

# *Western China, Popular Culture, and the Ambiguous Centrality of the Periphery*

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**Kevin Latham**

SOAS, University of London

**T**HIS ESSAY EXPLORES VARIOUS DIVERSE AND DIVERGENT REPRESENTATIONS of Western China<sup>1</sup> in Chinese media and popular culture with the aim of considering how they, and their reappropriations, reproductions, and reinventions still populate China's contemporary cultural landscape. In this way the essay will identify ways in which the peripherality of Western China has played, and continues to play, a key role in the constitution of mainstream Chinese popular culture. In particular, the essay will focus on examples from three different periods of Chinese cultural history: the Ming dynasty novel *Journey to the West*, revolutionary popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s, and cinema and television in the early post-Mao period.

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<sup>1</sup> Defining "Western China" is already problematic. China's Western Development Plan (see below) designates Western China as the six provinces of Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan, as well as the five autonomous regions of Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, and Ningxia. Other Chinese government definitions of Western China leave out Inner Mongolia and Guangxi from this list and include the municipality of Chongqing. However, geographically, both of these definitions include some regions—such as Shaanxi and Guizhou—that are actually fairly "central" in location. Some Chinese participants in the Perth symposium pointed out that they and, by implication, some other Chinese would consider, in their popular imaginary, Sichuan, Shaanxi, and some areas of the Yellow River valley to be part of "Central" China. However, in this essay the term "Western China" does not refer to a rigidly defined geopolitical territory, nor do I seek to identify the geographical boundaries of popular conceptualizations of what is or is not Western or Central China. Rather, I explore the discursive construction in Chinese popular culture of places in the western half of the country, which more or less coincide with the official government designations. Indeed, all the places I discuss as "Western China" fall within these official designations. However, one could also contend that this very ambiguity of what is "Western" and what is "Central" China only adds an additional layer of irony to the argument presented here.

I will argue that Western China has in various ways at these different times enjoyed an ambiguous status as simultaneously central and peripheral in China's popular cultural history. This has given it unique, if greatly divergent, roles in the construction of Chinese political, cultural, and historical self-understandings. Furthermore, one can identify a range of ironic tensions that populate many representations of Western China, suggesting that a search for a modernist "truth" through persuasion has been replaced by a popular culture of distraction, fragmentation, disjuncture, contradiction, and transience. This might be conceived of as a move from the ambiguous centrality of the periphery to a peripheralization of everything in the intangible realms of digital superficiality, inviting the question of where in China's contemporary popular cultural landscape one might find space for culture critique now.

Western China is in many senses peripheral. Historically, it was considered a region of barbarians and foreign traders. It has many areas dominated by ethnic minorities that, with respect to the Han Chinese mainstream, speak different languages, adhere to different religious beliefs, and follow different cultural practices. More recently, Western China has been relatively peripheral to the economic boom that has launched China onto the international stage as a major economic, political, and military power in the twenty-first century. Even if many of the migrant workers upon whom China's economic growth has depended have come from Central and Western China's less developed provinces, the southern and eastern coastal provinces have constituted the economic and manufacturing powerhouses that have driven the country's economic growth in recent decades. Although Western China has figured prominently in popular cultural representations dating back to imperial times, its particular resonances in recent decades constitute the main focus of this essay. Here I will consider some of the key diverse and divergent representations and how they, and their reappropriations, reproductions, and reinventions over the years, still populate China's contemporary cultural landscape. I will then move on to consider what they might tell us about key changes in the character of cultural representation in contemporary China.

After an initial consideration of recent representations of Western China in contemporary media, I will look back first to the sixteenth-century Ming dynasty novel *Journey to the West*, which has not only made popular reading for centuries but also inspired countless films, television series, novels, and, in recent years, video games. The second section will look at the revolutionary cultural legacy of Chairman Mao and the sojourn of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Yan'an in northwestern China. Not only were key policies formulated and developed during this period (from 1936 to 1948) but ideas about the "Yan'an spirit" (延安精神) and popular cultural representations of this period lived on long into the People's Republic period, even to the present day. Finally, with a particular focus on cinematic and televisual representations from the 1980s and 1990s, I will look at the way that Western China has featured as the locus of cultural negotiation in the post-Mao reform period. I will argue that in each of these periods and through this range of diverse examples we can identify ways in which the peripherality of Western China has actually come to play a central role in the constitution of mainstream Chinese popular culture, making the relationship between center and periphery in this context constitutively ambiguous. I will suggest that irony offers a recurring tropic lens for the analysis of these "central peripheries" (or peripheral centers) and also question whether in contemporary Chinese popular culture there is any longer any space for "centralities" at all (peripheral or otherwise). Not so very long ago, truth and persuasion were at the heart of the CCP's political and social program

for the country. Now the politics of representation is as much based on play as on truth and as much on distraction as on persuasion.

