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Revolutionary narratives of self-compassion among older women in post-Mao Beijing

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Drawing upon interviews and participant observation conducted with hundreds of middle-aged and elderly Chinese women in rural and urban neighborhoods in Beijing Municipality between 1993 and 2012, this paper explores the emergence of revolutionary new narratives of self-compassion among older women in reform-era Beijing. Taught before 1949 that they should first and foremost serve their families and after 1949 that they should put their own individual needs aside and serve the party and the masses, many older Chinese women in Beijing – after the seeds of market reform were sown in the late 1970s – slowly began to focus more attention than before on themselves, their past and present experiences, sources of and solutions to past and present distress, and their own personal enjoyment of everyday life. The analysis shows how western theories of both gero-transcendence and individualization as modernization are insufficient to account for the complex cultural formations of self-care that have developed among older women in the first decades of post-Mao China.

Keywords: alleviation of suffering; self-compassion; care of the self; aging; women; China; reform era; social change; popular healing practices; Qigong

Introduction

Compassion for others and their suffering is a way of being that China scholar Joan Kleinman embodied throughout her life (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997). This paper takes a somewhat unconventional approach to the theme of compassion and social suffering by focusing on self-compassion, or the phenomenon of being emotionally moved by and called to alleviate one's own pain and suffering. While seen as an instinctual given in many contexts, self-compassion has been something rather revolutionary – or, more aptly, post-revolutionary – for women who were born in mainland China before the 1960s. Taught before 1949 that they should first and foremost serve their families and after 1949 that they should put their own individual needs aside and serve the party and the masses, older women in China – after the seeds of market reform were sown in the late 1970s – slowly began to focus more attention than before on themselves, their past and present experiences, and their enjoyment of everyday life. By the mid-1990s, when this author conducted 18 months of fieldwork in Beijing, and the 2000s, upon returning for shorter follow-up visits, many older women stressed that a significant current goal in their lives was to try to make up for past suffering by 'really, really enjoying what life has to offer' in their remaining time. This paper focuses on how these older Chinese women described their attempts to take care of themselves and make sense of and enjoy life in the moment in the face of past suffering and present difficulties. In doing so, particular attention is

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paid to these women's use of sayings and practices that sprang up during the post-reform era and became popular with middle-aged and older women in Beijing. In describing these phenomena, the paper notes a curious coming together of strands of a wide range of both traditional and modern social values in the ways in which older women in reform-era Beijing talked about and embodied their attempts to take better care of their individual 'body-selves' (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). This paper argues that these women's multiple strivings to attend to the care of the body-self frequently took the form of self-compassionate speech and actions that comprised for them a radically new way of being.

This paper draws upon field notes and interview transcripts from the fieldwork that was conducted by the author with hundreds of middle-aged and elderly Chinese women in rural and urban neighborhoods in Beijing Municipality between 1993 and 2012, with a focus on the period before 2009 (Shea 2006, 2011). These data are marshalled to describe some of the various forms that post-revolutionary self-compassion has taken among older women in reform-era Beijing as they have undertaken the modern pursuit of 'the care of the self' (Foucault 1986) in a highly glocalised manner that is decidedly not a mere imitation of the modern West.¹ The analysis takes a critical interpretative approach to examining four case studies involving older Beijing Chinese women, illustrating respectively: (1) self-compassion through placing limits on demands from family, work and society; (2) self-compassion through personal enjoyment of consumer goods; (3) self-compassion through Fragrant Qigong morning exercise; and (4) self-compassion through the self-care practices of Shen Chang Culture. In each of these cases, the women with whom the author conversed were keenly attuned to the 'social origins' and implications of their distress, expanding upon a classic theme in the anthropology of China (Kleinman 1986). In contrast to the main thrust of modernization theories of individualization (e.g., Giddens 1991), while these women saw their self-care as a departure from the past, they also often saw it as a complex hybrid mixture of certain strands of modernity and choice bits of revived tradition. Furthermore, in contrast to the ethereality of western gero-transcendence theory (e.g., Tornstam 1989),² they often saw a large part of their salvation in later life as ensuing from material or physical sources that could give them worldly pleasures that they had not experienced – or fully experienced – in previous eras of their lives. In addition, their care of the self was not seen as an end in itself or as a pulling back from the social and into the self, but, rather, as a way to enhance and sustain their caring engagement with family and community in a way that went beyond the mere fulfillment of external obligations.

Placing Limits on Demands from Family, Work and Society

Before marriage, obey your father. 未嫁从父。

After marriage, obey your husband. 既嫁从夫。

When widowed, obey your son. 夫死从子。

(The Three Virtues of Pre-Modern China)

Serve the people! 为人民服务!

(Common slogan in Maoist-Era China)

While the vast majority of older Beijing women in the study were still dedicating a large amount of time, effort, and thought to the care of their families, there was also a distinct theme emphasized by many of them that it was time to put some limits on the demands that family, work, and society placed upon them. Traditional pre-revolutionary Confucian values that configured a woman's whole life as centered on the care of family

under the authority of a succession of male heads of household rankled with nearly all of them, but for many women so too did the modernist Maoist revolutionary spirit of serving society to such a degree that it was at the expense of one's own personal health, self-development, and enjoyment. In their discourse on placing limits on their receptivity to meeting external demands, these women were thus resisting certain key features of Confucian familialism and Maoist collectivism that had played such a large role in their earlier socialization and development. In so doing, as would be predicted by modernization theory, they were arguing for the right to be the kind of modern individual who is entitled to more attention to the care of the self than was the case in their earlier lives. However, while certain dimensions of modern life afforded them greater freedom to privilege self-care, they saw other aspects of modernity as preventing them from fully nurturing themselves. Furthermore, in contrast to gero-transcendence theory, their self-nurturance took the form of embracing material and physical means to self-care, rather than an idealized transcendence of materialism. Finally, what they were seeking was a better balance between the care of self and others, rather than an escape into themselves. These points can be illustrated with material from three older Beijing women: Yang Lichun, Ning Guiqin, and Bai Suzhen.³

Yang Lingchun was a semi-retired Chinese high school teacher in her mid-50s when the author interviewed her in her apartment in urban Beijing in the summer of 1994. Like many other women interviewed, she stressed the importance of older people placing limits on the demands of family, work, and society so that they themselves could enjoy the fruits of the reforms. Yang was looking forward to the prospect of an empty-nest lifestyle in the near future. Soon, her adult children would all be out of the house, and she and her husband could pay more attention to enjoying themselves. Their daughter, having just graduated from college and found a job, would be moving to her own apartment. Although their son and daughter-in-law will soon move in with them for four months so that her daughter-in-law could have a month of traditional postpartum rest (坐月子) and then return to her demanding career-track job immediately thereafter, Yang said that four months was her limit. It would give Yang the chance to 'enjoy holding her granddaughter' for a while, but after that, they would have to move out and find a nanny, because she did not want to be tied down long term. She told us these plans with an air of self-satisfied pride in doing the right thing for both herself and the younger generations who should learn to do for themselves.

