Song King:

Tradition, Social Change, and the Contemporary Art of a Northern Shaanxi Folksinger

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the life and songs of the “Folksong King of Western China,” Wang Xiangrong, looking at how both elements are intricately tied to social changes in China during the last few decades. Building on extensive fieldwork and interviews with Wang and other folksingers from northern Shaanxi province, it shows how a “traditional” art form has interacted with and been affected by economic development, new media forms, government policies, commercialization of art, TV singing contests, and the rise of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) preservation. At the same time, it gives voice to an individual’s interpretation of that tradition (an individual who has been declared one of two “national bearers” of ICH for this tradition), thus personalizing the tradition within its broader social and historical context. By fusing together both performer-centered and tradition-centered approaches to oral literature, the songs and the speeches surrounding them are shown as serving to negotiate relations with real people, imagined characters, and gods from the past, present, and future.
For Aída, a quien amo con todo mi corazón
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Preface

I first saw Wang Xiangrong, known variously as the “Folksong King of Western China” and the “King of Northern Shaanxi Folksongs,” at a solo concert he gave in 1999 at the most prestigious concert hall in Taiwan, and thus began a fourteen year intellectual journey leading up to this dissertation. After interviewing one of the folksong collectors in 2001 that discovered Wang in the late 1970s, I finally had the chance to meet him in 2006 at an international conference/fieldwork project held in his home region. During that time, he gave a performance for the assembled scholars, standing on the bank of the Yellow River, with his back to the rushing waters and the neighboring province of Shanxi across the way. Gathered together in a semi-circle in front of Wang, the Chinese and foreign scholars aimed their video cameras and recording devices at him, while a local TV station filmed the filming of the singing, and locals watched on in seeming amusement. “What shall I sing?” he asked offhandedly, in a typical disclaimer of performance, before he answered himself, “How about ‘Going Beyond the Western Pass’?” (Figure 1).

With heart-wrenching emotion and a seemingly pained look on his face, he sang, in part,
Figure 1. Wang Xiangrong Sings "Going Beyond the Western Pass" in 2006

Dear sis’—ai hei—sister, ai,
Don’t you cry for me.
If you cry, I can’t endure the ache in my heart,
At sixes and sevens, all in a bustle, my heart’s in deep trouble.

Heaven has met with disaster,
The five grains are withered and even grass doesn’t grow.
If one doesn’t go beyond the Western Pass,
The days of the poor are truly numbered.

At one point, when he sang the words “don’t you cry for me,” it sounded like he was holding back tears of his own. Later, I would learn that his renditions of this song would often bring audience members to tears.

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1 Photograph by author.
2 For the complete translated lyrics and the original Chinese, see Chapter 2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of song lyrics and excerpts from Chinese interviews are my own.
Several days later, I had the chance to interview Wang informally at a local restaurant over roast mutton and sorghum liquor, known as *baijiu* 白酒, together with two other scholars and several of his friends. I had seen him often quoted as saying something to the effect of “when I sing, I think about all of the roads I have traveled, and all the happy, sad, bitter, and bittersweet events in my life.” Intrigued, I asked him what he would think about when he sang.

His response was that every time he sang “Going Beyond the Western Pass,” the song he performed down by the river, he would think of her—the girl that got away, many years ago when he was young. Her parents had married her to a rich man in Inner Mongolia, and she and he were forced to part. Now, every time he sang this song about migrant farmworkers forced by drought to leave their loved ones and walk for eight days to the more fertile land of Inner Mongolia to find work, he thought of her. In another interview, Wang said that, in addition to providing entertainment, songs for him were the means of expressing emotions that could be expressed in no other way (cf. Gibbs 2006).

The way that the lyrics of a traditional song could be perceived as meaningful both to a performer’s personal life and to the collective history and memory of a place was quite fascinating to me. Armed with this intriguing example of Wang connecting a “traditional” song with its own “collective” meaning to his own “personal” experience, I set out to develop a research plan that would revolutionize the way we understand Chinese folksongs, especially their lyrics. I began to look at folksong anthologies and articles in a new light—so many seemed to paint abstract pictures of social characteristics.

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3 For more background on both the “going beyond the Western Pass” migratory phenomenon and the song traditions associated with it, see Gibbs 2009.
and customs, borderline passé interpretations of regional cultural characteristics, and blanket statements of “this song is sung at such-and-such festival.” Now, I began to think about how different singers relate to particular songs they sing, what they think about, what stories from the past and what people they might connect it to, and how what they think about changes depending on when, where, and whom they are singing to. If Wang had such a deep, intricate connection with just this one song, then by looking at the connections to all the songs he sings would paint an extremely complex, compelling picture—one that would infuse the pale, abstract descriptions of a generalized folksong tradition with vivid color and bring it to life. Furthermore, if other singers in Northern Shaanxi had as unique experiential relations to the songs as Wang did, the similarities and contrasts they shared with Wang’s understandings would further invigorate my description of the broader tradition, infusing it with a life blood nourished by the experience of numerous individuals.

At this point in my intellectual journey, along the broad spectrum of foci between individual and tradition, I leaned strongly toward the former. Thinking of studies that failed to make use of individual interpretations of songs, I would think, “They are missing the best part!” I had a mission—to personalize tradition. Armed with this goal, I began preparing my project plan, keeping a look out for any theoretical sources that might be useful in my quest. I decided to let Wang guide me, asking open-ended questions about what particular songs meant to him and what he thought about when he sang them.

4 Just to be clear, there have been several works using performer-centered and/or narrator-centered approaches.
When I interviewed Wang again in 2010 at his new home in Xi’an, I decided to ask him questions about specific lines in particular songs, in the hopes that this line of inquiry would elicit memories associated with the songs themselves. In the version of “Going Beyond the Western Pass” on his CD, released in 2006 but recorded in Beijing in 1994, it sounded to me as if he actually started crying mid-song around the “don’t you cry for me” section of the lyrics mentioned earlier. The fact that his emotion while singing appeared so strong that he could cause himself to cry mid-performance seemed to suggest memories so deep that I was sure the recording would bring them instantly to his mind, like an old photograph. The multiple dimensions of context involved—the particularities of the song, as well as what was happening in Wang’s life in 1994 and the occasion on which it was recorded—all led me to believe that he would remember this particular performance clearly, and would tell me a heart-wrenching story that both personalized the song and connected it to generations of similar experiences (cf. DuBois 2006).

When I played the clip of the recording to him and asked him what he had been thinking about and if he had actually been crying, Wang’s answer completely astounded me. Unlike the deeply personal stories he recounted in 2006, now he began to speak of this performance in seemingly objective, technical terms, noting that the “crying” was part of that section of the song, in a style known as a “crying beat” (kuban 哭板), which followed the brighter “voice-warming beat” (liangban 亮板) that began the aria. He said that the “voice-warming beat” had the dual function of warming up one’s voice for the

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5 I was inspired, in part, by a fieldwork methodology course I had taken that suggested using old photos to elicit dormant memories from elderly informants during interviews.
rest of the song and serving as a sort of advertisement that the singer was beginning and
people should come and listen (assuming the context of a traveling folk operatic troupe).
Wang insisted that the “crying beat,” for its part, was merely “a type of expression used
by artists” (yiren de yizhong biaoxian 艺人的一种表现). The exact nature of that artistic
expression depended on the singer’s understanding of the song’s content and its mood.6
Unlike the intensely personal connection to the song he had related in 2006, he now
appeared to draw a sharp line between artistic expression and personal experience.
Although he may have had a clear memory of what he was thinking when he sat in that
recording studio in 1994, he now seemed to barricade himself behind the persona of the
artist, the performer.

Only later did I realize what had led to this stark change. Whereas the interview
in 2006 had occurred amid drinks and large platters of roast mutton in a restaurant up
north with his friends and a few scholars, in 2010, I was speaking with him at his new
apartment in Xi’an. He was now in a new romantic relationship, and his partner, whom
he had joined in 2008, sat in the next room. While many earlier articles, TV shows, and
documentaries about Wang had touched on various ill-fated romances he had

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6 When I further pressed the point, confirming that it wasn’t real crying, Wang hedged his answer, saying
that if one sang to the point of moving one’s own emotions (chang dao dongqing chu 唱到动情处), the
singer might actually cry. However, he framed this as the ability of some singers to immerse themselves in
the songs (touru 投入). He went on to say that they might connect the song to the lives of their parents,
their own lives, etc. Nevertheless, at this point of the interview he was always talking about the “artist”
(yiren 艺人) in the third person, creating distance between his own life and the generalized individuals he
described. One should note that the concept of “crying beat” as an expressive technique does not appear to
be exclusive to the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition. In his study on the Suzhou pingtan 评弹
chantefable storytelling tradition, Mark Bender translates and annotates passages sung to a “crying tune”
(kudiao 哭调), which “help to build an emotional climax in... part of the episode” and use singing as a
“more effective” alternative to speaking in doing so (Bender 2003: 192).
experienced, not unlike the requisite “broken-heartedness” of the American country
singer, now Wang wished to distance himself from those stories.

After responding to this new development, I decided to focus more exclusively on
Wang’s explanations of the social backgrounds of each song he sang. I would go through
his album and the various published song anthologies that included songs collected from
him, translating the lyrics, and asking him questions raised during the process of
translation. This, I hoped, would provide ample “elicitation material” and would get him
to talk about the social aspects of the songs, even if he declined to share more of his
personal connections to them.

However, after I returned in 2011-2012 for more extended fieldwork with Wang,
the personal would sometimes continue to pop up in his explanations of song lyrics and
their connection to the social history of northern Shaanxi. One case in particular sticks
out in my mind. I was interviewing him about a song entitled “Drinking Opium” (“He
yangyan” 喝洋烟) that appears on his CD, which has several different versions collected
in various anthologies. I was familiar with a different version—one sung by the famous
female northern Shaanxi folksinger, Ma Ziqing 马子清 (b. 1935), which is commonly
taught in courses on regional Chinese folksongs in places like the Shanghai Conservatory
and the China Conservatory of Music—that seemed to diverge from Wang’s version in
several respects.

Ma’s version, which is often referred to as “If Your Mother Beats You, You Can
Tell Your Older Brother” (“Ni mama da ni, ni gei gege shuo” 你妈妈打你你给哥哥说),
was a playful, partly flirtatious duet between a muleteer (jiaofu 脚夫) and a woman.
Although Ma, like Wang, sings the entire version, the lyrics indicate that they are meant to alternate between a male and female singer. In the first stanza, the muleteer tells the woman that if her mother beats her, she should tell him, instead of trying to kill herself by drinking opium paste. She responds by saying that she had no one to tell about it, so only then did she drink the opium. He playfully pokes fun at her by suggesting that it was her own fault that her mother beat her—she wore her fancy red shoes on the muddy road. She flippantly defends herself, saying that if she chooses to wear red shoes, it’s only because she wants to look good—what does that have to do with a lowly donkey driver like him? In the final stanza, the muleteer complains that when she wears the red shoes and stands above him on the edge of a hill slope, it drives him crazy.

Wang’s version, on the other hand, has a much more subdued, forlorn, and even pained mood to it. It only contains three stanzas in the version recorded in 1994, but they all appear to be sung from the part of a man, whose identity is not explicitly stated. The pained, sorrowful wailing of the male voice sets up a stark contrast with the lack of reply, the nonexistent, and thus silent, female voice. Here are the lyrics as Wang sang them in 1994:

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7 In the stanza, the muleteer refers to himself as “older brother” (gege 哥哥), a term which is commonly used in love songs by the male lover.

8 Embroidered red shoes were often a key part of marriage dowries, and they appear in several northern Shaanxi folksongs, often with seemingly romantic or even sexual connotations.
“Drinking Opium” 喝洋烟 (CD Track 03)⁹

If your mother beat you, you should have told your Older Brother about it, Why did you drink opium and kill yourself?
你（格）妈妈打你（呀）给哥哥说（呀哎），
你为什么（那）要把（那个）洋（那）烟（儿）喝（呀哎）。

If your father scolded you, you shouldn’t have cried so,
You should have known that your dad has a surly temper.
你（格）大大（那）骂你（那个）你不要哭（呀哎），
你该知道你大（那个）脾（那）气倔（呀哎）。

If you older brother gave you a lesson, you shouldn’t have gotten so mad,
You should have known that your brother has a bad temper.
你（那）哥哥（那）训你（那个）你（那）不要气（呀哎），
你该知道你哥哥（那）灰（那）脾气（哟哎）。

When I asked Wang where the absent woman was, he replied quite clearly, “She is dead.”
As he talked about this song, he framed it as expressing the man’s anger at the woman for taking her own life, for succumbing to her bitter fate instead of rebelling against it. When I asked Wang whether he had heard of people committing suicide through drinking opium when he was a kid, he began to talk about an older female cousin of his who had suffered in an unhappy arranged marriage and killed herself in the 1940s, before the Revolution in 1949. Although she died before Wang was born in 1952, Wang’s mother often told him the story of that cousin when he was young. Wang said that, from her tone of voice and other paralinguistic features, he sensed his mother’s disapproval and resentment towards the old “feudal” system of arranged marriage. Though he did not

⁹ Here and in later song examples, those songs that are recorded on Wang’s CD are listed by their track number (see Wang 2006). As these tracks are publically available on the Internet, I have included hyperlinks to connect the reader to the song being discussed. Each link begins with an advertisement from the webpage, followed by the audio of the song from Wang’s CD.

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choose to go into further detail, he said that there were a lot of his own views embodied in his performance of the song.10

Several aspects distinguish Wang’s version from Ma’s. First, most obviously, the woman is still alive in the latter, since she is actively participating in the antiphonal exchange. Second, the mood in Ma’s version is much more upbeat and playful. Wang’s is filled with sorrow and regret, with hints of anger and resentment. Third, the reasons for the mother’s beatings and the girl’s attempted suicide are not made explicit in Ma’s version, and while they are not explicit in the lyrics of Wang’s version either, his comments on the song clearly connect it with the history of arranged marriage and the perceived unhappiness that it caused.11

This particular song and Wang’s interpretation made me realize that directly connecting a song to events that one had experienced oneself was only one possible way to relate to its content. In this case, as with that of other songs about which I interviewed Wang, it became clear that part of his lived experience included knowledge of and reactions to events that happened to people he knew or had heard about. When I asked Wang again, towards the end of my fieldwork in 2012, what he would think about when he sings “Going Beyond the Western Pass,” he expanded his previous answer to include not only his own experience, but the experiences of all of the people he had known in his old village, many of whom had traveled to Inner Mongolia and each of whom had a

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10 During our interview, perhaps in part do to my identity as a foreigner, Wang also connected the song lyrics with the history of foreign aggression and opium sales in China during the 19th century, culminating in the Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860). The Chinese term for opium is literally “foreign smoke” (yangyan 洋烟), highlighting its connection to foreign influence.

11 During my fieldwork in 2012, I attempted to contact and interview Ma Ziqing, who had retired and was living in Xi’an, about her interpretations of the song, but ill health and advanced age precluded the chance for an interview.
unique story, as well as stories from TV dramas and novels about going beyond the Western Pass, since the latter contained stories about people as well. While the latter may be “fictional,” the emotive content of their stories is palpable, and can contribute to a singer’s accumulated understanding and emotional interaction with a song. At the same time, the case of “Drinking Opium” made me realize that personal views, which are very much connected with one’s personal life, can also be gleaned from one’s descriptions of seemingly objective things like “traditional” song lyrics. Thus, even if Wang didn’t connect a song to his own life, his description of the song could also be quite telling.

Just as Wang’s performances and discussions of the song, “Going Beyond the Western Pass,” relate to his own life, the people he knew, those he just heard about, and those who have since faded into history, the following examination of Wang’s life, songs, and words attempts to engage with elements of history and social change, both personal and communal. Wang’s life is intricately connected with the evolving northern Shaanxi folksong tradition and the places and people it represents. In an article about Wang, one writer highlighted his significance by saying, “The fate of the individual is always intimately tied to the fate of the people/nation (minzu 民族),” and, as Cashman, Mould, and Shukla have suggested, “tradition and the individual are inseparable...” (Miao 2008: 73; Cashman, et al. 2011: vi). To understand one, we must attempt to understand the other. Through an examination of this interconnectedness, we can begin to see, among other things, how songs from small places are transformed into songs from big places, how “traditional” songs are used on an international stage to put local places on the global map, and how this song tradition continues to evolve today.
Introduction

On March 27, 2012, the “Folksong King of Western China,” 王向荣, attended his first elementary school class reunion at a big hotel in Fugu 府谷 County Town in northern Shaanxi province. Standing before over fifty sixty-year-olds, all of whom only made it through the sixth grade before the Cultural Revolution started in 1966, Wang talked about how, in the years since, he had brought the mentality and character of Fugu people to a broader stage, saying, “With my words and my voice, I convey this to those on the outside.” He then said the following:

What is greatness? What is uniqueness? The more local something is, the closer it is to the people (minjian 民间), the more it belongs to the entire world. I often say that with Fugu, maybe you can [find it on a map]. Marugeda, you will never ever find it on any map, but Marugeda, this place, does exist. You can’t say that just because you can’t find it on a map that this place doesn’t exist. ... I am a Fugu person. I only want to take my Fugu things and use them so that outsiders can get to know Fugu, to see our northern Shaanxi, to see our Marugeda. (emphasis added)12

Despite the juxtaposition of various concentric geographical areas—hometown, county, region—there seem to be two underlying ideas inherent in these words. First, there is a concern with invisibility—Marugeda 马茹疙瘩, Wang’s hometown, like many other

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12 For a transcription of the larger speech from which this excerpt was taken, as well as a more in-depth description of its context, see Chapter 5.
small villages in China, does not appear on any map. When Wang was younger, northern Shaanxi as a whole was largely unknown and/or looked down upon for its poverty, and he notes elsewhere that if anyone outside had heard of it, they were sure to be talking about the revolutionary base at Yan’an 延安, never even having heard of the other half of the region, Yulin 榆林, where Wang is from. Together with this notion of invisibility, Wang draws attention to the means of becoming visible—the uniqueness and perceived greatness of local folk culture. One might add Martin Stokes’ oft-cited statement that “[p]lace ... is something which is constructed through music with an intensity not found elsewhere in [people’s] social lives” (Stokes 1994: 114). Thus, in the eyes of Wang and others, by bringing such culture and music to the exterior, the outside can now begin to see this place. While the place itself always existed and will continue to exist, now the world knows that it exists. Nevertheless, the question remains—what types of songs can represent a place?

The story of Wang Xiangrong’s life and the songs he has sung over the years provides a unique thread that connects many places, people, and events. On one level, it stretches from Marugeda, a small village near the intersection of the Great Wall and the Yellow River, to Midland, Michigan, the global headquarters of one the world’s largest multinational corporations, Dow Chemical Company. Wang, like the song tradition he has come to represent, has moved from the rural village to the regional, provincial, and national capitals, and then abroad. As one of the faces of this tradition, Wang has had to negotiate between elements of the rural social life that he experienced as a child (some aspects of which now only exist in the minds of those who have since left for other cities)
and the rapidly changing urban social landscape. Wang represents the former to the latter, but also sees himself as a bridge to the past, to ways of life that have since disappeared.

In this Introduction, I begin with a brief overview of the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition. This general outline is then followed by a survey of theoretical approaches to the connection between individuals, such as Wang, and larger traditions, including different ways of understanding personal and social meanings in songs sung and stories told by and about singers. Lastly, I outline the content of the dissertation, highlighting its overall structure.

A Brief History of the Northern Shaanxi Folksong Tradition

One might argue that Northern Shaanxi folksongs began to be conceived as a genre in the 1930s and 1940s, when local melodies were used to compose revolutionary songs. After the Central Red Army arrived in northern Shaanxi in 1935 at the end of the Long March, cultural workers attempted to “put new wine into old bottles” by collecting local folksong melodies, composing new lyrics with revolutionary content, and redistributing the songs among the populace. In 1938, the Lu Xun Arts Academy (Lu Xun yishu xueyuan 鲁迅艺术学院, often abbreviated as “Luyi” 鲁艺) was established in

13 While songs clearly existed in the region earlier on, most descriptions of the history of northern Shaanxi folksongs begin with this time period, and it appears that the earliest collections of songs lyrics for the area began with the revolutionary propaganda efforts mentioned above. For an excellent analysis of development of early Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cultural policy and its engagement with and use of northern Shaanxi traditional performance arts, see Holm 1991.
14 The Long March was a journey, beginning in 1934, by the Red Army of the CCP from southeast China to Yan’an, an area in northern Shaanxi province. It was during this time that Mao Zedong ascended to a position of power within the CCP.
Yan’an, the terminus of the Long March (Kraus 1989: 55-56).\textsuperscript{15} Focusing on literature and drama, and with a special emphasis on music, the Academy worked to teach “young cadres how to compose songs and to organize and conduct choral groups” (Kraus 1989: 56). According to Antoinet Schimmelpenninck, “[f]or want of original music, the army texts were often set to the melodies of local folk songs, which were then distributed again among the peasants in the areas occupied by the Communists” (Schimmelpenninck 1997: 6). This mode of operation echoes the earlier words of Qu Qiubai (1899-1935), the leader of the Chinese Communist Party from 1927 to 1930, who in the late 1920s had advised Party cultural workers to put new lyrics to old melodies, since these “were often better than what could be composed new and... since they were already familiar to the peasants, they could be learned easily and spread rapidly” (quoted in Kraus 1989: 54).

In addition to rewritten revolutionary songs, professionally composed songs, produced at the Lu Xun Arts Academy, which used elements from northern Shaanxi folksong melodies, not only contributed to the development of northern Shaanxi revolutionary folksongs (\textit{shaanbei geming min'ge} 陕北革命民歌), but also, according to Liu Yulin, increased the perceived artistic status and historical place of northern Shaanxi songs as a genre (Liu, et al. 2010: 249). Collection efforts also led to the publication of one of the first anthologies of northern Shaanxi folksong to include both lyrics and music, which Liu argues gave the songs national exposure (Liu, et al. 2010: 249).

National exposure was further expanded when, in the winter of 1952, the Central Song and Dance Troupe in Beijing set up the first folksong choir, whose repertoire was

\textsuperscript{15} Named after Lu Xun (1881-1936), the great leftist writer of the May Fourth literary and cultural modernist revival during the 1920s.
based solely on northern Shaanxi folksongs (Liu, et al. 2010: 250). Called the Northern Shaanxi Folksong Choir (Shaanbei min’ge hechangdui 陕北民歌合唱队), this all-female group of over thirty young singers performed both traditional and revolutionary folksongs from northern Shaanxi a cappella in harmonized choral arrangements, including such pieces as “Going Beyond the Western Pass” (“Zou xikou” 走西口), “Thirty-Mile Inn” (“Sanshi li pu” 三十里铺), “River Water Flows in the Ravine” (“Duimian gou li liu heshui” 对面沟里流河水), and “When Older Brother Returns from the Red Army” (“Dang hongjun de gege huilai le” 当红军的哥哥回来了) (Liu, et al. 2010: 250). In order to preserve their “pure northern Shaanxi flavor” (chunzheng de shaanbei wei 纯正的陕北味), the troupe members were forbidden from learning to speak standard Mandarin, and their performances were highly praised by the likes of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai (Liu, et al. 2010: 250).

During the 1950s and 1960s, various “new” northern Shaanxi folksongs (Shaanbei xin min’ge 陕北新民歌) were composed, and during the winter of 1971, the Central People’s Broadcasting Station (Zhongyang renmin guangbo diantai 中央人民广播电台, later renamed China National Radio) broadcast five northern Shaanxi revolutionary folksongs to the entire country, and People’s Daily published the lyrics and notation for the five songs as well (Liu, et al. 2010: 251). One of the revolutionary songs from the 1940s, “The East Is Red” (“Dongfang hong” 东方红), based on a northern Shaanxi folksong, was played every morning and evening during the Cultural Revolution
on speakers installed in each residence (Lau 2008: 134), and when the first Chinese satellite was launched in 1970, it broadcast a recording of “The East Is Red.”

During the late 1970s, collection efforts leading up the massive *Grand Compendium of Chinese Folksongs* (*Zhongguo minjian gequ jicheng* 中国民间歌曲集成, of which the two Shaanxi province volumes were published in 1994) were conducted, involving both folksong collectors going out to find singers, as well as singers from various parts being gathered together to perform at performance selections of various scales. An early collection effort conducted jointly by the Music and Dance Research Office of the Ministry of Culture’s Literature and Arts Research Institute and Shaanxi Provincial Culture Bureau’s “Northern Shaanxi Revolutionary Folksong Anthology” Editorial Team in June 1977 led to the publication of *An Anthology of Northern Shaanxi Revolutionary Folksongs* in 1978 (WY and SSB 1978: 123).

In addition to published anthologies of various song traditions (cf. YDW 1983), another by-product of these efforts was the discovery of various performers who would later go on to join regional song and dance troupes in the 1980s. These troupes served to further make northern Shaanxi folksongs and the region itself visible at a national, and then international level. One of the first major performances of northern Shaanxi folksongs outside of China was in 1988, when the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe (including Wang Xiangrong) visited Switzerland and France.

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16 Lau also notes, “The people at every work unit were expected to sing the song in unison every morning, and students sang it in schools before the first class of the day. Political rallies, public gatherings, and broadcast programs usually began with this song” (Lau 2008: 134).

17 For further discussion of collection work beginning in 1979, see Chapter 6 of Mackerras 1981.
In terms of popular exposure, several films in the 1980s included composed and/or arranged songs based on northern Shaanxi folksongs, including Chen Kaige’s (1984) *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地), Wu Tianming’s (1984) *Life* (*Rensheng* 人生), and the controversial six-part documentary series, *River Elegy* (*Heshang* 河殇), broadcast on China Central Television in 1988.\(^{18}\) Also around this time, responses to the perceived cultural ruptures caused by the Cultural Revolution led to the Root-Seeking cultural movement (*xungen yundong* 寻根运动), which was expressed through its musical branch in the folk-rock genre of “Northwest Wind” (*xibei feng* 西北风), using several northern Shaanxi folksong melodies for inspiration.\(^{19}\)

In the past few years, the tradition has continued to evolve together with the emerging culture market (*wenhua shichang* 文化市场) and increased commercialization. Since 2000, a regional liquor company has begun hiring professional folksingers—about 200 or so individuals—to sing for patrons at restaurants throughout the central and northern Shaanxi region.\(^{20}\) When one buys a bottle of sorghum liquor, *baijiu*, two singers arrive with an electronic synthesizer atop a giant speaker on wheels, and you can select two to three folksongs of your choice. While this arrangement provides economic

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\(^{18}\) For an example of the inclusion of northern Shaanxi folksongs in *River Elegy*, see Su and Wang 1991: 101. The song included is “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River,” which is discussed in greater depth in Chapters 3 and 5.

\(^{19}\) Nimrod Baranovitch suggests that this song genre attempted to search for a collective past and reconnect with an “authentic China,” while at the same time, he sees “Northwest Wind” as an assertion of masculine, primordial essence, in response to the more “feminine” pop music emanating from Taiwan and Hong Kong (Baranovitch 2003: 20-21).

\(^{20}\) One of Wang’s younger disciples, Zhang Liaojun 张辽军, suggested that the use of northern Shaanxi folksongs had an immense effect on increasing the liquor brand’s popularity, saying, “That Old Yulin [the brand of liquor] was made famous by northern Shaanxi folksongs” (*nage lao Yulin jiushi shaanbei min’ge changhong de* 那个老榆林就是陕北民歌唱红的).
incentives to encourage the song tradition’s continuation, it also appears to have a somewhat limiting effect on singer repertoires, since they are only motivated to sing songs that are popular enough to be known and ordered by the customers.

