in China, death is part of the story. Qu was disgusted with his government, spoke up against misrule, and eventually committed suicide; the dragon boats are often said to be searching for his corpse.

Qu Yuan also left one of the most important bodies of poetry in China, especially "On Encountering Trouble," an autobiographical poem that tells of his frustrations with politics and describes shamanistic encounters with mythic beings. In this excerpt, he invokes the lush vegetation south of the Yangtze as an allegory for his disappointment and concern for his country's future:

I had tended many an acre of orchids,
And planted a hundred rods of melilots;
I had raised sweet lichens and the cart-halting flower,
And asarum mingled with fragrant angelica,
And hoped that when leaf and stem were in fullest bloom,
When the time had come, I could reap a fine harvest.
Though famine should pinch me, it is small matter:
But I grieve that all my blossoms should waste in rankweeds.

13

Chengdu: Recitation

Early one Friday morning in July, Wang Yi was leading a prayer group of twenty men and women. We sat in a circle, in the open area in front of his office, rubber mats cushioning us from the tiled floor. Some squatted, others knelt, a few crouched on all fours. It felt like a team meeting before a football game, with the players psyching themselves up by forming a primordial circle, heads pointing toward the center. We belted out an old Presbyterian hymn, sweating out the lyrics in the muggy Chengdu smog. As usual, we sang all the verses; there were never any shortcuts in Wang Yi's church. Then we repeated the first verse, which in English reads,

Beneath the cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand,
The shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land;
A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontide heat, and the burden of the day.

"This was a time before air-conditioning and before electric fans, but this was a way to keep cool!" Wang Yi joked as we wiped our brows and sat down on the mats. Then we read aloud an excerpt from Matthew, explaining how to pray:

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men.

Wang Yi noted that the message was not to pray in a showy fashion. This was common in many Chinese churches, where people prayed

aloud, as if they wanted their neighbors to hear their sins and hopes. Wang Yi didn't like this. To him, it wasn't proper—certainly not the way it was done in the overseas churches he took as a model.

"Small children pray aloud, but as we mature, we pray silently," he said as everyone nodded. "It's also less boastful. It's between you and God."

We sang another hymn and prayed again, and despite Matthew's admonition, everyone spoke out their prayers in turn. It was as if they needed to make their views clear—*biaotai* in Chinese, a way to show you are part of the group. Some wished that today would be successful, others that they would be diligent. All hoped that the Bible would enter their hearts. Then more public prayer, this time everyone speaking together like a swarm of bees.

"I have been unfaithful; make me more faithful."
"Open my heart."
"Make me a better person."
"Stop me from sinning."

The group was mostly men, clean-cut professionals in their forties. We focused on Wang Yi, his charisma and logical arguments holding us despite the heat and discomfort. After all, we were here because of his latest daring move: opening a seminary to train house church pastors.

It was an audacious step. China's State Administration for Religious Affairs runs not only the country's churches, temples, and mosques but also its seminaries. It determines who gets to be a priest, monk, nun, or imam. It sets the curriculum. It decides what version of a religion's history is taught, which ceremonies are acceptable, and which are "superstitious"—that vague, almost meaningless word used over the past century in China to discredit other people's beliefs. And, of course, the government also inserts political courses in the training programs so the clergy of all faiths know the latest slogans. In some ways, it was useful for religious professionals to know the party's latest policy lines, but the training often turned them into government parrots. This was especially true in churches, where sermons are so important. In government-run churches, pastors and priests studiously avoid problems in society, delivering at best bland

homilies. Churches like Early Rain offered an alternative—a mighty rock offering shade from the noontide heat.

Friday's classes in the seminary were given over to biblical Greek. The students were using an up-to-date Western primer, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, translated into Chinese and published in Hong Kong. The goal was to read the Gospels in the original Greek. But the room was full of doubting Thomases. Some still hadn't really mastered the Greek alphabet, while most seemed flummoxed by the endings attached to nouns.

"We understand the idea, but we can't memorize all of this," one of the students called out to much laughter.

"You've been learning a lot of practical things, like how to form a church or a council, but this is important, too," the teacher said. "This is your chance to read the Gospels in their original language." That reminder silenced the students, and they focused on the grammar. He summarized, saying that Greek had twenty-four letters and nouns with three possible genders: male, female, or neuter. Some people began to doze.