I'm not willing to take care of my grandchildren longer than that because children should exercise themselves in the practice (锻炼) of taking care of their own children. When a person gets to this time in life where I'm at, you should enjoy the good things in life (享受) and seek what makes you happy (找自己的乐趣). I am very against old women slavishly taking care of their grandchildren until they fall down dead and never taking care of their own health. I feel like if that's how you live out your final years, then life would not have been worth living. In your whole life, you'd never get a chance to take care of yourself and enjoy yourself and do what you felt like doing. And your kids and grandkids wouldn't ever learn how to do things for themselves."

In the interview, Yang expressed great regret that she 'hadn't been attentive to self-care' (自我保健) when she was young. Although Yang still did some paid tutoring and lecturing on the side, years ago she had to take sick leave and retire early from her job at the high school due to coronary heart disease and rapidly worsening eyesight, both stemming from self-neglect during the Maoist period. Yang recounted how in the 1950s and 1960s she and all her contemporaries:

We just worked like our lives depended on it (拼命地工作) to establish a new China and didn't take care of our own health. At that time, we felt like our families and work units desperately needed us to work, so even if we were going blind, we wouldn't miss any time at work to go to the doctor. Now our kids say that our generation was very stupid (很傻). And I agree with them that we were very stupid. If you don't take care of your health, then you can't do any work or housework if you get sick, so that was a very stupid way to do things! Now that society has changed so that making money is number one, I feel really stupid for having sacrificed so much for the building of communist society.

Here Yang was eschewing as moral or ethical the kinds and degrees of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation that extended to the point of causing individuals lasting physical or emotional harm, preventing them from being able to sustain their health and their long-term contribution to family and work. In its place, as above, Yang substituted a notion of new balance over the long haul between labor and self-care and between the older and the younger generations over a life-time.

By this point in life, Yang said that she had put in her due time of being primarily responsible for the care of others, and now it was time to turn to the care of the self. Yang said that when you get old, you should focus on 'doing things that you yourself really like to do' (自己喜欢的事). She likened later life to a 'time of harvest' (丰收季节) when you should 'enjoy the fruits of your life's labor,' rather than continue to 'suffer hard work and sacrifice' or 'worry about other people's problems.' She said that one of the things that she especially enjoyed in her semi-retirement was going out and having fun with friends and taking group dance classes in the park. She said that she no longer had any interest in national or international affairs, and was only interested in news about health, self-care, and 'secrets of longevity' (长寿的秘密). Recalling Premier Zhou Enlai's wife Deng Yingchao's newspaper article from the late 1970s, Yang said that the dawning of the reform era also gave her the go-ahead to focus not only on self-care but also on enjoying her conjugal relationship in 'the second springtime' (第二个春天) of life (Shea 2013). Yang said that the feeling between her and her husband (感情) just kept 'getting better and better' and volunteered that they were really looking forward to the near prospect of an empty nest to afford them more privacy and perhaps a 'second honeymoon' (第二个蜜月).

In the eyes of the interviewees, a large part of this relative freedom from intergenerational demands in later life in post-reform China is related to the modern luxury of having an old age pension and not being financially dependent on one's children. For example, in 1994 Ning Guiqin, a rural woman in her 60s, said:

Having a pension – that is what happiness/contentment/well-being is (有退休金, 这就是幸福)! Then you don't need to be dependent on your sons or daughters (不用依靠儿女). Otherwise, people will say [making a face mixing pity with mild disdain], 'Oh, you don't have any money?' But if you have your own money, then you don't have anything to get angry about (没气生). People like us don't have any patience to ask our sons for money (咱们都没有能耐问儿子要钱). Because if they give you two dollars (两块), only then can you spend a little, but if they don't give you anything, then you won't have any money to spend. That's no good.

In a way that mirrored Chinese feminist discourse on the economic roots of women's liberation, some women went so far as to say that the Chinese government had 'liberated' older people from 'being dependent on their children' by making policies that paved the way for livable retirement pensions in the reform era.

The importance of pensions for intergenerational independence was repeated in 2007 by Bai Suzhen, a retired urban factory union leader in her 70s. However, Bai pointed out that money was not the only factor. She and her husband had ample pensions and did not

need their children's money. However, like so many in reform-era China, one of their sons had gotten divorced, and found himself a single parent when his ex-wife opted for freedom from childrearing. Needing to work long hours to support his daughter on one income, he came to rely on his retired mother to take care of, cook for, and do laundry for his daughter. When the author asked Bai what it would mean to be liberated in later life, chuckling at the mischievous irony of the recent individualistic usage of the originally Maoist term "liberation", she said:

Me myself liberated, huh (自己解放了啊)? That would be if I could do whatever I was wanting to do, like go out and have some fun, read the newspaper, read a magazine, go out and make some friends, or get some physical exercise – if I could do that – now that would be liberation (这就算解放了)! People like me still taking care of this kid, we aren't yet liberated (还不算解放)!"

Thus, the notions inherent in modernization and gero-transcendence theories (Sokolosky 2009) fit in some ways with what these older Chinese women are undertaking, but not in others. Modernization theory fits in that the social attitudes and pension systems of modernity have made some intergenerational independence more tenable. However, other aspects of modernity like younger women's career tracks and rising divorce rates have further deferred grandmotherly ease. Likewise, gero-transcendence theory fits in that these older Chinese women are shifting their attention less toward the outside world and more toward themselves than they had earlier in their lives. However, it does not fit well with gero-transcendence theory in that their journey into more self-care is not via the route of eschewing the material and the physical for the cosmic and spiritual, but, rather, via particular ways of embracing material and physical resources. In addition, for the majority of these women, self-care was not a simple end in itself, but also a means for the long-term maintenance of their ability to engage with and care for others in their family and community. They were striving for a new form of this-worldly balance between self and other, rather than a personal form of cosmic transcendence.

Enjoying the fruits of the reforms

I want to really, really enjoy myself now! 我要好好儿享受!