In recent years, large-scale events have also been held in Yulin prefecture that purport to establish folksongs and folksingers as a key cultural attraction for the region. In 2006, an international conference and fieldwork project on northern Shaanxi folk music was held in conjunction with the European Chinese music journal, CHIME. This was followed by not one, but two televised singing contests searching for the “Ten Greatest Northern Shaanxi Folksong Kings,” of whom there are now twenty. In 2007, the Second Yulin International Folk Song Festival showcased northern Shaanxi folksongs as one of three major world song traditions, along with Russian and African American folksongs. The “African American folksongs” section was represented by the American blues and R&B singer, Bobby Rush. More recently, in 2009, northern Shaanxi folksongs were declared a national-level item of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and Wang Xiangrong was chosen as one of two national-level bearers for the tradition.21 There have also been two academic conferences held concerning the translation of northern Shaanxi folksong lyrics into languages including English, French, Arabic, Korean, German, and Italian (cf. Shoujie shaanbei min’ge yijie 2009).

21 Recent government efforts at Intangible Cultural Heritage preservation (see Chapter 1) reflect the continuing evolution of State support for traditional performance arts. In his discussion of the roles of the market and the State in Suzhou pingtan storytelling in the Lower Yangzi since 1949, Qiliang He notes that as of the 21st century, State support of the art has attained the new dimension of providing healthy recreation to elderly retirees (presently the only viable audience segment), who might be drawn into other pursuits such as gambling (He 2012: 266-267). Other goals for supporting local art forms include the promotion of local tourism and industries (see Chapter 5).
This brief outline of the history of the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition will serve as a backdrop when looking at Wang’s life and the songs he has sung over the years. In order to think more critically about the relationship between individuals such as Wang and the traditions they come to represent, I will lay out several ideas about such relations below.

**Ways of Understanding Wang: Theoretical Approaches to the Individual**

There are numerous useful theoretical approaches that we might use to look at various aspects of Wang’s life, repertoire, and the relation of both to the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition. Most generally, the juxtaposition of personal and communal elements relates to recent research on the Individual and Tradition (cf. Cashman, et al. 2011) and how the two mutually constitute each other. In addition, the multiple layers of meaning made available through lyric songs are discussed. At the same time, the wide variety of genres and themes performed by Wang suggests the need to examine how multiple personae in the songs he sings might relate to different aspects of Wang as an individual, as well as the evolving society in which he has lived. The example given earlier of both personal and social meanings of a single song, and how these evolve over time as Wang’s social position(s) change (e.g. his rising/falling fame, taking on new official positions, etc.) suggests the need to look at relevant ideas from celebrity studies, in particular, the distinction between celebrity and public figure. Lastly, Wang’s on-stage interactions with various audiences, as well as with folksong collectors and other scholars in different
contexts, position him as a mediator between an idealized rural folk (laobaixing 老百姓) and a more elite, intellectual, urban audience to which he presents the former.

**Individual and Tradition**

Henry Glassie has said that “[h]istory, culture, and the human actor meet in tradition” (Glassie 2003: 176, 193). Albert B. Lord writes, “The singer of tales is at once the tradition and an individual creator” (Lord 1960: 4). Cashman, Mould, and Shukla declare that “tradition and the individual are inseparable...” (Cashman, et al. 2011: vi). In recent years, there has been an increased scholarly interest in the individual in tradition. One might argue that this reflects a reaction against early Romantic views of the communal creation of songs and dance among the Folk. With regard to the relation between the individual and tradition, there is certainly an underlying question of where to begin. Lord suggests starting with an individual singer and working outwards, from the singers who have influenced him (or her) to the larger community, and eventually to the entire “language area” (Lord 1960: 49). In a similar vein, Porter and Gower write, “Instead of generalizing about musical change from observation of a group as if it were homogenous, a more orderly methodology would set out to ‘discover’ the beliefs and knowledge held by individuals, working outward in concentric circles to compare performers’ beliefs with those of nonperformers” (1995: 273). Thus, to understand the group, one must start with its individuals. At the same time, to appreciate the intricacies

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22 See, for example, Francis Gummere’s notions of “communal authorship” and anonymous “dancing, singing throng[s]” (Gummere 1907: 16, 20; cf. Cashman, et al. 2011: 5). For surveys of recent ethnographic works focusing on individual musicians and their relation to larger traditions, see Stock 2001 and Ruskin and Rice 2012.
of the individual, he/she must be compared with others: “Every singer must be discerned against a ground consisting of other singers in the same or a contiguous tradition; otherwise, the sense of a collective well of language, style, and idiom is lost” (Porter and Gower 1995: xlv). However, it is difficult to strike a balance between the two extremes. Porter and Gower also note that such musical traditions “cannot be reduced to a number of individual personalities, nor [are they] a homogeneous totality” (Porter and Gower 1995: xvii).

There are several scholarly approaches to the relation between the individual and tradition. Some scholars look at how the individual’s life experience enriches our understanding of the tradition (cf. Abrahams 1970; Newman 1995; Rees 2009). Others look at how elements of tradition can help us to better understand the nature of the individual (Sawin 2004). Still others look at how the two mutually transform each other (Porter and Gower 1995; Cashman et al. 2011).

This idea of mutual transformation and evolution is different from earlier approaches, which saw tradition as stable and unchanging. According to Ben-Amos, “creativity” was seen by some as one of the three threats to tradition (1984: 107). The perceived “stability” of tradition is clear in Toelken’s conservative-dynamic continuum. He writes that art can be understood as “a field of tension between conservation of tradition and experimentation, between the solid maintenance of older ideas and the dynamism of new ones” (Toelken 1996: 221). For some, any sort of change or “newness” with regard to tradition was regarded as suspect. Thus, Richard Dorson coined the term “fakelore” to refer to the “invention, selection, [and] fabrication” of
materials that were meant to imitate the traditional (Dorson 1959: 4; cf. Bronner 1998: 363-381). Later on, we have the term “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), which, according to Baker, is really just a euphemism for Dorson’s “fakelore” (Baker 2000: 107). Gradually, however, tradition came to be seen as more dynamic. Handler and Linnekin suggested that “there is no essential, bounded tradition; tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present” (1984: 276). They posit “the ongoing reconstruction of tradition is a facet of all social life, which is not natural but symbolically constituted” (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 276). While the conservative-dynamic tension described by Toelken continues to color how changes may be viewed, Handler and Linnekin remind us that this is an ongoing process.

One can argue that Wang’s life, as well as his song repertoire, has actively interacted with broader historical and social changes. Any question of the individual inevitably begs the question of agency, and, as Simon J. Bronner observes, “[v]ehement argument can arise whether following tradition means unconsciously following a severe form of cultural authority or choosing from tradition that which one finds appropriate” (Bronner 1998: 10, emphasis in original). For his part, Wang sees himself as an artist who is able to piece together bits and pieces of lyrics and melodies from a variety of singers and places, and prides himself on putting the mark of his own unique style on each song he performs. This idea of “piecing together” is common to many artists, including the Suzhou pinghua 评话 storyteller, Jin Shengbo 金声伯, who said, as described by Susan Blader, that “parts of the story are like pieces of furniture in a room and he moves them around until the room looks good” (Blader 1983: 87). Both Wang’s
and Jin’s conceptions of creative expression are similar to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1966) idea of the *bricoleur*, the individual who selects and assembles elements of tradition, characterized by Ray Cashman, et al. as “a crafty recycler who constructs new possibilities out of available handed down raw materials, meeting present needs” (Cashman, et al. 2011: 4).

This notion of “piecing together” is an integral component of many songs that Wang sings, which vary to some degree each time he sings them. Furthermore, as with other individuals, the patterns of what are active and inactive in Wang’s repertoire change over time, in conjunction with such factors as ownership and identity, topicality, taste and esthetics, social roles and identity, change or loss of audience, etc. (Goldstein 1971: 64-65). Thus, one would be remiss to assume that all items in a repertoire hold equal weight—what Goldstein refers to as the “quantitative fallacy”—and instead should look at when and for whom Wang tended to sing each song, and why he now normally only actively performs about five songs in public appearances (Goldstein 1971: 63). Changes in repertoire are often related to changes in audience, as well as changing demands of different audiences, and we see evidence of this in the various versions of songs discussed in Chapter 4 (cf. Goldstein 1971; Mullen 1981; Lord 1960; Glassie 1970).

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23 The *bricoleur* image manages to bridge together two otherwise seemingly contradictory notions—namely, “tradition as process and tradition as resource” (Cashman, et al. 2011: 3). In addition, in his work on memory in oral tradition, David C. Rubin suggests that “[e]xposure to variants of songs is the main learning device” through which singers gain “knowledge of the genre, of individual songs, and of the constraints that function in them... without formal teaching” (Rubin 1995: 307, cited in Blader 1999: 163).
The example in the preface of Wang’s discussions concerning his thoughts while singing “Going Beyond the Western Pass” point to the ability of songs to touch on both the personal and social. These multiple levels of meaning are explored in the work of Thomas A. DuBois on lyric song traditions in northern Europe, where he outlines three “interpretive axes” by which songs can be understood and experienced (DuBois 2006). On the one hand, in addition to the immediate performance context, a song can “[become] meaningful through reference to its inscribed situation,” in this case, not a specific story about specific people, but rather “something that typically happens to people in certain common situations”—here, the parting of migrant farmworkers from their loved ones (DuBois 2006: 3). At the same time, a song can be associated “with a particular person, place, or thing,” both relating it to one’s own life experiences and memories, and in the sense that it “envisions a person or being to whom the song’s lines are addressed,” making the song “a purposeful communication” (DuBois 2006: 3).

Lastly, Dubois talks about how “past performances and a tradition of interpretation in [a] locale” can lead an “audience [to listen] to any new performance from within a set of locally and historically shaped ‘generic’ expectations” (DuBois 2006: 2). Thus, when Wang says that there are some things that can only be expressed through song, there are certain influences of locally-based traditional precedent that are involved in his choice to use this type of “performance style, melody, word choice, and theme” to express himself, rather than producing an oil painting or a literary poem, which potentially could be emotionally expressive as well (DuBois 2006: 2).
These ways of experiencing a song, both personally based and more socially based, though we might analyze them separately, are also mutually influential. The use of traditional forms can sometimes allow individuals to both reflect upon and socialize their own personal experience in the broader social and historical context (cf. Porter and Gower 1995: 269). If we think about various highly stylized European traditions of funeral and wedding laments, we see examples of more or less generalized lyrics being applied to very specific individuals. In examining such European traditions, DuBois writes, “By referring to the deceased along these highly stereotyped lines, the personal experience and communication of sorrow is merged with the collective experience of past generations” (DuBois 2006: 86). In this way, individual suffering no longer has to be endured in solitude, but rather can be connected to “a set of experiences that members of the community have passed through for ages” (DuBois 2006: 88). Thus, one can see an interesting merging of personal and collective experiences in the performance of traditionally sanctioned oral forms.

As time passes and one’s life experience changes, the elements of personal and social meaning that one chooses to emphasize may also change. As mentioned earlier, Wang at one point related his singing of “Going Beyond the Western Pass” to a past love, whereas after he began a new romantic relationship, he chose to connect it to the broader social history of the region and even fictional stories from TV dramas. This shift in Wang’s narratives can be understood, in part, as due to the dialogic construction of self,

24 Anne McLaren (2008) has similarly looked at Chinese wedding laments from a coastal region near Shanghai.
25 Such means of expression may be particularly efficacious in cultural contexts where the expression of individual grief is shunned except for through certain communally-approved modes (Timonen 2004: 308 ff., mentioned in DuBois 2006: 17).
whereby changes in the self over time often correspond to changes among the people with whom one interacts (Sawin 2004: 70). For another example of such change over time, we might look at the case of an American singer, Bessie Eldreth, who, in gradually distancing herself from her deceased husband over time, ended up minimalizing his presence in her narratives, both silencing him and editing him out of her stories (Sawin 2004: 82).

At the same time, the example of Wang’s commentary concerning the song “Drinking Opium” points to the presence of personal views in discussions of “traditional” songs. This phenomenon relates to John McDowell’s discussion of the mythic narrative traditions of Andean peoples in Colombia and Ecuador, where he looks at how individuals tell stories that are assumed to be communally standardized and “objective,” but often belie aspects of their own individual views and lives through such means as the perspectives and/or characterization used in the telling (McDowell 2011). Another example of this phenomenon comes from Ray Cashman’s analysis of Packy Jim McGrath, a storyteller from Co. Donegal, Ireland (Cashman 2011). During his ongoing dialogue with Cashman, Packy Jim juxtaposed traditional, biblical stories with more personal narratives, such as one dealing with a rude individual in a tavern. This combination, according to Cashman, allowed for additional meanings and rhetorical moves to be attached to a seemingly traditional story. “Springboard for social commentary and moral proclamation, index of his predispositions or orientations to the world, Packy Jim’s versions of this story do much more than explain the origin of the
fairies or offer us another instantiation of tradition that can be dated, located, and archived” (Cashman 2011: 376).

Similar to DuBois’s notion of the socialization of personal emotions, Porter and Gower see tradition as helping the individual to make sense of his/her lived experience. They write, “The songs do not simply recount emotional high points in this experience, but crystallize and transform the lived reality into formal, coherent expressive structures” (Porter and Gower 1995: 269). Likewise, in Cashman’s study of Packy Jim, he writes, “Tradition provides Packy Jim both an explanation for evil in the world and a charter for his own moral behavior, helping him comprehend injustice and have faith that in the end the deserving will triumph” (Cashman 2011: 378). Just like Bessie Eldreth and Packy Jim, Wang’s songs and his discussions of them provide him with a platform through which to reflect on, crystallize, and express his views on a range of personal and social issues.

**Multiple Personae**

In addition to a variety of genres and themes, the songs Wang sings involve several different masks/personae. For example, on his CD, there are pieces where the lyrics present personae such as a Yellow River boatman, a muleteer, a migrant farmworker, a cowherd, a woman returning to her natal home during festival times, an audacious playboy, a tender peasant lover, a guest at a drinking party, a spirit medium/healer (*shenhan* 神汉), and a Mongol (Wang 2006). Some of these personae reflect roles Wang may have played at various points during his lifetime, while others do
not. In some sense, these roles could be seen as helping to construct a complex self, or a projected image of a self, or they could merely be “masks” that he wears for public performances. Even if they are mere masks, his choice of which masks to wear could be said to reflect aspects of personal taste.

With relation to a much earlier poet, Grace Fong (1990) brings up an interesting example of the use of various masks in the construction of self. She discusses various *ci* lyrics written by the poet, Zhu Dunru 朱敦儒 (1081-1159), together with a discussion of his life. Fong notes that Zhu uses different masks to express different types of sentiments, whereby, for example, “the female persona carries emotional associations,” while “the fisherman persona carries philosophical overtones” (Fong 1990: 474). She writes,

Zhu strips off mask after mask, costume after costume, role after role. He has worn them all before, and has seen them worn by others. If he has previously tried to take his masks, or costumes, seriously and felt obliged to leave them on, now he has learned to put them on and take them off with ease and nonchalance. This is precisely what the song lyric allows the poet to do: put on a performance with a persona, a mask, a song of varied surfaces. (Fong 1990: 472)

There seems to be a progression here from an earlier attachment to certain masks to a more subdued sense of objectivity that is seen to come with age, and with respect to the changes through time in Wang’s discussions of “Going Beyond the Western Pass,” one

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26 For example, while Wang has become well-known for singing “The Song of the Yellow River Boatman” (“Huanghe chuanfu qu” 黄河船夫曲), he admitted that he never even stepped on a boat until well into his twenties, and then only as a passenger.

27 *Ci* 词 refers to a genre of Chinese poetry of uneven line length that utilizes a variety of tonal and rhyme schemes.
wonders if that might be the case with him as well. Later on, Fong suggests that the act of switching between the personae and masks themselves may, in fact, allow the individual—and the audience—to gain a deeper understanding of the self that lies beneath. She writes, “Interestingly, by manipulating persona and mask in relation to the self, the song writer may be able to offer glimmers of true intent in the paradoxical union of self and mask” (Fong 1990: 473). When I discussed with him Fong’s notion of multiple masks representing various aspects of a singer’s personality, Wang replied that this made sense to him, although he noted that an individual may not be fully aware of every part of his/her own self, making it difficult to pinpoint why one feels an attraction for each individual song.

Part of this difficulty in defining oneself may be related to the inherent complexity of self, in constant negotiation with a variety of social spheres. In her study on personal narratives, Stahl reminds us that each individual belongs to many groups, each of which influences the means of expression used by the individual. Thus, “[t]he value of personal narratives to the study of identity is that no story can be assumed to represent only one of the many groups to which the storyteller belongs; every personal narrative grows out of the multiple combined cultural and personal resources of the storyteller” (Stahl 1989: xix).

While all expression may be autobiographical to a certain degree (Cashman 2011: 362), different genres often provide channels for different types of information (Bauman
Sawin (2004) shows how one individual uses different generic frameworks to construct different “facets” of her identity, while managing to deal with inherent contradictions through different genres. For example, the singer she examines, Bessie Eldreth, gives two different portrayals of her childhood on separate occasions: one of pastoral stability and another of repeated disruption and economic desperation (Sawin 2004: 25). While seemingly contradictory, they reflect different aspects of her life experience. Likewise, Wang sings certain songs that reminisce about the pastoral bliss of his childhood mountain village (see “Picking Maru Fruits” in Chapter 2), and others that mourn the suffering induced by a feudal past (such as “Drinking Opium,” mentioned in the Preface). In addition, similar to Wang (see Chapters 4 and 5), Eldreth’s singing repertoire, while consisting of songs that matter to her, is selectively performed in different ways when she

28 In addition, Cashman suggests that “genres not only accomplish different social tasks, they also accommodate and perhaps inculcate different ideological positions” (Cashman 2007: 14).

29 Bauman provides a similar example in his discussion of the first person narratives of Ed Bell, a storyteller from Texas first interviewed by folklorist Pat Mullen. Bell tells both true and fictional stories in the first person, and uses an array of expressive vehicles, including personal experience narratives, tall tales, and practical jokes, “to give voice to his intellect and his imagination” (Bauman 2004: 107). While Sawin’s book goes into more detail regarding her individual, the idea of using different genres to express different facets of one’s personality remains.

30 Ghost stories, on the other hand, appear to deal with “gender inequalities and the negotiation of power” (Sawin 2004: 99-100). Sawin divides these into three types: “moral exempla,” which were learned from her parents and are didactic and gender-neutral in nature, “ghost stories proper,” which she herself experienced and Sawin sees as gender-specific, reflecting the control of patriarchal gender roles, and “premonitions,” which validate women’s knowledge and assert the right to defend against male doubts (Sawin 2004: 100 ff.). These stories allow her to do many things, including criticizing women she does not approve of, elevating herself and praising her self-sacrificing nature, as well as justifying the occasions on which she defied her husband and proved him wrong (Sawin 2004: 132). Her practical jokes and the narratives recounting them allow for a momentary escape from the pressure of social roles, and also serve as indirect critiques of specific people (Sawin 2004: 26, 147). Mullen suggests a special importance in practical joking specifically for elderly people: “as a person gets older, he or she loses some of the control acquired in life... and pranks and hoaxes can function to symbolically maintain control in at least one area of interaction with others” (Mullen 1992: 165).
sings at church versus when she sings for national audiences, each presenting different aspects of her identity (Sawin 2004: 193-209).

The divergent elements observable between a performer and a particular mask or persona may often give the appearance of falsity. Samei writes, “being associated with performance and a fictional female persona, the ci was not considered suited to truthful self-expression... and thus was not valorized by early critical and philosophical texts that addressed the role of poetry” (Samei 2004: 75). Part of this ambiguity regarding the “falsity” of the masks/personae in ci comes from the contrasting “truth” associated with the traditional Chinese critical paradigm that “poetry expresses what is intently on the mind” (shi yan zhi 诗言志), relating to the perceived autobiographical nature of the majority of Chinese poetry.31 When Wang sings “Going Beyond the Western Pass,” the fact that he is from the border region of northern Shaanxi next to Inner Mongolia, that he and his relatives have traveled to Inner Mongolia themselves, etc. all could be seen as giving him additional credibility in performing this song. When asked about his performances of “The Yellow River Boatman,” he declined to speculate whether audience members might believe that he had also been a boatman in the past, despite the fact that he often sings it in front of a projection of the rushing waters of the Yellow River. However, one must note that many folksingers in this region often feel compelled

31 I am using Meow Hui Goh’s translation of this classic phrase, which she adapts from Stephen Owen’s translation of zhi 志 as “what is intently on the mind” (Goh 2010: 122). With regard to the assumed autobiographical nature of traditional Chinese poetry, Stephen Owen writes, “The poem (here only shih) was a privileged document of inner life, a presentation of self that potentially carried strong autobiographical dimensions. By its very definition, shih was the stuff of inner life, the person’s chih, ‘intent,’ and ch’ing, ‘emotions’ or ‘subjective disposition.’ Here, rather than in narrative, was the center of interest for traditional theorists—not how a person changed over time, but how a person could be known at all or make himself known” (Owen 1986: 74).
to mention their experience herding sheep (fangyang 放羊) when they were younger, often seeming to suggest this piece of information as evidence of their credentials as a folksinger in this region.

Whether or not one believes all of the components of a particular folksinger’s stage persona, song persona, and constructed life story to be accurate, sometimes it appears that perhaps objective reality is not the point. Fong notes that the genre of early ci poetry “participated in a theatre of commercial courtship in which everyone recognized the emotions expressed and knew that they were feigned. The male audience, out of a wish that the words be true, could forget for a while that the staged courtship drama was only a performance. Obvious masks and desired truths thus became strangely mixed together in ci” (Fong 1990: 459). While I do not now, nor would I ever, question the authenticity of emotion expressed by any of the northern Shaanxi folksingers, Fong’s point that a singer’s image (both physical and aural) provides a necessary vehicle for the expression and received experience of desires seems quite convincing. Obviously, performances of the same song sung by a former northern Shaanxi shepherd and an American PhD student are bound to be received, interpreted, and experienced in very different ways. The question that remains is what sorts of “desired truths” are being expressed.

Celebrity vs. Public Figure

One aspect that contributes to the uniqueness of Wang’s case is his fame, which forces him, like other celebrities, to negotiate back and forth between his public image
and private selves. During our interviews, Wang would sometimes refer to himself in the third person, and I came to see this as a means through which he attempted to separate his public persona, over which he had less control, from his private life, which he closely guarded. As one of the key representatives of the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition, he, as an individual, has become one of the “faces of tradition,” relating to Turner’s discussion of “the implication of celebrities in the processes through which cultural identity is negotiated and formed” (Turner 2004: 4).

The several decades leading up to Wang’s rise to fame allow us to see, in addition, how what it means to be famous has changed in China. Although one could argue that Wang’s “big break” occurred in several state-sponsored singing contests in the late 1970s and early 1980s and his subsequent employment in a government-run regional song and dance troupe, Baranovitch has shown that scholarly attempts to distinguish state and private artists remain problematic. He writes,

...[A] significant portion of culture today in China cannot really be divided into ‘popular’ as opposed to ‘official,’ or vice versa, because the two are often mixed together and overlapping. Popular culture is not an object over which a single force or social group has exclusive ownership. Rather it is a site where many different forces and groups meet, and the state certainly participates in much of popular culture today in China. (Baranovitch 2003: 271-272)

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32 During my fieldwork from 2011 to 2012, I attempted to accompany Wang to as many events and venues as possible. However, while he willingly received my interviews at his home and brought me to various public performances throughout the region, there were often events with friends that he would decline to take me to, objecting that the occasions did not have anything to do with “culture” (wenhua 文化). This response suggests to me that he wanted our interactions (and my future publications) to focus on his artistic contributions and relation to the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition, and not excessively on elements of his personal life.
With the evolution of the culture market, what it means to be a celebrity has changed. In addition to increased visibility (Yang 2011: 10), earnings, appearance fees, etc. have become markers of degrees of fame. “When the political catch-cry is ‘to get rich is glorious’ celebrities must engage with the cash economy to be credible. The nature of their engagement with the cash economy becomes the significant and redeeming feature” (Edwards 2010: 36). In learning to negotiate the multiple facets comprising current Chinese society, Louisa Schein uses the term “flexible celebrity” to suggest “the shifting and variable strategies that were adopted by... pop stars as they made their way to acclaim under dramatically changing circumstances” (Schein 2010: 146). While in one sense fluid and flexible, the involvement of such stars with the culture economy results in the “celebrity-as-commodity” phenomenon, whereby newly created “culture companies” (wenhua gongsi 文化公司) serve as brokering agents of star performers for high-level events (Jeffreys and Edwards 2010: 7).

Nevertheless, fame is not a static characteristic, and transitions in and out of fame or between different levels of fame can lead to changes in how an individual is publically seen and understood. A useful distinction is that between “public figure” and “celebrity.” According to Graeme Turner, a public figure becomes a celebrity “at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (such as their specific achievement in politics or sport) to investigating the details of their personality and private lives” (Turner 2004: 8). Thus, the public interest in Wang’s love
life over the years could be seen as an effect of his “celebrity” status. At the same time, his recent transition into more official roles, such as national bearer of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), could be seen as involving an attempt to reverse the transition described by Turner—from celebrity back to public figure. His reluctance to talk about certain aspects of his personal life, especially his romantic past, could be seen as evidence of this changed status.

### Mediator on a Spectrum Between Rural Folk and Urban Elite

Wang’s transition from a rural villager to an urban, professional folksinger has involved negotiations between elements of a rural, idealized folk and urban intellectuals, elites, and others, where his role has often been that of mediator between the two. In fact, when asked about the target audience for his 2006 CD, Wang mentioned two key demographics: common people (laobaixing) and high-level intellectuals (gaoji zhishifenzi), including music scholars. One could argue that these two idealized categories represent ends of the spectrum between which Wang negotiates back and forth as mediator.

The songs he sings present a vision of a rural (or even national) past often to people far removed from the time and space where Wang first came into contact with the

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33 Richard Schickel uses the term “intimate strangers” to refer to the phenomenon whereby members of the public feel as if they know the most personal details of and share a close bond with celebrities (Schickel 1985).

34 For more on the history of Intangible Cultural Heritage preservation in China, see Chapter 1 (cf. Rees 2012).

35 While “mediator” is certainly one of the roles played by Wang, it is entirely possible that he presents this aspect of himself more readily when dealing with “intellectuals” such as myself. I would like to thank Ray Cashman for pointing out this possibility.
songs. Similarly, his engagement with folksong collectors and scholars during large-scale collection efforts, as well as his more recent lectures on the social background and history of the songs at various institutions of higher learning, suggest that, in addition to his role as a performer, Wang sees himself as an active transmitter of knowledge about former times and places that have since rapidly changed. Wang’s desire to represent and present his understanding of not only the songs, but elements of geography, linguistics, history, and folk belief associated with them, could easily be characterized by Edward Said’s notion of intellectuals as “individuals with a vocation for the art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television” (Said 1996: 13). In an in-depth article written about Wang, Chu and Jiang suggest that he is not an ordinary folksinger, but also a folk music theorist (minjian yinyue lilunjia 民间音乐理论家) (Chu and Jiang 2005: 15). His current roles as vice-chairman of the provincial musician’s association and a national bearer of Intangible Cultural Heritage carry with them responsibilities for representing and transmitting the tradition both to younger generations and to outsiders. While in some sense, Wang’s transition from rural farmer (nongmin 农民) to urban folksinger has moved him from one end of the spectrum to the other, Wang finds it necessary to move back and forth along the spectrum in response to engagements with different audiences. Thus, when he performs back in his home region, he is compelled to show evidence that he has still maintained his local roots and remains fluent in a locally “authentic” dialect and song practice (see Chapter 3). However, he is just as

36 At this point, I refrain from suggesting to what degree Wang’s interpretations of the tradition and its history have influenced the views of others, although Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual,” in which “intellectuals are distinguished less by their professions… than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong,” is intriguing (Gramsci 1992: 3).
willing to use academic terminology when discussing folksong practices with scholars in the city.