## WESTERN CHINA AND INTERNAL OCCIDENTALISM TODAY

Images and representations of Western China in Chinese media today cover a range of different associations, from smiling, traditionally costumed, ethnic-minority peoples dancing and singing, to social unrest on the streets and terrorist attacks on train stations, to protesting monks and disruptive Tibetans, to corrupt politicians and high-level intrigue.<sup>2</sup> In various ways, these representations (and others) of Western China today constitute a form of internal “Occidentalism” through which various internal “Others”—often, though not always, from ethnic minorities, with whom Western China is often associated—constitute the springboard for the construction of the contemporary, modern Han Chinese self. Chen Xiaomei has written on how various Chinese representations of “the West,” where this refers to the global generalized “West,” have been used as a way of constituting China as their opposite.<sup>3</sup> However, Occidentalism can also be applied to the internal western Other—the Tibetan, the Uighur, the underdeveloped, and, one might even argue, the deviant politician.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic minorities (fifty-five are officially recognized) have long constituted the Other against which the norm of the Han mainstream has been defined.<sup>5</sup>

Distinguished in media representations by their colorful costumes, folk songs, and dances (see fig. 1), these musical Others, many coming from Western China, have long populated the country’s television and light-entertainment schedules, not to mention tourist attractions ranging from the Folk Culture Village in Shenzhen to shows staged for tourists in Yunnan’s Xishuangbanna and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> As Dru Gladney put it with a touch of irony: “One cannot be exposed to China without being confronted by its ‘colourful’ minorities. They sing, they dance; they twirl, they whirl. Most of all, they smile, showing their happiness to be part of the motherland.”<sup>7</sup> However, in recent years the prominent ethnic Others of Uighurs and Tibetans in particular have become increasingly bound up with the politics of religion, national identity, and economic development. Uighurs have become associated with street violence (see fig. 2) and Islamic separatist terrorism instigated by outside forces,<sup>8</sup> for instance, while noncompliant Tibetans are linked to the so-called Dalai Lama separatist clique.

<sup>2</sup> The disgraced politician Bo Xilai was the party chief of Chongqing for five years, and it was there that he met his political downfall in 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: The Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Cf. E. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Aiwa Ong, “Anthropology, China and Modernities: The Geopolitics of Cultural Knowledge,” in *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, ed. H. Moore (London: Routledge, 1996), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Dru Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (1994): 92–123.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., S. Doorne, Irena Ateljjevic, and Z. Bai, “Representing Identities through Tourism: Encounters of Ethnic Minorities in Dali, Yunnan Province, People’s Republic of China,” *International Journal of Tourism* 5, no. 1 (2003): 1–11; Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China”; and Louisa Schein, “Ethnoconsumerism as Cultural Production? Making Space for Miao Style,” in *Locating China: Space, Place and Popular Culture*, ed. Jing Wang (London: Routledge, 2007), 150–70.

<sup>7</sup> Gladney, “Representing Nationality in China,” 95.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., the CCTV News Channel’s *News 1+1* (新闻 1+1) broadcast on May 28, 2014: “Combating Terrorism in China Requires Joint Internal and External Controls!” (中国反恐, 需-内外兼治-!). The program, a half-hour analytical current-affairs critique, opens with images of Uighur street violence and its aftermath followed by images of armies of highly trained, well-equipped, and heavily armed antiterrorist police. The program



**FIGURE 1.**  
Colorful,  
dancing ethnic-  
minority people.



**FIGURE 2.**  
Protesting  
Uighurs.

Religion has become associated in these cases with threats to national sovereignty, identity, and unity. At the same time, both Xinjiang and Tibet are discursively constructed as areas of underdevelopment in need of Han Chinese intervention.<sup>9</sup> Complaints about Han immigration to these areas and the rising proportion of Han Chinese in these populations are regularly rebutted by the Chinese authorities with lists of infrastructure projects, economic development statistics,

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explores purported relations between domestic terrorism and the external forces inciting it (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoSSEunhII>). Another edition of the same program, on May 16, 2014, entitled “Resist Terrorism and Prevent Violence: A Smokeless War!” (反恐防暴：一场没有硝烟的战争!), reported on a huge antiterrorism exercise with similar arrays of weaponry and manpower on display. The exercises, viewers were told, were being staged in four places: Kunming, Guangzhou, Xinjiang, and Tibet. All, bar Guangzhou, which had recently suffered a widely reported Islamic terrorist attack, are in Western China (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9KUU8fABCA>).

<sup>9</sup> Said, *Orientalism*.

and rising educational levels.<sup>10</sup> All of this contributes to a hegemonic discourse that constitutes and reproduces the Han mainstream as the norm in processes of national identification.

In fact, the whole of Western China was drawn into the discourses of underdevelopment from the late 1990s with the launch of the Western Development Plan (西部大开发), which identified six provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan) and five autonomous regions (Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, and Ningxia) and one municipal region (Chongqing) as in need of special measures to promote economic development, to help these areas catch up with the rapidly developing eastern provinces, and to prevent the gap between the two sides of the country widening even further.<sup>11</sup> The plan has been widely discussed in Chinese media over the years and has featured prominently in national policy-making and planning, creating a dominant discursive context in which Western China was demarcated as different from the rest of the country and in need of special measures. The plan formed the basis for a range of targeted policies and development measures (such as the West–East gas pipeline and the Qinghai–Tibet railway) aimed at helping the region “catch up” with the rest of the country. Of course, the gap is not simply discursive—there really were and are large economic and developmental disparities between the two sides of the country that were becoming ever more marked. However, the high level of attention given to the plan nonetheless heightened awareness of these differences in the public realm.

These contemporary discourses of Western China constitute these territories as peripheral and distinctive. Practices of internal othering and internal Occidental construction focus attention on difference and separation. However, if we first look back at previous representations of Western China in Chinese popular culture and then also consider the ways in which these representations still populate the contemporary popular cultural landscape, we can start to appreciate a more complex portrait of Western China as not only peripheral but in many ways also carrying a legacy of peripherality-centrality in discourses of Chinese national and cultural identification.