(Frequent comment made by older women in post-reform Beijing)

One of the forms which older Chinese women's self-compassion has taken in the post-reform era is the personal enjoyment of consumer goods, through either individual consumption or vicarious enjoyment of associates' consumption. In 1990s' Beijing, this was expressed in a variety of sayings circulating among older men and women, beginning with 'I want to/I should' and ending variously with: 'really, really enjoy myself now (好好儿享受),' 'really live it up (好好活着),' 'live a few more years (多活几年),' or 'enjoy the good things in life (因该享福).' More recently, the sentiment has been given concrete form in the widespread establishment in urban areas since the 2000s of neighborhood centers for leisure activities (休闲中心) frequented by elders.

On this theme, the interviewees emphasized that life should not be just about hard work, self-sacrifice, and thrifty self-denial. Not only should it be the young who enjoy the good food, nice clothing, and other fruits of the reforms, but older people should enjoy these things too. At first, one may wonder if the idea that the young should come first was not a longstanding tradition but rather just a recent side effect of the 1960s' Maoist cult of youth, but these women also associated self-sacrifice with pre-Revolutionary times

when, they recalled, adults sacrificed the best morsels for growing children. While some historical sources report that choice food was regularly offered first to male elders in pre-Revolutionary China, the interviewees did not conjure that kind of patriarchal gerontocratic past. Instead, they talked of a conservative self-denying past in which older men, and especially older women, sacrificed for youth.

In the context of the recent affluence of Beijing, it was no longer seen as necessary or desirable for older people to deny themselves the pleasures of consumer goods. So the interviewees talked about how they should resist their socialization from tougher times in which they dared not eat or wear something nice (舍不得吃, 舍不得穿), lest a younger family member need it more or they themselves need it later. They bragged about now teaching their grandchildren that youth should not take the best pieces of food at the table but instead first offer it to their elders. They talked about how they convinced themselves to take out their good clothes and wear them on everyday occasions, rather than storing them away for some unknown future special occasion. Many of them also had a counter-discourse running, that they were too old to enjoy eating much and too old to look good in nice or new clothing, while at the same time criticizing themselves with the 'modern' idea that it was precisely older women who should wear colorful new clothing and makeup to compensate for the effects of aging. These women felt a moral imperative for older people to partake of the new consumer opportunities for pleasure (cf. Farquhar 2002), because they had suffered a great deal in the past and only had so many more years left to enjoy what their nation's new market economy had made available to them.

Examples of this kind of approach to consumerism in later life come from interviews with older women in Beijing as early as the early-1990s. For instance, in 1994 Wei Yufen, an urban retired doctor in her 60s spoke with delight and pride about herself and her husband, also retired, and both with pensions:

Before our whole family only earned a tiny bit of money in wages. Now the two of us eat as though we could never eat it all up. [Laughter] Now we don't save our money. You shouldn't be loath to part with money. Now we spend it on ourselves. ... Right now we both are just thinking of ways to live it up more/live longer (想办法多活). [Laughter]

Similarly, Wu Wenying, a rural-dweller and former agricultural laborer in her 60s argued that it was now her turn to treat herself well. She and her husband had recently completed their traditional duty of financially supporting their sons in getting married, building a house, and starting their own families: 'My sons have just established themselves. They've both started their families. It is just now that I finally have no burdens, so I should really take good care of myself and live well (好好生活) and live a few extra years (多活几年).' Likewise, Ma Fengxiang, an urban woman in her 60s who used to work in a factory and now did some community volunteer work said that unlike her father who never had the opportunity to enjoy life before he died, she had the moral obligation to make up for her past suffering by consuming the goods that the reform era proffered:

The age that people can live to has its limits. Isn't that the reality of it? It really is. Sometimes I say to some neighbors in the lane, 'if you've got some money, you should eat a little now. When we were young, we suffered bitter living conditions, so now that we are old, we should enjoy a bit of the prosperity (老了该享点福). You shouldn't be stingy with yourself (别细了). Whatever you should buy, you should buy it (该买什么, 买点什么 吧)! ... The other day I was talking with a neighbor and I said, 'when my father was young, he would lug us along with him to labor in the fields, holding a sickle, then sharpen the sickle, and then when it was sharpened, it was time to cut down the wheat. My father was just 55 years old when he

died. They didn't even find a reason for why he died. . . . Anyway, we are much better off now than back then (幸福多了). You look, now we have everything. If we want to eat, we have things to eat. If we want to drink, we have stuff to drink. In terms of living conditions, even though things are expensive, at least there are plenty of them. Back then in the countryside, we were all placing our cupped hands at the chicken's butt, waiting for her to lay two eggs (扣着鸡屁股下俩鸡蛋), so that we could take the eggs and trade them for some other food to eat. We suffered so much in the past, now we should enjoy a bit of the prosperity (享点福).

At the same time, some older women still felt that they had to be careful to watch their diets and not eat too much. For example, Shang Sihua, a retired doctor in her 60s, loved making complex recipes involving copious quantities of delicious meat-laden dishes, but having high blood pressure, heart disease, and pre-diabetes, she could only eat a small amount. So she would buy armloads of high-quality groceries and cook elaborate meals, tasting only a bit herself, and taking the rest of her enjoyment from watching younger family members and friends eat her creations. Although urging others to eat large amounts is an integral to traditional Chinese hospitality, Shang was also sincere about her vicarious enjoyment of watching others eat the bounty of the reforms. In this way, the physical care of others was reframed as a source of personal experiential enjoyment, rather than just a fulfillment of familial or hostly duty.

By 2007, a few Beijing women had taken their own later-life enjoyment of consumer goods and services to the level of feeling morally justified to spend all of their money before they died. While many older Chinese people retain the habit of saving large sums of money for rainy days in their own lives and to pass down to descendants, there was a small but growing portion of older Beijingers who felt that this traditional thrift was both unnecessary and unvirtuous. Beyond deserving some enjoyment themselves, these individuals felt that it was a disservice to younger generations to leave them an inheritance, because younger adults should have to exert themselves to develop the skills needed to make their own wealth.