While questions remain concerning the degree to which one individual can be representative of a larger group (Wang sometimes makes the claim to such representation and others times humbly disavows such claims), Wang can be considered one of the “faces of tradition” for northern Shaanxi folksongs, and, as such, aspects of his life could be said both to have been affected by and themselves to have affected the evolution of the broader tradition.

The chapters that follow are designed to establish interweaving archs that correspond to the sixty years from Wang’s birth to the time that my fieldwork ended in 2012. Chapter 1 begins by laying out a chronological account of Wang’s life, supplemented by an exploration of themes that various other accounts of his life have focused on, as well as my preliminary attempt to contextualize his life by comparing it to the lives of other older and younger singers. This provides a backdrop for the remaining chapters, which look at how the songs he sings have been connected with changing social realities, and have themselves changed either musically and lyrically or in terms of possible interpretations.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a set of metaphorical “bookends” for the time period covered in Wang’s life. Chapter 2 looks at how songs he acquired during the earlier part of his life relate to social and historical contexts in his hometown and the surrounding area during the 1950s and 1960s. Performed on various occasions, including temple festivals, home rituals for inviting the gods, and drinking parties, among others, these
songs relate to various social themes, such as love, illness and healing, the hierarchy of the gods, relationship management, hosting guests, poverty, festivals, and ethnic relations. They can be seen as a means through which singers/individuals engaged with different time periods, people, places, and gods. Chapter 3, in turn, explores Wang’s speeches and active performance repertoire during recent appearances on stage, looking at how he negotiates between local, regional, and national identities, establishes a sense of intimacy with each audience, and structures a narrative of historical progression that he presents in different versions to different audiences.

Exploring the transitional period between Wang’s childhood and the present, Chapter 4 looks at how government-organized folk music gala performances in the late 1970s and the establishment of regional song and dance troupes in the early 1980s created a need for new songs that could represent the region. The process of transformation through which such songs were created and/or acquired, as well as the existence of alternative bawdy versions, suggests a diversified set of performance contexts that have arisen along with social changes in the last few decades.

Chapter 5, in turn, explores how Wang’s rise to fame was related to broader changes in media and economics, and how some of the songs he sings became vehicles for cultural diplomacy and helped to establish economic alliances between regional and multinational companies. It provides specific examples of the local being used to attract the global, as well as the use of culture in bringing together distant localities.
Through these five chapters, I show how Wang’s life and songs are a bridge between the past, present, and future, providing a sense of home, tradition, region, and nation in a rapidly changing world.
Chapter 1: All of the Roads I’ve Walked Down: Wang Xiangrong’s Life, Its Various Presentations, And Its Relation to Other Regional Folksingers

Jeff Todd Titon (1980) has noted that any telling of an individual’s life story is inherently problematic, in that it is always constructed from a much larger pool of material (which might include what one had for breakfast each day of one’s life, etc.) to meet certain needs at the points of telling and to present particular images of one’s self (cf. Goffman 1959). He further points out that any other individual’s attempt to tell the story (which he refers to as a “life history” when it is told by someone besides the individual him/herself), be they a reporter, a biographer, or a scholar, carries with it the inherent, though usually unintended, effect of reframing the narrative to make certain points, which sometimes leads the individual being described to feel misquoted (Titon 1980; cf. Borland 1998). At the same time, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1989) makes us aware that life stories are not constructed by individuals alone, and contrasts the alien “monologue” style of life history that we are accustomed to seeing in print or other media with the “normal” type of dialogue that occurs between people regarding their past experience.

Unlike Titon, Porter and Gower (1995) find life story and life history to be complementary, suggesting that the framework of the more “objective” life history allows for the incorporation of an individual’s more “subjective” life story—“[t]heir ‘truths’ are
independent” (Porter and Gower 1995: xv-xvi). Regardless of the positive or negative effect of the interaction, we can see that life stories are negotiated (Linde 1993) and make up a cooperative effort between the person and his/her audience (Lawless 1991: 62). In the process of the telling and afterward, the audience can provide feedback, objecting to the narration and/or querying the narrator to draw out or change details, etc.37 As Linde puts it, “[t]he exchange of life stories is a social process, and there are social demands on the nature of a life story. One is not simply free to construct a life story in any possible way. Addressees make a number of types of social demands on the nature of the teller’s story” (Linde 1993: 7). Furthermore, if we view such dialogues as an ongoing reinvention of one’s presentation of self to others (cf. Goffman 1959), such social events play a key role in any attempts to alter one’s social image.38 For example, Elaine J. Lawless notes the use of personal narratives by Pentecostal women preachers to “rescript” their lives and justify their ascent to power in “the hostile, antifemale world of conservative Pentecostalism” (Lawless 1991: 61).39 This sort of “rescripting” appears to

37 For an example of an audience member’s objection causing the narrator to compress the section of the story they were telling and defend it, see Stahl’s chapter on “Koo-Nar, King of the Rats” (Stahl 1989: 81). According to Linde, when part of a story is contested, “[t]he speaker must then re-form the meaning she claims for her narrative into a mutually acceptable one” (Linde 1993: 13).

38 In his discussion of “the performed self,” Goffman writes, “The self... as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location. . . . It is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited” (Goffman 1959: xi).

39 Other effects of conversations involving personal narratives can be a perceived deepening of the bonds between individuals, as well as the establishment and/or maintenance of connections between the individual and group. According to Stahl, “when people tell personal narratives, they offer listeners an invitation to intimacy” (Stahl 1989: 49). Linde writes that life stories are often used “to claim or negotiate group membership and to demonstrate that we are in fact worthy members of those groups, understanding and properly following their moral standards” (Linde 1993: 3). Cashman looks at “how different genres of verbal and nonverbal folklore popular in Northern Ireland implicate, encode, and express different orientations toward the conceptions of community, belonging, and identity” (Cashman 2007: 14). In a description of events where stories are told, Bauman writes that “the interplay between the individual and social dimensions of the storytelling events gave shape to the internal organization of the gatherings

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be a common part of individual’s lives as they grow and change, and seems evident in Wang’s changing descriptions of the song “Going Beyond the Western Pass” mentioned in the Preface. Rather than solely focusing on individual change, we might consider, together with Sawin’s dialogic construction of self, how changes in the self over time often correspond to changes among the people with whom one interacts (Sawin 2004: 70). Furthermore, new listeners, including reporters and scholars, provide new opportunities for individuals to retell stories and even to reconstruct their selves in new and different ways (Sawin 2004: 95). While a detailed account of how Wang’s presentation of self to others might have changed over time is beyond the scope of this dissertation, future research on this aspect of inquiry would certainly provide new insight on the dynamic nature of self, and individuals of a certain level of fame, such as Wang, would certainly prove to be excellent subjects, given their more extensive “paper trails.”

Although scholarly interest in one individual in tradition can be seen as a reaction against early Romantic views of the communal creation of songs and dance among the Folk, it is my intent not only to relate Wang’s life and career to broader social changes that have occurred during the decades of his life, but also to begin to position them among the lives of other singers. With regard to the individual, Tong Soon Lee, in his study, “Grace Liu and Cantonese Opera in England: Becoming Chinese Overseas,” wrote, “Focusing on an individual enables us to extrapolate from detailed personal thoughts and actions broader issues that concern the larger community” (Lee 2009: 120).
In this sense, given that Wang has been one of the representatives of this tradition, by looking at his personal experience and interpretations of events and trends, we can gain entry into several of the issues that have been relevant to some degree to the tradition as a whole and the society in which it is embedded. At the same time, while Wang is intricately connected with the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition in many ways, he is clearly not the only singer. He has learned from and incorporated elements of other singers before him, and influenced the styles and repertoire of younger singers that have risen since. In attempting to better grasp such a webbed network of singers, Lord suggests starting with an individual singer and working outwards, from the singers who have influenced him (or her) to the larger community, and eventually to the entire “language area” (Lord 1960: 49). While an in-depth study examining the lives and interpretations of many northern Shaanxi folksingers awaits further research, this dissertation attempts to begin the effort by focusing closely on one individual, and attempting to relate that individual to other singers that came before, at the same time, and after him.

In addition, while both Lord (1960) and Porter and Gower (1995) have focused on the individual singers relation to other singers, I attempt to supplement such accounts in the biography section below by including others who have influenced Wang and are connected with his life. Thus, in addition to mentioning older singers who influenced him and some of the younger singers he has influenced, I also include a selection of Wang’s discussions about memorable elders from his childhood village, as well as a description of some of his recent friends. Wang says that when he sings, he often
remembers and is inspired by people he knew from his village. Thus, he relates the songs not only to his own life experience, but to those of others as well. The memories he has of various fellow villagers, related below, help to give something of a background for the people Wang knew, as well as the place in which he grew up.

The following account of Wang’s life is both a product of the ethnographic encounter (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989) and my engagement with previous publications concerning Wang’s life. My experience working with Wang has convinced me that on-going dialogues, like relationships and people themselves, are best understood as a fluid process that is constantly reconstructing and re-presenting itself. Each time I visited Wang’s home to have a conversation, I always learned something new, which led me to add to and revise my mental narrative of his life, career, personality, etc. At the same time, just like Wang, I have also changed and grown over time, so that our senses of the world and interpretations of things are always dynamic. While perhaps some handbooks of ethnographic fieldwork methods suggest that one eventually reaches a sort of “plateau” where one is able to anticipate the answers to all of the queries that one might pose, I question this assumption. For me, the present result of my interactions with Wang—this fixed, textual product—can and should only be seen as an approximation of a portion of what I have learned from our conversations up to this point. My goal is to share with the reader some of the experience of interacting with Wang, and why his life and songs bear witness to aspects of recent social change in China in a unique way. At the same time, I look forward to continued conversations with Wang in the future, and the chance to learn more.
Marugeda—The Village That Really Does Exist

Marugeda 马茹疙瘩 (Figure 2) is a small village located on a large mountain that was once covered by the yellow flowers of the maru 马茹 plant, a type of wild rose. The village looks out upon a ravine, which drops just beyond the General Guan Yu⁴⁰ Temple (Guandimiao 关帝庙) at the foot of the village, and another mountain ridge beyond. If you walk upwards, along its only road, past several yaodong 窑洞⁴¹ courtyards on the right, and the three-yaodong courtyard on the left where Wang was born and grew up, you soon reach a steeper, narrow path that brings you to the top of the mountain. There, surrounded by small plots of land, you can see the Dragon Mother Temple (longmu miao 龙母庙) on another hill in the distance. If you walk over the ridge to your left, you reach the temple, from which you can see all of the surrounding area.

Though there were only four people living in the village when I visited in 2012, when Wang was growing up in the 1950s, there had been around sixty or seventy. Everyone in the village had the surname Wang, and he remembers the older villagers saying that the village was founded by two brothers—ancestors of the Wang clan—who moved there from Shanxi province to the east. Arriving at this place, they saw the

⁴⁰ A general from the Three Kingdoms period (220CE-265CE) who later became deified as the God of War.
⁴¹ A typical style of home in northern Shaanxi province.
mountain and ravine filled with the yellow maru flowers, and called it Marugeda, meaning “Maru Hill.”

Figure 2. Marugeda, Wang Xiangrong's Home Village, Photographed in 2012

When Wang was young, people in the village used to eat the rose hips, the seeds of this thorny, herbaceous bush. Every year, in the sixth month, everywhere would be covered with the yellow flowers, and by the end of the month, they would be almost completely ripe. After the flowers withered, small seeds the size of one’s little finger

Geda in northern Shaanxi dialect literally means “clump,” but also refers to the round-topped, steep-sided hills commonly found in this area.

Photograph by the author.
would be ready for eating. They had a thin skin, a little bit of flesh, and there were many seeds. As there were frequent droughts in this area, during the sixth, seventh, and eighth months, people could pick these fruits and dry them out under the sun. Then, they would mix them together with whatever beans or grain might be available and grind them on the millstone into a sort of flour, from which noodles could be made. Sometimes, the fruit could be mixed with water and cooked into porridge. The ground meal could also be stored in order to weather years of drought.

Wang's recollections of Marugeda often seem to convey a sense of pastoral nostalgia. Although he remembers the villagers as being quite poor, not nearly as rich as in recent years with the development of the natural resource industry, he describes the pristine nature of the natural environment at that time and the relative freedom and happiness of the people. He would often go up the mountain with the adults—his parents and other older relatives and neighbors—playing to one side while the adults farmed and tended sheep. The sound of mountain songs (called *shan’ge* 山歌 or *xintianyou* 信天游) could often be heard. At that time, in addition to the various crops, there were numerous varieties of plants and trees, including *Artemisia scoparia* (huanghao 黄蒿, sometimes translated as caraway), *Caragana korshinskii* (ningtiao 柠条), and *Dianthera* (xiancao 仙草, “grass jelly”). The stream in the ravine below the village was deep blue and purple, and would often flood after heavy rainstorms. Various people in the surrounding area had built up small embankments along the stream over the years and would sometimes divert water to irrigate their crops. All sorts of grains were grown, including wheat, highland barley, millet, broomcorn millet (*meizi* 糜子), and sorghum. There were also
black soybeans, mung beans, cowpeas, red beans, and cabbage. In the ravine, there were corn and potatoes. Many types of birds inhabited the area, including magpies, doves, pheasants, hawks, black ducks (heilaoya 黑老鸭), and sparrows. In the gulley, there was also a type of sparrow, as well as a type of red-feathered, red-beaked bird that Wang thought was particularly beautiful. When Wang visited Marugeda again a few years ago, he noted that many of these birds had disappeared. He didn’t see any hawks or magpies, and even sparrows seemed to be fewer in number. His conclusion was that the degree of environmental destruction was extremely serious.

When asked about what people he remembered from the village, he spoke fondly and in great detail about Sixth Grandmother (Liu laolao 六姥姥), an elderly women two generations above his mother’s generation, who lived to almost ninety. He remembers her as always being healthy, never having to go to the hospital, and he attributes this to the good environment at that time, before things got worse, when “there were not as many crazy illnesses [as there are now]” (luanjibazao de bing bu duo 乱七八糟的病不多). Sixth Grandmother also dressed impeccably, with her snow-white hair tied back in a bun, coiled with a black thread net and a hairpin to hold it in place. Like the other older ladies in the village, she would wear a Chinese gown that buttons on the right, with beautiful buttons made of silver and engraved with flowers and other decorations. Like the other women, Sixth Grandmother had bound feet and she wore handmade shoes. Particular attention was paid to the colors used on the shoes. For example, black shoes might have blue, red, or green clasps. Another accessory of note were the bands for binding the lower part of the trouser legs (tuidai 腿带), which were sold nationally.
(guojia maizhe de 国家卖着的). For black pants, a white strip of cloth or white with flowers on it might be used, and this was considered quite aesthetically pleasing. Men were less particular about what they used, since they had to work hard in the fields, and they often just tied around a strip of coarse, white cloth or sheepskin.

Sixth Grandmother was very hardworking, always walking about the hillside and the village’s main road, sweeping up droppings left by the sheep that were herded back and forth each day. While Wang and other children would collect such droppings to play with as toys, Sixth Grandmother would collect them in a basket woven from willow branches and lay them out to dry, before using them as fertilizer for the crops.

Sixth Grandmother had three or four sons, who were of the generation of Wang’s grandparents. The one who made the biggest impression on Wang was the eldest, whom he calls Eldest Grandfather (Da yeye 大爷爷). He was a spirit medium (shenguan 神官), and it was from him that Wang learned the spirit medium tunes discussed in Chapter 2. Like the other spirit mediums in the area, he used a sheepskin drum (yangpi gu 羊皮鼓), and he had an incredible singing voice. Wang remembers him as being very serious, having a mysterious air about him when he invited the gods to descend from their horses, and being able to command a large array of spiritual forces. Whenever anyone in the village, young or old, suffered an illness or something was not quite right, they would ask for Eldest Grandfather’s assistance. No one went to hospitals at that time. For the people in the village, he was a mouthpiece for a heavenly god (yige tianshen de daiyanren 一个天神的代言入).

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44 Wang added that now these bands are no longer produced, since that generation of people no longer exists.
As a child, Wang felt that Eldest Grandfather was the most mysterious person in the village, and also the one with the most knowledge about the local ancient culture.

In addition to Elder Grandfather, there were two other men who sang very well that Wang remembers. One was the younger brother of Elder Grandfather, whose name was Wang San 王三 and was called Third Grandfather (San yeye 三爷爷), and the other was a distant paternal uncle (shushu 叔叔).

Wang’s mother ranked sixth among the women of her generation, and others called her Sixth Aunt (Liuma 六妈). When Wang was young, a sister-in-law of his mother lived in the same courtyard with their family, in the yaodong just next to theirs. She was known as Third Aunt (Sanma 三妈). Her husband (Wang’s father’s brother) and son had gone to work in Inner Mongolia, and she treated Wang as her own child. He recalls that often, after she ate her meal of a small potato, she would steam a small steamed bread (wotou 窝头) for him. As she was always around the courtyard, cleaning, sweeping, cooking, etc., Wang would often go to see what she was up to, after he woke up in the morning or came back from working outside. She would call him using his childhood nickname, saying, “Chouchou’s here!” Whenever she would go back to visit her natal family, she would always make sure to bring something, albeit a little cake, for Wang.

45 Chouchou 丑丑 might be translated as “little clown,” and conveys a sense of cuteness and affection in the local dialect.
Third Aunt was both a very good person and devout in her worship of the local deities (xinshen 信神). She believed that those who acted properly would receive good benefits, and those who didn’t would not. Every couple of weeks, on the first and the fifth of the lunar month, she bathed thoroughly, combed her hair meticulously, put on her best clothes, and prepared some small offerings. She would then take Wang over to the Temple of the Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin dian 观音殿) and the General Guan Yu Temple. Wang would follow along, imitating her every move, placing incense where she did and kowtowing where she kowtowed. Although the two temples were next to each other in the same courtyard, it was customary in Marugeda that women were not allowed inside the one dedicated to General Guan Yu. For this reason, Third Aunt would stand outside the door of the shrine, lighting the sticks of incense and handing them to Wang. Then, like the conductor of an orchestra, she would tell him where to stick each of them (three in the front, one each on the east and west side, and four more in the corners), where to kowtow, and where to place the fried dough used as an offering. Wang remembers being inspired by the sincerity of her belief, as well as the enticing fragrance of the dough that had been fried in vegetable oil. Four pieces were used for offerings, and afterwards, Wang usually got to eat at least two.

Sometime during the 1950s, when Wang was four or five years old, Third Aunt’s husband and son returned and took her off to Inner Mongolia, to Ordos City, where their family settled down. To this day, many of Wang’s relatives, like other villagers from Marugeda and the surrounding area, live in Inner Mongolia.
Wang’s father was a shepherd, and when Wang was six or seven years old, he started going with his father up into the mountains to tend sheep (Chu and Jiang 2005: 5). Wang treasured the chance to spend time with his father, and absorbed many of the mountain songs (shanqu 山曲) he heard him sing. Wang’s mother was also a talented singer, and Wang learned many of the songs included in the childhood section of Chapter 2 from her. Wang recalls that she was already old when he was born. She had bound feet, and planted crops all of her life.

Wang Xiangrong was born in the year of the dragon, 1952, on the twentieth day of the sixth lunar month. His mother had given birth to nine children, but only five survived. Wang was the youngest. Above him, there were his elder brother and three elder sisters. His sisters had all married by the time he was a child, and lived at varying distances from their natal family, with the farthest moving to Inner Mongolia in the fifties.

When Wang was little, he was fascinated by folk opera performances that were put on at nearby temple festivals, and would often walk great distances to see the singers he liked. Sometimes, he and the other kids would put on pretend temple festivals in his courtyard or inside of his yaodong, and Wang would stand on the heated brick kang 炕 bed as if it was a stage. The stories that Wang tells about himself, as well as those told by his older brother, paint the picture of an outgoing, intelligent, playful and humorous young boy. When he and his childhood friends would pretend to be characters from *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西游记), Wang would always play the part of Sun Wukong

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46 His older brother notes that Wang was the youngest of his entire generation in the Wang clan (Wang 2011: 44).
孙悟空, the martial arts master who was always getting into trouble with his antics, and was also the chosen leader of the novel’s anthropomorphic characters. Wang’s older brother had a passion for drawing and painting, and would frequently go to the village’s temples to attempt to copy the artwork on the wall and ceiling murals. He would often take Wang along, partly because he was scared of ghosts.

On Chinese New Year’s eve in 1966, in the year that the Cultural Revolution began, Wang’s father died. After the Cultural Revolution began, his school was shut down. Wang says that his dreams of going to college and becoming an official or a writer were destroyed, and he was forced to go back to the countryside. With his father gone, his mother became anxious about finding him a wife, and at the age of sixteen his marriage was arranged (*dinghun le* 订婚了). However, like countless couples in arranged marriage, he never saw his bride before the wedding day. His older brother, who ended up becoming an official in Fugu County Town, was entrusted by Wang’s mother with helping to arrange his marriage.

At the age of 17, after graduating from middle school (*chuzhong* 初中), Wang became a community-supported teacher (*minban jiaoshi* 民办教师) and taught at different elementary schools for several years (Zhao 2010: 5). During that time, he sought out different local folk musicians and learned their songs. He also taught a music class to schoolchildren, which was very popular.

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47 Different articles about Wang appear to offer different dates for when he started teaching. Chu and Jiang write that it was in 1970 (Chu and Jiang 2005: 9). The term *minban jiaoshi* refers to “teachers in rural citizen-managed or state-managed schools who do not received the normal remuneration from the government” ([http://www.iciba.com/民办教师](http://www.iciba.com/民办教师), accessed April 10, 2013).
In 1972, Wang Xiangrong married, and soon had two daughters and a son.\footnote{This date was given in a 2006 interview, although he used the word “probably” (keneng 可能), suggesting he wasn’t sure.} After teaching for six years, the cadre in charge of the commune’s education criticized Wang for spending too much time on his folk music interests and not enough time on political thought work, saying he was “ignoring his proper duties” (\textit{buwuzhengye 不务正业}) (Chu and Jiang 2005: 12). He was warned several times, but continued to pursue his passion for folksongs, and in the summer of 1975, he went back to the fields once more as a farmer (Chu and Jiang 2005: 12).

Over the years, Wang sought out many singers, learning from them melodies, vocal techniques, and lyrics that he liked, and assimilating those elements into his own unique style. Chu and Jiang state that Wang had studied with almost one hundred folksingers from different areas, although when I asked him about that number, he said that it was an exaggeration (Chu and Jiang 2005: 10).\footnote{However, in reviewing the transcription of an interview he gave in 2006, he said that he traveled all over Shanxi and Inner Mongolia and visited “over a hundred people” (\textit{renshu shang zui qima shangbai renci le 人数上起码上百人次了}).} Though he notes that the folksong culture does not have a strict master-disciple structure of transmission like other professions, such as opera singers or carpenters, he does mention one elderly errentai singer who served as a mentor. His name was Sun Bin 孙宾 (1890-1983), and he was from the same township (\textit{xiang 乡}) as Wang.\footnote{The description that follows of Sun Bin is based on Chu and Jiang 2005: 15-16.} Sun was from a wealthy landlord family and had received an excellent education. However, he did not aspire to become an official or a merchant, but instead devoted his time to his passion for folksongs. This led him to seek out teachers and perform himself at events throughout the area. Due to the
low status of singers in the area at that time, his family rejected him and neighboring villagers saw him as something of an eccentric. Along the way, he met a girl who loved folksongs as much as he did, and they got married.

During the 1950s, Sun was a frequent performer on the stages of farming villages in the western part of Fugu County, where Marugeda is located, and became Wang’s childhood idol (Chu and Jiang 2005: 15). During the Cultural Revolution, he was put under surveillance and not allowed to perform until the end of that period, when he had already reached his seventies. It was at this time, for a period of five or six years, that Wang frequently visited Sun’s home, often staying for a week or two, and was treated almost like a son. By the time Sun was eighty, he would sometimes forget the lyrics to songs he was attempting to teach Wang, and Sun’s wife would jump in and sing them for him. Thus, Wang considers her to be “half a teacher” (ban ge laoshi 半个老师) as well (Chu and Jiang 2005: 16). Sun’s teaching not only increased Wang’s repertoire, but also influenced the way he thought about folksongs. Sun would present them as “living fossils” (huo huashi 活化石) of high cultural value, and was intimately familiar with the origins, history, and variants of each song. The content of the songs was connected to local history, sociology, folklore, geography and other aspects of life, and it seems that Sun’s passion for explaining the significance of the songs contributed to Wang’s passion for the same. Sun Bin died at the age of 93 in 1983, the same year that Wang began to work at the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe (see below).

In addition to seeking out singers to learn from, Wang would take every chance he got to borrow records with folksongs or opera on them, and play them over and over
until he learned the songs word for word. Wang also recalls that there were speakers installed in every building and house during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which would begin each day with the revolutionary folksong, “The East Is Red” (see Chapters 3 and 4), and broadcast news and announcements. At the end of the evening program, after the news, he remembers that they would sometimes play a few folksongs, which he would learn as well.

In 1975, he was selected to join a people’s commune specialized work team (gongshe zhuanye dui 公社专业队), in which all the members were young people (Zhao 2010: 5). The team would work on projects to assist the various production brigades throughout the commune (Miao 2008: 73). During the day they would work, and at night when there was nothing to do, the team leader put together a propaganda team (xuanchuandui 宣传队), and Wang became one of its mainstays (Zhao 2010: 5). It was at this time that Wang formally mounted the stage, and soon became a well-known figure throughout the Xinmin People’s Commune (Xinmin gongshe 新民公社, the township that included his home village, Marugeda) (Miao 2008: 73). Also during that time, he joined a traveling troupe that went to Inner Mongolia to perform errentai (Lü 1994 (2): 1466).

When Wang was 23 years old, he won a prize for singing an errentai about the “Learn from Dazhai” Movement (Zhao 2010: 5). Later, when the Gang of Four fell, he

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51 The influence of records on folksingers is not unique to Wang’s case. Henry Glassie mentions the influence of commercial recordings of the 1920s and 1930s on Southern Mountain music in the U.S., which has “rendered the repertoires of contemporary Southern Appalachian singers largely predictable” (Glassie 1970: 31-32). Citing earlier scholarship, Sawin notes that, in her own area of research, the best local musicians often were first to own record-players (Sawin 2004: 164). Wald, in turn, notes that singers like Muddy Waters, when asked where they had first heard the blues, “would regularly refer not to any local singers or musicians, but to records” (Wald 2004: 79).

52 Miao Meng refers to it as a “commune pioneering brigade” (gongshe chuangye dui 公社创业队) (Miao 2008: 73).
adapted a poem about the event published in a local newspaper into a song, which received local critical acclaim. The end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 led to an opening up of opportunities for folksongs, including Wang’s position in the propaganda team mentioned above (Miao 2008: 73).

Beginning in 1977, Wang won a string of local, then regional, then national song contests. In 1977, he represented the Xinmin Commune in the Fugu County Arts Gala (Fugu xian wenyi huiyan 府谷县文艺汇演), winning first prize (Chu and Jiang 2005: 13). In 1978, he again won first place representing Fugu County in a Yulin prefecture artistic performance selection (wenyi diaoyan 文艺调演), singing “Fifth Older Brother Tends Sheep” (“Wuge fangyang” 五哥放羊) (Zhao 2010: 5). In 1979, he won two first place prizes at the Shaanxi Provincial Arts Gala (Shaanxi sheng wenyi huiyan 陕西省文艺汇演), for the errentai, “Earning Money” (“Da jinqian” 打金钱), and the short operatic drama, “Sister-in-Law Picks Vegetables” (“Gusao tiaocai” 姑嫂挑菜) (Zhao 2010: 5). Also in 1979, Wang performed at a cultural and artistic event held in Yan’an to commemorate Mao Zedong’s “Talks at Yan’an” (Nan 2003: 23). It was at that time that the then head of the Yulin Cultural Bureau, Shang Airen 尚爱仁, discovered Wang, and he began to enter into official performances (Nan 2003: 23).

