

# Still on This Road

*Twenty Years from Garden of Hope Beijing to Garden of Hope International*

By Baibin "Leon" Yin

Founder, Garden of Hope International, Inc.

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I have spent the past few days thinking about how to look back on twenty years.

Most people, recounting a history like this, start by counting: how many programs were run, how much recognition was earned, how many people were served. But sitting down to go through old photographs, notes, and records, I found myself realizing that none of that is really the point.

Garden of Hope never began as an organization. It began earlier than that, as a question — one that never fully took shape, and never quite went away: what do people in crisis actually need?

## **Where It Began**

The earliest surviving written record dates to May 2000. At that time, Garden of Hope was not yet a program, let alone an organization.

In 1999, my wife and I arrived at a shared conviction: that someone who has fallen in life should still have a chance to reconnect with society, rebuild their dignity, and find meaning again. It was in wrestling with that question together that we became colleagues, and eventually partners in life as well.

Starting in 2003, we immersed ourselves in a biblical counseling framework and began traveling to South Korea, building relationships with practitioners there that have now lasted two decades. Our research institute in Beijing took shape during this same

period. Garden of Hope and the institute were never two separate things — one was where we learned, the other was where we put what we learned into practice, among real people, real families, real communities.

In 2016, we marked ten years of this counseling ministry. That anniversary made something clear to us: building a real community takes time, trust, and a willingness to stay the course together.

## **Twenty Years, Many Threads**

In the years that followed, our work kept reaching into wider corners of society. The people we served were often standing at the intersection of several hardships at once — formerly incarcerated individuals, people struggling with addiction and the families around them, people living with mental illness, and their children, many of whom carried diagnoses like autism or other developmental conditions while also growing up in marginalized households. We came to believe that the more labels weighing someone down, the more they need someone willing to stay close.

Across these twenty years, we never stopped asking the same question in different forms: what kind of companionship, what kind of work, what kind of environment actually helps a person stand on their own again?

Around 2010, we opened Elim Spring Restaurant — our earliest experiment in connecting labor to reintegration, and the starting point of what became our social enterprise model. The restaurant was later passed on to a family we had supported, and it continues to operate today.

In 2014, the Garden of Hope Children's Training Center began its work, focused on children from marginalized families, including many diagnosed with autism or other developmental conditions. The center is now part of a network of partner schools, and was featured in a People's Political Consultative Daily story titled “A Playful Mix of Charity and Science,” which followed these children through a hands-on aerospace

education program.

In 2019, building on nearly two decades of experience supporting formerly incarcerated individuals and people recovering from substance dependency, we launched the Fresh Start Program in partnership with a foundation and several companies, offering systematic employment support to this population. The program drew coverage from major Chinese outlets including China National Radio, People's Political Consultative Daily, China.org.cn, China Philanthropist, People's Weekly, and the financial desk of People's Daily Online.

In 2020, we launched the Lunzheshan Care and Support Project in Beijing — a social enterprise initiative bringing together volunteers to support employment for formerly incarcerated individuals and others facing hardship during the pandemic. The project was covered by People's Political Consultative Daily, China Philanthropist, and China.org.cn.

None of these projects stood alone. Each was our answer, in a different setting, to the same underlying question: that a person who has fallen needs more than a single chance — they need a supported path forward.

From Elim Spring's launch in 2010 to today, we have never relied on public fundraising, and have sustained our work primarily through social enterprise. In later years, we also took on government-funded projects, staffed directly by the people we serve — which is, in itself, a form of reintegration. Alongside our mission, this model has also generated real returns for our investors and partners. Our parent organization, Beijing Xilesong Consulting, holds dual certification as a social enterprise from both the China Charity Fair and the Beijing municipal government.

## **Responsibility Shock: A Recurring Pattern**

Yet this long accompaniment also taught us something difficult.

Many people did well while still under our support — they met their goals, built new

habits, restored a sense of order to their lives. But often, just as things looked like a success story, within weeks or months of a program ending, they would begin to fall apart.

This was not the exception. It was a pattern, structural in nature. I came to call it “responsibility shock”: when institutional support is withdrawn, responsibility does not return gradually or gently — it floods back all at once. Bills, family expectations, moral pressure, debts of obligation never repaid, all arriving together.

An institutional environment, without anyone quite noticing, regulates the density of responsibility a person carries. When that regulation disappears, many people are simply crushed by what comes rushing back in.

## **Coming to America: The Same Question in a New Setting**

After arriving in the United States, I realized the question had not gone away. It had simply taken on a new form.

Over the past two years, I have spent time at a range of organizations across Pensacola, volunteering and observing the realities faced by more than a hundred people experiencing homelessness. Much of what I saw happened outside any institution — on sidewalks, late at night, in the corners of different neighborhoods, regardless of the weather.

On July 4, 2023, near the Escambia County government complex, several people experiencing homelessness recognized me and asked if I would photograph them. That moment taught me something: photography is not only a way of documenting others. Sometimes it is a form of permitted closeness — a relationship, a kind of trust.