### **JOURNEY TO THE WEST**

The novel *Journey to the West* (西游记; literally, “Records of Travel to the West”) is generally thought to have been written in the sixteenth century and is attributed to Wu Cheng’en. It has become known not only in China but also worldwide through acclaimed translations by Arthur Waley and William Jenner and, perhaps even more importantly, through its manifestation in countless cinematic and televisual formats exported around the world.

The original novel tells the story of a real Tang dynasty monk, Xuanzang, who traveled through Western China and neighboring territories to India in search of deeper understanding of Buddhist teaching. In 629 he left Chang’an (present-day Xi’an—literally, “Western peace”), which was then the capital of the Tang dynasty, and returned in 646, after nearly two decades of traveling, studying, and collecting Buddhist texts to bring back with him. However, the story of Xuanzang’s journey in the novel, although based on some historical fact, is also a compilation of fantastical characters and events derived partly from popular folk mythology and partly from

<sup>10</sup> June Teufel Dreyer, “Economic Development in Tibet under the People’s Republic of China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 36 (2003): 411–30.

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Huang, Joie Ma, and Kyle Sullivan, “Economic Development Policies for Central and Western China,” *China Business Review*, November 2010, <http://www.chinabusinessreview.com/economic-development-policies-for-central-and-western-china/>.

the author's imagination. The novel largely consists of a series of adventurous episodes in which Xuanzang and his traveling companions—Sun Wukong, the Monkey King; Zhu Bajie, a pig and former general in heaven banished for misbehavior; another banished celestial general, Sha Wujing; and Yulong, son of the Dragon King of the West Sea—encounter a wide range of physical obstacles and mystical creatures, which often threaten them with some kind of mortal danger and from which they have to extricate themselves through combinations of guile, violence, and magic.

There are several things to note about what Western China might mean in terms of the *Journey to the West*. First of all, the parameters of center and west at the time in which the novel is set were quite different from those of the modern period. To start with, China's capital in the Tang dynasty was Chang'an, current-day Xi'an, which is itself located in what is in contemporary terms considered Western China. Xi'an is the capital of today's Shaanxi Province, one of the six provinces and five autonomous regions officially recognized as Western China by the Chinese government. This reminds us that historically "Western China" has in fact been a shifting concept, and indeed in the Tang dynasty the capital was more "central," geographically, than it has been in more recent times. However, at the time of the writing of the novel, in the late sixteenth century, China's capital lay already in Beijing, much further to the east. Second, it is important to acknowledge that the ultimate destination of Xuanzang's "journey to the west" was in fact India, beyond China's borders, and indeed, much of the actual journey occurs not only in Western China but also in places that are today the neighboring states of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. However, the novel is nonetheless clearly associated with the then notions of "the West," including the western regions of the Chinese sphere of influence.

The West, in this novel, is a border region (as indeed it still is), but perhaps a more important area of cultural and economic influence than today. In contemporary China the foreign is indeed to a large degree conceptualized in terms of a generalized "West,"<sup>12</sup> but the route to this West is much less often thought of in terms of westward land travel. China's eastern coast has in many ways become the conceptual departure point for reaching the foreign, especially as far as economic development and business is concerned.<sup>13</sup> In *Journey to the West*, by contrast, the West constitutes the principal link to the Arab world and Europe via the Silk Route, along part of which Xuanzang and his companions travel. It is the direction of foreign trade, the direction from which foreigners come, and, significantly for this text of course, also the direction from which new religious beliefs and influences came, particularly in the shape of Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the story of *Journey to the West* is about the search for a certain spiritual authenticity, the search for enlightenment through travels in the periphery. Although the attention in the novel—and even more so in many of its various media reincarnations—is quite strongly focused on the heroic and sometimes comic exploits of the story's key characters, it is nonetheless a fantastic version of the

<sup>12</sup> Consider, for example, the use of the phrase *xifangren* (西方人; literally, "people for the West") to talk about foreigners, including Australians and Americans, who might more logically be thought of as coming from the south and the east respectively. We should also note that many significant foreign "Others" in China these days come from the east—for example, Japanese, Koreans, Taiwanese, and Filipinos.

<sup>13</sup> One might also consider the phrase *xia hai* (下海; literally, "go down into the sea"), used from the 1980s onward to refer to the decision to leave the security of state employment in order to become a private entrepreneur. See also below on the significance of looking out to the blue sea in relation to the *Heshang* television series.

<sup>14</sup> However, it is also worth noting that the Tang emperor Gaozhong was also the first to officially allow Islam to be practiced in China, even though Muslims had settled there earlier. Indeed, today Xi'an is recognized for its considerable Muslim Chinese population.

story of how Buddhism—a foreign religion from the West—came to be rooted more securely at the heart of Chinese cultural life, something that has continued, with some brief periods of exception, to the present day.

However, beyond the longstanding popularity of the novel itself, for centuries the novel has also had a far-reaching influence on Chinese popular cultural production. The stories of the Monkey King and other characters from the novel have appeared countless times in Chinese regional operas, novels, cartoons, television series, films, and, more recently, also multiple-player online games. One recent count of international media adaptations of *Journey to the West* lists twenty films, eleven television series, twenty-one comic book and anim  reproductions, and fourteen video games.<sup>15</sup>

These figures are far from complete but nonetheless offer an indication of the popularity of the novel and its characters as well as its ability to inspire popular cultural production, appropriation, and reinvention over the decades and indeed centuries. The most recent of these adaptations of the *Journey to the West* theme includes Hong Kong comic actor and director Stephen Chow’s historical spoof drama *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (2013) and Cheang Poi-soi’s film *The Monkey King* (released late in 2014). Chow’s film is a reworking that draws our attention to how, especially in recent years, *Journey to the West* has been the starting point, the source of inspiration, for innumerable cultural improvisations. This film is more a parodic play on themes, characters, and film styles (as many of Chow’s films are) than a dramatization of the novel.