In 1980, at a national rural amateur performance selection (quanguo nongcun yeyu yanchu diaoyan 全国农村业余演出调演), Wang’s performance, in cooperation

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53 The information about the Gang of Four song comes from an interview with Wang.
54 Miao Meng refers to it as a “national peasant art selection” (quanguo nongmin yishu diaoyan 全国农民艺术调演) (Miao 2008: 73).
with Shenmu County, of “Brother and Sister Go to the Market” (“Xiongmei ganji” 兄妹赶集) was chosen to be performed in Zhongnanhai, the residential compound in Beijing that is home to top party leaders (Zhao 2010: 5). The lyrics are translated below:

《兄妹赶集》 “Brother and Sister Go to the Market”\(^{55}\)

The old sun comes up, shining on the western mountain,
I’m going with my Third Elder Brother to the market,
Third Younger Sister, ai, hurry up, Older Brother, ai, let’s hold hands,
Ai hai yo, we two are walking together, ai—

M 阳婆上来照呀么照西山，
F 我和我的三哥哥把集赶，
M 三妹妹哎快点走，F 叫哥哥哎咱手拉上手，
MF 哎嗨哟，咱们二人相跟上走哎—

Look at all the people going to the market, strung together in a bunch,
Big carts, ya, small carts, yo ho, bustling about,
Over mountains and crossing rivers, dashing about to enter the market,
Today there are tons of people, a noisy bustling village scene.
Ai hai yo, bustling people, horses neighing, it’s truly lively and exciting.
M 你看那赶集的人儿连成那一串串，
F 大车呀小车哟嗬跑得欢，
M 翻过山 F 跳过河，M 紧赶几步 F 进市场，
今天这人儿实在多，人欢马叫闹嚷嚷。
MF 哎嗨哟集场上那人欢马叫真呀么真红火。

Mountain products, local specialties, all kinds are available,
Oil cakes, ya, are fragrant, rice wine is sweet,
Melons from Jingbian, dates from Jiaxian, Yulin’s tofu has a great flavor,
Quick, Older Brother, look over there, there are so many cows, donkeys, mules, and horses,
Donkeys from Jiaxian and Mizhi are nice and tall, horned cattle jump along
gে beng beng，
Buying and selling at reasonable prices, everyone laughing ha ha ha,
The open market has open to the people,

\(^{55}\) The Chinese lyrics are from WSR 2011: 220-221. I have added “M” for male and “F” for female to indicate who sings what, according to an MTV of the song that Wang showed me.
Deng Xiaoping and other national leaders saw his performance (Zhao 2010: 5). The author, Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904-1986), who had spent time in northern Shaanxi during the revolutionary period, was also present, and is quoted as saying, “Having left northern Shaanxi several decades ago, today we heard real northern Shaanxi folksongs once more!” (quoted in Miao 2008: 73). Wang’s performance could also be seen as a sort of grassroots praise for the newly established “open markets” and the abundance of goods for sale.

Several writers see 1980 as a turning point for Wang’s career (Miao 2008: 73; Chu and Jiang 2005: 15). After his success in Beijing, several professional troupes had their eyes on Wang, and in order to keep him in his home region, the Yulin Prefecture Art Academy (Diqu yishuguan 地区艺术馆) took him on and paid him a monthly salary (Huo 2006 [2]: 952). In 1983, he was formally hired as a member of the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe (Yulin minjian yishutuan 榆林民间艺术团).

A music scholar who worked with Wang during his time with the troupe in the 1980s remembers him staying up late at night to read books and always reading backstage. When asked about his reading habits, Wang said that he began reading
novels, especially Western novels translated into Chinese, in the late 1970s, and by the
1980s had read most of the masterpieces that were available at that time, including such
works as Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and *Resurrection*,
Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel Was Tempered*.
Frustrated by the lack of realistic depiction of human emotions and psychology in
Chinese literature produced during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Wang’s interest
in foreign literature sprang from a curiosity towards how people lived in other places,
how the same sort of human events might be dealt with differently in France, in the
former Soviet Union, in the U.S., etc. Though he did not specifically mention the
connection, this interest in people from different times and places may have infused his
earlier reading as well. After beginning to read classic Chinese novels, such as *Journey
to the West, Water Margin*, and *Three Kingdoms*, in the third grade, Wang went on to
read a great deal of Chinese historical fiction, until such works became scarce at the start
of the Cultural Revolution. When asked about which contemporary novels he felt best
reflected Shaanxi province and/or northern Shaanxi, he mentioned works by Li Ruobing
李若冰, Lu Yao 路遥, and Jia Pingwa 贾平凹, and said that his two favorites were Chen
Zhongshi’s 陈忠实 (1993) *White Deer Plain* (*Bailuyuan* 白鹿原) and Gao Jianqun’s 高

Wang’s first trip abroad with the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe occurred in 1988, when
its members traveled by trans-Siberian railway to France and Switzerland. In many
ways, it was a transformative experience, where he began to see himself as Chinese. He
recalls that the foreign audiences loved his singing, even though they couldn’t understand
the lyrics, and would come up to him afterwards and say, “this is *real* Chinese culture.” In various interviews, Wang contrasted this with Chinese pop music and other genres. He later traveled to other countries as well, including Japan in 1992 and the U.S. in 2008 (see Chapter 5).

Beginning in the 1980s, Wang appeared in numerous films and TV dramas, as well as television shows, documentaries, MTV videos, and televised performances.\(^{56}\) These included the film *The Yellow River Curves Here* (*Huanghe zai zher zhuan wan* 黄河在那儿转弯) and the TV series, *China Has Produced a Mao Zedong* (*Zhongguo chule yige Mao Zedong* 中国出了一个毛泽东) and *Mao Zedong in Northern Shaanxi* (*Mao Zedong zai shaanbei* 毛泽东在陕北) (Chu and Jiang 2005: 17). In the latter, Wang played the role of Chairman Mao’s horsegroom (*mafu* 马夫). He also provided the theme songs and soundtracks for several other TV dramas set in revolutionary Yan’an, including one based on Edgar Snow’s book, *Red Star Over China* (*Xixing manji* 西行漫记) (Chu and Jiang 2005: 17; cf. Snow 1938). More recently, Wang appeared in the 2010 film, *I Am an Extraterrestrial* (*Wo shi waixingren* 我是外星人), which has the official English name of *A Chinese E.T. Boy*, about a boy from northern Shaanxi with an active imagination who dreams of becoming an astronaut, as well as battling space aliens. In the film, Wang plays a wise old folksinger that befriends a young musicology student from Beijing.

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\(^{56}\) Different sources provide different total numbers of movies and TV shows for which Wang either acted, provided theme songs, or both. One article, published in 2005, had the number at “over twenty,” while Wang’s older brother’s book, published in 2011, said it was thirty-six (Chu and Jiang 2005: 17; Wang 2011: 42).
In addition, similar to other regional/ethnic celebrity folksingers, such as the hugely popular ethnic Miao singer, A You Duo 阿幼朵, in Guizhou, Wang also has served as a spokesman for regional products, including *baijiu* liquor, regional cell phone services, clothing, and dried bean curd (Figure 3). Wang said that he took on several of the advertising roles voluntarily, in order to help promote local and regional industries.

![Figure 3. Advertisements for Sorghum Liquor and Cell Phone Service Featuring Wang](image)

In recent years, Wang has obtained several official positions, including Vice-Chairman of the Shaanxi Province Musician’s Association and member of the Shaanxi Provincial Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (Zheng-Xie 政)...

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57 Regarding A You Duo’s product promotion, Louisa Schein writes, “A You Duo’s ethnic image has saturated popular culture in Guizhou. An advertisement for a telephone information service featured six photos of A You Duo in costume and appeared on billboards all over the province. She has become a celebrity worthy of doing product endorsements. In Guiyang, her smiling face appeared on a three-story-high billboard on the side of a building” (Schein 2010: 159).
协). As Vice-Chairman of the Musician’s Association, he serves as judge at yearly singing competitions with categories including Western bel canto style (*meisheng* 美声), Chinese national style (*minzu changfa* 民族唱法), and non-conservatory trained folksong style (*yuanshengtai* 原生态). He is also frequently invited to sit as judge for other contests, such as the provincial finals for the Red Song Contest (*Honggehui* 红歌会) in 2012, where he was an honored guest judge (Figure 4). In 2008, Wang was chosen as one of the Olympic torchbearers and sang a specially composed panegyric as he ran, inspired by the Beijing Olympics (Figure 5) (Miao 2008: 71).

![Figure 4. Wang Xiangrong Serving as Judge in the Xi'an Finals of the 2012 Red Song Contest](image)

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58 Helen Rees translates the term *yuanshengtai min'ge* as “original ecology folksongs” (Rees 2012: 34).

59 In many such contests, the most honored judges tend to be placed in the center section of the panel of judges.
In 2009, after being declared a provincial-level heritage bearer in 2008, Wang was included in the second group of national-level bearers of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) for northern Shaanxi folksongs. One of the requirements for such bearers is that they take on official disciples, who are registered with the government, and that they actively transmit the tradition to them. It was during this process, in 2008, that Wang took on his first disciples, which I discuss below.

During the past few years, Wang has frequently given lectures on northern Shaanxi folksongs and their social history at various universities and music conservatories, including the Xi’an Conservatory of Music, the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing, Xi’an Jiaotong University, Shaanxi Normal University, Chang’an

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Figure 5. Wang Xiangrong Carrying the Olympic Torch, 2008

60 Photograph by author.
University, and Xi’an University of Art and Science (Chu and Jiang 2005: 16; Luo 2006). He also gives lectures twice a year to military officials on the “Land and Songs” of northern Shaanxi at a local political academy where they come for training.

When asked about his current friends, Wang mentioned an elite coterie of artists and writers who meet on occasion in Xi’an, including writers such as Chen Zhongshi and Jia Pingwa, painters such as Liu Wenxi 刘文曦 and Yang Xiaoyang 杨晓阳, and famous calligraphers such as Zhong Mingshan 钟明善, Wu Shanda 吴山大, and Wang Xijin 王西进. In addition to these writers and artists, his coterie includes numerous performers from music circles, troupe members, conservatory professors, etc. When ask why he was drawn to such artistic circles, he said that, though they may work in different genres, they share a common language—art. At the same time, Wang maintains a network of friends in northern Shaanxi that includes coal bosses, entrepreneurs, company executives, the boss of a large regional liquor company, and others.

**Visions/Versions of Wang**

Many articles and documentaries about Wang seem to focus on the narrative of his hard life leading up to and providing a foundation for his later development into a song king (gewang 歌王) (Miao 2008; Yang 1995; Zhao 2010). In the advertisement for one TV documentary about Wang’s life, the phrase “from a shepherd boy to the

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62 Professor Ren Junwen 任俊文 from Shanxi province shared with me a video he recorded of a guest lecture Wang presented at the China Conservatory of Music in Beijing, where he taught the students in the audience to sing two songs.

63 For a study of competing biographies of another influential Chinese musician, see Stock 1996.
northern Shaanxi folksong king of a generation” (*cong yige fangyangwa dao yidai shaanbei gewang* 从一个放羊娃到一代陕北歌王) is highlighted.\(^6^4\)

In addition to narratives about Wang’s childhood poverty and his road to success, several articles focus on aspects of Wang’s love life, including the youthful romance with the girl who was married away to Inner Mongolia, mentioned in the preface, as well as his unsuccessful marriage (*Chu and Jiang 2005: 10-11; “Shaanbei gewang”). *Di Ma* 狄马, a writer who is a friend of Wang’s and has written several articles about him, complained that many people focused too much on stories about him of an erotic nature, while failing to appreciate him as the great artist he is (*Di 2010: 15*).

At times, elements of Wang’s romantic life, including his failed marriage and earlier struggles in finding a partner (he is now happily settled in a long-term relationship), were presented as endemic of larger trends as areas of rural China evolved from arranged marriages to individual choice. A few years ago, Wang appeared on a TV show called “One Hundred Years of Love and Marriage” (*Bainian hunlian* 百年婚恋), which examined the love lives of prominent individuals as case studies in the exploration concerning how public conceptions of love and marriage have changed over time. In the episode about Wang, interspersed between clips of interviews with both Wang and his estranged wife, there were segments shot in a TV studio with a sociologist and a psychologist analyzing Wang’s case and how it relates to his own psychology (his

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\(^{64}\) *Renwu: shaanbei gewang—Wang Xiangrong* 人物：陕北歌王——王向荣 [*“People: The King of Northern Shaanxi Folksongs—Wang Xiangrong”*]. [http://space.tv.cctv.com/act/article.jsp?articleId=ART11225776921003914&nowpage=0](http://space.tv.cctv.com/act/article.jsp?articleId=ART11225776921003914&nowpage=0) [accessed April 12, 2013]; cf. “Shaanbei gewang.”
relationship with his mother) and to broader social trends. Towards the end, the psychologist concludes that Wang is in a state of limbo, caught between the rural and urban social spheres, the traditional and the progressive. She suggests that while he still feels a sense of duty, which precludes him from officially divorcing his wife, neither has he completely adapted to the more liberal urban lifestyle (“Bainian hunlian”). This extrapolation of social tendencies from a famous individual like Wang relates to one of the social functions of celebrity outlined by Graeme Turner—namely, “the celebrity’s role as a location for the interrogation and elaboration of cultural identity” (Turner 2004: 24). Turner specifically points out the idea of “celebrity as a source of gossip, which is itself understood as an important social process through which relationships, identity, and social and cultural norms are debated, evaluated, modified and shared” (Turner 2004: 24). Thus, public interest in Wang’s private love life could be seen, in one sense, as the desire of people to engage and deal with ambivalent issues that arise in the midst of social change.

Another depiction of Wang’s life is found in his older brother’s 2011 book, Wang Xiangrong Family Chronicle (Wang Xiangrong jiazu jishi 王向荣家族纪事), which presents a collection of articles dealing with aspects of Wang’s life (some of which had been previously published as newspaper articles), but also capitalizes on Wang Xiangrong’s fame to present histories of other members of the Wang clan (Wang 2011). In a preface to the book, Zhao Xirong 赵喜荣 notes that only about 40% of the book is actually about Wang, and that “the author’s writing of each chapter was motivated from the point of view of educating people” (zuozhe xie mei pian wenzhang dou shi cong
In the introduction, Wang’s brother, Wang Shangrong 王尚荣, writes that he includes stories about a great-grandfather who worked as a traveling doctor in Inner Mongolia to “provide later generations something with which to learn from his spirit and moral character as an upright person” (gōng hòu běi mén xué xí tā de jīng shén hé zuò rén de pǐn dé 供后辈们学习他的精神和做人的品德) (Wang 2011: 4-5).

The book includes some interesting stories about Marugeda, the village they grew up in, and tales of Wang as a child. For example, Chapter 2, which relates playful stories from Wang’s childhood, is called “Fellow Villagers Called Him ‘The King of the Children.’” Throughout the book, there seems to be an interesting mixture of pride in Wang’s fame, illustrated in the recounting of various countries he had been to and films and TV programs in which he has appeared, with subtle criticism of Wang’s lifestyle, such as the chapter entitled, “Unable to Quit the Tobacco Addiction” (“Jì bu liào de hàn yán yǐn” 忌不了的旱烟瘾), which details Wang’s lifelong addiction to cigarettes. According to Wang’s brother, during the time when the family was saving up money for Wang’s marriage, their mother had Wang go by himself to mine the family’s yearly supply of coal, a process that necessitated about a month annually. Spending the entire day in the cramped, damp mines, upon returning home, Wang’s mother insisted that he smoke tobacco from a pipe in order to “warm his stomach” and help him rest (Wang 2011: 93). This relatively short chapter ends with the brother’s exhortation:
Having written to here, I once again urge my younger brother: For the sake of your health, for the sake of your artistic livelihood, you had better start smoking less, and then not smoke at all. You had the determination to become an artist, so you should also have the determination to give up this bad habit!

写到这里，我还是再劝劝我的弟弟，为了你的健康，为了你的艺术生涯，你还是把吸烟由大吸变成小吸，继而不吸为好。你有决心成为艺术家，也应该有决心改掉不良习惯! (Wang 2011: 94)

Perhaps the most problematic chapter is the sixth, “I Arranged a Marriage for My Little Brother” (“Wo wei didi ding le qin” 我为弟弟定了亲), which details the hard work that the brother did for several years to help earn money for Wang’s wedding, and blames Wang for the failure of his marriage (Wang 2011: 60-70). He even includes a portrait at the end of Wang Xiangrong, his now estranged wife, and their mother (Wang 2011: 71).

**Contextualizing Wang’s Life**

In order to begin to see how Wang’s life fits into the bigger picture of northern Shaanxi history and society, it is necessary to compare his life to other singers from the same area, including those of the older, same, and younger generations. While each individual is unique, the fact that similar things happened to several different singers might suggest the presence of broader trends. This, in turn, gives us a window into which aspects of Wang’s life can be more more closely tied to historical circumstances surrounding it, and which aspects may have been more due to his own agency and initiative.
Older Generations of Singers

Looking at the lives of earlier generations of northern Shaanxi folksingers gives us the chance to see what elements of Wang’s life might be common to the lives of other singers within the broader tradition, as well as what unique opportunities and accomplishments Wang enjoyed. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of information available about some of these earlier singers (with a couple exceptions). What we do have are short biographies of selected singers at the end of large folksong anthologies. The singers are chosen either for their prominence in the tradition, their composition/arrangement of songs that have since become classics within the traditional repertoire, their willingness to share large amounts of songs during collection efforts, or some combination of the three. That said, we must note that the folksong collectors who edited these anthologies put these biographies together, so we can surmise that they only included the details they felt were relevant to their lives as singers.

Several of the singers included are said to have joined amateur troupes in their twenties, if not earlier. These include Li Zhiwen 李志文 (1931-1994) and Chen Weiye 陈维业 (b. 1929) (Huo 2006 [2]: 950-951). In addition, Ding Xicai 丁喜才 (1920-1994) is said to have traveled with his father performing in order to make a living, and one hears about other singers who had similar experiences, sometimes traveling to Inner Mongolia to perform (Huo 2006 [2]: 950). In addition to amateur troupes, several singers also joined professional troupes. Both Ma Ziqing 马子清 (b. 1935) and Li Zhiwen joined

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65 There are eight short bios provided at the end of *A Complete Collection of Folk Songs From Northern Shaanxi*, and seven of northern Shaanxi folksingers at the end of the Shaanxi volume of the *Grand Compendium of Chinese Folksongs* (Huo 2006 [2]: 949-952; Lü 1994 [2]: 1465-1466). Six of the same singers are included in both works.
the Northern Shaanxi Folksong Choir in the 1950s, and Ma Ziqing went on to join the Yan’an Song and Dance Troupe and then the Shaanxi Province Song and Dance Troupe (Huo 2006 [2]: 951). Taken together, these experiences bear a certain similarity both to Wang’s life and that of his disciples. Wang worked with an amateur errentai troupe in Inner Mongolia in his twenties, and later joined the professional troupe in Yulin. Several of his disciples started out in local operatic troupes (see below).

Another common thread that runs through several of the singers’ biographical narratives is their participation in various song contests and/or large-scale performance showcases (huiyan 汇演 or diaoyan 调演). The narrative always mentions that they participated in such-and-such contest or showcase and received critical acclaim and/or won one or several prizes. Ding Xicai, who was from the same county as Wang and later went on to teach at the Shanghai Conservatory, participated in one such contest in 1953 (Huo 2006 [2]: 950). Yang Jinshan 杨进山 (1912-1987) attended several such events both at the county and prefectural level (Huo 2006 [2]: 949). Chen Weiye, who was from the same county as Wang but of an older generation, was invited to perform in a large-scale performance conference in 1975 (Huo 2006 [2]: 950). At that time, Wang was still not well-known outside of his home area and did not participate (Li Shibin, personal communication). Li Zhiwen, like Wang, attended multiple levels of song contests beginning in 1977 and won awards in each, although their careers diverged in the 1980s, with Li playing older characters in films and working as a consultant for the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe and Wang working as a member of the Troupe (Huo 2006 [2]: 950-951).
Given the local to county to regional to provincial to national trajectory of the song contests, a key part of several biographies seems to be the opportunity for various singers to meet national leaders. Ma Ziqing, together with the other members of the *a cappella* troupe, were able to meet Zhou Enlai in the 1950s. Wang Xiangrong met Deng Xiaoping in 1980. Li Zhiwen met the national vice-chairman, Wang Zhen 王震 (1908-1993), in 1990 (Huo 2006 [2]: 951).

In addition to vocal talent evidenced by membership in troupes, prizes won at song contests, and meetings with dignitaries, several of the biographies focus on the tireless efforts of the singers in preserving and transmitting the tradition. Some of the singers are described as collecting folksongs either during their work (if that be at a troupe or local culture bureau) or during their free time. Special emphasis is placed on those who shared multiple songs with folksong collectors during various collection efforts, including Yang Jinshan, Ding Xicai (who provided material for not one but *two* collections in the 1950s), and Wang Xiangrong, who contributed a whopping 26 songs that were included in the large *Grand Compendium* (*jicheng* 集成) project that began in the late 1970s (Huo 2006 [2]: 949-950; Lü 1994 [2]: 1466).

In addition to collaborating with folksong collection efforts, several of the singers were invited, in various capacities, to teach at certain universities and/or music conservatories. Both Ding Xicai and Zhang Tian’en 張天恩 (1910-1969) taught at the

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66 There is a photo of the all-female acapella folksong troupe, of which Ma Ziqing was a member and lead singer, meeting Zhou Enlai in the collection of pictures at the beginning of the first volume of Huo 2006.  
67 This equivalence between meeting national leaders and achieving artistic success appears to be something of a nationwide (or perhaps worldwide) trend. Louisa Schein, in describing the career of a female Miao singer named Luo Xiuying (b. 1941), who worked in the Central Nationalities Song and Dance Troupe, mentions that Luo met Mao Zedong in 1959 (Schein 2010: 147-148).
Northwest Arts Academy (Xibei yizhuan 西北艺专), the predecessor of the Xi’an Conservatory of Music (Huo 2006 [2]: 949-950; Lü 1994 [2]: 1465-1466). When Zhang Tian’en taught there in 1951, he is said to have taught students “several tens of northern Shaanxi folksongs” that later became widely sung by numerous singers (Huo 2006 [2]: 949). Ding Xicai went on to teach at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music (at that time known as the Eastern China Campus of the Central Conservatory of Music) (Lü 1994 [2]: 1465). During his over 30 years of teaching, Ding is said to have taught over 1,000 students, including several who won awards (Lü 1994 [2]: 1465). In a similar educational fashion, in the 1980s, when Wang Xiangrong was hired into the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe, Li Zhiwen was also invited as an artistic consultant for the younger generation of singers, and it was from him that Wang learned several of the “classic” folksongs from the Mizhi and Suide region from where Li hailed.

In several of the biographies of these older singers, there seems to be some connection with various positions they held related to government offices. Li Youyuan 李有源 (1903-1955), the attributed composer of earlier versions of “The East Is Red,” worked as a secretary (wenshu 文书) in a rural government office during part of his life (Huo 2006 [2]: 949). Certain singers, even to this day, are hired to work in local culture bureau offices. Chen Weiye is said to have worked hard during his eight years at the Fugu County Cultural Center (wenhuaguan 文化馆) in going out and collecting local folksongs and errentai folk opera music (Huo 2006 [2]: 950). Yang Jinshan was a member of the CCP and held several posts, including as a member of the Poor Peasants Committee (pinnong weiyuan 贫农委员) (Huo 2006 [2]: 949). In addition to official
posts, one might reiterate participation in the officially-produced song performances, such as many of the contests mentioned earlier. Furthermore, yearly anniversaries commemorating Mao’s “Talks on the Arts and Literature at Yan’an” often called for performances of northern Shaanxi folksongs, given the CCP’s revolutionary history in Yan’an. Wang Xiangrong has participated in many of these since the 1980s, and Li Zhiwen spoke and performed at one such occasion in 1990 (Huo 2006 [2]: 951).

Just as Wang has been referred to as the “Folksong King of Western China” and the “King of Northern Shaanxi Folksongs,” several of these singers were given titles that perhaps intended to affix public images and claims to talent and authenticity in the mind of the general populace. Li Youyuan was called “The People’s Singer” (renmin geshou 人民歌手), while Li Zhiwen has been called a “real Chinese folksinger” (zhenzheng de Zhongguo min’ge yanchangjia 真正的中国民歌演唱家) and “The Song King of the Loess Plateau” (huangtu gaoyuan de gewang 黄土高原的歌王) (Huo 2006 [2]: 949, 951).

While each of the characteristics mentioned may not be included in every biography, I suspect many of them are common to other singers, even if they are not explicitly included in their biographies. Overall, based on the biographies that we have available for these singers, what gets stressed is the idea that they were not just good performers, but also actively contributed to a broader knowledge and understanding of the songs and contexts in which the songs were performed. The latter often included participation in collection efforts, teaching in universities and conservatories,
participating in officially orchestrated performances, and sometimes holding or interacting with those who held official positions.

**The Other Two Song Kings of Northern Shaanxi**

One of Wang’s disciples referred to Wang and two other similarly-aged singers, He Yutang 贺玉堂 (b. 1949) and Sun Zhikuan 孙志宽 (b. 1958), as the “Three Great Song Kings of Northern Shaanxi Folksongs” (*Shaanbei min’ge san da gewang* 陕北民歌三大歌王). While it is difficult to determine how widely held this notion might be, this grouping proves useful for a comparative look at two of Wang’s contemporaries. Both Wang and He Yutang have been declared national bearers of ICH for northern Shaanxi folksongs (Wang for Yulin prefecture and He for Yan’an prefecture), and Wang and Sun come from neighboring counties and both joined the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe around the same time in the early 1980s.⁶⁸

Known as the “Great King of Chinese Folksongs” (*Zhongguo min’ge dawang* 中国民歌大王), He Yutang was born in 1949. His mother died when he was young, and he was sold to a neighbor’s family with the last name He 贺 when he was five years old for the price of a decaliter of sorghum (Yin 2007: 1). There were many amateur singers in his new family, and he grew up surrounded by music. After graduating from high school, he joined the army in 1968, and later held many official positions, including the director of the Ansai 安塞 County Culture Bureau. He is perhaps most famous for his appearance

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⁶⁸ Certainly, there are still other singers of a similar or slightly older age that are prominent in the northern Shaanxi, and I hope that future research expands and further nuances the examples introduced here.
in Chen Kaige’s 1984 film, *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地) (Yin 2007: 3). Along with Wang, He Yutang was chosen as one of the two national-level bearers of ICH for the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition in 2009.

Sun Zhikuan, called the “Xintianyou Song King” (*Xintianyou gewang* 信天游歌王), was born and raised in Shenmu County, next to Wang’s home county of Fugu.\(^69\)

Born in 1958, Sun entered the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe in 1982, around the same time that Wang did.\(^70\) Sun studied the Chinese national style of voice (*minzu shengyue* 民族声乐) for two years at the Xi’an Conservatory of Music beginning in 1985, working with the highly acclaimed northern Shaanxi folksong expert and voice coach, Bai Bingquan 白秉权 (1930-2010). In 1986, he gained notoriety for winning the Golden Peacock (*jin kongque* 金孔雀) Cup Award in a national competition for his rendition of “Tears Fall on the Desert Brush” (“Lei dandan pao zai shahaohao lin” 泪蛋蛋抛在沙蒿蒿林, see Chapter 3), which became one of his hits. He has since become the artistic committee director for the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe, a member of the provincial Musician’s Association, a top-rated national performer, and a member of the Shaanxi Provincial Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). In addition to belonging to many of the same organizations as Wang, Sun also recorded songs for several of the same movies, including “The Yellow River Curves Here” and “China Has Produced a
Mao Zedong.” He also traveled with the troupe to many of the same countries, including France, Switzerland, Japan, the former Soviet Union, and others.

