\) Li, “Making a Name.”

and stopping to chat with its habitués, one feels that neighborhood life and even private domestic life has been extended into this most public of spaces. Activities Americans think of as personal, and sometimes prefer to do privately, such as exercise or handicrafts, are brought into the open and shared. Large and small social collectives are formed for singing, dancing, martial arts, or crocheting, but rules are few and attendance is casual.

These regular park users seldom rent a boat, buy a snack, or pay the entry fee for an exhibit. As I have noted, they don’t even pay the entry fee for the park itself, which in the case of the major historical parks costs US$1–$4. Instead these Beijingers invest in a yearly park pass. For the equivalent of US$6–$12 annually, depending on age—along with proof of Beijing residency and a small ID
The Park Pass

photo—the park pass offers unlimited admission to the city’s twelve most famous and expensive parks.\(^{23}\)

This small but treasured object, the park pass, laminated and kept in a shirt pocket or hung on a lanyard around the neck, marks its owner as unique while connecting him or her to the collective goods offered by the city. As I noted above, it holds the place of the old Maoist-era ID cards, long carried by urbanites to certify their mode of belonging to the polity, naming their work unit and inherited class status and including a photograph. Paperwork of this kind was, and is, called *shenfen*, “personal (body) status” or “person assignment.” Though the rules governing the issuance of a park pass are less stringent than those involved in obtaining an ID card based on official residence (*hukou*), this little card still functions to identify its holder as a Beijinger. Having one is an expression of belonging to the city.

The park pass is a great deal. As a matter of household economy, this expense outdoes all routine bargains, by far. In the many casual talks I have had with Beijingers in parks, the park pass has been the most common and most natural subject. It is the first thing people tell me about, and if more than one park user is present, everyone pulls out a park pass to show, drawing my attention to the list of parks open without charge to the holder. Beijingers love to talk about their bargain-hunting successes, and one would hardly think it necessary to go beyond the market value of this little bit of laminated paper to explain its significance and its salience in a conversation with a foreigner. Yet reflection on my experience of talking with Beijingers persuades me that when the park pass is mentioned, as it so often is, much more is being invoked than a cheap way to enter through the gates of a public place.

These humble objects are easily seen as instrumental; the park pass is certainly a tool that solves some practical problems of everyday life. Like other tools, it does something in itself; it gives form to action, though it is often thought of as inert. The park pass can also be seen semiotically: it represents and communicates certain rights, memories, and values. As both instrument and sign, the park pass facilitates an act of claiming a historical and political relation between the people and the urban space of the capital. This form of space claiming can be thought of as peopling the city, filling its most historically resonant spaces with bodies

\(^{23}\) In 2008 the admissions fees for many city parks were canceled to facilitate tourist use of the parks during the Olympics period. The park pass remained useful for some of the biggest and most popular parks (Temple of Heaven, for example), and admissions fees have been reinstated for tourist parks now that the Olympics are over.
that make a positive and very local contribution to Beijing’s modernization. In effect, the park pass fills time and space with qualities in a deliberate nationalist aesthetic of Chinese civilization. The park pass not only helps its users to people Beijing, but it also enables them to render this space civilized (wenming) for an imagined international gaze.24

The park pass amounts, then, to a mark of activity and efficacy in the production of a good life. It is a form of intervention in an imperfect world; it performs a propriety about the relation of individuals to the state. I have been investigating such forms of activity and efficacy in Beijing since the late 1990s, in collaboration with Qicheng Zhang. In surveys and interviews our group conducted with the people who use the parks most heavily, many of them retired and over forty-five years old, and in extensive readings of popular media, we hear again and again that “getting out into public places” is healthful and wise. Without a park pass, without their daily or weekly park enjoyments, people told us, they would be more isolated, ailing, and perhaps even exploited (by their families, by their neighbors). A tailor who retired early on disability, for example, spoke of relying on her martial arts companions in Yuetan Park for advice about how to handle her vision problems; laid-off workers in a park-bench crocheting group praised their volunteer teacher and their new comrades in handicrafts; a long-standing participant in choral singing in Beihai Park insisted that everyone is welcome even though the pavilions they use are too small for the crowd. Perhaps the most basic form of action for these Beijingers was leaving home to (re)join an informal collective. A subset of these pleasure seekers, moreover, considered themselves activists, organizing more opportunities for neighborhood people to join together in wholesome “life-nurturing” (yangsheng) activity.