Sitting up in the front row were Wang Yi and his wife, Jiang Rong. They sat quietly, exchanging the occasional glance, former childhood sweethearts still in love. Later that year, Wang Yi would write, "Twenty years ago, I had a dream. I hoped that in class the teacher would suddenly say, 'Wang Yi, go over and sit together with Jiang Rong.' God is so great. He has allowed my wife to become my desk mate in His own time, making the hope for my first love come true."

Love was at the center of today's class. The teacher wrote the word for unconditional love, *agapē*. The students wrote out the root "agap" and the endings. Then the teacher did the same for "word," or *logos*, as in the word of God.

The two dozen students wrote out the declensions, faces pressed close to their notebooks as they struggled with the foreign letters. About half of the students were from Chengdu, including Early Rain church members who wanted to improve their knowledge of Christianity. The rest came from other parts of China—some as far away as the east coast. Over the next year, they would attend courses that lasted four to six weeks and teach them theology, history, and

organizational skills. Most were in their forties or fifties, about three-quarters men, almost all sent by their congregations. Today's class might seem impossibly difficult, but they at least wanted to be able to use the word *agapē* in a sermon, and I recognized the same sense of wonder I had when I had picked my way through my first classical Chinese poem. But to them this was much more important; it wasn't just a window to a different culture but the language used to record God's word.

During a break, I talked to a student from Fuyang, a city in a poorer part of China's otherwise affluent east coast. Forty-five years old, he had converted twenty years earlier and become active in his local church. His skin was still darkened by years in the field, even though he had moved to the town a decade ago along with many able-bodied men and women to look for work. He was dressed in a polo shirt and jeans, and everything about him was unremarkable—a man one might see hundreds of times each day in a Chinese city.

"The countryside is emptying out," he said as we sat in Early Rain's main hall of worship, a converted conference room with a big cross on the far wall. "There's just old people and kids left, so the church's work is in the city.

"But people are changing now. It used to be charismatics who ran the churches in the villages, but people are not so satisfied with that. They want more content."

That led his congregation of about sixty to sponsor his three-year study. Costs were minimal: he took an old, slow train to get here, and a local Christian family provided room and board. Tuition and books cost about $1,000 a semester, and he survived on about $100 a month in spending money, enough for buses and maybe the occasional bowl of noodles when studying late. Next month he would head back to Fuyang and spend two months there on self-study and helping in the congregation as an assistant to the pastor.

"It seems a long way off," he said with a laugh, "but in a few years I'll probably have my own congregation, and hopefully I can teach some of these ideas."

Earlier this week, the seminary had offered a class that seemed more practical: Church Planting. It was taught by two teachers from New York, who used a dozen books translated from English, including *Church Planter's Toolkit, Indigenous Church Planting, Planting Churches Cross-Culturally, Starting a New Church, Church Planting Landmines, Planting Missional Churches,* and *Churches That Multiply.*

Church planting was one of the hottest topics among Christians in China, and one that directly affected Early Rain. The church was already overflowing, and its leaders were beginning to discuss planting a new church elsewhere in Chengdu. The technique had been tried around the world: find a part of town that needs a church, and send a core group of reliable members there to start services. People coming to the old church from that part of town would begin to go there too and possibly start bringing friends. If done properly, a new church would take root.

I wondered what the seasons are for planting a new church. How does it take root? Right now, the soil did not feel fertile. A party congress was coming up, and the government was putting its resources behind China's traditional religions, not Christianity, as well as tightening social control. But as Wang Yi had said to me at Easter, the Chinese political calendar was always full of sensitive dates and anniversaries; here at the grass roots, these events faded, and life unfolded according to more lasting rhythms.

After the Greek class ended, Wang Yi and I had a simple boxed lunch of rice with stir-fried vegetables—the same quick, $1 meal that the students were wolfing down. What we had just experienced—the prayer meeting and then learning the abstruse rules of ancient Greek—seemed so far removed from Wang Yi's previous life as a human rights lawyer. I wondered if there was a direct link. People like the filmmaker Yuan Zhiming had converted directly after the failed democracy uprising of 1989; was this his catalyst, too?

"June 4, from my perspective, destroyed the Communist Party's position in society, so I became a believer in freedom," he said. "I thought that freedom was the most important thing in society."

"So you felt that without Christianity, political reform would not occur?"

"It's not a question of achieving political aims. If you believe in a God above and in the passing of life, and if you believe in an eternal soul, then what matters here is not crucial. Of course we wish for a free, democratic system. We think it fits the Bible better, but having

a democratic society isn't the key. If God wishes it, he can make his people live in a nondemocratic society. He can still love these people and care for them. What matters is the freedom in your heart."