The comparison with these two contemporaries reveals that Wang shares several similar traits with them. They all have official positions, have won awards, share certain songs in their repertoire of “hits,” have appeared in various films and TV programs, and have had the chance to share local songs with those abroad (through live concerts and/or international films). Future comparative research on these three singers, combined with examinations of several of the younger generation of singers (some who are mentioned below), will continue to flesh out the broader “field” of northern Shaanxi folksingers (Bourdieu 1993). In order to examine how this field may be evolving over time from generation to generation, below I first look at examples of Wang’s students, and then follow with a discussion of other prominent younger northern Shaanxi folksong singers (most of whom are actually from the region).

**Wang Xiangrong 2.0**

Wang’s designation as a “representative transmitter” of ICH for Northern Shaanxi folksongs led to new relationships with several younger singers. In looking at how he chose these “disciples,” who are meant to carry on the tradition after him, we might look at how their lives have compared to his, as well as how they compare to each other, giving us a chance to see several ways in which northern Shaanxi folksongs are being appropriated and performed.
Inspired by the various proclamations of UNESCO’s Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity and UNESCO’s 2003 “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,” the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center (Zhongguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhongxin 中国非物质文化遗产保护中心) was established within the Chinese Academy of Arts in 2006, and the first of what now totals three lists of National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage was published in that year (Rees 2012: 26, 28). Connected to these lists of Chinese national-level ICH are three lists of what Helen Rees has translated as “Representative Transmitters” (daibiaoxing chuanchengren 代表性传承人), published between 2007 and 2009. Rees has compared the idea of “Representative Transmitters” to the “designation of important tradition-bearers as ‘living national treasures’” in Japan and South Korea (Rees 2012: 31). In China, these “representative transmitters,” totaling 1,488 individuals as of 2009, are seen as having a key role in the transmission of ICH (Rees 2012: 32).

Whereas the title of UNESCO’s Article 14 is “Education, awareness-raising and capacity-building,” the equivalent clause in the Chinese State Council’s official document uses the term chuancheng 传承, which can be loosely understood as “cultural transmission and inheritance.” The “representative transmitters” are seen as key figures in the generation-to-generation transmission of ICH projects, and the heritage is

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71 This two-character Chinese term combines chuan 传, meaning to pass on, hand down, impart, teach, transmit, etc. and cheng 承, meaning to bear, hold, carry, continue, carry on, etc. As this process of “cultural transmission and inheritance” (chuancheng) is institutionally understood and constructed, unique cultural traditions are to be transmitted from “Representative Transmitters” to inheritors, successors, “receivers of tradition,” known as jichengren 继承人. The goal is make sure that there are “no lack of successors” (houjiyouren 后继有人) for the ICH items, and promotion among youth is especially encouraged (GBM 2005: 12; cf. UNESCO 2003).
understood to be embodied in their memories and skills (ZMWX 2005: 1). On the one hand, the representative transmitters must prove their connection to the tradition through the submission of a “genealogy of inheritance” (chuancheng puxi 传承谱系), as well as a history of how the aforementioned skills were inherited (jiyi chuancheng shi 技艺传承史) (ZMWX 2005: 3). At the same time, they are also required to actively impart this knowledge to the “receivers,” and there is even a clause warning that they must “hold nothing back” (SWB 2007: 1, 5, 7). While the various means of transmission may include social education, formal and informal instruction, the relevant official documents specifically call for master-disciple transmission (shicheng 师承), and failing to maintain such relationships is understood as grounds for having one’s “representative transmitter” title removed. As Wang puts it, without disciples, there are no chuanchengren (transmitters).

At this time, Wang has established relationships with six other singers, including five men and one woman, who are officially registered as his disciples/apprentices (tudi 徒弟). This type of master-disciple relationship may seem like a logical choice for the institutionalized preservation of ICH and is uniformly applied to all ranges of projects, including decorative paper cutting, storytelling, local opera, and acrobatics. However, while the master-disciple system may be traditional for certain genres, including regional operas and carpentry, Wang stresses that it is not a traditional means of transmission for northern Shaanxi folksongs. In the past, singers might come to the house of a more

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72 In a chapter commemorating northern Shaanxi folksongs from the Yulin prefecture (there is another chapter for those from the Yan’an prefecture) in a six-volume celebratory catalog of the first group of items
experienced singer and ask to study with him/her, even saying that they wished to become an apprentice or disciple. According to Wang, “In the past, this kind of thing always occurred among the folk, but the national government didn’t stipulate it. I only began to receive disciples after the country required it, otherwise, in the past I did not have the time to do this.”

Wang lists three criteria that he follows in choosing who to accept as a formal disciple. First, they must behave well and be good people (weiren yao hao 为人要好) and conduct themselves according to correct principles (zou zhengdao 走正道). Second, they must truly love northern Shaanxi folksongs. Third, they must have good vocal abilities (tiaojian 条件)—a good voice. Below, I discuss a bit about the lives of Wang’s six disciples.

Wang’s Disciples

Born in 1975, Feng Xiaohong 冯小红 was 36 years old when I first interviewed him at a teahouse near his home in Xi’an in 2011. He was born in a village in Zichang 子长 County, which is located in the northern part of Yan’an prefecture, next to Yulin prefecture. At the age of 14, he quit school and herded sheep for two years. During that time, he heard a locally famous singer-storyteller named He Si 贺四 perform, and liked the stories a lot. He decided to sell his sheep, and was accepted as a student of He Si in

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included in the listing of Shaanxi Intangible Cultural Heritage, prominent folksingers are mentioned and several bios are given. However, the text also notes that “[b]efore the 1937 Yan’an New Culture Movement, the vast majority [of northern Shaanxi folksongs] were not handed down in a direct, linear manner (xianxing chuancheng 线形传承), but rather in a scattered and indirect manner (sanxing he jianjie chuancheng 散形和间接传承)” (Meng and Song 2008: 114).
1990, paying him a master fee of 100 yuan, although other students had to pay 300 yuan. Feng also liked singing since he was little, and learned various popular folksongs from the adults in his village. However, he noted that many of the bits he learned were just excerpts and pieces of songs, and not many people sang at that time. In addition to “Northern Shaanxi Telling Books” (Shaanbei shuoshu 陕北说书), the genre he learned from He Si, Feng also performed a local Daoqing opera (Daoqing xi 道情戏) from Qingjian County for two and a half years when he was 21 or 22.

In 2005, Feng moved to Xi’an and began working in a northern Shaanxi-themed restaurant next to the Art Institute (Meishu xueyuan 美术学院), performing the chantefable storytelling tradition he had learned and accompanying himself with the three-stringed sanxian 三弦 lute. In 2007, he began performing together with Li Chunru 李春如 and an electronic keyboard player, and the three have since become a group. At first, he continued to perform “Northern Shaanxi Telling Books,” adding in folksongs and duets, and by 2008, he transitioned over to folksongs, although he still performs Shaanbei shuoshu when asked to.

It was there at the restaurant that Wang Xiangrong would sometimes be invited as a guest to banquets (he was good friends with the restaurant’s owner), and had the chance to hear Feng and Li perform and get to know them, sometimes giving them informal advice on singing even before they were formally taken on as disciples. Wang often spoke with pride of Feng’s ability at Shaanbei shuoshu. For his part, Feng Xiaohong had

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73 Feng’s point in mentioning this detail seemed to both emphasize his childhood poverty and the inherent talent that He Si saw in him.
seen Wang several times on TV beginning around 2000, and met Wang at the restaurant when he began to work there in 2005. According to Feng, when Wang heard him sing Shaanbei shuoshu, Wang said, “This kid’s voice is really good—suitable for singing errentai—he can hit the highs and lows” (zhe wawa de sangzi tinghao de, shihe chang errentai, you gao you di 这娃娃的嗓子挺好的，适合唱二人台的，有高有低).

After becoming friends, when Wang was in the process of becoming a national-level bearer of ICH, he needed his first disciples, and selected Feng and Li. The three conducted a Master-Disciple ceremony (baishi yishi 拜师仪式) at a northern Shaanxi-style restaurant in Xi’an on November 30, 2008. Although such a ritual (and such a master-disciple relationship, for that matter) was not part of the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition, it did have roots in other local generic traditions. A knowledgeable person was called in to direct them in what to do—when to offer him wine, when to give him food, when to kowtow to him, etc. In describing the ceremony, Feng placed special emphasis on the kowtowing, which he said made Wang like their “second parents” (zaisheng fumu 再生父母), comparing it to the way that children will kowtow to their parents and grandparents during the Chinese New Year. Feng contrasted Li’s and his willingness to kowtow with other later disciples who did not kowtow or hold such elaborate ceremonies, possibly suggesting that they were less sincere.74

Working at the restaurant, Feng and Li were on the payroll of a regional liquor company from northern Shaanxi, Lao Yulin jiu (see Introduction). He described the work as exhausting, having to sing everyday from 11:00AM to 1:30PM for the lunch crowd,

74 When I brought up the issue of kowtowing with Wang, he said that he was very easy-going and it didn’t matter whether a disciple kowtowed to him or not.
and then again in the evening from 5:30PM or 6:00PM to 8:30PM or 9:00PM. If special guests were scheduled to arrive and their plane was late, sometimes they would have to sing until midnight. Eventually, after building up their social network in Xi’an, he and Li Chunru left the restaurant job and started working as freelance performers. When I interviewed them in late 2011, they had begun working on the payroll of a real estate mogul from northern Shaanxi who had offices in Xi’an. He would pay them a monthly salary in return for the privilege of being able to call them at any hour of any day and ask them to come perform for guests he was hosting. The real estate mogul considered them as friends and was himself a music aficionado, often joining them by playing the *dizi* flute while they performed. Outside of performing for the mogul, Feng and Li could continue to perform at other gigs, including weddings and the like. In addition, twice each year, Wang would bring them to perform songs during his lectures on “Land and Song” at a local political academy where military officials from around the country would come each year for training.

Li Chunru was born in a village in Mizhi County in 1977. She lived there until the age of 16, when she joined the Mizhi County Opera Troupe (*Mizhi xian jutuan* 米脂县剧团). There were no local song and dance troupes looking for members at the time, so Li saw the opera troupe as her only way out of the countryside, as well as a means to express her artistic abilities (*zhanshi ziji de caiyi* 展示自己的才艺). Like Feng, she

75 John Crespi has also observed ties between real estate and poetry recitation, suggesting the latter’s increasing participation in the culture economy (Crespi 2009: 180-188). Both cases seem to illustrate a general trend, described by Richard Kraus, whereby, with the decline of traditional, state-run cultural agencies, artists have been forced to look for alternative patrons, including wealthy individuals, corporate angels, foundations, foreigners, and self-support (Kraus 2005: 218-222).
described learning songs from fellow villagers when she was little. She mentioned hearing them from the shepherds in the mountains, as well as those who farmed.

After training for three months at the opera school (xixiao 戏校), she began performing with the song and dance ensemble (wengongtuan 文工团), often at temple festivals around the countryside. Though it used a different dialect than the one she had grown up with, she learned to sing Shaanxi opera (Qinqiang 秦腔), which was popular in the areas of Yan’an and Yulin City. Later on, desiring to sing on a bigger stage, she transferred to the Xianyang Municipal People’s Opera Troupe (Xianyang shi renmin jutuan 咸阳市人民剧团), near Xi’an. Around 2003, she came to Xi’an, and was singing in a restaurant on the east side before joining up with Feng Xiaohong in 2007.

In 2009, Wang took on another disciple, Zhang Shengbao 张胜宝, who was primarily a percussionist, and had become good friends with Wang. Zhang was born in 1970 in Jiaxian County (where the composer of “The East Is Red” is from), and was admitted into a local arts academy in 1985. After graduating in 1988, he entered the Yulin Municipal Song and Dance Ensemble (Yulin shi wengongtuan 榆林市文工团) in 1989 as the head percussionist (sigu 司鼓), later becoming the head of the ensemble’s orchestra in 2000. In 2008, he was promoted to director of the ensemble’s artistic committee (yiweihui 艺委会). He also traveled with his troupe to Japan three times between 1996 and 1998, participating in an Asian Arts Festival and other festivals and representing northern Shaanxi musical culture.

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76 Due to scheduling conflicts, I was unable to interview Zhang Shengbao during my fieldwork, but I hope to do so in the future.
In 2010, Wang added two more disciples, Zhou Jinping 周金平 and Li Zhengfei 李政飞. The eldest of Wang’s disciples, Zhou was born in Yulin City in 1961. A multi-talented individual, Zhou has worked as a singer, musician, and MC, and is also an accomplished calligrapher. When I interviewed him in 2012, he was scheduled to perform on a television program in neighboring Shanxi province, where he planned to sing and write calligraphy at the same time, in order to exhibit his unique talents.

Zhou Jinping started off studying Henan opera, *Yuju* 豫剧, at the Huanglong 黄龙 County Opera School in 1977, and joined the Huanglong County Henan Opera Troupe *(Huanglong xian yuju tuan 黄龙县豫剧团)* in 1980. He began studying voice in 1983 and studied with a teacher from the Yan’an Song and Dance troupe. During our interview, Zhou said that he sang various genres of songs, including pop songs and rock ’n’ roll, before arriving at folksongs. Since 1994, he has worked at the Xianyang 咸阳 Municipal Henan Opera Troupe, near Xi’an.

In addition to growing up around parents and grandparents who loved singing *xintianyou* 舞剧 folksongs, Zhou sought out the “three great song kings of northern Shaanxi folksongs”—Wang Xiangrong, He Yutang, and Sun Zhikuan—attempting to learn from their styles and experience. He also spent considerable time seeking out older singers in Yulin prefecture, including an elderly (now deceased) singer named Gouwa 狗娃 (lit. “Puppy”). In my interviews with Wang, he praised Zhou’s passion for northern Shaanxi folksongs above his other disciples, suggesting that, since Zhou was already older and

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77 Though it might seem unusual to study a local opera tradition in a different province, I met several individuals during the course of my fieldwork who had done so.
more economically stable (unlike his younger disciples who still had to provide for their young children), he was able to spend more time learning from rural singers and studying a variety of songs, not just those that were commercially useful. Several of the songs Zhou sings bear an uncanny resemblance to Wang’s style, and even one of Wang’s other disciples referred to Zhou as “the one who sings exactly like Teacher Wang.” Zhou met Wang at a singing contest where Wang was judging and Zhou won first prize. Since becoming Wang’s disciple in 2010, they have been good friends, and Zhou often travels to Wang’s home when convenient to discuss various songs and their history and social background.

Wang characterized the other disciple he took on in 2010, Li Zhengfei, as the most famous of the bunch. Born in Yulin City in 1980, he tested into the Shenmu County Advanced Opera School (Shenmu gaodeng xixiao 神木高等戏校) in 1995, and soon began performing throughout the region. In 2002, he studied at the Music Education Department of Xi’an Radio and Television University, and currently performs for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy Political Department Song and Dance Ensemble, as well as independently. He has won numerous awards and frequently appears on television and in large-scale performances. Having won a drinking song contest in Yulin prefecture in 2001, he has now become a spokesman for Old Yulin Liquor (Lao Yulin jiu), the company that has hired numerous folksingers, including Feng Xiaohong and Li Chunru, and for which Wang used to be a spokesman. Li’s wife also owns and operates a local distributor for the liquor company in Xi’an. While too numerous to list here, his awards include being named one of the “Top Ten Song Kings” at a national contest in
2005, as well as the honor of being one of the “National Top Ten Red Singers” in the Red Song Contest (Honggehui 红歌会) of 2007. He went on to organize and serve as judge at the Shaanxi province regionals for the Red Song Contest in 2012, where he invited Wang Xiangrong and others to serve as judges. In recent years, he has also started his own media company, a restaurant, and other enterprises.

Wang’s most recent disciple, as of 2012, was added in 2011. Although extremely talented vocally, Zhang Liaojun 张辽军 followed a different path leading up to becoming one of Wang’s disciples. Born in a village in Jiaxian 佳县 County (like Zhang Shengbao) in 1982, after high school, Zhang studied physical education at a university in Xi’an and then became a P.E. teacher at a school up in Yulin City. He recounts how, although he was still relatively unfamiliar with folksongs when he started college, during one of his trips on a long-distance bus back and forth from Xi’an to Yulin in 2004, he heard a recording of Wang Xiangrong singing “The East Is Red” and fell in love with northern Shaanxi folksongs. In 2010, he started an organization for amateur northern Shaanxi folksong enthusiasts, called the Northern Shaanxi Original Ecology Folksong Art Association (Shaanbei yuanshengtai min’ge yishu xiehui 陕北原生态民歌艺术协会), which he largely funded himself.

In the last few years, Zhang switched from his job as a P.E. teacher to a position in the Yulin Coal Ministry (meitajun 煤炭局). He is passionate about composing new folksongs and arranging old classics by adding different MIDI instrumental accompaniment, carrying around a small electronic device that provides such accompaniment whenever he finds the need to perform. During my visits with Zhang, he
talked about his desire to translate and sing northern Shaanxi folksongs in English in order to get on one of the TV singing competitions, since he thought this would be a “new and fresh” (xin xian 新鲜) approach. The last I heard from Zhang before I returned to the U.S. in the summer of 2012, he had made it through several regional finals for the TV singing competition, Starlight Highway (described in the following section), but ultimately failed in dance-talent category. Apparently, in order to be suitable for the stage, in addition to a great voice (which he has in spades), good moves are also required.

In looking at these examples, never, even in Wang’s case, do we have a simple narrative of learning to sing folksongs at a young age and developing that talent directly into a career. In fact, elsewhere Wang has noted that aspiring to be a professional folksinger was not an established, viable option when he was growing up, but he believes that the success of his career has made it an attractive goal for younger generations today (Gibbs 2006). Interestingly, just as Wang was exposed to erentai, shenguandiao, and other genres of singing at an early age, several of his disciples started off specializing in other genres, before transitioning to northern Shaanxi folksongs. Feng Xiaohong started off with a chantefable sung storytelling tradition known as “Northern Shaanxi Telling Books” (Shaanbei shuoshu 陕北说书) and also sang Daoqing opera (Daoqing xi 道情戏) for a time. His performance partner, Li Chunru, also one of Wang’s earliest disciples, started her career singing regional Shaanxi opera (Qinqiang 秦腔). Zhou Jinping began with Henan Opera (Yuju 豫剧), whereas Li Zhengfei attended an opera school in Shenmu County. When Feng Xiaohong and Li Chunru described to me their respective genres with which they began their careers, both framed them as locally elite forms of art—those
that were highly respected as art forms—and as the only means by which they believed they could successfully leave their village homes. Similarly, Wang Xiangrong, in talking to a group of his former elementary school classmates in 2012, described singing as the only way out the poverty of the village in which he grew up. In this context, one might view these genres—errentai, Shaanbei shuoshu, and Qin Qiang—as northern Shaanxi equivalents to sports or the Army in certain regions of rural America and hockey in rural Canada, a means to escape from the isolation of one’s home. At the same time, with respect to Wang’s requirement that his disciples have good voices, the intense training and performance schedules attached to these other genres and troupes could also be seen as a foundational preparation for both vocal strengthening and performance experience.

While Wang only has the aforementioned six officially recognized disciples, he considers other singers that may seek him out—and even anyone who listens to his recordings and learns from them—as his student (xuesheng 学生), and I often heard him refer to the influence he has had on the younger generations of singers that have grown up listening to his recordings, saying, “they are all my students.”

Younger Singers and New Opportunities

With an increase in televised singing competitions in recent years, “packaging” (baozhuang 包装) of singers by culture and media companies, the rise of the album (zhuanji 专辑) as a marker of professional success and identity, as well as the growth of the culture market, younger singers now have different possibilities than those available.

78 I would like to thank Dr. Bender for pointing out the “basketball” comparison with respect to rural American towns and Dr. Denton for suggesting the Canadian hockey example.
to Wang and the older generations. A classic example would be the star performer, A Bao 阿宝, known as the “Xintianyou Song King” (xintianyou gewang 信天游歌王), who was “discovered” on the TV singing contest, Starlight Highway (Xingguang dadao 星光大道), after which he went on to become a highly popular media sensation. According to other singers I spoke with, A Bao, who is not actually from northern Shaanxi, but rather the urban metropolis of Datong 大同 in neighboring Shanxi province, began singing pop songs in karaoke establishments. It was only when the host of Starlight Highway, Bi Fujian 毕福剑, known as “Old Bi” (Lao Bi 老毕), who sponsored A Bao’s initial appearance on the show, told him that he would never become famous singing pop songs, and suggested that he instead sing the revolutionary northern Shaanxi folksong, “The Wild Lilies Bloom a Brilliant Red” (“Shandandan kaihua hongyanyan” 山丹丹开花红艳艳), that he made the crossover to northern Shaanxi folksongs.79 His rendition of this song won him fame, including impressions by a prominent xiangsheng 相声 comedian, and soon he himself began appearing as a judge on Starlight Highway. Despite heated criticisms of his vocal technique and style by various northern Shaanxi folksong experts I

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79 This transition from pop songs to folk/ethnic songs can also be seen in the career of the extremely popular ethnic Miao singer, A You Duo, who started off singing pop songs in restaurants. According to Louisa Schein, “As soon as she began to be recognized, A You Duo stopped singing mainstream pop songs and sang Miao songs in both Mandarin and the Hmu dialect of Miao. Belting out songs themed to her special identity, she has won prize after prize, even in national level competitions” (Schein 2010: 159). This tendency may have to do with what Chen Jie (2008) has called the “third wave” of consumption of minzu culture, which emerged in the 2000s.
spoke with, A Bao remains perhaps the most popularly-known singer of this category of songs.  

Other cases similar to A Bao’s sudden rise to fame have occurred since 2000, with Wang Erni 王二妮 (b. 1985) appearing on Starlight Highway in 2007 and later moving to Beijing for frequent performances on national television, and another female northern Shaanxi folksinger, Cui Miao 崔苗 (b. 1986), known as the “Song Phoenix” (ge fenghuang 歌凤凰), receiving a similar boost after appearing on Starlight Highway in 2009.

There have also been two large-scale Northern Shaanxi Folksong Contests (Shaanbei min’ge dasai 陕北民歌大赛) in 2006 and 2010, which each selected the “ten greatest folksingers” (shida min’geshou 十大民歌手), now totaling twenty. Even the search for new disciples to carry on the ICH of northern Shaanxi folksongs led to a singing contest. In 2010, a contest to find new disciples for Wang was held, which was funded by a media company and an Internet company and received significant funding.

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80 For an account of A Bao’s life, see Wu 2005. Criticism of A Bao, like that of other celebrities (sometimes including Wang as well), can often be linked to debates over “true” talent versus media hype. Jeffreys and Edwards write that “in the case of boy bands, girl bands, and reality shows, media commentators and consumers may dismiss such entertainers as ‘phonies’ whose temporary celebrity is an effect of artificial and commercially motivated media promotion (Turner 2004: 56-8). However, in all of these cases, real celebrity is defined as being independent from rather than a product of media processes” (Jeffreys and Edwards 2010: 6). Since he is not from northern Shaanxi, various locals feel that A Bao has changed the flavor of the songs, a process that one scholar has referred to as the “A Bao phenomenon” (A Bao xianxiang 阿宝现象) (Liu, et al. 2010: 255).


from a clothing company.\textsuperscript{83} It was reported to be the first contest where applications were done completely online, thus potentially expanding the geographical range of applicants. However, Wang surmises that certain folksingers are less tech-savvy, and he was less than pleased with the ten finalists who were supposed to become his new disciples. In the end, he named them all his “students.”

This chapter has shown the uniqueness of Wang’s life, but also some of the common threads that it shares with the lives of other singers. At the same time, it has also touched on how social and technological changes have reshaped the “field” of northern Shaanxi folksinging. In order to become singers of reknown, individuals must train their voices and performance presence, either through participation in operatic troupes or karaoke establishments. Winning awards in various levels of song contests can bring one gradually—or suddenly—to broader fame, and the speed with which this is possible, as well as the magnitude of visual exposure, has increased in recent years with changes in media. After establishing oneself as a singer, often the judged now become the judges, and eventually take on official positions, ceding some of the fame and spotlight to the up-and-coming younger generations of singers.

This introductory sketch of Wang’s life and its social and historical context lays the backdrop for an exploration of the songs he learned when young, his current performances, and how the songs, together with Wang’s life and society at large, evolved in the years between.

\textsuperscript{83} As the clothing company was named “Apple,” the title of the contest included the words “Apple Cup” (\textit{pingguo bei} 苹果杯).
Chapter 2: “Traditional” Contexts for Wang’s Songs

In this chapter, I look at how songs acquired during the earlier part of Wang’s life relate to social and historical contexts in his hometown and the surrounding area during the 1950s and 1960s. Given that any sort of “tradition” is by nature dynamic and constantly in the midst of reconstruction and reinterpretation (Handler and Linnekin 1984), the “traditional” in the title of this chapter is only meant to be relative. I am concerned with just some of the “traditional” contexts from Wang’s point of view, in the sense that he experienced them as a child and compares recent social changes to memories of these earlier contexts.

I begin with some of the earliest songs he remembers, songs about love (expressed through metaphors that made use of local foliage), Robin Hood-like outlaws, and classical tales of romance. Following this, I look at the regional folk opera, errentai 二人台, which so captivated Wang in performances held at nearby temple festivals. Wang’s passion for this genre led him to seek out local masters, and some of his proudest creative adaptations involved the reworking of famous arias for performance in the late 1970s and 1980s.84

84 For the most part, the genre classifications used here follow those used in the accompanying text to Wang’s CD, which, in turn, follows genre categories used by folksong anthologies like the Shaanxi Volume of the Grand Compendium of Chinese Folksongs (Lü 1994). It should be noted, however, that such categories are not meant to place strict limitations on possible performance contexts, since a Mongol-
were often sung by an older resident of his home village, who would perform rituals inviting local deities in order to cure the sick and rid one’s family of ill fortune. Wang was deeply impressed by these songs, and his explanations of them touch on the hierarchy of the gods (which he relates to folksinger and governmental hierarchies as well), traditional ideas of folk healing, and connections between the treatment of living and supernatural guests. These connections are further illuminated through a look at various drinking songs (jiuqu 酒曲) that Wang sings, which relate to local drinking culture and serve as mediators of relationship management. Lastly, I explore several of Wang’s “Mongol-Han ditties” (Meng-Han diao 蒙汉调, also referred to as manhandiao 漫瀚调), which tell of his numerous trips to Inner Mongolia, connections with family there, and a long history of cultural interaction in the border region where he grew up.

The groups of songs discussed in this chapter can be understood in several ways. Taken as part of a collective body shared, at least to some degree, by the people in Wang’s village when he was young, they can be seen as what Lauri Honko calls a “pool of tradition,” acting like a body of water where traditional elements mingle and from which they emerge (Honko 2000: 18). As Honko puts it, “[t]he pool holds a multiplicity of traditions, a coexistence of expressive forms and genres, mostly in a latent state, only parts of it becoming activated by the individual user” (Honko 2000: 18-19). The individual user’s choice, then, merges his/her own desire with what is seen to be available. This coincides with Michael Owen Jones’ notion that “[the individual] does
not simply ‘follow’ tradition. He chooses from tradition those behaviors, activities and objects with which he can symbolically construct an identity. This identity is dynamic, multifaceted and even at times contradictory” (Jones 2000: 133). Thus, dipping into the “pool of tradition” can also be seen as telling us a great deal about the individual. Honko calls this “the selection and application of tradition by one individual,” and suggests that “[r]epertoire analysis is a natural outgrowth of the intensification of fieldwork and the growing interest in informants. It may reveal interesting features of the learning and use, the selection and application of tradition by one individual. Personality traits and the life history of the individual will then play perhaps as important a role as the tradition itself” (Honko 1979: 151).