Life in the parks is an improvement over everyday life in the alleys and apartment blocks, and this is not just because regular exercise and fresh air is good for you and pleasurable besides. But the use values of the park pass extend beyond the instrumental to incorporate several forms of significant action. Above all, perhaps, the park pass both gives its holder a position in history and the polity and

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allows the citizen a role in national or metropolitan development. The characteristics of this position are subject to continuous micropolitical crafting on the part of agents who still speak the language of revolution and are still committed to their country’s and their city’s mobilization.

**Forms of Efficacy**

To understand how the park pass is a tool for crafting a good life as citizen, or for civilizing urban space, it is necessary to understand a bit more about the arrangements of space in the city. For the six hundred years of its history as the capital, Beijing has been centered on the Imperial Palace, now popularly known as the Forbidden City. Before the twentieth century a walled area covering more than forty square kilometers around the palace was an imperial zone mostly inhabited by princely families in their garden mansions, the Palace Guard, and a wide range of craftspeople and servants providing support services to the court. The imperial enclave also contained parklands, temples, and monasteries. Nowadays the area of the old Imperial City is roughly demarcated by the Second Ring Road and the No. 2 subway line. The Communist Party administrative complex occupying the old palace grounds at Zhongnanhai—closed to the public—is in this area, just west of the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, as are a number of luxury hotels and a few glitzy shopping districts. Some of the old princely mansions are open to the paying public, and others are used for government offices or schools. In a gesture toward historic preservation and the nostalgias of the tourist industry, zoning laws discourage (but have not reliably prevented) high-rise development in this zone. Some old courtyard houses are being restored as private residences or exclusive clubs by wealthy neotraditionalists, and there have been a few city-sponsored but privately developed projects to build new (but not necessarily more affordable) courtyard housing. In a significant development for everyday life, clean public toilets staffed by attendants are beginning to replace, in more heavily trafficked areas, the collective latrines scattered throughout the back alleys. The famous parks inside the Second Ring Road are especially well groomed and especially popular with tourists.

At the same time, many lower-middle-class people live in these same districts of central Beijing, intensively jammed into the picturesque but uncomfortable housing that was subdivided decades ago from older, more spacious courtyard

houses. Ranged along the alleys made ever more narrow and twisted by the addition of tiny kitchens, storage rooms, and pigeon coops on the alley sides of cramped rooms, these houses are made of crumbling masonry (damp in rainy weather, dusty the rest of the time) and heated by space heaters. Most of them are stacked high with possessions stored in boxes and bundles; life at home can often be a constant process of digging out and then re-storing clothes, tools, and family records. Social life in the alleys casually thrives as residents make trips to the public toilets, leave out trash for daily pickup, exercise a pet, run an errand to the nearest daily street market, get an outdoor haircut, or gather in doorways and under trees for card games and gossip. This sort of back-alley social life, where residents are surrounded by people they have known most of their lives, is sometimes fraught with petty conflicts, and those who complain speak of inadequate space for which too many people compete. But many present the community life of the alleys as a precious but disappearing feature of the “old Beijing” life inside the Second Ring Road.

Gradually the low-level civil servants, workers, teachers, and small business people who have long lived in these alleys, many of them retired, are moving out to the far suburbs, where they can buy—with the compensation they receive from the city or private developers when their old house is razed for development—modern apartments in vast high-rise estates. These exiles from the old neighborhoods often speak of reconciling themselves to a lack of community in the new place. People who live in the new suburban high-rise communities become bored, they tell me, with the small gardens inside their gated compounds and miss their long walks to street markets through neighborhoods of familiars. Parents who have moved into new apartments with grown children enjoy cooking in indoor kitchens and shopping in supermarkets and appreciate that the walls, floors, and counters of new apartments are easier to keep clean. But more than one displaced retired woman has said to me that she wonders how she is supposed to spend the extra time she has gained with her modern conveniences.