"So it's not about politics?"

"No, it's about knowing the word of God."

It was 12:30 and time for the midday break. Wang Yi would spend the afternoon studying more ancient Greek. I went back to a little hostel where I kept a room and checked my messages. One was from an old friend of Wang Yi's, the exiled writer Liao Yiwu. He was also from Sichuan and had written about Christianity in Yunnanese hill tribes. But Liao hadn't converted and had later found his freedom by walking across the mountains to Vietnam. He now lived in Germany with his new wife and young daughter. But he was still involved in the daily battles for political freedom that concerned Ran Yunfei and other activists and that were once the center of Wang Yi's life.

Liao was reminding the world that the trial of Li Bifeng, another Sichuan writer and activist, was starting soon. In years past, Wang Yi might have championed Li Bifeng, perhaps even defending him in court. But now he was silent. In fact, he rarely met his politically active friends like Ran Yunfei, focusing instead on Early Rain.

One day during a trip to Washington, I had met another one of Wang Yi's old friends, Yu Jie. He had converted Wang Yi in 2005 and now lived in the United States. Unlike Wang Yi, Yu had not founded a congregation. Instead, he remained closely attuned to politics, authoring a biography of the jailed Nobel laureate, Liu Xiaobo, and criticizing Chinese political problems. A young, severe man, Yu spoke carefully but forthrightly.

"God has chosen Wang Yi to be a pastor, but on the other hand I regret that he's no longer that much of a public intellectual, a writer, or a legal thinker. He's written a lot less than in the past. He has a lot of concrete work in the congregation that takes his time. I hope in the future, when the congregation is more mature, that he has more assistants who can run the congregation and allow him time to think."

Perhaps one day Wang Yi would become politically active again, but I thought of it from another perspective too: As a public intellectual in a repressive state like China, what could Wang Yi really

achieve through activism? House arrest and a blocked Internet connection? An appeal to free Li Bifeng that no one would see? As a pastor and seminary teacher, Wang Yi could influence hundreds of people and help plant congregations across the country. At the very least, here he was creating his own society—a tiny cosmos of order and justice in the middle of one of China's largest cities.

One of Chengdu's holiest spots is the Palace of the Bronze Ram, a well-preserved Daoist temple with a lively teahouse under a canopy of trees. I always imagined that the temple would be best appreciated there, drinking a cup of green tea and contemplating the Dao under the old oaks. Unfortunately, the experience usually ended up being something more like this: You went to the counter to buy tea. No one was there. You waited. A grumpy old lady appeared and ignored you. When you finally attracted her attention, she said she wasn't responsible for whatever it is you wanted. Finally, you located someone in charge, usually another grumpy old lady who grunted out answers. She flung the cup, saucer, and a packet of tea. You wandered the grounds for fifteen minutes, trying to find an empty chair; there were plenty, but people invariably claimed they were reserved for someone else. When you finally sat down, the man pouring the water almost never arrived. After an hour, you'd wish a Daoist Jesus would drive these money changers out of the temple.

One Saturday I stopped by to attend a course on Daoist massage, or *tuina,* offered by the temple's Laozi Zhuangzi Academy, a public education center started two years earlier. It was part of an effort by Daoist temples to appeal to the better-educated urban class, many of whom were attracted to churches like Wang Yi's. In the past, Daoist temples were secretive and rarely open to the public. And when they were, it was just to offer their halls as places to burn incense or perhaps have one's fortune told. Ceremonies, scriptures, or the ideas behind Daoism—all of this was kept a mystery. Today's event was an effort to claim ownership of traditional Chinese healing arts, some of which originated with Daoist ideas about the cosmos and the human body. In the Communist era, they had been stripped away from religion, which left many Chinese wondering what Daoism was all about—what had it contributed to Chinese culture? Offering

massage classes at the temple was a chance to show that this physical practice originated in Daoism.

But the class had been canceled with no notice, and so I spent a miserable hour attempting to drink tea. Then I remembered that the temple sometimes had Saturday afternoon readings of the *Daodejing—The Way and Its Power*—founding text of religious Daoism. I located the room and stuck my head in. Its sole occupant was a man in his sixties walking around an immense wooden table that ran the length of the hall. It had twenty-five seats around it, and he seemed to be searching for a place to sit.

"Come in and sit down," he said to me, as if my action might help him decide. "Sit anywhere."