## FOLLOWING THE YAN’AN SPIRIT

*Journey to the West* was reputedly one of Mao Zedong’s favorite classical novels as a child, engendering an interest in him that he would carry into his later life.<sup>16</sup> However, Western China was to appear even more prominently in Mao’s life and, consequently, in that of both the CCP and the Chinese nation, with long-term consequences for popular cultural production, after the Long March of 1936, which saw a beleaguered CCP retreat from eastern China to the relatively remote city of Yan’an in Shaanxi Province. Yan’an became Mao’s base between 1937 and 1948, and this period played a crucial role in shaping the history, mythology, and popular culture of the CCP for years to come. From Yan’an, Mao sought to rebuild the party, to redefine its path, and to continue the fight against the Japanese and the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek. At this time party workers and soldiers spread out into the countryside to win over Chinese peasants to their cause and to invest time and effort in understanding their daily lives, their cultural practices, and their daily challenges. In this work considerable attention was given to popular culture, which was seen as a crucial tool for understanding and getting close to the people while also offering material for future morale building and propaganda work.<sup>17</sup> It was in relation to this work that in May 1942 Mao spoke to a gathering of party members and intellectuals known as the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art (延安文艺座谈会). Subsequently, Mao’s lectures to the forum, published as *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*, were to have a profound impact on

<sup>15</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. “List of media adaptations of *Journey to the West*,” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_media\\_adaptations\\_of\\_Journey\\_to\\_the\\_West](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_media_adaptations_of_Journey_to_the_West) (accessed 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Dong Zhixin, *Mao Reads “Journey to the West”* [*Mao Zedong du xi you ji* 毛泽东读西游记] (Liaoning: Liaoning Pictorial Publishing House, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Bonnie S. MacDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talk at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1980).

popular cultural production throughout China for more than three decades following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949.

Mao's *Talks*, which were aimed at unifying party policy on cultural production, made two key points. First, in what can be seen as an anti-elitist move, artists should take seriously workers, peasants, and soldiers both as inspirational sources for artistic production and as audiences for their work. Second, Mao stipulated that all artistic production should serve a political purpose: namely, the promotion of socialism and what would later become known as Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought. Mao's *Talks* were to have an immediate and lasting impact on cultural and artistic production. Folk stories, music, and dance were reevaluated, artistic production spoke to and for the “masses” (群众), and political messages became increasingly entrenched in literature, theater, music, and other types of artistic production, culminating in the rigid application of these ideas by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, when only a small number of prescribed model operas could be performed in the country. Mao's *Talks* effectively subordinated cultural production to politics until the 1980s.

However, the effect of the *Talks* was only part of the Yan'an legacy that survives to this day. The “Yan'an Spirit” (延安精神) or the “Yan'an Way” (延安作风), as the idea has come to be known, refers to the sense of sacrifice, socially oriented collective effort, hard work, enthusiasm for the party and its objectives, and the striving for the realization of socialism against all odds that characterized many party workers of the period, especially the survivors of the Long March, and has since entered into the party's own mythology. Calls to study the Yan'an Spirit became repetitive themes in speeches, media, and poster campaigns both during and after the Yan'an period (see figs. 3 and 4).



**FIGURE 3.** Poster with the exhortation “Study the Yan’an Way, develop a revolutionary tradition” (1962).



**FIGURE 4.** “Long live the Yan’an Way” (1961).

Following the Communist victory in the civil war and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the party and its central administration, media organizations, and leaders all moved to Beijing and other parts of the country. However, the legacy of Yan'an and the Long March endured, with the spirit of Yan'an still being invoked today. The Yan'an Spirit was a common theme in revolutionary films of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, perhaps best epitomized by the biopic *Dr. Bethune*, which was made in 1964 and recounts the life of Canadian-born doctor Norman Bethune, who devoted himself to China's rural population in the Yan'an years. Mao's eulogy for the doctor, originally written in 1939, became compulsory learning in Chinese primary schools in the 1960s, and excerpts can still be found in textbooks today.<sup>18</sup>

The 1964 film, directed by Zhang Junxiang, Gao Zheng, and Li Shutian, has been viewed over the years by hundreds of millions of people throughout the country, especially since it has been shown at regular intervals on Chinese television since the 1980s. Bethune became the cinematic embodiment of the Yan'an Spirit. As Mao himself put it:

Comrade Bethune's spirit, his utter devotion to others without any thought of self, was shown in his great sense of responsibility in his work and his great warm-heartedness towards all comrades and the people. . . . We must all learn the spirit of absolute selflessness from him. With this spirit everyone can be very useful to the people. A man's ability may be great or small, but if he has this spirit, he is already noble-minded and pure, a man of moral integrity and above vulgar interests, a man who is of value to the people.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the filmmakers of the 1964 feature film had also worked on a 1939 documentary on Norman Bethune produced by the newly formed Yan'an Film Group, the first film propaganda organization of the CCP, which made various films about life in Yan'an. One of these, *Nanniwan* (1942), told the story of an agricultural cooperative set up in the region of the Nanniwan Gorge, about 90 kilometers from Yan'an, which was later hailed as a success and model for future collective effort and collaboration.