And one meets these relocated former residents still in the downtown historic parks: they have ridden city buses for a great distance to rejoin old neighbors for recreation and sociability. “I ride the bus from the far south to Beihai Park because there’s much more going on here than in my home community,” one woman said to me. “My children work all day, they don’t really need my help in

26. On the changing legal and enforcement regimes affecting housing in Beijing, see Zhang, Strangers in the City; and Sian Victoria Liu, “In the Wake of Workers: Civil Society and the Moral Economy of Marketization at a Beijing Neighborhood” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2004).
the new apartment, so I have lots of time to come back downtown and find my friends, dance, sing, chat.” With a remark like this, I can usually expect the park pass to appear as a sort of demonstration.

But many long-term residents still remain in the downtown alleys, unable to move, cooking in minuscule shared kitchens, using collective latrines, bathing in washtubs or paying for the use of the few remaining bathhouses, bundling up to spend hours outside in the winter and staking an early claim on a shady spot outdoors in the summer. Life in the low-rise housing of central Beijing, in other words, cannot be completely lived indoors or even in the rather intimate neighborhood space of the alleys. Going outdoors, especially to parks, is an essential ingredient of the good life of Beijing’s central district.

It is important, then, that the city provides appealing places for people to gather and that they are made accessible to the city’s lower-income residents. New parks built all over the city as Beijing prepared for the 2008 Olympics were clearly designed to facilitate the outdoor life of citizens; all the new sites are free, requiring not even a park pass, and all are designed for diverse uses. The two-kilometer median park along Heyan Street, for example, offers pavilions with benches for opera groups, wide paved spaces that can accommodate both pedestrians and water calligraphers, and flower beds and public sculpture favored by photographers and climbing children. The plaza that was built over Xizhimen Street offers large open spaces for the yangge folk dance groups that once “stole” space under the Xizhimen highway ramps for their nightly practice. And every major high-rise development, it seems, must provide a small park where chess playing, taiji, and the exercising of dogs, birds, and toddlers can be facilitated. These design features acknowledge the habits of the people and render them as lasting structural features of the modern city.

Residents of the old Imperial City are well aware of the history of this space; in a sense they live it every day. Every renovation and most new structures in this area recall the architectural style of the Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1911), and my casual questioning about the neighborhood inevitably yielded a list of the great imperial personages who not long ago — perhaps only a hundred years ago — lived just a short walk in one direction or another. Some Qing dynasty princely residences are open to the public; others form the subject of popular media accounts.27 The Xuanwu District residence of the great Kangxi-era scholar Ji Xiaolan has figured

27. See the online journal China Heritage Quarterly, no. 12 (2007), www.chinaheritagequarterly.org, for a series of articles by Bruce Doar and Geremie R. Barmé about princely and official residences in inner-city Beijing.
in several much-loved television historical dramas; the bicycle rickshaw drivers who narrate Beijing’s popular hutong, or back-alley, tours rattle off the names of famous tenants in the courtyard houses they whiz past. In some cases their lists for only one house range from princes to bankers to underground communists to (after 1949) high government officials. Even when whole neighborhoods have been razed for redevelopment, as has happened in the Qianmen area, a virtualized “historical character” is maintained, and residents still recall the history of that patch of ground, even when it is only the ground that remains.28

The major parks themselves are known to be part of the former imperial complex; the nationalist symbolism of opening a once “forbidden” enclave to “the people” continues to be symbolically exploited in park development. The parklands and historic sites of the Imperial City began to be opened, in piecemeal fashion, to ordinary citizens in the 1920s and 1930s. Well before the ascendancy of the Communist Party in 1949, nationalist propaganda was emphasizing the populist value of the opening of the “Forbidden City.”29 Also in this period Beihai Park—just north of the still restricted Party Compound—began to be valorized in songs and belles lettres as a place where students, the elderly, soldiers, and families could come seeking leisurely sociability. This popular commitment to the nationalist idea of the power of the people persists, though the sense of history it propagates often forgets the egalitarian collectivism of park and public life of the Maoist era.

The Maoist provision of public space for the people is not entirely forgotten, though. A popular song of the 1950s and 1960s, still sung with gusto by choral groups who gather in park pavilions, speaks of the pleasures of park life after liberation:

“Let’s Ply the Oars”
Let’s ply the oars, let’s skim our little boat over the waves.
The beautiful White Dagoba reflects in the water, green trees and red walls surround us.
Our red scarves echo the sun’s red rays, sunlight glints on the lake surface,
Fish look up at us from under the water, quietly listening to our happy singing.