In her mid-60s, Rong Muhua, a retired manager of a small rural print shop, expressed these kinds of sentiments in 2007. Rong's husband had died many years previously of cancer, before getting to 'fully enjoy the fruits of the reforms.' Since her husband died, Rong had traveled with one of her daughters to see the sights in Hong Kong, Macau, and Tibet, and the next year she would go to Taiwan to, as she said, 'go out and play and open up her eyes' (玩玩去, 开开眼) to the world beyond her village. After her husband died, Rong had decided that you need to 'spend your money while you are alive,' because you 'should enjoy the fruits of your own labor,' and you 'cannot take it with you' in death. Countering popular Confucian values, but drawing upon notions locally associated with Buddhism and upon dimensions of Daoism channeled through Maoist allegory, Rong argued that leaving property to one's descendants would lead them to trouble through idleness, rendering it best for elders to consume:

You can't take your money with you [in death]. Everyone leaves this life with a bare butt (还是光屁儿走). [Laughter] Some people say to leave it to your sons and grandsons, but I say sons and grandsons should make their own prosperity (儿孙自有儿孙福). They should make their own prosperity. If you say it according to the way that Buddhism says it (要按佛教讲), if you leave a lot of money and property behind, this is a kind of bad deed (罪孽). Why? They say that if your sons and daughters have that much money and property, they won't have proper behavior (不干正经事儿) and it will make them guilty of misdeeds (犯了罪了). . . . If he didn't have this money handed down, then he'd need to busy himself with making a living, establish himself in a profession, and he wouldn't do bad things. So like in Chairman

Mao's philosophical thought (毛主席的哲学思想), a good thing turns into a bad thing, and a bad thing turns into a good thing (好事变坏事, 坏事变好事).

Unlike some of her more conservative peers who saw travel as frivolous and wasted on an old person with no real job to which to apply the experiences gained, Rong saw travel as a means for an individual person to open their mind to new experiences for the sake of savoring them. Being old meant that one had a lifetime of experiences to bring to bear, making new experiences all the more meaningful. A broader long-term public productive purpose was not necessary; self-enjoyment and personal experience were enough. Yet, elders making their own personal enjoyment a priority after decades of scrimping was also a form of caring for the younger generations; by making the younger generations suffer to generate their own wealth, elders could cultivate diligence and resourcefulness in youth and teach them to respect that the elderly had earned the right to enjoy themselves.

With regard to gero-transcendence theory in its most fundamental formulation, once again Chinese women's transcendence in later life takes a culturally particular form that defies clear dualism into material versus non-material. The main axis of transcendence is putting a new emphasis on individual enjoyment and personal experience, two goods that may be attained through money, food, clothing, travel, or other material means. In addition, transcendence in later life in contemporary China need not mean narrowing one's focus to pre-existing deep relationships, but rather seeking out new and novel ones through leisure and travel. Further, rather than being seen as merely a modern way of life, reform-era elder consumption was bolstered with reference to popular traditional values, stemming from Daoism via Maoist allusion and from popular Buddhism.

Fragrant Qigong: smelling the (jasmine) flowers

Relax my whole body! 全身放松!

A smile on my face! 面对笑容!

(Refrain of Fragrant Qigong practitioners)

Morning practice of Fragrant Qigong (香功) started in a call and response. The group leader, a man in his 60s from the local neighborhood called out, 'Relax my whole body' (全身放松) and the group of largely late middle-aged and elderly women enthusiastically repeated back the phrase and copied his movement of sweeping the hands down in front of the body as he modeled relaxing the shoulders and spine. 'A smile on my face' (面对笑容) the leader then called, with a broad smile, and everyone burst back with a jovial 'smile on my face,' followed by giggles, chuckles, and chortles. It was six-thirty in the morning, and the author was feeling groggy from having woken up at 5:00 am to bike across Beijing to this little urban neighborhood park. Although the author is not a morning person, the atmosphere was infectious, and soon she was smiling and laughing too and getting energized. This was a world apart from Beijing's daily grind of chores and work, competition and distinction. The air was not yet thick with car exhaust, and the morning sun was glimmering through the light smog of the mid-1990s' city. 'Life is in movement!' (生活在运动), the leader proclaimed, and everyone called back in agreement. The cassette tape greeting from the founder of Fragrant Qigong, Tian Ruisheng (田瑞生), that the group leader played for the group emphasized that 'his main wish for us was that we be joyful (愉快),' raise our 'natural immunity levels (免疫功能),' have 'everything in life go our way (万事如意),' and be cheerful, happy, and well (快乐, 幸福). Although his voice also cautioned that one should not do Fragrant Qigong along the

side of a road or a river, the fact that the group was in a very small, paved city park with just a handful of trees stuck right on the corner of the four-way crossing of a large highway was no cause for concern. In urban Chinese terms, the group was not by the side of a road, but in the depths of a nature area. Here participants could soak in the Qi (气) energy/essence of Nature, like the man who, exercising another form of Qigong (气功), was embracing a tree off to the side, soaking in the Qi that flowed up the trunk from the earth below, his face lifted, gazing at the branches above.

A health craze that took off in the 1980s and continued to be very popular in the 1990s, Qigong drew its sensibilities from Daoist and Buddhist philosophies (Chen 2003; Palmer 2007; Ownby 2010) and consisted of movements much less exacting than those of Taiqi (Taijiquan, 太极拳) which has very clear and precise requirements for posture, position and movement. At this time in the mid-1990s, Fragrant Qigong was one of the most popular forms of Qigong in Beijing, especially among middle-aged and elderly women, but also among some older men. The basic movements of Fragrant Qigong were even simpler than many other forms of Qigong. The movements consisted solely of light, slow movements of the arms while standing up in a relaxed posture, every so often shifting one's weight from both hips to one hip or the other, and that was it. To begin, participants put their hands out flat in front of them at waist level, hips-length apart, and then slowly moved their hands out to their sides, still at waist level. Then practitioners put their hands together at hip level on one side of their body and then the other. Partway through the sequence of 80 simple postures, participants pat their ears lightly with the palms of their hands, feeling the air slowly whoosh in and out of their ears ('wind on the ears'). At another point, group members make their hands into the shape of binoculars in front of their eyes ('golden light brightens the eyes'), and at another, they lay their hands lightly on their abdomens ('Old Weng places hands'). To close, participants raise their arms up, curving them into an open circle above their heads, and then stretch their arms down toward the ground, ending in a relaxed standing posture, arms hanging loosely at their sides.

The tape instructed the group that each movement was done six times in a row, but that was clearly a rough figure. No one seemed to be taking the specifics at all seriously. Unlike Taiqi, it did not seem to matter how one did it as long as one was there doing something. In Fragrant Qigong, no one was corrected if they did the movements in a non-standard way or if their stance was askew or even if one did not even try to do the movements for a while. Most people were making small talk and laughing and cracking jokes much of the time. They were, it appeared, thoroughly enjoying the relaxed atmosphere, appreciating being there, what they were feeling, and the lightness of the assembled company. As the participants listened to the lilting background music of traditional Chinese zither and bamboo flute emanating from the boom box in front of them, the group leader, a community volunteer who offered the classes for free, showed no hint of minding how laissez-faire people were about form and following instructions. This was in no way a precise bodily art or serious meditation on the deep esoteric meanings of existence. Relaxing the body and the mind, enjoying the levity of company, and being present and open in the moment were what mattered.