The next logical question is whether the repertoire of one individual can be seen as in any way representative of a larger community. Honko, for his part, suggests that this is the only feasible, and meaningful, way to proceed:

Without going very deep into the various definitions of tradition, it should be clear that what we need is a model of the organisation of traditional elements in the human mind. There are basically two alternatives: either we focus on the individual user of traditions or on the collective unit, be it a social group, a speech community or whatever. The problem with the latter alternative is that it has been widely used but rarely attested in empirical terms. Most scholars construct their theories thinking about cultural collectives not individuals, although their access to the postulated groups is minimal indeed. Theories impose the illusion upon us that tradition, like language, must be social and shared, and hence all tradition is group tradition. The role of individual traditions is reduced to ‘idiosyncracies’, slightly doubtful elements, barely qualified to be called traditions at all. It seems that our deductions are able to conceal the simple fact that whatever we know about traditions has come to us through the individual human mind. It is the only locus where the traditions are put in relation to each other in a meaningful way which deserves the word ‘system’ even without scholarly intervention. (Honko 1998: 70-71)
In what follows, I have attempted to incorporate Wang’s discussion of the social backgrounds of the songs, as well as his interpretations of individual lines and lyrics. As a thoughtful, knowledgable insider who has spent his life learning not only to perform, but also to understand and explain the contexts of these songs, Wang’s reflections relayed below provide a deeper, more vivid understanding of songs that elsewhere may be simply published with lyrics, musical notation, and precious little analysis of content. As Honko argues above, this examination also shows one case of how traditions are experienced by individuals. At the same time, where appropriate, I have added in supplementary information from other reference works, in order to connect Wang’s songs and his interpretations to a broader context.

**Childhood Songs**

Wang remembers certain songs from his childhood, learned from his mother or other adults in his village. Several of these are pastoral love songs—some use the imagery of picking fruits and vegetables as a metaphor for budding love, while others draw on famous legends of Romeo and Juliet-esque lovers found throughout China. There are also songs about Robin Hood-like bandits that would roam the border regions in or near Inner Mongolia, which also may or may not have been infused with elements of love songs. Lastly, growing up in the 1950s, Wang’s childhood, though “remote” in geographical terms, was influenced by contemporary history and politics, so he also remembers learning a revolutionary song about women’s liberation.
During interviews with folksong collectors and reporters, Wang has on several occasions performed the following song, which he says he learned from his mother. The name of the plant in the title, maru 马茹 or maruru 马茹茹, forms part of the name of Wang’s home village, Marugeda 马茹疙瘩, which literally means “Maru Hill” or “cluster of Maru.”

Ostensibly, this name refers to the large quantities of the flowering plant that used to grow in the area surrounding the village. Wang speaks fondly of the “fruits” of the plant, which could be picked, boiled, and eaten in a sort of porridge. In an interview in 2006 when he discussed this practice, he followed by contrasting the purity of the water and vegetation in the area when he was a kid with recent environmentally harmful practices.

The “purity” of the natural environment suggested in the song by this plant, its flowers and fruits, seems to conjure up an image of an idyllic, pastoral past—simpler times, when the environment, like the love between men and women, was “pure.” Indeed, Wang points out that the lyrics to this song use a sort of parallelism between the blossoming of the maru and the burgeoning love that grows between the couple. The act of going out together to pick the fruits is used as backdrop against which to express their affection for each other. This use of motifs involving planting and picking fruits and vegetables in love songs appears to be somewhat common: one also finds songs with titles such as “Picking Cherries” (“Da yingtao” 打樱桃) and “Planting Cabbage” (“Zhong baicai” 种白菜, see below).

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85 For a description of Marugeda, see Chapter 1.
In the following version of “Picking Maru Fruits,” I have pieced together two performances that Wang did of this song. During an interview in 2006, he performed the first two stanzas and talked about his mother and some of the memories of his home village mentioned above. In 2010, when I interviewed him again in his home, I sang those two stanzas that I had learned from a recording of the 2006 interview, and asked him to sing “the rest of the song,” thinking that there were a set number of stanzas in a specific order. At that time, he sang the following four stanzas, saying that there were many more, but he couldn’t remember them all. As he would later repeat over and over to me during my fieldwork from 2011 to 2012, nothing is set in stone, and different stanzas, lines, and lyrics can be mixed and matched according to the whims and abilities of the performer and the influence of the performance context.

“Picking Maru Fruits” 《打马茹茹》

Now you are exactly twenty-one,
In the sixth month, at the bottom of the gulley, the maru flowers are red,
Older Brother’s dear Little Sister.
现在（你）如今二十一年正呀，
六月里沟底里马茹红呀，哥哥那小妹子。

Next door, there is an Aunt Wang,
Heading out to pick maru, she follows along,
Older Brother’s dear Little Sister.
隔勒壁子那有个王勒大的娘呀，
打马茹茹走起身相跟上呀，哥哥那小妹子。

When other people pick maru, they go in large groups,
When we go to pick maru, it’s just the two of us,
Older Brother’s dear Little Sister.

86 For another version of this song collected in 1962 from the Baota 宝塔 area of Yan’an, which contains some slightly similar lyrics, see Huo 2006 [2]: 663.
人勒家那打马茹茹一勒大的群呀，
咱二人打马茹茹两个人呀，哥哥那小妹子。

(Say) when others pick it, they get two or three decaliters,
When we pick it, we don’t get that much,
Older Brother’s dear Little Sister.
(说)人勒家你打了二勒三的斗呀，
咱二人打不下来该公怎呀，哥哥那小妹子。

I ask my Older Brother to carry me on his back,
After he carries me over the river, I’ll be sure to pay back his kindness,
Older Brother’s dear Little Sister.
叫了一声哥哥背了给我呀，
背了过河那边补恩情呀，哥哥那小妹子。

Place the sack on the lower millstone,
And the bamboo pole on the top one,
Older Brother’s dear Little Sister.
口勒袋那放在磨勒盘的上呀，
竹勒竿竿放在那磨顶上呀，哥哥那小妹子。

The second lines of several of these stanzas are playfully suggestive: She follows along when he sets off to pick the fruit. The two of them are not in a larger group, but just by themselves. She will “pay back his kindness” later. With regard to the imagery of the final stanza, one might note that two millstones coming together are used in certain regions of China as a metaphor for harmonious marital relations (cf. Mair and Bender 2011: 56-57).

The following song, also learned from Wang’s mother, seems to compare the density of various rows of cabbage planted closely together to the beauty of a woman. Once again, we see the use of natural imagery in metaphors for human emotion—a common technique going back to early Chinese poetry.
“Planting Cabbage” 《种白菜》

A row, a row, na huer hai, a little row of white,
A small garden, na huer hai ya, planting cabbage.\(^{87}\)
一溜一溜（那呼儿嗨）一溜溜白，
一亩园子（那呼儿嗨呀）种白菜。

This woman, na huer hai, is nice and young,
With two eyebrows, na huer hai ya, so thick and dense.
这个女人（那呼儿嗨）正年（的）轻，
两眼儿眉毛（那呼儿嗨呀）特森（的）森。

This woman, na huer hai, is truly refined and tasteful,
With big, beautiful braids, na huer hai ya, flowing in two strands.
这个女人（那呼儿嗨）正风（的）流，
大码子辫子（那呼儿嗨呀）两综综留。

The word in the final stanza that I have translated as “refined and tasteful” (fengliu 风流) has multiple meanings, including denoting physical attraction. Like the previous song, the simple melody and colloquial language used here evoke a purity of feeling, possibly with hints of playfulness.

The following song draws on a story that has been described as the Chinese version of “Romeo and Juliet.”\(^{88}\) Zhu Yingtai 祝英台, an intelligent young woman, dresses as a man in order to pursue studies at a time when only males could go to school, and soon falls in love with a fellow classmate, Liang Shanbo 梁山伯. The second stanza refers to her numerous attempts to hint to Liang about her true identity, and his failure to see what is “right before his eyes.” Interestingly, while the second line in the first stanza

\(^{87}\) The word for cabbage in Chinese is literally “white vegetable” (baicai 白菜).
\(^{88}\) For various versions of the story, see Idema 2010.
about walking down the mountain may or may not come from earlier versions originating in other geographical areas, one might posit that its meaning could have been enhanced by Marugeda’s location on the top of a mountain. In logistical terms, potential lovers would have had to “go down the mountain” in order to get away from prying eyes.⁸⁹

“Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai” 《梁山伯与祝英台》

Older Brother Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai,  
Brother and Sister, down the mountain we come.  
梁山伯哥哥、祝英台,  
咱兄妹二人下山来。

Brother Liang Shanbo is really muddleheaded,  
Even with a thousand hints, he still can’t wake up and smell the coffee.  
梁山伯哥哥真闷懂,  
千提万提提不醒。

While this song could be understood in one sense as a simple narration of a popular story, the image of the “muddleheaded” Liang Shanbo, unable to see the woman in love with him standing before his eyes, must have resonated with numerous individuals during Wang’s childhood, at a time that he recalls it was not socially acceptable to speak openly about love. While not specifically mentioning this song, Wang noted that impromptu songs during festivals were one of the only times during the year to “tell” someone that you loved them, albeit indirectly. One is reminded of Alessandro Falassi’s work on the Tuscan veglia, where he calls love songs “impersonal carriers of very personal communications,” providing a way to express feelings in a public way without publicly

⁸⁹ This is based on my own observation and speculation, and has not been confirmed by Wang or fellow villagers.
admitting any direct connection to those present, since the song “goes like this” (Falassi 1980: 106).

Love is also hinted at, albeit more subtly, in the following song. Though Wang could only remember two stanzas of it during an interview in 2012, there appears to be a rich history behind it. He recalls there being other similar songs about Robin Hood-like individuals who would rob from the rich and give to the poor in the borderlands between northern Shaanxi and Inner Mongolia. The remoteness of this area, combined with the comings and goings of migrant farmworkers who would “go beyond the Western Pass” to Inner Mongolia to find work and return with various forms of payment, led to the rise of banditry in the area (cf. Wang and Zhao 2008).

“Second and Third Linze Rob Others” 二三林则刁人

Front Gulley Pass, Back Gully Pass,
A “Water-Sweeping Star” has risen above of the gulley pass.
前沟门来，后沟门，
沟门上上来一个水扫星。

Front Gulley Pass, Back Gully Pass,
Dear Older Brother, Third Linze, is going to rob someone.
前沟门来，后沟门，
三林则哥（勒）哥要刁人。

Wang pointed out that the singer, possibly female, referred to Third Linze as “Dear Older Brother” (gege 哥哥)—an affectionate term often reserved for close friends and lovers.

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90 The contexts Falassi refers to are evening gatherings where amorous intentions could only be conveyed through stolen glances before, during, or after the song (Falassi 1980).
Given Wang’s description, there seems to be an interesting contrast between the acts of violence that we assume the two brothers are going to commit, and the affection suggested by the song’s lyrics.

While “Second and Third Linze Rob Others” evokes elements of the lengthy history of the region, Wang also learned the following newly composed song, variously titled “Women Have Stood Up” (“Funü fanshen le” 妇女翻身了) and the “Women’s Freedom Song” (“Funü ziyou ge” 妇女自由歌). Many of the lyrics of this song seem to relate to other stories Wang tells about his mother and her attitude towards feudal society and the treatment of women. As mentioned earlier, she had an arranged marriage and remained with bound feet her entire life. However, she also told stories to her children about deceased female relatives who had been driven to suicide by the suffering caused by ill-fated arranged marriages. In Wang’s own recollection, his parents were very forward-thinking in their criticism of such feudal practices. According to Wang, the following song, which he learned in the 1950s, though revolutionary in nature, was based on a Shanxi folksong melody.

“**Women Have Stood Up”** 《妇女翻身了》

The Old Society was like a dark, dried well of bottomless depth,
The bottom of the well pressed down us common people,
   and women were at the bottom.
旧社会好比是黑格咚咚的枯井万丈深,
井底下压着咱们老百姓，妇女们最底层。

We couldn’t see the sun and moon, couldn’t see the sky,
   Couldn’t tell what month or day, couldn’t even tell what year it was.
看不见那个日月，看不见那个天,
Endlessly laboring beasts of burden, never-ending suffering,
Who will come to rescue us?

Though a composed song, this piece seems to build on earlier ideas about song and its relation to women. For example, during the 1920s, in addition to romantic notions about folksongs and peasants, several scholarly works posited specific connections between folksongs and women. Liu Jing’an’s 1928 book, *Women in Folksongs*, and Yang Shiqing’s article, entitled “The Position of Chinese Women as Seen Through Songs,” both depict women as victims of feudal society, and suggest that folksongs are the only means through which they can express their bitter situation (Liu 1971; Yang 1989).  

The victimization of women as evidence of the necessity for social change gets echoed later on in Mao Zedong’s “Decree Regarding Marriage,” where he suggests that women’s “oppression and suffering” was much greater than men’s, and the new Marriage Law would help them “to escape from their tragic circumstances” (Diamant 2000: 179).  

Though many of these excerpts of childhood songs are fragmented and/or short, they touch on several common themes: love, danger, suffering, and humor. Elements of local geography are merged with elements of history, and both nostalgic and critical views of the past are juxtaposed with implicit change in the present.

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91 The idea that folksongs were a favored expressive medium for women relates to strategies of “coding,” where the perceived objectivity of song lyrics could be used to “protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages” (Radner and Lanser 1993: 3).

92 See Mao’s “Decree Regarding Marriage” in Schram 1969: 337. Earlier on, beginning in 1919, Mao had written at least nine articles on Zhao Wuzhen, a woman who slit her throat on her way to an unwanted arranged marriage (Witke 1967: 128).
**Errentai and Temple Festivals**

*Errentai* 二人台 (literally “two-person opera/stage”) is a sung folk performance genre popular in Fugu 府谷 and Shenmu 神木 counties in northern Shaanxi province, Hequ 河曲 County in northwestern Shanxi province, and Yikezhaomeng 伊克昭盟 and the areas near Baotou 包頭 and Hohhot (Huhehaote 呼和浩特) in Inner Mongolia (YDW 1983: 1). It is usually sung by two performers, one female role (*dan* 旦) and one male clown role (*chou* 丑). Both roles were traditionally performed by men (ZYXZYY 1962: 213). The performance is usually accompanied by several instruments, including the bamboo flute, *sixian* 四弦 (a spike fiddle with four strings), and *yangqin* 杨琴 (a type of hammered dulcimer) (YDW 1983: 2).

The formation and development of *errentai* is said to be closely connected to a historical phenomenon known as “going beyond the Western Pass” (*zou xikou 走西口*). The “Western Pass” (*xikou*) refers to the gates in the western sections of the Great Wall, which was seen as a boundary between the area south of the Great Wall, known as “inside the pass” or *kouli* 口里, and the area to the north, known as “outside the pass” or *kouwai* 口外. Over several centuries, men from Shanxi, Shaanxi, and other provinces were forced by droughts, scarce lands, periodic civil unrest, and heavy taxes to travel beyond the Great Wall to the western sections of Inner Mongolia to find work (ibid.). There, they would find jobs as shepherds, coal miners, day laborers, boatmen, and seasonal crop harvesters (ZYXZYY 1962: 1). Usually, the men would
leave in the spring and return after the fall harvest, although there were some that stayed “beyond the Pass” for many years (ibid.).

Over the years, this back and forth movement of the Han from ethnically Chinese areas to Inner Mongolia led to a mutual exchange of Han and Mongolian cultures, including music. According to Yang Hong, *errentai* is the “crystallization of the common knowledge of the Mongolian and Han peoples” that was formed through the waves of “walking beyond the Western Pass” (Yang 2006: 57). As the two cultures interacted, each brought elements of their own folk musics and soon formed a new genre. Perhaps it is quite fitting that one of the most popular *errentai* pieces, discussed below, is entitled “Walking Beyond the Western Pass” (“Zou xikou” “走西口”), which tells the story of a Han man who must leave his wife and travel to Inner Mongolia to find work (ZYXZYY 1962: 201).

Performances of *errentai* often occurred at local temple festivals throughout the region.93 Adam Yuet Chau, who has done extensive research on such festivals in northern Shaanxi province, contends that most of the visitors to such festivals and their associated performances experience what he calls “felt satisfaction: a sense of having been part of intense red-hot sociality” (Chau 2006b: 164, emphasis in original). In Chau’s view, this idea of “red-hot sociality” (*honghuo* 红火) seems to be an integral part

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93 For a description of one such festival where *errentai* were performed in a small village in Shanxi province, across the Yellow River from Wang’s home county in Shaanxi, see Yang 2006: 200-201. For a description of temple festivals in southeastern Shanxi province and their staging of Shanxi village opera, see Johnson 2009.
of the experience of such performances, and I would suggest that Wang’s passion for this genre may have been due in large part to such “felt satisfaction” (Chau 2006b: 164).94

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Wang often walked great distances to watch performances of errentai at temple festivals in the area surrounding his home village. Both he and his older brother tell stories about how Wang and other local children would put on their own “temple festivals” in the courtyard or inside their family’s yaodong, and sometimes Wang would sing while standing on top of the heated, brick kang, pretending it was a stage, with the other children playing the “audience,” seated on the floor below.95

Not only were these songs closely connected with festival occasions, but they were also one of the only locally produced “professional” sorts of singing. As we may note in the discussions of Wang’s life and those of several of his disciples in Chapter 1, for many isolated village children, such “professional” song troupes were seen as one of the only ways out of the village. Nowadays, with the influx of rural migrant workers to the cities and the resulting dearth of young people in the countryside, this is perhaps no longer the case.

Given the embedded history of the development of errentai with the historical migratory phenomenon known as “going beyond the Western Pass” (zou xikou), it seems

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94 In Chau’s work, he provides an excellent description that attempts to capture the feeling of honghuo at temple festivals, in which he describes the various sensations, including noises, sights, smells, tastes, and ambient sensations. He notes that the average participant is “someone who is experiencing intensely his surroundings through all his senses,” an experience which he calls “sensoric” (Chau 2006b: 162).
95 In fact, Wang’s choice of the kang as stage may have been rooted in common performance practice at the time. Yang Hong 杨红, a scholar at the China Conservatory of Music who has done extensive research on errentai, recorded the recollection of an old resident of Fugu 府谷 County (where Wang’s home village is located) who remembered how errentai was performed when he was young during the Chinese lunar new year. According to this old resident, the performers would sit cross-legged on the kang and sing, with the audience sitting on the floor. In this way, the kang would serve as a makeshift “stage” (Yang 2006: 51).
fitting to begin this section with this aria, which is often listed as one of Wang’s most representative pieces.

“Going Beyond the Western Pass” 走西口 (CD Track 17)

In the fifth year of Xianfeng’s reign,
Shaanxi province met with a year of famine.
Those with money had granaries filled to the brim,
While each and every suffering farmer was truly pitiful.
咸丰正（呀）五年（哎），
陕西省（呀那）遭下（那）年（的）馑。
有（那）钱的（那有钱的）粮（那）满（的）仓，
受苦的人儿一个一个实实在在。

Second cousin has sent a letter,
He says that beyond the Western Pass there’s a good harvest.
I have it in my mind to go beyond the Pass,
But I’m afraid Yulian won’t agree.
二姑舅捎来（那）一封信，
他说是（那）西口（哎）好收（的）成。
我（那）有心（那我有心）走了口（的）外，
又怕（那）玉莲不（呀那）不依从。

Dear sis, ai hei, sister, ai,
Don’t you cry for me.
If you cry, I can’t endure the aching in my heart,
At sixes and sevens, all in a bustle, my heart’s in deep trouble.
妹（哎嘿妹）妹（哎），
你不要给哥哥我哭。
你哭的（那个）哥（那）哥我心痒难耐，
七上八下，扑忙乱燥，心上不好过。

Heaven has met with disaster,
The five grains are withered and even grass doesn’t grow.
If one doesn’t go beyond the Western Pass,
The days of the poor are truly numbered.
天遭（那个）荒（那）旱，
这五谷禾苗百草（那）也（那）不长。
不走西（那）口，

98
This is the song mentioned in the Preface that Wang sang down by the Yellow River in 2006. There is an interesting shifting of imagined audiences throughout the course of the lyrics, whereby the first two stanzas seem to narrate a story to the assembled crowd (we might remember that *errentai* were often sung to crowds at temple festivals), and then the third stanza switches to an “invocation” directed at the singer-persona’s beloved, Yulian (DuBois 2006: 3). It was this latter stanza that contained the “crying beat” (*kuban*) mentioned by Wang in the Preface. There is a convenient ambiguity in the invocation to Yulian—whether the singer imagines a fictional character or a real person from one’s past, the audience is none the wiser.

The following piece is traditionally performed during the Chinese lunar new year, and tells the story of a couple paying their respects to each other for the coming year (*bainian* 拜年) and then going out to look at the impressive variety of lanterns on display during the Lantern Festival, held on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. It is usually sung by a man and a woman, who alternate lines and phrases, sometimes singing separately and sometimes together, although the version below was sung entirely by Wang during the recording session in 1994.

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96 The shifting between narration and playing the role of a character (in this case, the male migrant farmworker who must leave his wife to go find work beyond the Western Pass) shares similar dynamics with certain *Yuefu* 乐府 ballads from the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE). Hans Frankel refers to the two modes of singing as “objective narration” and “impersonation” (Frankel 1985: 107).
Passing the New Year, on the very first day,
I invite Older Brother Liancheng to my home to pay his New Year’s respects.

Entering the door, he bends at the waist,
Left hand dragging him, my right hand helps him up,
*Nai si yi ya hai,*

What year is this for which we two are paying our respects, *nai si yi ya hai!*

The first lunar month on the fifteenth day, we celebrate the Lantern Festival,
I go to watch the lanterns with my Older Brother Liancheng.

The first lunar month on the fifteenth day, we celebrate the Lantern Festival,
The watermelon lantern, *ei,* is a brilliant red,
The cabbage lantern, *ei,* is a glistening green,
The Chinese chives lantern, *hei hei hei,* is broad and upright,
The coriander lantern, has numerous little pieces,
The eggplant lantern is sparkling purple,
Twists and turns has the cucumber lantern,
The dragon lantern has a body covered in scales,
The phoenix lantern is covered in myriad colors,
The tiger lantern has impressive power and dignity,
Playfully shaking its head and wagging its tail is the lion lantern,

And also those two *drerrrrrrrrr-ping-pang-ping-pang* firecracker lanterns,

*And also those two drerrrrrrrrr-ping-pang-ping-pang* firecracker lanterns,

And also those two *drerrrrrrrrr-ping-pang-ping-pang* firecracker lanterns,
This song is meant to liven up the festival atmosphere, both through its lyrics, which provide a list of colorful and uniquely-shaped lamps, and the rapid-fire tempo of the singers, which becomes faster and faster during the final section of the song. The “drrrrrrrrr” in the final line includes a trilled “r” sound (similar to the rolled “r” in Spanish), which approximates the noise of festive firecrackers, just before the singers finish, singing in unison.

The following is a version, arranged by Wang and others, of a traditional love song duet. The “ten li markers” refer to ten road markers, designating distances of one li 里 each (approximately a third of a mile), by which the couple passes as they walk together. Wang said that, in the earlier “traditional” versions of this song, the male and female singers would alternate singing entire stanzas, but he felt that this had a rather monotonous effect on the listener. Thus, he worked out a version where there is a playful back-and-forth singing between the performers within each stanza. In addition, in the version below, the couple doesn’t make it past the first marker.

“Ten Li Markers” 十里墩 (CD Track 18)

Sister, open the door, Sister, open the door,
Use both hands for your Older Brother, come and pull the door open,
Aiyo, your Older Brother has brought you a leg of mutton.
妹子（儿）开门来，妹子（儿）开门来，
双手手（那个）给哥哥把门（儿）拉开，
（哎哟）哥哥给你提回（那）羊（了）腿腿来。

Gu ge na la der gai,
One li marker, ya ha si lu lu lu yi ya ha hei,
One li marker, ya ha ge ba ba yi ba yi ba beng.
The one li marker is close, close, close,
Ai yi yo yo, ai yo yo yo, yo yi yo yo,
Looking at the lanterns, ya, looking at the stars, ya,
Xi liu liu liu, pa la la la, si lu lu lu, gei guar gei guar, gu lu lu lu,
The willows, ya a, willows are green.

（咕个那啦嗒儿该，
一里墩来呀哈倏噜噜噜一呀嘿，
一里墩来呀哈格吧吧吧一吧一吧蹦，
一里墩近近近，
哟咿哟哟，哎哟哟哟，哟咿哟哟，
观明灯呀，观明星呀，
唏溜溜溜，朴啦啦啦，倏噜噜噜，该咕儿该咕儿，咕噜噜噜，
样呀啊样青。）

I think of my dear Little Sis, but I can’t see your face,
Whether dreaming or not, Older Brother, come over tonight.
Ai yo, happy in the heart, a smile on Little Sister’s face.
我（那）想（那个）妹妹见不上你的面，
梦（那）也（那个）不梦哥哥你今天晚上来。
（哎哟）喜在心上笑在（那）妹妹的脸。

Gu ge na la der gai,
One li marker, ya ha si lu lu lu yi ya ha hei,
One li marker, ya ha ge ba ba yi ba yi ba beng.
The one li marker is close, close, close,
Ai yi yo yo, ai yo yo yo, yo yi yo yo,
Looking at the lanterns, ya, looking at the stars, ya,
Xi liu liu liu, pa la la la, si lu lu lu, gei guar gei guar, gu lu lu lu,
The willows, ya a, willows are green.

（咕个那啦嗒儿该，
一里墩来呀哈倏噜噜噜一呀嘿，
一里墩来呀哈格吧吧吧一吧一吧蹦，
一里墩近近近，
哟咿哟哟，哎哟哟哟，哟咿哟哟，
观明灯呀，观明星呀，
唏溜溜溜，朴啦啦啦，倏噜噜噜，该咕儿该咕儿，咕噜噜噜，
样呀啊样青。）
Similar to the previous New Year’s song, “Ten Li Markers” evokes a festive atmosphere with the couple is looking at lanterns (presumably during the Lantern Festival). While the lyrics do not explicitly place the sung content as occurring during the Chinese New Year, one might note that a leg of mutton was and still remains a common gift given during that time. Both of these songs remind us of the connection between the errentai genre and festival performances.

The following song, “Picking Cherries,” is reminiscent of other flora-related love songs, such as “Picking Maru Fruits” and “Planting Cabbage,” mentioned earlier. Once again, we have a couple using the picking of fruits as an excuse to go off together, away from prying eyes. Here, we have the additional metaphor of love taking a long time to grow, just like a cherry tree. We will see a similar metaphor involving pine and cypress trees below in one the love songs classified as Mongol-Han tunes.

“Picking Cherries” 打樱桃 (CD Track 19)

The sun has risen in the sky,
Not a breeze, ai hai hai hai, the weather... ya me na, weather is fine.
Ai yo, I call out to Little Sister to go pick cherries with me.
阳婆婆（那）上来丈二（呀那）高，
风（那）尘尘不动（哎嘿嘿嘿）天（呀么那天）气好。
（哎哟）叫（了）声妹妹跟哥哥打（那）樱桃。

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97 During the Spring Festival of 2012, I observed smoked, dried mutton legs in vacuum-packed plastic being sold in a large supermarket in Xi’an.
98 The picking of fruit could also be understood as a sexual metaphor, depending on the audience (cf. Toelken 1995).
If you want to pick cherries, *ai hai hai hai*, plant that, *ya na*, tree, If you want to make friends, *ai hai hai hai*, take your time. *Ai yo*, Older Brother, you must be more patient.

要吃（那个）樱桃（哎嘿嘿嘿）把树（呀那）栽，
要交（那）朋友（哎嘿嘿嘿）慢慢（儿）来。
（哎哟）还（那）得哥哥你多（那）忍耐。

Shiny black hair, *ai hai hai hai*, pearly white teeth,
A pretty mouth that says some sweet things. *Ai yo*, such a pretty white face, what is Older Brother to do!