In 1943 a revolutionary song of the same name was written by the poet He Jingzhi and became one of the most widely known songs in China for decades to come. The song—an example perhaps of what Brady calls “revolutionary romanticism of the Mao period”—urges people to come to Nanniwan to see the transformation from a barren mountain into a rural agricultural idyll.<sup>20</sup> A good theatrical example of such revolutionary romanticism can be seen in Lan Guoying's (郭兰英) 1965 rendition of the song.<sup>21</sup> In this highly choreographed spectacle, stylized peasants and soldiers, the girls carrying baskets of colorful flowers, swing gently in time to the music and stream around the stage in traditional Chinese theater fashion while providing choral punctuation and accompaniment.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> For English-speaking audiences around the world it was another foreigner, Edgar Snow, who spread the word of Yan'an and the Communist revolution, through his book *Red Star over China*.

<sup>19</sup> Mao Zedong, “In Memory of Norman Bethune,” in *Serve the People* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966).

<sup>20</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBDMT57SpD8>.

<sup>22</sup> What the song does not mention is that the agricultural cooperative was cultivating opium poppies as a means of raising much-needed hard cash for the war effort. See James Mulvenon, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise of the Military-Business Complex in the Chinese People's Liberation Army, 1978–1998* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 32–33.

The importance of these representations of Yan'an has not diminished over time. Even if their political and cultural context has been transformed, especially in the last three decades, these representations have not been left behind in a mummified Maoist past. On the contrary, a postmodern nostalgia (which has seen the reappropriation of Maoist imagery<sup>23</sup> and even the popularity of Cultural Revolution experience themed restaurants in Beijing) and the continuing political manipulation and reinvention of the revolutionary past by the CCP have led to the revitalization, reappropriation, and reinvention of these representations from the past, even to the present day.

However, the CCP has not been alone in reappropriating this piece of Yan'an cultural heritage. In the early 1990s, following the Tiananmen Square crackdown, Cui Jian, the so-called father of Chinese rock music, then considered by the authorities cautiously as somewhat subversive, sang the song "Nanniwan" in his own style at concerts in Beijing and elsewhere, performances that can now be relived online through Youku, YouTube, and other video websites and that add another layer of complex reference to this history of reappropriations of the revolutionary past. In one slow and pensive acoustic set from the mid-1990s, we can see shots of the audience clapping and singing along loudly at Cui's behest, revealing their familiarity and enthusiasm for the song, even if one is left uncertain about the motives for their appreciation of the performance (see more below).<sup>24</sup>

In 2012 Chinese film director Diana Peng produced a new film with the same title (*Nanniwan*) recounting once again for contemporary audiences and with contemporary film technologies the story of the valiant efforts of the Eighth Route Army in Yan'an back in the 1940s. Meanwhile, in 2004 the Chinese central government launched an effort to promote "red tourism," which has brought thousands of visitors to Yan'an. According to Yan'an tourism officials, the city attracted 14.5 million tourists in 2010, bringing in revenues of Rmb7.65 billion (around US\$1.17 billion), with more than a thousand viewers daily of the tourist reconstruction of the "Battle Defending Yan'an."<sup>25</sup>

In 2006 China Central Television (CCTV) also produced *Norman Bethune*, a twenty-episode series retelling once again the life and times of the famous Canadian physician, concentrating particularly on his time in China. The series, costing some Rmb30 million, was reported to be the most expensive television drama series ever made in China up to that date.<sup>26</sup> Also in 2006, Yin Li's film *Zhang Side*, a biopic of a Yan'an period soldier hero who worked in Nanniwan, among other places, swept China's most prestigious film awards, the Golden Rooster Awards, with actor Wu Jun winning best actor for playing Zhang, Yin Li winning best director, and the film taking best film.<sup>27</sup> Just how these films and songs are transformed, adapted, and reappropriated and the cultural significance of these practices could be the theme of another essay, and it is beyond the

<sup>23</sup> See Geremie R. Barme, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bErB2cCisHM>.

<sup>25</sup> In this private, commercially operated tourist attraction, complete with gunpowder smoke and the sound of gunshots, tourists get to dress up as soldiers and participate in the reconstruction of a famous 1947 battle in which the Communist forces repelled an effort by the Nationalists to drive them out of their revolutionary base. "China Focus: Red Tourism Flourishes in Old Revolutionary Bases" (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, 2011), [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-05/14/c\\_13874806.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-05/14/c_13874806.htm) (accessed November 27, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> "Sixty-Seven Years On, Canadian Idealist Moves China Again," *People's Daily*, August 31, 2006, [http://en.people.cn/200608/31/eng20060831\\_298507.html](http://en.people.cn/200608/31/eng20060831_298507.html) (accessed November 19, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Yu Sen-lun, "Zhang Side Dominates Top Chinese Awards," *Screen Daily*, October 29, 2006, <http://www.screendaily.com/zhang-side-dominates-top-chinese-awards/4029325.article> (accessed November 19, 2015).

scope of the present discussion to explore this further. However, what all these examples show is that Yan'an lives on as an important and recurring theme in Chinese popular culture. From the 1940s, and particularly with the Communist victory in 1949, Western China in the guise of the trope of Yan'an has remained central to China's mediated "popular reality."<sup>28</sup>

Yan'an assumed a metonymic role at the center of the semiosphere that is CCP mythology. What is more, one might argue that it is precisely because of the marginality of Yan'an, the fact that after 1949 it was in many ways left behind only to continue its existence in the realm of CCP mythology,<sup>29</sup> that it managed to maintain this centrality in popular culture. It is the detachment from the continuing reality of CCP and national politics that preserved its tropic status. Yan'an remained the symbolic locus of the revolutionarily idyllic past relatively untainted by the following political intrigues, campaigns, and infighting that characterized the future of the party in Beijing. Indeed, it was precisely at times of crisis or heightened political tension such as the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution that Yan'an—and we might also add the more recent promotion of red tourism and remakes of revolutionary films—would be rolled out as a reminder of what was at stake, what the point of the revolution had been, and what was expected of ordinary citizens in their daily lives. It is this function, devoid of its original political and historical context, that has enabled Yan'an to be used, or referred to, in such a way that "[s]ymbols from the Maoist past are now used to evoke images of nostalgia and support without retaining the substance of their original meaning."<sup>30</sup> In the end it is Yan'an's peripherality—its geographical distance and its ability to become detached from the more complex and painful associations of Mao's China—that has ensured its continuing centrality in China's popular cultural landscape.