'Smelling it' was also part of this morning ritual, but not everyone 'smelled it' and not all the time. Just every so often as participants did light movements together, someone would cheerfully call out, 'I smelled it! (我闻到了),' but beyond that momentary burst of glee, there was usually no further reaction on the part of either the smeller or those around him or her. For the first couple weeks of practicing with the group, the author did not know what the 'smelling' meant. She just heard participants calling it out, one here, one

there, but did not give it much thought. At most, the author thought it an abstract metaphor of content enjoyment as in the saying ‘books are fragrant.’ The author was focusing on just being part of the group, listening, watching, and doing whatever the other group members did. No one mentioned or asked about what, if anything, was being smelled, so for a while the author did not think to inquire.

But then one morning, in the midst of this tiny concrete park abutting two busy city streets in the cool of late fall with no flowers to be seen in the area, the author suddenly smelled jasmine flowers. She looked around and could not see a source. So she asked the lady beside her, ‘What are you supposed to smell when you smell it?’ And she said, ‘Either sandalwood or jasmine flowers. Did you smell it?’ When the author admitted that she smelled jasmine flowers, the woman behind her quipped jovially, ‘Oh, gee! I’ve been doing this for months and the foreigner has only been doing it for a few weeks, and she already smelled it, but I haven’t smelled it yet! All I ever smell are those oily dough sticks frying over there!’ Everyone within earshot then laughed.

That was it, and the group moved on. It was not a big deal that the author ‘smelled it’, because the main point was being relaxed and delighting in being alive. Unlike her American students when she tells them this story, no one wondered aloud whether the author really did smell it, or if she did, why or how? The author must admit that as a skeptical agnostic American, she did wonder whether someone beside her had a sachet of jasmine tea in their pocket, and if they did, why she only smelled it for an instant and no one around her smelled or admitted to smelling it. However, the author did not inquire. Not just because it seemed like it would be impolite, but because it seemed beside the point.

After the exercises were done, everyone chatted a bit and then headed out by foot or bicycle, some to go back home to make breakfast for the family, some to buy groceries at the outdoor markets for the day ahead, and a few of the middle-aged participants went off to work. The next morning the participants returned for this feeling of enjoying simply being alive together – before rushing off to get the best buy on a bunch of scallions or a dozen eggs.

There was a popular joke going around Beijing in the 1990s about a trickster character called Afanti (阿凡提) from China’s western Xinjiang Province who was once asked by a rich man to pay for having, uninvited, smelled the aromas of the latter’s feast. Afanti said, ‘Sure, I’ll pay you.’ Jingling his small bag of money, Afanti clarified, ‘I will pay you for the smell of your food with the sound of my money.’ Similarly, Fragrant Qigong was a kind of non-consumerist, non-competitive form of communal appreciation of one’s embodied self being in the world before it was open for business. It was about being gentle and kind to one’s self, one’s body, one’s sensibilities, and each other. Participants were all in the same boat, all people with bodies that felt things. Members were consuming things, but things that could not be bought, like deep breaths of relatively fresh morning air, smiles, laughter, breezes, smells, and pats. It was different from the previous example of appreciation of being able to buy what one wanted to eat or drink or wear since the advent of the reforms, in that, here, no money was needed, so everyone could all consume the same things. It was similar to the previous example, however, in that it was a celebration of the individual body-self enjoying an experience with the senses. Furthermore, for many of Fragrant Qigong participants, this morning participation in a community appreciation of the sensory body served to shore up the participants’ physical, emotional, and social reserves before they headed back home to another day of attending to family, household, and community responsibilities. Even for those whose primary responsibility was to take care of themselves, this was often embedded within felt social obligations not to become a burden, or any more of a burden, on other family members.

The practice of Fragrant Qigong as described above comes much closer to the classic western formulation of gero-transcendence than the previous two forms of later-life liberatory practices. It is seeking happiness and contentment through the medium of things that are both free and priceless – gathering in a public park, light movement, laughter, smiles, air, and olfaction. Yet, still it emphasizes that the path to inner happiness and health is through physical movement and interaction with the material environment and light superficial chatter with people, most of whom are distant acquaintances or relative strangers. At the same time, a personal focus on well-being at the start of the day is viewed by practitioners as a foundation for caring for others, at the very least by not becoming more of a burden on them. Thus, it both clasps hands with and pushes against western gero-transcendence theory.

Classic modernization theory is also too simple to capture the complex epistemological and ontological issues raised by reform-era elder self-care through Fragrant Qigong. Fragrant Qigong is a recent innovation (Palmer 2007) seen by locals as a modern advance, but the kind of advance emically perceived to be a revival of best practices from purer past incarnations of Daoist and Buddhist traditions. Practitioners are believers in the syncretic and parallel usage of the best from past and present. While celebrating the free and natural benefits of Fragrant Qigong, if they can afford it they will not forgo purchasing the modern technical diagnostics and treatments offered by Western biomedicine and contemporary Chinese medicine,⁴ which are seen as complementary with Fragrant Qigong.

Shen Chang Culture: The power of mind and mentor's methods

My husband and I observe social trends with detachment. It is in the midst of the human world that the land of the immortals exists. But you won't apprehend it if you seek it. (Quote from practitioner of Shen Chang Culture)

Tape cassettes, at-home meditation practice, books with special knowledge, jasmine-flavored 'information' tea (信息茶), regular fasting, chiropractic manipulation, and occasional meetings – routes to health and happiness. Starting in the mid-1990s, many older women in rural Beijing became involved with a health practice called Shen Chang's Science and Technology of the Body (沈昌人体科技) or Shen Chang Culture (沈昌文化). Whereas Fragrant Qigong was popular in the urban communities the author visited, Shen Chang Culture was the rage in the rural areas the author frequented. Shen Chang refers to man who founded Shen Chang Culture. Master Shen was born in China's southern Jiangsu Province in 1956, was 'sent down to the countryside' to learn from the peasants as a youth during the Cultural Revolution, then got an undergraduate agricultural degree in plant conservation and became a college lecturer, before becoming in 1991 a full-time guru of the health philosophy and practices that he developed. While his enterprise came under official scrutiny in the early 2000s, charged with fraudulent tea advertising claims, financial mismanagement, and some cult-like practices (邪教), these issues were of little concern to the women that this author knew.