29. Indeed, it is arguable that the widespread and somewhat ironic use of the name Forbidden City (zijincheng) dates from the 1930s, precisely when large parts of the compound were no longer forbidden to the public.
Today’s homework is done, we came to play to our heart’s content.
Dear friends, I ask you, who has given us this happy life?
Our little boat so light drifts on the water, a cool breeze visits our faces.

Adopting the voice of schoolchildren (or, more exactly, young pioneers with their red scarves), the song links perfect enjoyment of a free afternoon with the benevolence of the Communist Party (“Who has given us . . . ?”). Though parks were more run-down then, admission was free or very cheap, and they provided a favorite haunt for retired soldiers and workers, high school and college students, grandmas looking after babies, and everyone on their once-longer lunch breaks. Now that they are rebeautified, however, many parks are thought of more immediately as once-exclusive imperial compounds, ownership of which has been transferred to the people. In this context, the park pass speaks of citizenship and belonging, a great (notionally precommunist) heritage of architecture and connoisseurship, and a republican end to aristocracies of wealth and special privilege, all at once. The cultural nationalism is unmistakable: what this object symbolizes is equal rights and equal participation in civilized Chineseness, every man, woman, and child an entitled user of the cultured spaces that are quintessentially China.

The Park Pass and the Act of Claiming

The act of getting and using a park pass for, say, the nurturing of one’s own life and health is more than a symbolic gesture of participation in a nationally conceived history, however. The disposition of bodies in public space, the weaving of personal life trajectories into the time and space of the city, the region, and the nation—these are acts of crafting space and time that have, as I have argued, a political edge. Some of this process is as much a politics of forgetting as it is of remembering. The personal claiming and framing of public space is a highly evolved tactic in both the history of popular movements in twentieth- and twenty-first-century China and in the daily life of—at least—Beijing. The art historian Wu Hung—a Beijinger himself—has recently published a book, Remaking Beijing, that records many grand historical gestures of urban occupation in the city; he places these alongside more minor dispositions of bodies in space and time, both those crafted by performance artists and a few that are taken for granted as part of everyday occupancy of the city.30

In his introduction Wu reproduces a work of performance art that illustrates well the particular relationship between the bodies of the population and the monumental historical spaces of the city (fig. 3). He has this to say about the image:

Deceptively simple, this performance in 2000 consisted of little more than staging a tableau: holding up an enlarged black and white family photo, the artist and his nine-year-old son took another picture in Tiananmen Square. The implications of the performance are rich and complex, however, largely due to Tiananmen's double role as the site of the performance and as the backdrop in the “photo-within-a-photo.” Taken in 1957, the old family photo shows [the artist] Zheng’s parents and his five older brothers and sisters, posed before a painted Tiananmen backdrop in a photo studio. Born five years later, Zheng was not among them.31

31. Wu, Remaking Beijing, 12.
In his subsequent discussion of the work, Wu notes but perhaps understates the politics of Zheng Lianjie’s performance. Most interesting is a curious failure to mention an important gesture of the photograph. Beijingers who read the image—deploying their habit of reading political codes into everything—point out immediately that the 1957 Tiananmen backdrop lacks the portrait of Mao Zedong that is supposed to be over the main door. Yet Wu’s history tells us that Mao’s portrait had hung there since before the founding of the People’s Republic in October 1949, and earlier national leaders had also had their portraits displayed at this spot in the center of Tiananmen. Did an unknown studio photographer in 1957 omit Mao’s portrait in his painted backdrop? Or did Zheng himself airbrush out the great helmsman? In either year, 1957 or 2000, this absence suggests an unconventional statement about the nation and the proper disposition of its leaders in the spaces of the national capital. Who are the leaders, when Mao’s portrait is gone? The people?