## REVISITING THE REVOLUTIONARY WEST

In the 1980s, with the advent of Deng Xiaoping's reform and open-door policies, Chinese intellectual debate flourished in a way that it had not done for decades, with a new atmosphere of relative freedom and openness characterizing a reinvigorated realm of cultural negotiation—what was known then as "culture fever" (文化热).<sup>31</sup> It was at this time that the so-called "fifth generation" of Chinese filmmakers emerged from the Beijing Film Academy, largely under the patronage of the older director Wu Tianming at the Xi'an Film Studios and most notably led by future blockbuster and internationally renowned directors Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou.<sup>32</sup> However, many others deserve equal credit for their role in the revolution in Chinese filmmaking, including Tian Zhuangzhuang, Wu Ziniu, Huang Jianxin, Hu Mei, and Zhang Junzhao. These fifth-generation

<sup>28</sup> John Hartley, *Popular Reality: Journalism and Popular Culture* (New York: Arnold, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> Liangyu Hu, "A City in Retold Myth: The Changing Image of Yan'an in Chinese Revolutionary Memory and Narrative" (MA diss., SOAS, University of London, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, 3. Another way of putting this might be to say that such popular cultural relics have become simulacra (cf. J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman [New York: Semiotext(e), 1983]) operating only in the realm of recycled and mutually referential signs through which China's revolutionary past is so often experienced today.

<sup>31</sup> See also Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> See Chris Berry, ed., *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (London: BFI, 1991); Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau, eds., *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Paul Pickowicz, "Velvet Prisons and the Political Economy of Chinese Filmmaking," in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, ed. Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth J. Perry, Woodrow Wilson Center Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 193–220.

filmmakers employed a wide range of styles and subject matter, but a certain number of these films, particularly the earlier ones and those by some of the most prominent filmmakers, displayed some common themes and used similar devices in their interrogation of Chinese culture. It is beyond the scope of this essay to detail all the issues and arguments involved, but some of them are pertinent here. Most notably, a number of films used depictions of China's remote, often Western, regions as a vehicle for interrogating Chinese cultural modernity, experimenting with new ideas of film language and escaping the clichés of previous Chinese films. As Zhang Xudong put it:

In the major Fifth Generation films, where the norm of socialist realism is visually dismantled in the name of a higher realism (the ontology of the photographic image), the new reality encountered by the new perspective in a new optical situation *takes form in the marginal or residual realms of nature* (*the Yellow River, the Tibetan Plateau, the Mongolian grassland, the mountain village in Yunnan*), the archaic, the mythic or the utopian.<sup>33</sup>

So, for example, Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Horse Thief* and *On the Hunting Ground* were set in Tibet and Mongolia respectively; Chen Kaige's *King of the Children* was based on a short story by Ah Cheng set in southwestern China's remote mountainous villages of the border province of Yunnan; and the same director's *Yellow Earth*, described by Zhang as the "aesthetic and political manifesto of the Fifth Generation" and the "archetype of the genre of Chinese cinematic modernism," is set in the loess plains of the Yellow River near Yan'an.<sup>34</sup>

*Yellow Earth*, released in 1984, was Chen Kaige's directorial debut film, made with Zhang Yimou as cinematographer. The film returned Chinese audiences once again to Shaanxi and the Yan'an period. However, this time it was with a difference. Although the film is about a Communist Party soldier from Yan'an collecting folk songs as part of the party project to learn from the people, the film offers a representation of the period, its politics, and its peasantry that starkly contrasts with what we find in, for instance, *Nanniwan*.

In *Yellow Earth* Chen set out to deliberately challenge the conventions of Chinese filmmaking as they were known at the time. There were to be no joyful dancing peasants, no Communist Party heroes, no sloganeering or propaganda. Rather, in this slow, contemplative, highly visual film with a simple narrative structure—almost to the point of not having one—one is invited to reflect upon the achievements of the CCP and how far, viewed from the 1980s, the party had lived up to its expectations.

Zhang Xudong's masterful analysis of the film draws our attention to a new kind of decentering.<sup>35</sup> Zhang argues that Chen Kaige's and Zhang Yimou's appropriation of the heavy, yellow landscape is used as a way of escaping the spatial construction of temporality in the socialist realist films of the past:

What is smashed by the presentation of this landscape, though, is not a temporality per se, but rather the narrativity of time inscribed in a particular mode of representation, the official,

<sup>33</sup> Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 243 (emphasis added).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 246–65.

bureaucratized discourse of socialist realism. The seizure of cinematic space by this landscape, then, introduces . . . an entire historical age crying for representation.<sup>36</sup>