From its beginnings, the emphasis of Shen Chang Culture has been on physical health and emotional well-being and happiness through the power of one's own mind with the assistance of the ideas and materials developed by 'Teacher Shen Chang.' First and foremost, practitioners focus on the usefulness of Shen Chang Culture for their self-care and personal well-being. This form of self-care is focused on not only physical health but also emotional health and happiness and on maintaining a harmonious family life. Shen Chang Culture pits itself against the excesses of modern consumer culture and emphasizes one's

own mental and physical ability to maintain and improve one's health and life with the help of a few simple inexpensive methods and tools learned from Master Shen's books, cassette tapes, and occasional optional group booster sessions. Its practitioners talk of Shen Chang Culture as a 'natural science,' drawing on both traditional and modern wisdom, on indigenous and foreign methods, nearly free of cost, simple, and available to anyone willing to read the books and/or listen to the tapes.

Claiming over 100 million practitioners in the mid to late 1990s and still practiced to this day, Shen Chang Culture is a combination of many different influences, a self-professed *mélange* of Daoism, Buddhism, Communism, Confucianism, Chinese science, Chinese and Western medicine, and chiropractic healing. It is inspired by Daoism in its emphasis on Qi, Yin and Yang, the Dao, and the Natural, and by Buddhism in its practitioners' focus on striving to rise above the petty grasping of the mundane world to open up one's Third Eye (天目) and become enlightened. At the same time as it stresses family harmony and related Confucian values, its founder and practitioners also profess that their practices are 'inseparable from the Communist party,' in distinction from Falun Gong. Practitioners also stress that Shen Chang Culture is complementary to both Chinese medicine and Western medicine, unlike Falun Gong, which has been criticized for telling its adherents to eschew all forms of technical medicine, whether Chinese or Western. Finally, Shen Chang Culture places an emphasis on the wisdom of chiropractic practices and the importance of the correct vertebral positioning for preventing illness and maintaining health, through practices like rubbing the vertebrae firmly with a plastic comb-sized tool and laying down with one's head hanging back off the edge of a bed.

Shen Chang Culture is similar to Fragrant Qigong in some ways, but different in others. Although similar in sharing some Daoist and Buddhist dimensions, important differences are noted by practitioners. Similar to Fragrant Qigong, practitioners of Shen Chang Culture were dismissive of consumer culture, but to a greater degree in that it was more often voiced in everyday conversation and embodied in everyday habits outside of practice sessions. One primary way in which this anti-consumerism was expressed among Shen Chang Culture but not Fragrant Qigong practitioners, was in the practice of frequently skipping at least one meal a day and in regularly abstaining from eating rice, wheat, and any other grains (闭谷). In addition, drawing from Buddhism, Shen Chang Culture practitioners tried to avoid meat (荤的). Another difference is that Shen Chang Culture daily practice sessions were usually done at home alone with a cassette tape, rather than in groups. Group meetings were occasional, once a week at most. These differences were not just abstractions. Shen Chang claimed that 'the only thing that his practices were incompatible with was Fragrant Qigong.' Practitioners stressed that the two were mutually-exclusive, incompatible practices (对立的) that should not be done together. Nonetheless, from an outsider's perspective, they were similar in that their focus on the enjoyment of the simple things in life that need not be bought or which cost very little money.

Illustrative material can be drawn from Gao Xiang, a rural Beijing schoolteacher who started practicing Shen Chang Culture in 1994 when she was in her 40s. After the first interview in 1994, Gao participated in follow-up interviews in 2000, 2007, 2008, and 2012. Each time she continued to be an avid enthusiast. She emphasized that once you have listened to Shen's tapes or read his book, then 'All you have to do is think, and you can regulate yourself.' She stressed that in absorbing Shen's way of thinking, one is learning the 'Way of Nature (自然道),' which Shen has happened to apprehend but which is available to anyone who approaches it in the right way. Gao said that adopting Shen Chang Culture led to a radically positive transformation in her health, her emotions, and

her way of being in the world. Referring back to having lost her mother to disease as a young girl, Gao said, 'Now I have returned back to my mother's bosom – to the Great Mother, Nature! I am now healthy, my emotions feel comfortable, my spirits are good, and I don't feel tired at work.'

Gao delighted in telling anyone who would listen how, through Shen Chang Culture, she had disengaged from competitive capitalist consumption and no longer felt bad for not keeping up with her neighbors in acquiring consumer goods. Laughing delightedly, Gao said: 'Now I have an Ah-Q mentality. I have no refrigerator, so I say refrigerators are of no use, they are harmful.' While for Lu Xun (鲁迅), author of the *True Story of Ah-Q* (1921), an Ah-Q mentality was not a good thing, for Gao, it was a positive symbol of not following the winds of current materialist fads. Beyond her refrigerator, Gao also saw her recent consumption of cheap devalued coarse grains (粗米), rather than choice white rice, and her new practice of frequently fasting from grain altogether (闭谷), as ways of rebelling against consumerism:

Now people have all fixed their eyes on money. But I won't speak about these things. I've gone beyond this mortal world and broken away from eating grain. I don't pursue a standard of living. If you seek too much, the result will be bad. You should go along with the Natural.

From her initial entry into Shen Chang Culture until the early 2010s, Gao not only saw eating non-processed grains as natural, but also saw fasting as a natural means of driving sickness out of the body. She described Shen's theory of how caloric deprivation leads diseased cells to die, leaving only healthy cells remaining: Shen's books feature many case studies of people who fasted from grains (闭谷) for several weeks and felt themselves cured of diseases such as cancer or high blood pressure. Shen writes about how he got this idea from watching chickens molt. Gao told her own story of her first time fasting from grain:

Right after I turned 40, I had a kind of depressed feeling (忧郁感). At that time I had symptoms of the climacteric (更年期症状) like migraine headaches ... I had at least 200 white hairs. But after I came into contact with Shen Chang Culture and I started to fast from grains (闭谷), all my old white hair fell out ... and new black hair grew back in.

Gao also credited Shen Chang Culture for helping her to regulate her emotions, which in turn, she felt, helped her return to good health. Gao said: 'The way of taking care of life is to have a calm heart and thus a peaceful spirit. This is Shen Chang's culture' and 'If your spirits are good, then your health will be good.' Gao felt that it was mainly a combination of reading Shen's books, listening to his tapes, and fasting and drinking the 'information' tea that helped her to regulate her emotions. Of the tea, she said: 'Before I used to be prone to lose my temper with other people ... It's after I started drinking Shen Chang information tea (信息茶) that I stopped losing my temper ... Now I have a more open frame of mind (想开了). I don't get angry any longer (不生气).' Although her focus on Shen's practices as a panacea is not shared by the majority of people her age and older, the idea that anger can generate all kinds of physical illnesses is a very common notion among older Chinese to this day (Shea 2013).