But I want to emphasize another, less secretive but more understated politics represented in this performance. In this “deceptively simple” gesture Zheng and his son make art from history and place. The enlarged photograph they hold makes visible an always implicit presence in Tiananmen Square, the center of the nation: this place not only marks the symbolic core of modern China, but it also holds millions of personal histories, some of them unremembered by any living person. After all, Zheng himself was not yet born when the earlier photograph was taken in 1957. For a moment when he returns with his son and a family snapshot, an atom of the personal history of the square is made visible again in the place itself. A family takes possession of the place for a second time, asserts its right to be there, its capacity to fold the symbolism of the nation into the intimate space and time of private lives. The grand abstract destiny of the nation is brought down to earth and made quite physical in the very material presence of the parents, the older siblings, the artist, and his son. Past and future inhabit this instant of performance: it need not be long—all the elements of national/personal time and space can be combined in the instant of a shutter opening. Photography makes its realist claim, preserving a moment of actual space while literally upstaging the architectural nationalism of Tiananmen and its curiously absent Great Leader.32

Adopting the same performance logic as Zheng and his son, park pass users prove in the doing that it is their right to occupy the parks, to fill the walkways with their ballroom dancing, to cover the paving stones with their water calligra-

Public Culture

To travel all over the city to gather in these public spaces. Laid-off workers, who sometimes feel stigmatized in the complex class consciousness of the city, colonize many park benches with their crocheting clubs and proudly announce their unemployed industriousness as they offer to sell crocheted hats, purses, and cell-phone pouches (fig. 4). City dwellers without residence papers, even while describing the daily hassles that go with being undocumented, talk of the precious release from anxiety they find walking, dancing, or practicing qigong in the park. Wedding couples and their photographic crews re-create, before the ornate gates of park pavilions, a fantasy of an imperial family that never was, complete with elaborate (rented) Western-style white wedding dresses. And of course, everyone proudly displays a park pass, by way of proof that they belong in this space and that this space, however national it may be, belongs, partly, to them.

Figure 4  A laid-off workers’ crocheting group occupying a lakeside park bench
The Park Pass and Its Civilized Quality

One thing that has impressed me about the people I see in central Beijing’s fee-charging parks is that many of them are quite dressed up. In fact, I have sometimes seen a woman in Beihai Park who seems to be a spontaneous work of satirical art: over her gauzy ball gown she wears several layers of glittery sweaters and scarves, many strings of costume jewelry, and a couple of hats. Her makeup is colorful, her purses bejeweled. I suppose she could be seen as one of the city’s walking wounded, but I cannot help reading her charming excess as a clever comment on the more refined good taste of the choral singers and ballroom dancers who are in the park most mornings. With their silk blouses and carefully pressed pants or their respectable and cheerfully colored sportswear, these park users have definitely gone out in public. Back in their own neighborhood alleys or apartment building courtyards, they would not have bothered—trash can be taken out and dogs walked in pajamas or yesterday’s undershirt, and it does not really matter if new or old neighbors or a phalanx of rickshaws bearing tourists on a hutong tour happens to see you. Dressing up for the park, in other words, is not a matter of simple visibility. Rather, it marks the place and the moment as an occasion; it civilizes the space (fig. 5).

It is especially those who participate in group activities who dress most carefully. Complimenting a choral singer on her beautiful clothes, for example, I was told: “We should dress up to come and sing. It shows respect for the park and for the wonderful singers who come here to lead us. And besides, it makes a special occasion for me—the two days a week I come to sing are my special time to enjoy myself.” After this first conversation I asked many singers and dancers whether they especially dressed up for their trips to the park, and all said that they did and that it was considered proper to do so. Almost everyone also said that they enjoyed the opportunity to wear their nicest clothes, and they appreciated everyone else looking their best.

Figure 5 Choral singers dressed up for their day in the park
In what sense can ordinary people “civilize” an urban space through everyday customs like these? Modern Chinese notions of civilization (wenming, civility, civil citizenship) and quality (suzhi) have been addressed before in the anthropological literature; 33 in fact, these linked concepts are almost unavoidable in any culturally oriented engagement with contemporary China. The former term has been the focus of numerous campaigns since the early 1980s. Wenming campaigns have not been entirely homogeneous—one in Beijing looked toward presenting a pleasant face for Olympic visitors in 2008, for example, while earlier ones were more about maintaining an ascetic socialist self-discipline—but they have all sought to persuade the Chinese population to adopt more polite, hygienic, orderly, and aesthetically pleasing (now, bourgeois) personal habits. The latter term, suzhi, became prominent in the 1990s in conjunction with a broadly eugenic emphasis in Chinese public policy: “education for quality” and “quality births” referred to state policies on family planning. The “spoiled” only children of the 1990s city needed to be disciplined in school to be socially responsible and collectively oriented, and families needed to be persuaded that having only one child was an opportunity to devote all resources to producing a high-quality (well-educated, moral, cosmopolitan, and clean) citizen.