In this film Western China becomes the repository of a feudal, unchanging, traditional past: a place where young girls are married off to older men against their will,<sup>37</sup> where poverty is intermingled with folk culture in shaping farmers' everyday lives and experiences. Standing for this onerous cultural burden, here we find the landscape of Western China as much a part of the problem as the solution. Indeed, one reading of *Yellow Earth* would lie in its identification of the failure or inability of the CCP, despite all its promises, to overcome the inertia of Chinese traditionalism represented by the intricately intertwined characteristics of earth, landscape, economy, and cultural practice.<sup>38</sup> Pushing Zhang Xudong's point further, what we find here is Western China deployed as the battering ram that reveals the disingenuousness of its previous representations from Nanniwan to Dr. Bethune. What is revealed is how Western China actually disappeared behind the clichés of what Mitter has called the "Mao-centred historiography which placed the Yan'an base area at the centre of the permitted narrative."<sup>39</sup>

This theme of a burdensome, physically and geographically rooted culture standing somehow between the Chinese people and modernity recurs, more explicitly stated, in the 1988 television series *Heshang (River Elegy)*, which was aired nationally on the eve of the Tiananmen demonstrations and was subsequently associated with, and heavily criticized for, fanning the flames of intellectual discontent that the demonstrations represented.<sup>40</sup>

In one episode of *Heshang*, China is contrasted with a generalized "West." China is portrayed as a yellow, earth-bound culture suggesting rootedness, closed-mindedness, and some degree of introversion; whereas the West is depicted as blue, seafaring, exploratory, inquisitive, and open.<sup>41</sup> However, what is interesting from the point of view of this essay is the identification and depiction of China's earth-bound rootedness. The "yellowness" of this inertia is drawn from the same loess plains of the Yellow River valley where Chen Kaige filmed his feudally encumbered peasantry, not far from either the revolutionary capital of Yan'an or the Tang dynasty capital of Chang'an (now Xi'an). The Yellow River valley has a further historical and cultural significance in China as the site of some of the earliest archaeological traces of Chinese culture. The Yellow River basin is sometimes, in fact, referred to as the "cradle of Chinese civilization." Consequently, in these depictions of Western China (in *Yellow Earth* and *Heshang*) we find a

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>37</sup> See also Lewis Mayo, "Images of 'Feudal Marriage' in Recent Chinese Art Films," in *Modernization of the Chinese Past*, ed. Mabel Lee and A. D. Syrokomla-Stefanowska (Broadway, Australia: Wild Peony / Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 137–51.

<sup>38</sup> We should also acknowledge the links of the fifth-generation group of filmmakers to the May Fourth Movement and to similar critiques of Chinese traditional culture from authors as diverse as Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, and Shen Congwen. See, e.g., Merle Goldman and Leo Ou-fan Lee, eds., *An Intellectual History of Modern China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>39</sup> Rana Mitter, "Old Ghosts, New Memories: China's Changing War History in the Era of Post-Mao Politics," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 1 (2003): 119.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., "He shang' de wu qu: cong 'he shang' dao 'wu si'" 《河殇》的误区：从《河殇》到《五四》 [The mistakes of "River Elegy": From "River Elegy" to "May 4th"] (Zhong gong zhong yang xuan chuan bu wen hua yi shu ju ying shi chu bian, 1990) [published by the Film and Television Office of the Literature and Art Bureau of the Central Ministry of Propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party, 1990].

<sup>41</sup> Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, *Deathsong of the River: A Reader's Guide to the Chinese TV Series "Heshang,"* trans. Richard W. Bodman and Pin P. Wan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 203–22, 249–69; and Chen, *Occidentalism*.

questioning, a problematization, and an interrogation of this cultural yellowness. These portrayals of the central role of the Yellow River's loess plains in the formation of Chinese cultural identity suggest a need for decentering, for looking elsewhere for positive inspirations, and, in line with an intellectual tradition dating back to at least the May Fourth Movement, for critically appraising China's cultural heritage rooted in this part of Western China.<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I have argued here that Western China has in various ways and at different times enjoyed an ambiguous status as simultaneously central and peripheral in China's popular cultural history, a status that has given it unique, if greatly divergent, roles in the construction of Chinese political, cultural, and historical self-understandings. I have argued that there is an internal Occidentalism that works to support a Han mainstream hegemony through ideological representations. This tends to work toward a separation of the western regions—the west is the Other, distinct and separate and often the negative of the Han—which are seen as religious, feudal, violent, disruptive, threatening, backward, underdeveloped, uneducated, and in need of Han-centric state support/development and intervention.<sup>43</sup> However, despite this separation, this marginalization and peripheralization, compounded by geographical and physical marginality or peripherality, Western China has played key roles at different times in the construction, negotiation, evaluation, and reevaluation of mainstream cultural identities in China.

With *Journey to the West* and its tale of the search for enlightenment in the periphery of the Chinese sphere of influence, we see a lasting and highly influential inspiration for popular cultural production, which has exploded with the arrival of electronic and subsequently digital media. In this we can already identify a certain ambiguous centrality of the periphery. There is a certain irony surrounding the centrality of *Journey to the West*, following Kenneth Burke's use of the term, in that irony holds together two contending perspectives—"a tension of difference and an attempt to see two sides together."<sup>44</sup> This book, which has become a key Chinese cultural marker, is focused on a group of people leaving China and traveling to the West in search of greater cultural enlightenment. I want to argue that this kind of irony is also, even if in very different ways, a recurring theme in other representations of Western China that have also proven central through their peripherality.

With Yan'an in revolutionary culture, the irony is that this mythical center, this trope of self-sacrifice and devotion to the cause, (a) was left behind when power moved to Beijing and (b) came about as a result of a forced retreat, the Long March, from Eastern China. What is more, as we have seen, ironically it is Yan'an's historical peripherality that has enabled it to retain this ideological force over the decades.