黒格顶顶（那）头发（哎嘿嘿嘿）白格（那）生生的牙，
巧嘴嘴说下一些（那）知心（呀那）话。
（哎哟）白格生生白脸脸你叫哥哥咋！

Wild lilies blossom, six petals of red,
Older Brother is a good person and young, *Ai yo*, such a strong young man, *ai hei*.

山丹丹（那个）开花六瓣瓣（那个）红，
哥哥（那）人好（那个）又年轻，
（哎哟）身（那）强力壮好（那）后生（哎嘿）。

In looking at these examples of *errentai* from Wang’s repertoire, their performance at temple festivals ties them all to festive occasions, and each suggests a certain degree of love and/or playful flirting between the male and female singers’ personae. Even the aria about the tragedy of separation caused by “going beyond the Western Pass” evokes a deep love between the named characters—perhaps even deeper than the playful, upbeat love of “Ten Li Markers” and “Picking Cherries.”

**Spirit Medium Tunes**

The area of northern Shaanxi in which Wang grew up has a tradition of male spirit mediums that would communicate with the gods and spirits, often with the goal of
curing various illnesses and other maladies. Called either “spirit officials” (shenguany神官) or “spirit men” (shenhan 神汉), the songs that they would sing during rituals are known as “spirit medium tunes” (shenguandiao 神官调) (Lü 1994 (1): 571; Huo 2006 [2]: 872).

According to Wang, every god was like a “folk doctor” (minjian de yisheng 民间的医生), a “traveling country doctor” (xingyi de yi ge langzhong 行医的一个郎中 or xingzoujianghu de yi ge yisheng 行走江湖的一个医生), or a doctor of Chinese medicine (Zhongyi xiansheng 中医先生). When Wang was young, he says that his village was poor, and no one in his family went to hospitals, so calling on the spirits via a shenguansheng was a common means of treating maladies. Though the range of afflictions might include broken bones, stomach ulcers, headaches, etc., the root cause of such phenomenon would have to be divined, and might stem from one’s own improper actions or the faults of one’s ancestors. Sometimes, vengeful ghosts (gui 鬼) were involved in stirring up trouble, and rituals were needed to remove them from the premises and send them back from whence they came. In addition, gods had to be invited, kowtowed to, presented with incense, told in detail what was wrong, and then sent back once they had been treated in a proper manner.

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99 In their work on folk medicine, Bonnie B. O’Connor and David J. Hufford note that “[a] significant number of folk medical systems recognize magical and supernatural elements in disease etiology” (O’Connor and Hufford 2001: 20).

100 Wang believes that seeking shenguansheng for cures was more or less pervasive throughout the countryside of northern Shaanxi when he was young, and, with the exception of medical facilities in larger cities, one of the main means used at the time.
Individual gods were said to oversee different geographical territories, and people in a particular place tended to ask the same spirit for assistance with all types of illnesses—they were considered to be all-powerful (wanneng de 万能的). At the same time, certain gods might be perceived as better at curing certain types of injuries, stomach diseases, or mental illnesses. If the local god proved ineffective in curing the particular malady, one might then choose to seek the help of a different locality’s god. Sometimes, the reason given for a god’s failed efficacy was that the person seeking help had not been sincere (cheng 诚) enough and failed to move the deity, who then rejected their plea.

In all of this, the shenguan would serve as a representative that spoke for the spirit, so the true “doctor” (langzhong 郎中) was seen as the spirit himself. The gods themselves were of several types, including fox spirits (foxes that had become spirits) and ancestral spirits (ancestors who had become gods). In the latter case, if the person had been virtuous and was worthy of respect, rather than staying in the netherworld (diyu 地狱) after death as a ghost (gui 鬼), Yama, the King of Hell (Yanwang 阎王), could release them to ascend to the sky (shang tian 上天) as a god (shen 神).

Wang learned the songs translated and discussed below from an older relative whom he refers to as Eldest Grandfather (Da yeye 大爷爷, see Chapter 1), who was of the same generation as Wang’s grandfather, and was the son of Sixth Grandmother (Liu

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101 Wang joked that the gods’ expertise included everything—internal medicine and external medicine, Chinese medicine and Western medicine—truly comprehensive.
102 For more information on fox spirits and the spread of the fox cult, including ethnographic information from Wang’s home area of Yulin prefecture in northern Shaanxi, see Kang 2006.
103 This type of ancestral god was referred to either as zu wei shen 祖为神 or zong wei shen 宗为神 (see “Treating an Illness” below).
lao niangniang 六老娘娘 or Liu laolao 六姥姥), the older woman whom Wang mentioned in the description of his childhood (see Chapter 1). Wang heard these songs, whose melodies he says are all from the Shenmu-Fugu area, during the 1950s and 1960s, up through the time he was a teenager, before Eldest Grandfather passed away in the early 1970s.

As a child, Wang tried to imitate the songs when playing together with other children. This was only done for fun, because, as Wang noted, the adults would not let them sing these things. Only shenguan had the authority to really sing these songs, and then only within the context of a proper ritual with an altar and other accoutrements.

As an adult, Wang stated several times that these songs could not be sung on stage in public performances. He recalls that he sang them during the late 1970s when various folksong collectors came to gather material for the massive Grand Compendium (jicheng 集成) project, and then again during the recording session with Qiao Jianzhong 乔建中 in 1994, when the versions translated below were recorded.104 Other than those isolated occasions, he says that he also sang these songs sometimes at gatherings with friends, but just for everyone’s amusement (shijishang shi wanr de yisi 实际上是玩儿的意思).

In what follows, I have translated five excerpts of spirit medium tunes from Wang’s album (Tracks 28 to 32), which represent different sections of a ritual—in this

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104 This relates to the influence of folklorists and scholars on performers’ repertoires. Sawin notes a similar dynamic in the influence on the repertoire of another singer, Bessie Eldreth, “from folklorists and festival audiences, who have probably encouraged Eldreth to sing the murder ballads and her songs from the early cylinder recordings more frequently than she would have otherwise” (Sawin 2004: 173).
case, an attempt to cure an ailing family member. The gods are invited, and their arrival is announced to everyone within hearing distance. A sacrificial altar is set up with incense, and soon the god speaks through the spirit medium, singing explanations about the cause and directions for the cure of the malady. After that, the gods and their horses must be fed, and then are sent on their way. There is a remarkable similarity between this flow of events and other social traditions involving host/guest interaction, some aspects of which I point out below.

In the first song, the gods are invited to the ritual. According to Wang, the beginning of the first stanza, with its “left” and “right,” “morning” and “evening,” is meant to broadly evoke the spirit of worshipping the gods throughout the day (fanzhi zhe yi tian dou zai jingshen). The “left” and “right” immediately call to mind the Five Directions, with which most deities are associated. In addition, it is said that the left is greater, while the right is smaller, and thus the left comes first, while the right follows. For example, if two relatives of the same generation sit next to each other, the older one sits on the left and the younger on the right.

“Inviting the Gods” 请神 (CD Track 28)

Hou—hou ei hei ye hei ye hei ei!
Pay respects to the gods on the left, pay respects to the gods on the right,
In the morning, pay respects to the Sovereign,
In the evening, pay respects to the Soldiers.

105 For additional spirit medium tunes from northern Shaanxi, several of which were recorded from Wang, see Huo 2006 [2]: 897-907; Lü 1994 (1): 596-606; and Li and Li 2003: 249-330.
106 East, South, West, North, and Center.
107 One might think of the traditional Chinese hosting setup, where two chairs are placed with their backs to the wall and a table in between, and the host sits on the left and the guest on the right.
In the morning, pay respects to the gods with incense smoke,
In the evening, pay respects to the gods with golden lamps.

In the morning receiving incense smoke, in the evening receiving light,
With a golden helmet on the head and body armor,
The gods change their clothes, change their helmet, and get off their horses.

左参（的）神是右参神，
早参君王是晚参兵。
早参神神受香烟，晚参神神受金灯。
早受香烟晚受（的）灯，
顶金盔是穿金甲，
神神披衣换（那）甲是来下马。

Hou, hou! Hou ei hei ye hei—hei!
With a golden helmet on the head and wearing armor,
The gods change their clothes, change their helmet, and get off their horses. An ivory table is set out,
Melons, fruits, and fresh vegetables are placed on top.
Have the host quickly fetch fresh chopsticks, Then, slowly and at ease, relate your problems to those above.
Freshly poured cold tea, full cups of clear wine, And three oil lamps serve as offerings to the Supreme Being (Shenwang).

顶金盔是穿金甲，
披衣换甲来下马。
象牙桌是放一张，
瓜果时菜是端上来。
叫事主是快换著，
逍遥自在是往上数。

According to Wang, the “golden lamps” here refer to candles with metal bases.
A poetic term for a steel helmet, which Wang compared to the helmets that American soldiers wear.
Wang likened this to a bulletproof vest, which would protect one against arrows and bullets.
With regard to this line, Wang noted that you couldn’t very well continue to wear the clothes you had on the train on the way to get here when visiting a host, but should change into some suitable for a visit.
The “host” refers to the ritual host (shizhu 事主) who has invited the deities on this occasion. In the case of a sick child, the father would usually host the gods, while if the father had already passed, the mother could also do it.
The wine is “clear” (qingjiu 清酒), because most deities are vegetarian. Therefore, they are never offered dishes with meat in them, and even the oil in the lamps mentioned in the following line is vegetable oil (“clear oil” qingyou 清油). The “cold tea” does not necessarily refer to the temperature of the tea itself, but rather its property of “reducing internal heat” (qinghuo 清火) in accordance with the principles of Chinese medicine. Wang notes that teas with cooling properties all have a bitter taste.
The Supreme Being here refers to the deity that is being invited on this occasion.
清斟凉茶满奠的酒，
油花三盏供神王。

Hou—hou ei hei ye hei, hou ei, hei hei hei, hei hei hei, hei hei hei, 
Hai......Three cups of tea to rinse and refresh your mouth, 
Four cups of wine to bring color to your cheeks. 
At, I urge the gods not to drink too much wine and tea,
Be careful as you embark on the roads in Five Directions to save all the people. 
Hai, for the gods who love tea, three cups of tea, 
For the gods who love wine, four cups of wine, 
And for those who are not fond of tea or wine,  
Please go to the Altar for the Five Immortals of the Five Directions 
to enjoy the incense smoke. 

Hou—hei! Ei...... 
I have invited and welcomed [them], 
Invited and welcomed [them]. 
Those of the Upper Eight Immortal Caves, 
Those of the Lower Eight Immortal Caves, 

115 Wang noted that, given the oral nature of these songs, the word *shu* 数 could be any one of four characters, depending on personal interpretations. 
116 Wang compared this to himself, since due to a stomach ulcer, he can no longer drink wine or tea, but only plain boiled water. 
117 Since the gods have already transcended the mortal world (*tuofan* 脱凡), Wang says they no longer have the same desires to eat certain foods that humans do. Instead, they search for a different flavor (*weidao* 味道), which they find in incense smoke. With regards to the name of the Altar, Wang said that each of the Five Directions has an Immortal (*daoren* 道人). For example, for the East, it’s “Black Five Directions” (*hei wudao* 黑五道), while for the South, it’s “Red Five Directions” (*hong wudao* 红五道). 
118 The Eight Immortal Cave refers to the place where the gods reside. (Immortals tend to live in the mountains.) The Eight Cave Immortals (*Ba dong shenxian*), also known as the Eight Immortals (*ba xian* 八仙), refer to Zhongli Quan 钟离权, Zhang Guolao 张果老, Lü Dongbin 吕洞宾, Tieguai Li 铁拐李, Han Xiangzi 韩湘子, Cao Guojue 曹国舅, Lan Caihe 蓝采和, and He Xiangu 何仙姑 (cf. Ho and O’Brien 1990). Wang used the term “cave abode” (*dongfu*, literally “cave city”) to describe the abode of each god, noting that there was a city in each cave, one suitable for the gods. Each major god had his own cave.
I am at the mouth of Eight Immortal Cave inviting the gods.

("höh, hoi hoi hoi eie heii heii"

我请了（的）请了迎了迎，
请了请来迎了迎。
上八洞是下八（的）洞，
我在八洞口上来请神。

Hou hou hou hou ei hei ye hei,
Jade Emperor, please receive this invitation,
Taishang Laojun, please receive this invitation,
Queen Mother of the West, please receive this invitation,
Immortal Maiden of the Ninth Heaven, please receive this invitation,
Four-Eyed Sky God, please receive this invitation,
Pagoda-Holding Emperor, please receive this invitation,
Twenty-Eight Constellations, please receive this invitation,
By the Five Directions and Five Ways, come as soon as possible.

Ai, having invited you down, you are given seats,
I ask the gods to find their places.

There were not just eight caves. Some people said there were sixteen (i.e. eight plus eight) or even sixty-four (i.e. eight times eight), as there were many lesser gods in addition to the main leaders.

The Ninth Heaven is the highest heavenly realm.

This deity has two eyes to observe the heavens and two to observe the mortal realm. He sees everything that occurs, and is considered a Heavenly General (shenjiang 神将) in the Heavenly Palace (Tiangong 天宫).

According to Wang, this refers to a constellation of twenty-eight stars, where each star is a deity with unique abilities. They appear in the novel, Journey to the West (Xiyou ji 西游记), and save the Monkey King hero, Sun Wukong, when he is trapped. Although at least one dictionary translated the name of this set of gods as the “28 Lunar Mansions,” when I asked if they were located on the moon, he insisted they were stars, not located on the moon.

Wang noted that some shenguan referred to this deity as jiutian xuannü 九天玄女 and others as jiutian xiannü 九天仙女. He related this variation to the fact that some shenguan were illiterate and might not distinguish between the two characters (xuan 玄 and xian 仙).
If you are greater, sit above at the seat of honor,
If you are smaller, sit below,
If neither big nor small, sit in the middle.
Those with horses sit on their mounts,
Those without horses sit on sedan chairs,
Those without horses or sedan chairs please lead the way to
the Altar of the Five Directions,
Raise the flags, hang up the spirit tablet,
On the wall with carved murals I seat you.

The “Sovereign” and the “Soldiers” in the second line of the main text bring up
the issue of the hierarchy of the gods. Stephan Feuchtwang (1992) has famously

123 Wang said that the phrase could also be sung as “I ask the gods to ascend [sheng] to their seats,” but
here had the meaning of “to find” their seats. He listed different possible verbs that might be used here,
emphasizing once again the flexibility of the lyrics.
124 The flags (biaogan 标杆) are the symbols/signs for each god and their assistants. Wang compared the
spirit tablets to the “ID cards” (shenfenzheng 身份证) for the spirits, representing them.
125 The “wall with carved murals” (yingbiqiang 影壁墙) refers
to a decorated wall immediately inside of
the main door, which shields the rest of the house from outside view. It is also referred to as a screen wall
(zhaobi 照壁). Wang noted that the “wall with carved murals” might also refer to the wall at the back end
of the home, immediately behind the kang (brick bed), which could also be used to set up the spirit tablets.
When I commented that his childhood home did not have such a wall near the entrance, he said that
Marugeda was too small of a village to pay attention to such rules of etiquette, but the nearby town center
had courtyard houses with such walls, as did the regional capital of Yulin.
126 This is a ritual saying of a host to a guest, asking the latter to forgive the “inattentiveness” of the former.
Wang said this was to ask the gods’ forgiveness if the host had been ignorant of their relative rank
(guanwei daxiao 官位大小) and unintentionally seated them in an incorrect order.
analyzed the “imperial metaphor” used in certain local Chinese folk belief, and Wang, in his description of the various gods, expands on such metaphor to include various seemingly parallel hierarchical structures. The Sovereign (junwang 君王) refers to larger, higher-ranked deities, while the Soldiers (bing 兵) are smaller and lower in the overall hierarchy. Deities are said to travel in a sort of military formation, including officers (junguan 军官) and rank-and-file soldiers (shibing 士兵), with the main god (zhushen 主神) known as the General (shuai 帅) or the Sovereign (jun 君). Everything is laid out—who is at the front and who carries the rear, with the main deity at the center, surrounded by lesser deities on horses who are there to carry out his orders (gei ta banshi de 给他办事的).

In discussing the above song, I asked Wang whether the Sovereign (junwang) in the song referred to the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang dadi 玉皇大帝), who is usually considered to be the supreme deity. He said that it depended on the particularities of the ritual event. While in a larger context it could be the Jade Emperor, it depended on which deity had been invited for the particular task at hand. That deity was then considered the Commander-in-Chief (zhushuai 主帅), surrounded by his Soldiers.

Wang compared this sort of hierarchy to similar structures in government and in the world of professional folksingers, two realms in which he is involved at some level. When he talked about the Immortals of the Eight Caves (badong shenxian 八洞神仙), Wang noted that the Jade Emperor was the head (zong 总), “just like Hu Jintao” (jiu
xiang Hu Jintao 就像胡锦涛).  He continued that the hierarchy of the spirits embodied the “same logic” (yi ge daoli 一个道理) as the way that Hu Jintao manages all of the officials throughout China, and was the “highest ranking god” (zuida de yi ge shen 最大的一个神). He also talked about how each of the Eight Immortals had their own set of gods beneath them, and could be considered the heads (zong) of the gods of particular caves (yi dong shenxian de zong 一洞神仙的总). Referring to the lower-ranking gods associated with a higher-ranking god, he called them “his disciples” (ta zhao de tudi 他招的徒弟), using the same word for the younger singers with whom he has established relationships as a national bearer of ICH (see Chapter 1). He then added, “Spirits also have generation after generation. They also take on many disciples, just like Wang Xiangrong takes on disciples” (神仙他也是一代一代，他要招好多徒弟，就像王向荣要招徒弟). When I asked if it was the same sort of structure, Wang replied, “Sure. Now then, below Wang Xiangrong there are Li Zhengfei, Feng Xiaohong, and them, and they also have others below them...” (对啊，那，王向荣下面还有李政飞、冯小红、他们。他们下面又有……).

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127 Hu Jintao served as president of the People’s Republic of China from 2003 to 2013,
128 Xiaofei Kang notes master-disciple relationships established both between spirits and mediums and between older and newer mediums (Kang 2006: 101).
129 For a fuller discussion of Wang’s disciples mentioned here, see Chapter 1. Later on, when discussing various shenguan of the past, Wang mentioned that they also had different grades/classes (dangci 档次), just like modern-day singers. He said, “In the past, shenguan were also divided into various ranks, just like singers. As for singers, some are vocalists (gechangjia), while others are just mere singers (geshou). Some are first-class performers (yiji yanyuan, referring to the nationally allocated ranking system), while others are unranked. The latter are just artistic aficionados, amateur singers. There is a difference. There were also some shenguan, the old shenguan in the past, who had books (shuben) from old masters, who would teach them word-by-word. Furthermore, what they did was all traditional, scrupulous and methodical—they understood everything very clearly. Now then, these younger/lesser shenguan, after so many
Curious, I asked Wang why people did not automatically choose to invite the Jade Emperor over smaller, local deities, if the power and rank of the former was indeed the greatest. The following bit of conversation ensued:

Wang: Because if you invite him directly... for example, if I invite... can I invite... can I just invite Hu Jintao whenever I feel like it?

Gibbs: Oh, you mean he wouldn’t come, right?

Wang: Of course not! If you invite... if you invite Obama, would he come?

Gibbs: Right, he wouldn’t, he wouldn’t.

Wang: Right. As for Obama, who can succeed in inviting him? Only congressmen. As for Hu Jintao, only the Politburo (zhengzhiju), members of the Central Politburo Standing Committee (zhongyang zhengzhiju changwei), and the Premier—only those members of the Politburo can succeed in getting him to come. Perhaps if the Shaanxi Provincial Party Committee and Provincial Government invite Hu Jintao to visit, they still must notify the higher authorities, and after notifying those higher-ups, the higher-ups must deliberate and study (yanjiu) the matter and see whether Hu Jintao can go or not, whether Hu Jintao has time. They also have to make all of the arrangements. Now then, he can only go if he has time. If he is busy, they will send someone else in his place.

Gibbs: Right, right, right.

Wang: Isn’t it so? The Jade Emperor is not someone you can just invite on a whim.

generations, the amount of things they have learned is much less. Furthermore, though they may have received some of the same songs, when an old master-singer sings it and a beginner sings it—they both “know how to” sing it, but though you can sing it and he can also sing it, the level (chengdu) at which you can sing it is different. This is how it works.” (过去那个神官也有分三六九等，就像歌手一样嘛。歌手呢也有的就是歌唱家，有的就是一个歌手。有的是一级演员，有的就是没级品。他就是个文艺爱好者，唱歌的爱好者。不一样嘛。神官他也是有的神官，他是人家过去的老神官，他都是根据书本老师傅，神官老师傅教的是一字不差的，而且是那传统的，一板一眼的，他都清楚了。那么，再下来的小神官，他一代一代，他学的东西就少了嘛。而且呢，接受的也只能说同样一首歌，老歌唱家唱出来和你一个初学的一个唱歌的，同样会唱啦，但是你会唱，他也会唱，但是会唱的程度不同嘛。就这个道理。)
王向荣：因为你直接请……比如说我请……我能……我能随便请胡锦涛吗？

葛融：哦，他不来，是吧？

王向荣：对啊。你请……你请奥巴马，奥巴马就会来吗？

葛融：嗯，不会不会。

王向荣：对啊。奥巴马谁能请到，只有国会议员……胡锦涛只有政治局，中央政治局常委和这个总理嘛，就是他们政治局成员，这些才能请到。或者说陕西省委省政府要请胡锦涛来，你还必须得给上面打招呼，打招呼人家还要通过研究，研究看胡锦涛能不能去，胡锦涛有空没空。那么，有时间没时间。还要做安排嘛。那么，有时间才能去，没时间呢就派一个谁就来了嘛。

葛融：对对对对对。

王向荣：对不对？玉皇大帝不是你想请就请来了。

This issue of who one is able to invite as related to one’s relative social status brings up inherent undertones of social class that affect both gods and mortals. In discussing how, in the past, the gods were categorized into groups belonging to Eight Caves (badong shen八洞神), corresponding to the Eight Immortals, Wang noted that there were said to be two sets of caves—the Upper Eight Caves (shang badong 上八洞) and the Lower Eight Caves (xia badong 下八洞). The gods were:

...divided according to their position, their place. It was also a question of their title (zhicheng). For example, whoever had a higher position or post belonged to the Upper Eight Caves. Whoever had a lower position would belong to the Lower Eight Caves.

......分了一个方位，位置。......也有一个职称的问题。比如说哪些神的职位高，他就得上八洞呢。哪些的职位以次于他就是在下八洞嘛。
There is an interesting parallel here between the mythical abodes and categorization of the gods and Wang’s natal village. Known as Marugeda village, Wang told me that it is more properly called “Upper Marugeda village” (\textit{shang Marugeda cun} 上马茹疙瘩村), because there is another nearby village that is known as “Lower Marugeda village” (\textit{xia Marugeda cun} 下马茹疙瘩村). Like the mythical abode of the gods, Wang’s village is on a mountain and the families all lived in traditional \textit{yaodong} cave homes, similar at least in outer form to the Eight Caves inhabited by the immortals. While I don’t recall Wang explicitly stating that Upper Marugeda was socially better, there nevertheless seems to be a certain similarity in the naming practices involved.

In addition to hierarchical categorization of places, as suggested above, there was a clear demarcation of different classes among the gods.

Most gods, the things they use are more expensive, fashionable, and high-ranking, so they call it “gold” (\textit{jin}). Now then, common folk probably don’t have much gold [\textit{laughs}], so they use iron or copper or tin. They can’t use real gold to make the lamp. Now then, only the most respected gods—heavenly spirits (\textit{tianshen})—have the right to enjoy lamps made out of gold. It’s just like the way that we people in this world are divided into different classes. Now then, as for what type of lamp the imperial family uses, or what types of lamps the first-rank provincial government officials use—common people can’t use the lamps used in the imperial palace. They certainly will use the lowest level of lamps.

一般神嘛，用的肯定比凡人的要富豪，要时尚，要富贵，所以把它叫成“金”。那么，老百姓可能用不起金，[laughs] 他用的就是铁，或者是铜，或者是锡。他不会用金子做灯。那么，只有尊敬的这种神，天神，那么，他才有权利享受金子做的灯。也就像我们世界人都分了三六九等吧，那么，皇家用的是什么灯，那么，比如说省政府一级的官员用的是什么灯，那么，老百姓用不起皇宫里边的灯嘛，肯定用的是最低阶的灯。
Two parallel ideas presented here are that those people and gods of certain rank have the right to use certain classes of material objects, while at the same time acknowledging that differing statuses of wealth also dictate one’s ability to obtain such objects. Elsewhere, Wang has said, “Rich families will certainly use golden lamps, lamps made of gold. As for the poor, of course they will just use ordinary clay lamps or wooden lamps” (有钱的人家肯定用的是金灯，金子做的灯。没钱的呢肯定做的是一般的陶瓷灯或者是木头灯).

Seen in the light of Wang’s previous discussion of who is able to invite Hu Jintao (or Obama or the Jade Emperor), it would seem that only the rich could afford to invite the higher-ranking gods. However, as can be seen from the translated lyrics above, the song contains reference to several of what can be termed “hyperbolically named objects.” For example, the wooden or clay lamp that a poorer family uses to burn incense to the gods is still referred to as a “golden lamp” in the song. In a similar manner, while rich people might actually have an “ivory table” (xiangya zhuo 象牙桌), which may in fact consist of a wooden table embedded with some ivory, Wang said that these terms “were all meant to ‘sound good’” (dou shi shuode haoting yi dianr 都是说得好听一点儿). The idea was that one presented one’s best tea service (chaju 茶具) to one’s most honored guests. Including food, tea, and wine, Wang noted, “When lofty guests arrive, for example, when you invite the gods to your home, of course you must bring out your best
There is a clear guest/host relationship inherent here, with gods ranked at the highest end of the social spectrum. When I asked Wang about the dual actions of “inviting” (qing 请) and “welcoming/meeting” (ying 迎), mentioned in the second and third lines of the fourth stanza, he replied,

Welcoming guests (yingjie) means that when people or gods come, you should go to the entrance to meet them. This shows your respect for them. Now then, when the gods come, how could you not go out to meet them? They were invited by you! Your invited guests.

When he said this, it reminded me of the way he had acted during my mother’s visit to Xi’an. During my frequent visits to Wang’s home during my fieldwork to conduct interviews, he had become increasingly relaxed with my arrivals, and often I would get there to find his apartment door wide open and Wang playing an online Chinese card game in an undershirt or his pajamas. However, when I told him that I was going to bring my mother to visit while she was in town, we arrived to find the door closed. After knocking, Wang came to the door dressed in one of the traditional, silk, Chinese-style shirts that he tends to wear on public occasions. He smiled and greeted my mother
warmly, as I translated. This varying behavior in relation to the identity of a guest seems to be consistent with Wang’s description of how to “host” the gods, discussed above.130

While the above song suggests various levels of differential status both among the people who might host the gods and between mortals and spirits, one line in particular seemed to suggest an equalizing of such social levels. In the third line of stanza three, it says, “I urge the gods not to drink too much wine and tea.” I asked Wang why the shenguan would ask the gods not to drink too much; after all, wouldn’t that be considered a rude thing for a host to do? He replied that this was not the case. Rather, in Chinese people’s interactions with truly good friends (zhengheng hao pengyou 真正好朋友) or people one respects (zunjing ren 尊敬人), they seek to have them “drink just enough but not too much” (rang ni he dao qiadao haochu 让你喝到恰到好处), and not insist that they become overly inebriated. Wang suggested that drinking too much tea, just like drinking too much wine, was bad for one’s health, so a good friend would look out for (guanxin 关心) fellow friends and not force them into such destructive behavior. When I pointed out that the line quoted above was similar with the drinking song he sings, “Wine Ruins the Gentleman, Water Ruins the Road” (see the section on Drinking Songs below), Wang replied, “Right! It’s the same thing, the same idea” (对！是一回事，一个意思).