Part of Shen's method for preventing anger is rooted in rising above the mundane politics that so many people, young and old, say makes being a Chinese person in China such a tiring prospect. In talking about this, Gao specified that this includes both petty interpersonal politics and broader regional or national politics and both the past and the

present. This is illustrated in the quote opening this section and the following quotes, all from Gao:

Now I've taken all past history and forgotten it. I don't mention it . . . Teacher doesn't let us mention history. To use Teacher's culture to say this: You shouldn't stay attached to the past. Instead you should just keep thinking one thing: that you don't have any illnesses.

We Shen Chang Culture people, we stand at a high point, we see far into the distance. At any rate, we have an open frame of mind. If you take other people's business, like taking the nation's affairs to consider it yourself, and it's not your own matter, then you're going to worry for nothing. Now I have an open mind about everything.

While Gao feels that Shen Chang Culture allows her to stand apart as an individual from economic and political jousting, it is not as an escape into the self, but as a way of releasing the self to contribute to society with a 'pure collective spirit,' a kind of self-actualization through cutting through the chaff to what really matters. For example, Gao said: 'Not only has the experience of Shen Chang culture not negatively influenced my work, but it has actually enhanced my work' and 'My heart is still the heart of the 1950s and 1960s. I want to make a contribution.' In this sense, putting a priority on the care of the self in Shen Chang Culture does not mean self-centered indulgence of the self, but rather care for one's body and emotions to form a strong foundation for mindful caregiving for others that goes beyond mindlessly following social expectations.

The 'collective spirit' of which Gao spoke is modulated by an emphasis that personal priorities, such as family, should not be neglected for the sake of broader work in society, as they so often were in radical Maoist times. Starting to teach during the 1970s, Gao herself had experienced the strong pull to put work above family, and on many occasions in the past she had done just that. However, she said that since discovering Shen Chang Culture, she had come to a better work-life balance:

Teacher Shen Chang says that, as people we shouldn't do things too poorly or too well – especially in work matters. For instance, in the newspaper there was an article about a teacher in Beijing. Her son got a high fever and had to be hospitalized. His mother was a teacher and so she stayed with her students and didn't go to the hospital. Well, the hospital couldn't save him, and he died right there in the hospital. Her husband couldn't comprehend what she had done and demanded a divorce. . . . So this goes to show that if you do your job responsibilities too well, that isn't good either. Now I understand. This kind of behavior goes against the laws of Nature (违犯自然道).

Shen Chang Culture and its relationship to the emergence of self-care among older women in reform-era China could not be well-predicted by either modernization theory or gero-transcendence theory. To its followers, Shen Chang Culture is a combination of the best of tradition and modernity, leaving out the worst of each. It is not a clear movement toward westernization, but a combination of Chinese culture and a few selected Western elements, such as chiropractic healing. While clearly placed in opposition to the materialism of consumerism in many ways, the youthfulness of the hair and the body as material substrates were key focal points of Shen Chang Culture. Keeping the body alive and healthy for as long as possible was a central concern. Unlike in classic western gero-transcendence theory, facing mortality, eventually leaving this existence and this body, and the question of what exists after death, were not foci in Shen Chang's ideology or practices. Rather, avoiding physical sickness and death through the power of one's own mind was at the forefront. At the same time, a key to avoiding unhappiness, suffering and

illness was withdrawing from the political sphere and stepping out of the arenas of conspicuous consumption; yet it was not avoiding consumption of consumer goods altogether, and it did not involve stepping away from providing care for one's own family. However anti-consumerist it claims to be, Shen Chang Culture is similar even to the consumption-oriented examples at the beginning of this paper in that the focus is on individuals enjoying their own experience of life and putting a priority on taking care of themselves as a counterbalance to having earlier in life sacrificed themselves to the care of others. In addition, while professing anti-consumerism, Master Shen did sell some products to his followers, such as the 'information' tea, which he claimed to be an easy way to get a daily boost of his philosophy through the oral route, but which seemed to this author's undiscerning senses, as it had to the authorities who tried Master Shen for fraud, like ordinary jasmine tea. So one cannot clearly say that Shen Chang Culture values the spiritual over the material, and it certainly does not uphold the hereafter over present company. Again, the dualisms of western formulations of gero-transcendence and modernization theories are inadequate for describing this form of later-life self-care.

Conclusion

The way in which older women in post-Mao China have been approaching self-care constitutes a particular instantiation of individualization in China (Yan 2009), characteristic of generations born early enough to have been influenced by Confucian familialism and/or Communist collectivism before reform-era varieties of individualism emerged. Although much of what older Chinese women today are doing may sound like ordinary mind-body indulgence to younger Chinese or uninformed Westerners, in the eyes of these women, it is neither ordinary nor indulgence. Rather, the ways in which these women are recognizing the value of their own embodied lives as highly meaningful personal experience is nothing short of revolutionary (or post-revolutionary) for these generations. It is a radical departure from the pre-revolutionary Confucian and the 'revolutionary' Maoist past alike, in which standard official narratives emphasized self-sacrifice on the part of women – especially older ones – for future generations and the nation. While many older Chinese women still devote a large portions of time to the care of others, increasingly they are turning some attention to the care of the self. The idea that older Chinese women have an inner life and a yearning to nurture and enjoy themselves, often in non-consumerist, though still very material ways, to this day frequently escapes outside notice. Yet, over time, growing numbers of older women in reform-era China have been learning to value their own physical, emotional and social experiences of life as worthy of note.

The budding experiential and narrative focus on older women's self-worth, well-being, and pleasure for their own sake is an enormous change in the moral landscape of post-Mao China and an example of some of the complex and varied quests for personal meaning that are taking shape in contemporary China (Kleinman 2011), which are decidedly not a mere imitation of the modern West. This paper has illustrated some of the ways in which older women in post-reform China are claiming a space for themselves, their sensibilities, and their bodies to be figured at the center of 'what really matters' (Kleinman 2006). In doing so through the medium of affording themselves things such as time, money, food, clothing, travel, Qigong exercises, and information tea, they are seeking a form of liberation that defies the material/spiritual dualism at the base of western gero-transcendence theory and overrides the modern selfish consumer versus traditional selfless reproducer dichotomy at the heart of modernization theories of individualization. As illustrated in Table 1, the value systems upon which older reform-era Chinese women

Table 1. Some local varieties of self-compassion among older women in reform-era mainland China.