I chose a chair near the door. The man sat down across from me. He looked distracted, his face overwhelmed by big, 1980s-style glasses that hung precariously off the tip of his nose. He handed me a name card. His name was Huang Niu, and like everyone else in China he had a seemingly infinite array of positions, honorifics, and posts—so many, in fact, that the name card folded out twice to list all his titles and tributes. He advised governments how to obtain intangible cultural heritage. He served on a committee to promote the *Daodejing*. He chaired a commission on Daoist philosophy. He taught calligraphy. He made wooden screens. He designed inkwells. As I admired his card, he slid a copy of the *Daodejing* across the table toward me.

"I edited this," he said. "You see, it has pinyin, so you don't need to understand the characters to read it."

He was referring to the system of converting Chinese characters to letters.

"We're going to read this out loud," he said. "Join us."

"You're going to read the whole thing? Why?" I glanced at my watch. "And how long will this take?"

"It creates merit for you if you read it out loud, but even if you just want to understand it intellectually, the only way to really understand it is to read it one hundred times."

"That's good," I said uneasily. "But how long will it take?"

"It's only got five thousand characters, so you can do it pretty quickly. It takes about an hour or an hour and a half to read it

through once. So if you really concentrate, you can read it one hundred times in a week. We'll start by reading it once today; that will give people an idea of how to do it. Mainly, I don't want them to rush. People are used to rushing through Buddhist texts because they're just transliterated Sanskrit and don't mean anything to most people. But you can actually understand the *Daodejing* because it's an original Chinese text.

"The next thing you have to do to understand a text is to copy it out by hand. And then last thing you do is memorize it," he said, "although by the time you've read it and copied it, you probably have almost memorized it."

I had grown up in an era when memorization was disdained. You can always consult a reference book, our teachers from elementary school onward had told us. I only realized the error of this advice later in life. Even if you have reference books at your fingertips, they are no substitute for calling up verses in your head. I envied my father, who could recall poems and verses from Shakespeare, all of which had been hardwired into his brain. My generation had memorized pop songs and lines from sitcoms. Maybe learning this text by heart wouldn't be a bad idea.

People began arriving. Two young women sat down next to Mr. Huang.

"How would you explain Daoism?" an aggressive young woman said to him in a challenging, almost flippant tone.

"Everyone talks about Christianity nowadays," he said, looking at me. "In the West, people say that God is supreme. There is one God and he rules everything. But Daoism is different. We believe in God too. But above God is *ziran*. It is much more mysterious and powerful than a mere god, no matter how powerful that god."

Ziran is a term often translated as "nature," but it means something more like the cosmos, or the natural, spontaneous flow of life. Behind Mr. Huang were twenty dark wood panels with the entire *Daodejing* carved into the wood. On either side, two pillars were decorated with couplets meant to inspire and warn us:

Among the disciples is a saint
Without ziran, *there is no Dao.*

He pointed to the first line and explained that the saint was Confucius. He is an important person, Mr. Huang conceded, but he didn't get the big picture. Sure, the sage's rules and rites mattered, but without the Dao they were empty.

By now another dozen people had floated in, and it was 2:30, time to start our recitation. I couldn't read the characters fast enough, but Mr. Huang's pinyin below each one made it easy to speak the words out loud. I found even on this first pass that some phrases suddenly became clear because I was reading it out loud. It felt like a first stab at understanding.

An hour later we were finished. When we had read the last lines—"The Dao nourishes by not forcing / By not dominating, the Master leads"—we looked at each other in a daze. The world outside felt far away, and the text felt present in our bodies.

The *Daodejing* was still ringing in my head as I headed across town to Dacisi, the Temple of Great Charity. This was the Buddhist temple that Ran Yunfei had written a book about, and we met there so he could show me around. It was an unimposing, smallish temple, mostly reconstructed after the Cultural Revolution, but it reminded me of an important distinction that Old Mr. Ni had made at the start of the year: sometimes the best or most historic temples weren't real centers of religion. Miaofengshan in Beijing, for example, had been rebuilt from scratch after the Cultural Revolution. These temples might not have the cultural treasures of a famous temple or holy mountain, but that didn't matter. What counted was what you invested in the practice, not the age of the statuary.

Ran's temple also reminded me of how Buddhism was much better organized than Daoism. The theories about this difference were legion, and all of them had a kernel of truth, but the upshot was that Buddhist temples simply had more events and activities. The first thing I noticed in the temple was a large banner announcing several classes on Buddhist philosophy. Meanwhile, in the main hall, a ceremony was being held to induct fifty new lay worshippers—volunteers and activists to distribute scriptures, staff booths, and help visitors understand the precepts of Buddhism. The men and women knelt, stood, and chanted according to a monk's instructions.