The notions of wenming and suzhi made their way into popular discourse in complicated ways. Low-level civic volunteers in the neighborhoods sought to make their communities more wenming with trash cleanup campaigns, better enforcement of public latrine maintenance duties, afternoon programs to keep schoolkids busy, and, above all, the posting of signs reminding that a wenming neighborhood was everyone’s responsibility. Apart from the sign posting, such noble efforts have been hard to sustain, though not for lack of a general agreement that a more wenming environment would be desirable. Suzhi has had a more effective and troubling career in the popular imagination, in that a highly fluid idea of “quality” has become a term for denouncing neighbors while making special claims on virtue for oneself. The use of suzhi makes sometimes invidious distinctions, though these cannot be easily mapped onto class in any literal sociological sense.

33. Continuing public campaigns for a wenming city life and the widespread official and popular concern with population suzhi relate closely to the civilizing practices I discuss here. On both issues see Anagnost, National Past-Times; and Terry Woronov, “Transforming the Future: ‘Quality’ Children and the Chinese Nation” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2003). See also Social Culture Department, Lun chengshi.
One day, for example, I went mountain climbing in Fragrant Hills Park with two middle-aged women friends (they used their park passes; I bought a ticket). They were working-class housewives and close neighborhood friends. One, Mrs. Li, was getting by on an amazingly small income provided by her children. On this excursion day, Mrs. Li was dressed in an impeccably clean and ironed white blouse, simple black pants, and flat cloth shoes. I asked her about the blouse, which I admired. It was twenty-three years old, and she had made it herself. On the way down the mountain we bumped into a close relative of our second companion; this in-law was a woman who had a small business background. As Mrs. Li and I walked ahead of the two relatives, who were talking family matters, Mrs. Li grumbled that the newcomer was of “low suzhi.” “Just look at her clothes! And the vulgar way she talks!” This could have been merely an expression of jealousy that a relative stranger had barged into our mountain-climbing party; I certainly felt with some discomfort the classconsciousness embedded in the use of suzhi. But I was interested that Mrs. Li could, through her denunciation, place herself, in a much-launched homemade blouse, at a higher level of “quality” than this richer and more cosmopolitan intruder. Apparently, in some people’s eyes, there are proper ways of going out in public, and codes of behavior can be read in intimate relation to Maoist asceticism or to the florid consumerism of the new millennium.

“I Am Old Beijing”

In the park-centered practice of so many Beijingers, space and time are not natural and homogeneous abstract dimensions within which life is oriented; rather, they are crafted and lived heterogeneities. An insistent activism focused on making the good life works at the level of the spatiotemporal to assertively occupy the city and to bring quality to its everyday life. One cannot take this peopling and civilizing activity as a foregone conclusion; unless someone does it, it will not get done. Many collective activities (but far from all) are, for example, organized by volunteer activists based in the neighborhood committees. One retired accountant my collaborators and I spoke with often, for example, spends six nights a week leading a disco group for neighborhood women; she sees this activity partly as

34. In a similar vein, conversations with choral singers in several parks sometimes revealed an exclusivist class consciousness. Some retirees pointed out to me that all the singers were retirees, not laid-off workers (though this was not true). And one laid-off worker who sang expressed anxiety that her companions in this hobby did not fully welcome her.
her own exercise regime, partly as public service, and partly as a sacrifice, since she often has to miss favorite television shows in the evening. Several men who, though retired on pensions, received small monthly stipends to lead neighborhood committees spoke of their community activism as a continuation of the collectivist values they had lived as youths. They made little distinction between organizing a painting or seal-carving class and maintaining public health surveillance during the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, crisis. And the idiom in which they most naturally spoke was Maoist.

