CHAPTER 3

PARK LIVES AND SECRET SPACES

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I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflexions
Or the beauty of innuendos,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

—Wallace Stevens, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”

“We were just wondering if you work.”

It was one of the guys from Anhui Province who had spoken, jarring me out of my sword practice—one of the workers who maintained the grounds in People’s Park. I was just completing a three-hour-long morning practice session in the park, and the young Anhui laborer with whom I had a nodding acquaintance waved me over to join him and his five friends. Recently, I had been teaching English classes in the evenings, so I told him, “Yes, I work in the evening, but mostly I study.”

“You’re still in school?” he asked a little incredulously.

“I’m a research scholar,” I replied. “At Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.”

None of them showed much interest in that fact, and my friend just said, “You practice a lot.”

“I’m researching taijiquan. I’m writing a taijiquan dissertation.” This seemed to pique their interest, and they asked a few questions about the project. “How about you?” I asked. “Do you practice martial arts?”
My friend laughed. “Yeah,” he said. “I practice Shaolin.” I didn’t know whether to interpret the laugh as “Gee, I’m not very good” or “Yeah, I practice real martial arts.” A lot of people did not put much stock in taijiquan’s martial efficacy, especially in comparison with Shaolin.

I asked him about his life, how he came to work in the park, how he came to Shanghai. He said that he had lost a job in Anhui and had friends in Shanghai, so he came there looking for work. “It’s common for city park bosses to look for workers on the street,” he said. “There are so many out-of-towners looking for work that it’s easy to find them.”

As a rule, with no residence permit (bukou dengji), they were illegals whom park officials had hired to complete short-term projects. Regular gardening and maintenance positions were reserved for local Shanghainese. Most Anhui workers were male, ex-military, young, and willing to work for low pay, seven days a week. The park workers seemed to feel that they were more comfortable than those who took some of the other jobs that drew on illegal labor around Shanghai. Park construction projects—such as laying garden stones, refurbishing bathrooms and kiosks, repairing plumbing—were generally less dangerous than high-rise construction projects, tunnel building, and road construction.

Their Shanghainese boss passed by. “See you later,” my friend said. I nodded a good-bye and headed for the Starbucks on the other side of the park.

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If the teacher-student relationships described in the previous chapter constitute “structuring structures” of identity (Bourdieu 1991), then relationships that lie outside the teacher-student interaction, including our relationships with the physical environment, contribute to the formation of sometimes very different identities. Revisiting the path I laid out earlier, park, city, nation-state, imagination, and transnation all ultimately find their location in the body of the individual taijiquan player, who is both a recording medium of the art passed on to him or her and an actor upon the world that produces the art. Viewing ourselves through the lens of the art, the lens of practice, we discover different “selves” from each of these multiple viewpoints and, at the same time, a discrete “self” that is the coalescence of