I also met someone who played guitar and sang. It made me start asking a different question: if someone still has a real musical gift, should we only see them as someone in need of help? Or could we instead ask how to help them become a musician again, in full?

## **Working the Night Shift: Learning Through Labor**

After moving to the United States, I spent long stretches of time doing night cleaning, restaurant kitchen work, and other repetitive, physically demanding labor. At first, this was simply a matter of survival. Over time, though, I began to see it as something else: a form of learning.

When I started tracking how my own days were actually spent — labor, commuting, the bare minimum of physical recovery — I found that the window left for any kind of mental breathing room was sometimes less than thirty minutes. And it was almost always in that narrow, compressed gap that family obligations and moral demands chose to arrive.

There is one day I remember with particular clarity. It was December 11, 2025. I was standing outside a bank, about to go in to clean. I was exhausted, and expecting nothing good, when I opened a letter from immigration services that had been sitting in my mailbox. My first instinct was that it would be a denial, or another request for documents.

Instead, it was an immigration approval notice under the EB-1A extraordinary ability category. Occupation code: social worker.

I did not feel happy. I did not have the energy to feel happy. I sent my daughter a brief, flat text message, and walked into the bank to start cleaning.

I have thought about that moment many times since. Someone recognized by the United States government as a person of extraordinary ability did not have enough left in him to feel glad about it, standing outside a bank. That is not personal weakness. That is the real weight of structural compression.

I still have an education, experience, and a sense of purpose to draw on. Even so, a labor structure this demanding can leave a person feeling perpetually compressed. If that is true for someone with as many resources as I have, how much harder must it be

for someone experiencing homelessness, who has not yet completed the work of reintegration and is still carrying trauma and disconnection?

What became clear to me is that the path back into society is rarely short on labor opportunities. What is genuinely scarce is something else: whether there is any room left, after the labor, to recover, to grow, to rebuild. Without that buffer, reintegration can quietly turn into a form of ongoing depletion.

It is precisely because of this that I have come to deeply respect the long-established, highly capable relief organizations across the United States. They carry the mission of emergency assistance with professionalism built over decades, and that work is irreplaceable.

### **Garden of Hope: Working in the Buffer Zone**

That is why, from the very beginning, Garden of Hope chose not to position itself as a traditional food or shelter organization. Not because that work isn't important — quite the opposite. Precisely because so many organizations already carry that work with long experience and real excellence, we wanted to ask a different question: between emergency relief and full independence, is there still a space for buffer, growth, and repositioning?

What we want to do is help people who have already survived the initial crisis but have not yet found their footing — to give them, during this most vulnerable window, a genuine buffer: a way for responsibility to return at a manageable pace, rather than all at once.

In the cases I have followed over many years, lasting recovery rarely came from the people in the most intensive programs. It came, more often, from those who, after leaving a program, still had some protected period of breathing room — a family that held off on its demands for a while, a job with a predictable rhythm, or someone who simply helped delay the reopening of certain relationships.

That kind of buffer can be designed. That is the direction Garden of Hope wants to explore. We are continuing the same logic that has guided our work for twenty years: not relying on public donations, not depending primarily on government funding, but sustaining our mission through a viable social enterprise model — because that is both what we have practiced, and what we believe can actually last.

## **Still on This Road**

In December 2025, I formally filed the registration for Garden of Hope International.

What stays with me most is December 31, 2025 — New Year's Eve, just about a week after that filing. I went back, deliberately, to the exact spot where I had taken my very first photograph of someone experiencing homelessness, and I raised the camera again.

That photograph is no longer just a street scene. It has become something closer to a reminder: the question is still here, and so is the responsibility.

Twenty years ago, we asked whether someone who had fallen could still reconnect with society, rebuild their dignity, and find meaning again. Today, standing in the United States, that same question is still here — only now, in a new setting, with new challenges, and new possibilities.

What we understand more clearly now is that the question is not only how to help someone stand up. It is whether, once they are standing, we have left them enough room that they don't fall again.

And we are still on this road.

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**About the Author** Baibin “Leon” Yin is the founder of Garden of Hope International, Inc., a

social entrepreneur and documentary photographer. Since 2004, he has worked in Beijing on reintegration support for formerly incarcerated individuals, people in community correction programs, and individuals and families affected by addiction, founding social enterprises and public service programs including Elim Spring Restaurant, the Garden of Hope Children's Training Center, the Fresh Start Program, and the Lunzheshan Care and Support Project. This work has been covered extensively by Chinese media outlets including China National Radio, People's Political Consultative Daily, China Philanthropist, and China.org.cn. In 2025, he was approved for immigration under the EB-1A extraordinary ability category. He is now based in Pensacola, Florida, where he continues to document the lives of people experiencing homelessness through photography, and where he founded Garden of Hope International, Inc. to explore a buffer model for reintegration between emergency relief and full independence.