Members of the generation now moving into retirement were not just politically aware, they were politically active. They took very little that was institutional for granted, and they understood national responsibility as extending all the way down to the individual level. Like the boaters rowing across Beihai Lake after school in the 1950s and 1960s, they still ask, “Who has given us this happy life?” Perhaps this is why—as so many in Beijing have told me—you have to persist with your exercise regimes, your hobbies and recreations. What would the city be if its spaces and times were not constantly made and remade in the daily round of its citizens? People told me, for example, that the achievement of a wholesome old age in public, in Beijing, is a service to the nation. It looks good, they said, and it shows off citizens’ collective good health, to have ninety-year-olds in the neighborhoods and in the parks. This is more than the voice of a populace that has since the early 1970s been hyperaware of their city’s global image produced through journalism and tourism. It is also the voice of a thorough nationalist identification with the modern capital and its Chinese imperial past. Further, it is the voice of a people who have rejected the language of crisis and continuing revolution in favor of a quotidian extension of their own lives through forms of action that are under their own control. If this is a depoliticization, it is deeply internal to the political history of modern China.

Even in the most flat-footed demographic parts of interviews my collaborators and I have done, many people, when asked how long they have lived in the city, have replied, “I am old Beijing” (Wo shi lao Beijing). In one respect this statement is just shorthand and would be most correctly translated as “I am [a member of the] old Beijing [population].” But there are other ways of saying this that are equally easy (Wo shu lao Beijing; Wo shi lao Beijingde), and in context it is clear

35. In a recent discussion of Mao’s philosophical works, Slavoj Žižek has thrown interesting light on the untenable logic of crisis and continuing revolution in Maoism; his analysis is suggestive despite his misapprehension of certain features of Chinese history (“Introduction: Mao Tse-tung, the Marxist Lord of Misrule,” in On Practice and Contradiction [New York: Verso, 2007], 1–28).
that the statement “I am old Beijing” also performs a strong identification with the place and insists on the possession of a history. The statement is always made with pride, and the identity claimed is — of course — a political one. To claim to be of the group that has owned property in the city and lived here for several generations is at the same moment to assert a form of superiority: migrant workers, southerners transferred here decades ago to help run the new government, Chinese tourists from inferior cities — these neighbors are not part of the club. It is thus not at all surprising that those who think they can demonstrate a status as “old Beijing” are quick and proud to say so.

What interests me more, however, is how such an identification with the capital is lived, even for those who do not have deep family ties to the city. Zheng Lianjie, holding his family portrait in Tiananmen Square, asserts a kind of belonging-in-time that even feels entitled to delete Chairman Mao from the past. In an almost identical but more “commercial” gesture, wedding photographers recall imperial splendor for their clients who record the start of their own families in front of renovated fragments of old palaces. Photographic performances of this kind directly invoke not only a past but a future: Zheng’s young son is provided with a multigenerational personal-cum-national past of his own, and the future of a new family is photographically embedded in an imperial-yet-modern (but not revolutionary) heritage. But most of the uses of public space facilitated by the park pass and allowed by the authorities are more ephemeral than this; they go undocumented and usually uncommented on unless a journalist or anthropologist comes along to ask for an explanation. Do the well-dressed singers and earnest water calligraphers, joggers, dancers, and bird fanciers who fill the parks with practices of life nurturance have any power to form the future? Does their work to take possession of this space and beautify it with their lives last in any way? Do ordinary city dwellers feel as if they are powerful in making a new Beijing? Do they exceed, or even transgress, the urban imaginary propagated by the state and city governments?

The answers to questions like these are usually negative. Certainly we know that the residents of the city’s old neighborhoods are almost never consulted about the development plans that will eventually change their lives completely. But the regularity and enthusiasm with which Beijingers fill the parks with their self-cultivations, their sense of history, and their collective and personal ways of nurturing life suggest creativity, hopefulness, and empowerment. In a sense they are asserting a particular form of homegrown use value against the market priorities of a developmentalist state. Above all, though, they invoke the city as made of people, civilized people, even “the people” still recalled from the revolutions of
the twentieth century. As Beijingers flood into the parks in the early mornings, and drift home for lunch in the afternoons, sometimes returning in the evening to dance, they dispose themselves as agents who can live up to, live through, and craft a national heritage while improving a tourist moment. All this is a politics; all this is condensed in the park pass.