Next door was the office of local Buddhist charities. A professionally produced report detailed the first six years of the foundation's work. It cost just 120 yuan, or about $20, to join the foundation, which undertook all manner of work, from releasing animals into the wild (a symbolic act of renouncing violence against sentient creatures) to supporting poor schoolchildren. I couldn't help contrasting all this to the Temple of the Bronze Ram. We had recited the *Daodejing* there, but the other event had been canceled, and for the rest of the week the temple had no activities for lay believers.

Eventually, I found Ran in the teahouse. He was his usual rambunctious self, gleefully telling me about a government social media hack who had been beaten up by a female journalist in a Beijing park. I sat there enjoying his rapid-fire delivery, his mind shifting so fast it caused his body to jerk up and down as if convulsed by electricity. His head was shaved for the summer—he'd just gotten back from the barber—and I thought this was a good idea because it might allow his mind to cool off a bit.

Our conversation turned to our mutual friend Wang Yi and the path he had chosen.

"Everyone has their role in life and he's doing his part. I tell you, he'll be more influential in China as a pastor than as an intellectual. The churches are really becoming big now. They are absolutely crucial to China. They're the only really independent organizations in China. These temples are government run. I like them, don't get me wrong, but it's not the same.

"I'm reading the Bible myself. I read a chapter from a book every day. That's how to read it, right? You don't read too much of it; you read a chapter a day and savor it. I read it almost first thing. I get up and make sure nothing is urgent on my e-mail. Then I read the Bible out loud."

On Sunday, it was Wang Yi's turn to recite. He was wearing a light blue oxford shirt, short sleeved, with a striped tie. He bounced forward on the balls of his feet, grasping the pulpit like a pogo stick. He talked about today's reading, which was the story of Jesus's feeding five thousand people with just a little fish and bread—a miracle.

"China's congregations are like this today. You hear so many peo-

ple say, especially intellectuals like I used to be, 'Christianity can promote economic development. Capitalism is brought by Christianity. It can help clothe and feed us. It can promote a more civilized form of commerce based on trust.'

"Christianity can bring democracy and human rights. It can make us a constitutional country based on rule of law. In other words, Christianity can allow us to feed ourselves like the manna from heaven or the loaves of bread. Christianity can bring a truly harmonious society.

"But the Gospels aren't about this. What is the relationship between the Gospels and capitalism? There is no relationship. What is the relationship between God and democracy? There is no relationship. What is the relationship between Christianity and eating your fill? There is no relationship.

"This doesn't mean we won't push freedom and democracy and people eating their fill. But this isn't what the Bible is about."

Instead, he said it was about God revealing himself through Jesus. It started with individuals' taking responsibility for their own actions, he said, and it started with the Greek verb "to be." And then he began to recite.

"*Ego eimi*," he said in ancient Greek: "I am."

I am the bread of life.
I am the light of the world.
I am the way, the truth, and the life.
I am.

14

Practice: Learning to Walk

Beijing's north and east are its carefully groomed public face. Here, within easy range of its main airport, are its boisterous bar streets and foreigner enclaves, its university district and gentrified *hutongs*, its business district and big hotel chains. The city's south is an afterthought: the poor part of town, an army of housing towers rolling endlessly into the cornfields of Hebei, punctuated only by high-speed rail lines whisking people to China's prosperous south. But the capital's mystery and power lie hidden in its western reaches, which rise slowly toward the city's holiest grounds along the northern end of the Taihang Mountains, here simply called the Western Mountains, home to Miaofengshan and almost every famous temple from imperial times: the Temple of the Sleeping Buddha, the Temple of Great Perception, the Eight Great Sites, the Temple of the Ordination Terrace, and the Monastery of Clear Pools and Wild Mulberry.

The Communists built on this tradition. Directly west of the Forbidden City is the Zhongnanhai leadership compound, a walled complex of buildings scattered around two lakes that were once a royal park. Then come a chain of ministries and housing for the country's political elite. The most famous is the Nanshagou housing compound, its entrances manned by soldiers and its sixteen buildings nicknamed *bumen lou*, or ministry buildings, because each structure housed a different ministry or agency. Building Six: distinguished academics from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Building Eight: Ministry of Electrical Machinery. Building Ten: Finance. Building Twelve: Construction Materials. Many well-connected party officials also lived here, such as Xi Jinping in the 1970s and 1980s before he set off to make a name for himself in the provinces.