Tradition					Modernity		
Self-compassion through:	Confucian Familialism	Popular Daoism	Popular Buddhism	Maoist Collectivism	Technical Medicine	Market Consumerism	Form of Individualism
Limiting demands from others	(-) Resisting slavish service to family	n/a	n/a	(-) Resisting slavish service to work and society	(+) Getting timely health care for self	(+) Marshalling material means to take care of one's health	(+) Personal health; Balance self and other; Self-reliance
Personal enjoyment of consumer goods	(-) Resisting elders scrimping for younger generations	n/a	n/a	(-) Resisting extreme frugality and self-denial	n/a	(+) Material enjoyment, pleasure, and broadening experiences	(+) Life is about enjoying, consuming, and new experiences
Fragrant Qigong and simple pleasure of being	(+) Take care of self so can help and not burden others	(+) Flow of Qi of Nature; Life in flow	(+) Buddha Nature in all things; Moving meditation	(+) Non-familial community support; all equals	(+) Use with Chinese +/or Biomedicine	(-) The best things in life are free	(+) Personal health and well-being; Simple free pleasures
Anti-consumerist self-care practices of Shen Chang Culture	(+) Family harmony	(+) Qi, Yin Yang, Dao of Nature	(+) Above the mundane; opening third eye	(+) Values true spirit of service to society	(+) Use with Chinese, +/or Chiropractic	(-) Resisting conspicuous consumption	(+) Personal health and wellbeing; Balance self, family, and society

have been drawing in these attempts at self-nurturance and individualism have included a wide array of traditional and modern value systems, including: Confucianism and anti-Confucianism, Maoist collectivism and anti-collectivism, consumerism and anti-consumerism, technical Chinese and Western medicines, and popular Daoism and Buddhism. Depending on the type of foray into individualism, various combinations of these values have been used syncretically, or posed as in conflict with the others or ignored as irrelevant to the situation at hand.

Older Chinese women's reform-era self-nurturance has been neither the simple global transfer of a modern Western consumerist individual, nor the return to a golden age of traditional spirituality. Rather, as the case studies above have shown, these older women have been creatively juxtaposing and combining a wide variety of traditional and modern value systems in their attempts at self-care in ways that go beyond a simple matter of modernity overtaking tradition, materiality overtaking spirituality, selfishness overtaking selflessness, or their reverse. Overall, this analysis has found that, in contrast to western gero-transcendence theory, the older Chinese women interviewed often saw a large part of their liberation in later life as ensuing from material or physical sources that could give them various worldly pleasures that they had not (fully) experienced in previous eras of their lives. This care of the self was, in turn, seen not as selfish indulgence – as some former incarnations of Confucian or Maoist ethics might have it – but, rather, as forming the long-term basis for sustainable care for others within their local moral worlds.

While aging in Asian cultures is often romantically imagined by Western gerontologists as focused on traditional wisdom and spiritual transcendence, the good life imagined by the women in this study tended to focus on some combination of tradition and modernity, a moderate embrace of material goods and worldly pleasures, and a recalibrated balance between self-care and the care of others. In this recalibration, better care of the self was figured as a more humane, natural, healthy, and sustainable way of being both in and for the world. While consumption in China today is for many about competitive capitalist consumerism and keeping up with the Zhang's, that is not the whole picture. For some, especially older Chinese individuals, it is also about mindful self-compassion, and enjoying the simple pleasures of being present in the moment with fellow human beings, or taking delight in staying healthy and happy by using special natural 'technologies' that allow one to resist the excesses of consumerism, but still enjoy the creature comforts of life for as long as possible, while avoiding becoming a burden on one's family.

Thus, this is not about becoming western selves, not about going from selfless Orientals or Maoists to selfish or self-actualized Westerners, but about proceeding to a plane on which the personal self is elevated to a partner with the selves embedded within familial and governmental expectations. The focus is on a balance of these selves in the interest of long-term sustainability, each a check on the excesses of the others. It is about a generational subculture of self-compassion arising in later life in dialogue with women's earlier cultural and historical experiences of suffering and the moralities of their families, communities, and politics and the popular ethics of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Maoism, and market cosmopolitanism. It is akin to the 'caring for the caregiver' notion in contemporary international professional discourse on caregiving – that is, the idea that care of the self provides a physical, emotional, and social basis for better caregiving for others – without, however, explicit mention of that phrase. Whereas in Confucian and Maoist iconography, martyrs to self-sacrifice made their way into the paeans of virtuous women and the diaries of Lei Feng, these women have evolved to reject martyrdom as a fool's errand in light of changing reform-era social values. They are striving to be self-nurturing survivors, cultivating their physical, emotional, and social resources in the

interest of long-term personal and social pursuits, in partial concert with their families and local government, but in more balanced ways that extend beyond social duty. In putting more limits on the demands of others in their family and polity and speaking about it, these women are refusing to see care of the self as shameful selfishness. In demanding some time, space, nurturing, leisure, and pleasure for themselves, they are even framing self-care as a more genuine way of caring about others by teaching them the lesson of heeding the subjectivity, personal contributions, and individual personhood of older women. While the tenacious tendency to see older women as social utilities rather than as experiencing beings in the world is by no means unique to China, the precise ways in which it is instantiated and transformed in this setting are at least in part culturally and historically distinctive. At the same time, there may be some ground for common cause as increasing numbers of women in developing countries gain enough resources to seek a more balanced timesharing between their lived body-selves, familial roles and relationships, and expectations placed upon them by political institutions.

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Conflict of interest

None.

Notes

1. This post-Mao Chinese version of self-compassion is distinct from the current discussion of self-compassion in Western psychological circles (e.g., Neff 2011), which contends that self-compassion is preferable to self-esteem, whether self-esteem stemming from the boundless praise of indulgent parents or from the driving criticism of Tiger-Mother types.
2. As Tornstam (1989, 55), a key player in the theoretical formulation of gero-transcendence, defines the term: 'This latter can be described as a shift in meta-perspective from a materialistic and rational view to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally followed by an increase in life satisfaction'.
3. All names of informants are pseudonyms.
4. Of course, as Scheid (2002) has shown, contemporary Chinese medicine in China is an invented unitary tradition constructed through the bricolage of nationalist Maoist modernization.

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