However, irony can also be found in some of the more recent reappropriations of the Yan'an legacy. Consider Cui Jian's rendition of "Nanniwan," for instance, which is full of irony. Is he

<sup>42</sup> Incidentally, we might also note that Xuanzang set out from this same part of China in search of Buddhist enlightenment some fourteen centuries earlier.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. also Mark Hobart, ed., *An Anthropological Critique of Development: The Growth of Ignorance* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>44</sup> Hans Steinmüller, "The State of Irony in China," *Critique of Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (2011): 34. See also Hans Steinmüller and Suzanne Brandtstädter, eds., *Irony, Cynicism and the Chinese State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); and Kenneth Burke, "The Four Master Tropes" (1941), in *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

truly praising and being nostalgic for the Mao period? Is he suggesting that the CCP should look back to its roots and reacquire those values? Or is he satirizing, parodying, or poking fun at the dogmatic propaganda of the past? And in any of these cases, what is the nature of the audience's enthusiastic clapping and singing along? Is that a sign of appreciation for Cui Jian's irony or parody? Or is it perhaps just simply ironic (in another sense, another layer of irony) that they don't understand Cui Jian's irony and indeed sing along simply because they know the song so well? We cannot of course answer these questions, but the fact that we can—indeed, perhaps, *must*—ask them if we are to try to determine what was going on in this performance is enough to reveal layers of irony involved.

With culture fever and fifth-generation cinema there is further irony. *Yellow Earth* is replete with irony: it deals with a classic propaganda theme—an Eighth Route Army soldier during the Yan'an period collecting folk songs, inspiring a young girl to the cause, and so on—but it is handled in such a completely different way that it pulls open the curtain on everything that has been hidden by the clichés of these themes in past representations. What is ironic here is that Western China is used—again for, in, and through its peripherality—to offer a critique of both the weight of Chinese traditions and the CCP's promises, abilities, and achievements. This is done, furthermore, using a style and a theme that are utterly reminiscent of May Fourth literature—the culture critique of Lu Xun in *The True Story of Ah Q* and *New Year's Sacrifice*,<sup>45</sup> of the young girl in Shen Congwen's *Girl from Hunan*, or the protagonist in Yu Dafu's *Sinking* or in Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi*. The cultural critique found in this literature in many ways formed the intellectual roots of left-wing movements, including the CCP, from the 1920s onward.<sup>46</sup>

This critique looks at the enduring influence of “feudal” Chinese culture and the weight and burden of Chinese tradition—something pursued further in *Heshang*, where a further irony arises. In this television series, the Yellow River valley, part of Western China considered to be the cradle of Chinese civilization, is deployed as a metonym for the rooted, introverted cultural burden that Chinese culture had become in a modernizing world (again themes highly reminiscent of May Fourth period writing). One might argue again that it is the relatively remote peripherality of the Yellow River valley that makes such a critique possible. Although the program got into trouble—and has subsequently all but disappeared from China's explicitly voiced cultural heritage—it might never have been broadcast if this critique had been focused on, say, the Forbidden City or other places or personalities much closer to contemporary centers of power in China.

*Journey to the West*, by contrast, is thriving in the contemporary popular cultural landscape. The novel's story, its comic demeanor, and its diverse reappropriations in recent decades (not to mention previously in theater, literature, etc.) all lend themselves to the ludic, carnivalesque superficiality of contemporary digital consumer culture, which has an insatiable appetite for content. Consequently, *Journey to the West*, perhaps like Yan'an and Nanniwan in their own ways, has

<sup>45</sup> Both short stories are in *Lu Xun: Selected Works* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980).

<sup>46</sup> This style of critique continues through fifth-generation films such as *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, etc. Rey Chow traces the link between the critical approaches of the May Fourth Movement and fifth-generation cinema through her notion of the “visuality” of Chinese culture. Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

become a simulacrum in Baudrillard's sense of the word<sup>47</sup>—its various representations, realizations, and manifestations refer as much to each other as to any original story or novel.

However, perhaps the biggest irony of all is that contemporary popular culture in China is so fundamentally fragmented, disjointed, contradictory, and transitory that all these critiques from the 1980s and early 1990s now seem so dated, so unnecessary, and so distant from so many people's daily practices. In contemporary China, consumerism has in so many ways taken over from, or at least subdued, ideas; and culture critique (i.e., the politicized interrogation of one's own cultural heritage and production), which was in any case largely wiped from China's intellectual landscape following the events of 1989, has become a thing of the past. Early fifth-generation films now sit—alongside pop stars, celebrity intellectuals, cheap TV dramas, reality TV shows, and digital games—on the digital shelves of Chinese consumers' electronic devices, the remnants of a now-forgotten modernist discourse in a postrevolutionary, postmodern world.<sup>48</sup> Fifth-generation films are barely known among young people and have become simply some (a few of the least popular at that) among many other entertainment options in the fragmented postmodern landscape of contemporary Chinese popular culture—where incidentally the carnivalesque of *Journey to the West* has thrived.<sup>49</sup> The cultural center of Chinese popular culture seems to have shifted from the ambiguously central periphery to the intangible realms of digital superficiality, where the excess of information removes even the conditions of possibility for culture critique. A

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<sup>47</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*.

<sup>48</sup> All these various representations have been detached from their original contexts of production, despite their contradictions and mutual incompatibilities—a phenomenon that Peter Sloterdijk has associated with an age of cynical reason. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). But that is another story.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt, eds., *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).