130 Another similarity with human host-guest rituals appeared when I asked Wang about the lines in the sixth stanza detailing the host showing gods of different ranks to their seats. Wang said that, if a large number of gods had been invited, then they might have to be attended to in smaller groups (yi qi yi qi 一齐一齐). This resonates with what I observed at large weddings in the countryside, where three groups of guests (corresponding to the groom’s family, the bride’s family, and the fellow villagers) are treated to banquets, one after the other, in a singular space.
“Oh, so one treats the gods the same as people,” I suggested. Wang answered, “The same, the same, the same, the same. In the past in China, people and gods were of one category (renshen yilie 人神一列). After all, gods are raised up (peng chulai de 捧出来的) by people. They are molded (suzao chulai de 塑造出来的) by people. So, their system of thought (sixiang tixi 思想体系) still belongs to the category of the human system of thought.”

Another interesting connection between the human and godly realms came when I asked Wang why the deities had to wear armor. After all, they couldn’t die, so why should they be afraid of bullets and arrows? He replied that it was not a question of dying or not dying. In fact, they were already dead. He said,

Whether or not they can die, this is a matter of the afterlife... Gods have all transcended the mundane world, but after transcending, those that are supposed to wear gold armor still wear gold armor, and those that should wear silver armor still wear silver armor—according to their relative rank. This type of human... the gods themselves are an idea (yinian) created by people. Now then, for example, in Western countries they call it God (shangdi). Who has actually seen God? No one. Now then, in China it is called “Spirits” (shen). Who has actually seen Spirits? No one. It is a type of belief, but the gods are created by... for example, whatever the Jade Emperor wears or carries with him, that is similar to [the customs] of mortals (fanren). Mmm-hmm, ’tis just that the suit of armor he wears, it’s just like a suit of armor in real life, only that it is improved. Maybe his suit of armor is more... more expensive. [laughs]

他会死不会死，这是他死了以后……神一般都是脱了凡界的，但是他脱凡以后他还是该穿金甲是金甲，该穿银甲是银甲，按他的职位大小。他的这个……在人的这种……神本身是人所做出来的一种……一种意念。那么，比如说西方国家称“上帝”，谁见过上帝？没有。那么，中国称“神”，谁见过神？没有。它是一种信念，但是把这个神所造的他……比如说玉皇大帝穿的是什么，带的是什么，也就像凡人一样。嗯，他只不过是他穿的是……这个盔呀甲呀这种都是……就像现实生活中的盔甲是一回事，只不过是把他伸望了，可能他的盔甲更……更贵。[LAUGHS]
Already in this first song, we can see certain similarities and interrelations between human and godly hierarchies, and how various rhetorical techniques are used to suggest social difference and guest-host intimacy—both ideas that are expanded below.

In the next song, the spirit medium announces the arrival of the spirits. There is an interesting fusion of multiple audiences that can be seen in the language used here. On the one hand, the lyrics are meant to proclaim the gods’ arrival, telling all of those involved in the ritual, including the host, the ill person, their family, the neighbors, as well as other bystanders, that the gods have come, over the hill across the way, jumping over the river in the ravine down below, up the slopes covered in coal (see below), and through the main gate of the courtyard. In this sense, it broadcasts the fact that a ritual is taking place. At the same time, there is a conscious attempt at inclusiveness in the repeated use of the word “we” (women 我们). Speaking of the intimacy created through the language of the spirit medium, Wang said,

He treats this god in a very close, intimate manner. Since he has invited him in, all he thinks about is “we”—a “we” that includes people and gods—there is no difference among us.

Wang compared this to treating guests in one’s home as members of one’s own family. In that case, he noted that it would be appropriate to say “we blah blah blah, we blah blah blah” (women zenyang, women zenyang 我们怎样, 我们怎样), instead of “you all

131 While the object of the imperative “Look” is not explicit in English, the Chinese literally says “you look” (ni kan 你看), with the “you” referring to all of the people assembled and in adjoining areas.
blah blah blah, we blah blah blah” (nimen zenyang, women zenyang 你们怎样，我们怎样). He continued, “If you distinguished between ‘you all’ (nimen) and ‘we’ (women), that would place more distance between you [and them].” In his work on Daoist rituals and local cults, Robert Hymes argues that Chinese relationships with the divine are formed in two independent manners: the bureaucratic and the personal (Hymes 2002).

Whereas the former implies distance and hierarchy both among the gods themselves and in their relations to mortals, the latter tends to focus on “dyadic (one-to-one)” and reciprocal connections between gods and humans, which seems to fit in with Wang’s analysis of the language used above (Hymes 2002: 4-5).

The “altar” (tan 坛, also referred to as shentan 神坛) in the following song refers to the place where the image of the god (shenxiang 神像) is positioned, with an incense burner (xianglu 香炉) placed in front of it.132

“Preparing the Sacrificial Altar” 设坛 (CD Track 29)

Look, we’ve all arrived, we’ve arrived, we’ve just arrived, ya, our Spirit.
Look, down from the hill right in front we have arrived, ya hei ei ei.
你看我们来了来了才来了（呀），我的仙根。
你看我们对正坡坡下来了（呀嘿哎哎）。

Look, we’ve all arrived, we’ve arrived, we’ve just arrived, ya, our Spirit.
Look, jumping over the ravine down below we have arrived, we have arrived, ei.
你看我们来了来了才来了（呀），我的仙根。
你看我们对正沟沟跳过来了来了来了（哎）。

132 The altar may also include a memorial tablet (paiwei 牌位) for the deity, which Wang described as their “identity card” (shenfenzheng 身份证).
Look, we’ve all arrived, we’ve arrived, we’ve just arrived, ya, our Spirit.
Look, climbing up the coal hills, we have arrived, ya ei.
你看我们来了来了才来了（呀），我的仙根。
你看我们蓝炭坡坡上来了（呀哎）。

Look, we’ve all arrived, we’ve arrived, we’ve just arrived, ya, our Spirit.
Look, we have entered the main gate, ya ai hai ei.
你看我们来了来了才来了（呀），我的仙根。
你看我们大门口口进来了（呀哎嘿哎）。

There is a clear spatial progression in the four stanzas. Having visited Wang’s home village of Marugeda, it is easy to envision the topography described, which is common in much of the area with its alternating hill slopes and ravines. Wang’s village is on one mountain and faces another mountain, with a ravine in between. The yaodong cave homes face outwards, with a large walled courtyard (yuanzi 院子) and its main gate (da menkou 大门口) also facing outward. The “coal” in the translation below is actually coke (jiaotan 焦炭), which is locally referred to as “blue coal” (lantan 蓝炭). Although nowadays, since coke can still be burned and furthermore produces no smoke, it is frequently used as a raw material for processing (gongyi yuanliao 工艺原料). However, in the old days, since it could no longer be used to cook food, it was often discarded by dumping it down the side of the mountain slope, thus creating “hills of coal” (lantan po 蓝炭坡).

The term that I have translated as “my Spirit” is actually a respectful form of address for the gods, which could be literally translated as “Immortal Root” (xiangen 仙根), referring to “those of immortal origin.” The “root” (gen) here refers to one’s essence
or nature (benzhi 本质), and Wang listed other related terms, including “human root” (renge 人根), referring to people (as opposed to gods), and “beast root” (shougen 兽根), referring to people who had commit certain wrongdoings that “people should not do” (bu shi ren gan de shiqing 不是人干的事情). Wang chuckled as he described people who “act like beasts” (gan de dou shi chusheng de shi 干的都是畜生的事), saying they “have not yet evolved into humans” (mei jinhua cheng ren 没进化成人).

Once the altar has been set up and the spirits invited, Wang sings a section where the spirit medium becomes possessed by the spirit, who then uses the medium to dictate an herbal remedy via song for the illness in question. Though Wang merely performed these spirit medium songs without being a real spirit medium or actually becoming possessed, he notes that there is an audible difference in the lines sung by the spirit medium himself and the lines (starting with the third line of the first stanza) that are sung by the spirit through the spirit medium. In the latter, the spirit medium “represents the god” (daibiao shen le 代表神了). At that point, the spirit medium enters an otherworldly trance, a sort of muddleheaded, carefree (xilihutu 稀里糊涂) state:

Once you have arrived at this muddleheaded, carefree state, the voice that one sings out is different. It is different than the normal singing voice of that person. That is to say, people can recognize this and say, “Oh, the god has already attached itself to his body.” He serves as a proxy for what the god wants to say. The language he uses to say it is different...

把你达到一种稀里糊涂的这种情况, 唱出来的声音, 它就是不一样了。它和那个人所唱的就是……不是一回事。那就是说……人们就知道说“啊, 这神...
神，神仙已经附到他身体上啦。他就代表神去说话了。说话的口语不一样啦...

The lyrics for this section are as follows:

“Curing an Illness” 看病 (CD Track 30)

Look, the god shouts from within the clouds,
He rides his horse atop the clouds—our ancestor turned god.134
“Look, if you want to know my name, my name, my name and surname,
I am the Grand Immortal of the Black Clouds135 of your Wang Family, ye, are you clear?”
你看神神大喝上一声是云，是云里的云，
神神云头上跑马（耶）宗为神。
你看你是要知我名，是名，是名和姓，
我是你家王门的黑云大仙（耶）你精明？

“Ai... tell the host to listen carefully,
Why do you cry out to this Spirit?
State it clearly line by line,
And, line by line, the gods will show you the way.”
哎——叫事主把话（的）听，
喊到灵神因为甚？
你一句一句述分明，
神神一句一句给你表分清。

“A... on the west side of your house a wall was built,
On the east side of your house ground was broken (for construction),
Rolling the roller where it shouldn’t be rolled,
The earth on the God of the Year’s head was moved,

134 The zong 宗 can be read as self-referential, as in “I,” where the “I” refers to a god that represents the ancestors (daibiao zuxian de yi ge shen 代表祖先的一个神).
135 Wang said that this was an immortal (xianjia 仙家) from Marugeda, where all of the villagers had the surname Wang (hence the “our your Wang family” part). Granduncle had a special hall (tang 堂) dedicated to this deity, who was said to be entirely black, to ride black clouds, wear black clothes, ride a black horse, and carry black flags. Other deities might have similar monochromatic accouterments in red, white, etc. In the case of fox spirits, their color would correspond to that of their fur—white, red, yellow, etc.
Disturbing your family with dog and cat calamities,  
And leading your adults and children to be troubled throughout the  
four seasons of the year.  
Do you understand? [You] understand.”

Things have already reached their present state,  
Even the gods don’t have a good means to fix your problem,  
But since your child has come down with a severe illness,  
The gods will tell you an herbal remedy prescription to use  
internally and externally,  
Do you understand? [You] understand.  
Is it clear? It is clear.”

“First, combine Medicine King roots,  
Mountains and rivers, seven in total,  
\( A_i \), rhizome of wind-weed, fritillary bulb, winter board flower,  
yin-yang stone flowers,  
Stone child, Chinese tamarisk, willow berries,  
Then, add in atractylodes rhizome and realgar,  
Mix them together and use it.  
This is [the part] to be drunk internally.  
There is also [the part] to be applied externally.  
Line by line it is clearly explained,  
Line by line, you listen carefully.”

头一量子药王爷是根子往上（的）用，  
山水道道是七个整，  
（哎）知母、贝母、板冬花、阴阳石花、  
（是）石娃娃、三春柳儿、（是）柳树杞，  
还有那个苍术、雄黄，

啊——你家西方打了墙，
你家东边是动了土，
安碾子滚磨是不是处，
太岁头上把土动，
猫殃狗殃来打搅，
闹的你家大人娃娃（了）一年四季不安宁。
听开了没有？听开了。

事到如今了，
神神给你也没有好办法给你来整治，
只有你的孩儿下来病沉重，
神神给你把那引子方头说上一道是里外用，
听开没有？听开了。
解开没有？解开了。

127
一搭搭配上是往上用。
这是那个内吃的。
还有那个外贴的。
一句一句是述分明，
你一句一句来听清。

“Ai...scallion thread,
Mixed together with flour and steamed,
Mix it all together.
Ai, take it out together,
Put it in together,
After it boils, apply it to the skin.
If during seven days it sticks to the head, it has gotten the illness,
The gods will continue to descend and scare it away.
But if for seven days it doesn’t stick to the head, and there is no relief,
The gods will pay no regard, mounting their horses and setting out into the sky,

哎——葱丝子，
（是）白面一个搭搭蒸，
你看你把它是和到一块儿了。
（哎）一个搭搭出，
（是）一个搭搭进，
滚滚儿下来是来拓嗑。
七天头上了打了杵，是收了病，
神神给你继续下来来弄怂。
说是七天头上了不打杵，是不安心，
神神一不管来二不管，立马登程起空中（呜噢）。

There is a fascinating progression outlined in this song, whereby the root cause of the malady is made explicit (i.e. a local spirit was disturbed when ground was broken near the home), internal and external remedies are described in detail, and possible outcomes are listed. There is an interesting sort of “disclaimer” in the final stanza, which states that, if the cure doesn’t work, it is because the gods have abandoned the cause. This seems to relate to Wang’s earlier discussion of both the need for sincerity when asking
favors from the gods, and the possibility that a local god may not produce an effective result, thus necessitating the solicitation of another god from a different locality.

Beyond providing instructions for an herbal prescription, one could argue that the *shenguan* is also providing a conceptual framework through which to deal with the uncertainty caused by illness. Lévi-Strauss (1967) has emphasized the ability of the provision of language (i.e. how to talk about a difficult situation and the possibility of its resolution) to alleviate anxiety and even to affect the functioning of the body. In his key example, he describes a case where the chants of a Native American shaman from the Cuna of Panama brought about relief for a woman caught in the midst of a difficult labor:

The shaman provides the sick woman with a *language*, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is the transition to this verbal expression—at the same time making it possible to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible—which induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganization, in a favorable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected. (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 374)

In this sense, like the Cuna shaman, the *shenguan* provides a way—through language—to engage with an inherently enigmatic illness in a meaningfully way. Thus, in a sense, the words of the god sung through the *shenguan* provide a path through which to envision recovery, addressing both the psychological and physical aspects of the malady.

In the following song, after receiving curative advice from the gods, the *shenguan* must locate and measure out sufficient grain to feed the gods and fodder for their horses, before sending them on their way. The “three rings” in the first line refer to three iron
rings (tiehuan 铁环) located at the bottom of the sheepskin drum (yangpi gu 羊皮鼓) that the shenguan shakes with one hand and beats with a stick in the other. There are also several smaller rings attached to the three larger rings.\(^{136}\) When I asked about the significance of the number three here, Wang at first glossed over the question by attributing it to custom, but later speculated that it might have to do with notions of “heaven, earth, and people” (tian di ren 天地人), “people, ghosts, and gods” (ren gui shen 人鬼神), and/or the idea of the “three divisions of the universe” (sanjie 三界).

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\(^{136}\) Among other types of ritual accoutrements that shenguan have used in the past are “precious swords” (baojian 宝剑) and fans (shanzi 扇子), among others.

\(^{137}\) The gate here refers to the gate in the city wall, used in entering the city. The color used here is difficult to translate, as the Chinese word qing 青 can refer to blue, green, and black, depending on context. When I asked Wang whether this meant black, he answered in the affirmative, but it is unclear how this differs from the “black” (hei 黑) used in the fourth stanza, which can only refer to black and is therefore unambiguous.

\(^{138}\) Wang said that the phrase youyouwanwan 游游玩玩 here referred to “turning” and “moving from side to side” (zhuanyou 转游). In a video of a shenguan that I discussed with Wang, the shenguan does in fact turn to face the various directions.
（是）叫门童是来开锁，叫斗子是来下仓。
（哎）每人吃的是半升粮，每马吃的半料，
算打计是打算计，共打共算（了）一千八百五十斗。

Hou—
The hand shakes three rings, clinking ring-a-ling-a-ling,
Turning and turning, I arrive at the South.
In the South, there is a red secret city, a red secret gate,
On the red secret gate hangs a red secret lock.
Tell the gate boy to open the lock, tell the storehouse keeper to go down
into the granary.
Every person gets half a pint of grain, every horse gets one and a half
pints of feed.
Calculating and calculating, all together it comes to 1,850 decaliters.

吼——
手摇三环飒啦啦响,
游游玩玩是到南方。
南方有座红幽城，红幽门，
红幽门上挂的一把红幽锁。
叫门童是来开锁，叫斗子是来下仓。
每人吃的半升粮，每马吃的半料，
算打计是打算计，共打共算一千八百五十斗。

Hou—
The hand shakes three rings, clinking ring-a-ling-a-ling,
Turning and turning, I arrive at the West.
In the West, there is a white secret city, a white secret gate,
On the white secret gate hangs a white secret lock.
Tell the gate boy to open the lock, tell the storehouse keeper to go down
into the granary.
Every person gets half a pint of grain, every horse gets one and a half
pints of feed.
Calculating and calculating, all together it comes to 1,850 decaliters.

嗬——
手摇三环飒啦啦响，
我游游玩玩到西方。
西方有座白幽城是白幽门，
白幽门上挂着一把白幽锁，
叫门童是来开锁，叫斗子是来下仓。
每人吃的半升粮，每马吃的是半料。 
算打计是打算计，共打共算一千八百五十斗。
After making sure that the gods and their horses are well provided for, the *shenguan* must “see them off,” just like any other guest. The following song asks the gods to mount their horses and ride back into the sky.

“*Sending Off the Gods*” 发神 (CD Track 32)
Pray to the gods to disperse, pray to the gods to disperse,
I pray to the gods to disperse as you get on your horses.
Get on, get on, quickly get on your horses,
When you get on, it will be multi-colored horse with golden saddle and reins.
拜神散，拜神散，我拜神散是你上马。
上马上马快上马，一上上到金丝镏鞍（是）乌云花。

Pray to the gods to disperse, pray to the gods to disperse,
I pray to the gods to disperse as you get on your horses.
Red Cloud Immortal, I send you off,
Black Cloud Immortal, I send you off,
Jade Emperor, you go first,
Twenty-Eight Constellations follow closely behind at your heels.
拜神散，拜神散，我拜神散是你上马。
红云大仙是我送你，黑云大仙是我发你，
玉皇大帝你先行，二十八宿（那）紧后跟（嗯）。

David Johnson (2009) has emphasized the central place of ritual in traditional Chinese culture, and the close association of performance culture with that ritual culture. Wang’s interpretations and explanations concerning the spirit medium tunes above show a close relation between the world of the gods and the world of humans, as well as between the past and the present. According to Johnson, “[i]f we wish to understand how Chinese people thought and felt about the family, the community, the state, or the gods, we must study the rituals by which those thoughts and feelings were expressed and shaped” (Johnson 2009: 8). The similarities in host-guest protocol and hierarchical structures (including those of gods, government officials, and singers) outlined above help us to highlight the connection between the various groups mentioned by Johnson. Wang notes that the gods are similar to humans because they are created by humans, and this point is
further reinforced when we look at similarities between certain lines in the spirit medium
tune lyrics above and the drinking song lyrics that follow.

Drinking Songs and Relationship Management

Drinking songs (jiuqu 酒曲) are an established genre, especially in the northern
part of Northern Shaanxi, tied to local drinking culture (jiu wenhua 酒文化) and wining
and dining (yinyan 饮宴) customs (Lü 1994 (1): 570). According to Wang, Northern
Shaanxi, like most of Northwest China, or even China as a whole, has a saying that
“Without wine, it’s not a banquet” (wu jiu bu cheng yan 无酒不成宴).139 Wang
explained it thusly:

When everyone gets together to attend a banquet, they must drink a bit of wine.
What is wine? Wine is a means to enhance mutual feelings for each other. After
drinking, everyone’s feelings are stirred, and furthermore, it has an anesthetizing
effect. You dare to say what you would normally never dare to say. People who
normally wouldn’t dare to sing now sing. You dare to do what you normally
wouldn’t dare to do. You become bold.

He stressed that drinking together can bring people into closer contact and deepen their
feelings for each other (rang tamen de ganqing geng shen 让他们的感情更深). Wang

139 There have been numerous books and studies concerning so-called “drinking culture” (jiu wenhua 酒文化) (cf. He 2009; Sun 2003; and Chang and Guo 2001). For a discussion of recent youth activity in relation to the drinking culture in northern Shaanxi, see Chau 2006a.
believes that one of the reasons that such gatherings require drinking is that it serves to “link together the hearts of people” (ren yu ren de xin de goutong 人与人的心的沟通), in addition to the pursuit of renao (tu ge renao 图个热闹), a term that literally means “hot and noisy,” which refers to lively situations “buzzing with excitement,” and has connotations of mirth and merrymaking. Adam Yuet Chau translates a similar northern Shaanxi dialect term as “red-hot sociality” (honghuo 红火) (Chau 2006b: 164). Chau relates this to what he calls the “sociothermic theory of sociality,” referring to the idea that “when people converge they generate more social heat (i.e., honghuo)” (Chau 2006b: 156).

While there is a long history of using song to motivate drinking and increase the social excitement of events, formal ties between the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition and the regional liquor industry have been established during the past decade or so. Not only did Wang serve for several years as a spokesman for a local Yulin liquor company, but he also came up with an idea for a mutually beneficial collaboration for both enterprises. Sometime around 1999, Li Yu, Wang’s friend and the owner of the Puhui Liquor Factory in Yulin, organized a conference together with Wang touting the benefits of packaging together drinking songs and liquor sales. In 2000, Li Yu “organized a contest for drinking songs (jiuqu dasai) at his liquor factory, which was apparently a great success” (Jones 2009: 212). Sometime after that, the liquor company began to hire professional folksingers to sing in restaurants and at events, such as weddings, where the company’s baijiu sorghum liquor was bought and consumed.
According to Qiao Jianzhong, et al., at its height, Puhui was employing about 500 singers in restaurants throughout northern Shaanxi and the area in and around Xi’an, and according to surveys in 2011, the number was then closer to 200 singers (Qiao, et al. 2011: 13). During my fieldwork in 2011 and 2012, although Wang was no longer actively serving as a spokesman for Old Yulin Liquor, one of his disciples, Li Zhengfei, appeared in various ads for Old Yulin in northern Shaanxi style restaurants, and Li’s wife owned one of the local distributors for the company in Xi’an. When one goes to such a restaurant, after buying a bottle of this brand of sorghum liquor, two singers arrive with an electronic synthesizer atop a giant speaker on wheels, and the customers can choose two to three folksongs of their choice. If you have a wedding in one of the small towns that dot the countryside surrounding Xi’an and you order a case of this liquor, the company sends a van complete with singers, a keyboardist, sound equipment, etc. and performs throughout each banquet.  

The songs translated below stem from the countryside setting of Wang’s youth. Like many villages throughout northern Shaanxi, families in Wang’s home village lived in cave-homes known as yaodong 窑洞. Some might be simple, singular cave-rooms, with a heated brick bed (kang 炕) at one end, while others might be more elaborate, with one, two, or three adjoining rooms dug out on the sides and/or at the back. On occasions when many guests were invited, many people would have to be seated on each

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140 In one such countryside wedding that I accompanied several singers to, the wedding rotated sequentially between three groups of banquet guests—the groom’s relatives, the bride’s relative, and fellow villagers—each of whom were offered a sit-down meal. The singers had to sing the entire time, which lasted over an hour.

141 Wang noted that some rooms would have one large kang, while others would have two smaller kang. He estimated that anywhere from ten to fifteen people could sleep together on a large kang.
kang, and it was the host’s responsibility to seat each individual according to relational status and communal propriety. Here, we see echoes of the host/spirit medium assigning the visiting gods to their seats according to their respective ranks, in the spirit medium tunes discussed above. On larger occasions, one might even have one’s neighbors and nearby relatives help out, offering their homes for additional seating. Only after everyone was properly seated would the drinking and festivities begin.

The first two songs below are used for finger-guessing drinking games (huaquan 划拳). In the first, after one singer begins with the introductory stanzas meant to amuse and entertain, the third stanza would normally be sung in alternation by two individuals as they compete at attempting to guess the combined number of fingers thrust forward in the game. One might understand it as a highly artistic, more complex, sung version of “rock, paper, scissors.” In the version translated below, which appears on his CD, Wang sang a selection of numbers in succession, in order to provide a presentation of how this sort of play-performance might sound.143

“A Lotus Flower Blooms on the Spot” 一朵莲花就地开 (CD Track 24)

A lotus flower blooms on the spot,
Our host has invited me here to drink.
Ten rooms with large heated brick kang, ya hai,
Wherever the host seats me, there I shall sit, me nai si yi ya hai, yi zier yue.

一朵莲花（那）就地开，

142 For a description of youth participation in finger-guessing drinking games in northern Shaanxi, see Chau 2006a: 169-170.
143 While such traditional-style performances, where both individuals sing the numerical phrases as they play the game, may still occur in certain areas of northern Shaanxi, I have not had the opportunity to observe them. Nowadays, it seems more common either to conduct such games through speaking (or rather shouting), or to play another drinking game that uses containers with dice in them (and also spoken/shouted numbers).
主人请我喝酒来。
十间满间炕（呀嘿），
安在哪里哪里坐（么，乃是咿呀咳，咿子儿哟）。

In the front room the lamps are lit, the back room becomes bright,
Shedding light on our host’s large wine bottles.
The good quality wine is not for us, ya,
The poor quality wine makes your head hurt, ya me nai si yi ya hai, yi zier yue.

前室点灯（那）后室明，
照见主人的大（那）酒瓶。
大号烧酒不给喝（呀），
小烧喝得拐骨疼（呀么，乃是咿呀咳，咿子儿哟）。

The sun comes up, a little dot of red,
Shedding light on our host’s wedding wine bottles.
By playing finger-guessing games we have strengthened our feelings together, ya,
Two people get along, strengthening our feelings together,
Four happinesses bring wealth, strengthening our feelings together,
Five of the best and brightest, strengthening our feelings together,
Six, six, lucky six, strengthening our feelings together,
The Eight Immortals celebrate their longevity,
   strengthening our feelings together,
A full ten have arrived, strengthening our feelings together.

太阳上来（那）一点红，
照见主人的喜酒瓶。
因为划拳咱交了一番情（呀），
二人相好（交了一番情），
四喜来财（交了一番情），
魁首五朵（交了一番情），
六六大顺（交了一番情），
八仙庆寿（交了一番情），
满十到（交了一番情）。

In the second stanza, there is some playful badinage between the singer and the host, with
the former teasing the latter by saying that the host has kept the best wine for other
presumably more important guests, while only offering the cheap stuff that causes
unpleasant hangovers to the group assembled on this occasion. While Wang did make
the distinction that good quality *baijiu* (*da shaojiu* 大烧酒) is only drunk by the rich, while poor quality *baijiu* (*xiao shaojiu* 小烧酒) is the only thing available to the poor, he stressed that the language here is meant to be understood in a humorous context:

So then, during the process of drinking, lots of the language used has to do with the different atmosphere, the different ambience. It is different from when one normally sits down and has a serious conversation. It has an element of joking, meant to poke fun and provoke laughter, purposefully saying how awful you are and how great I am, boasting and praising each other. Sometimes, each will say how great the other is, lavishing praise on him/her. One would be embarrassed to praise oneself [in public], so they praise the other person, and the other person comes back and praises them in return. This kind of thing also happens. So then, this type of situation is determined according to relationship and feelings between the people involved. So, this language, when the words are like this, it might seem to you that [the singer] is blaming [the host] or complaining, saying your liquor tastes terrible, but, in fact, that’s not necessarily the true meaning. It carries a joking undertone with it.

According to Wang, the directness of the language used in such jokes reflects the “extremely close relationship” (*guanxi feichang miqie* 关系非常密切) between the singer and host.

As mentioned earlier, one of the perceived effects of drinking together is a bringing together of individuals and a deepening of interpersonal feelings, which appears
to be reflected in the chorus of “strengthening our feelings together” (jiao le yi fan qing 交了一番情) that the drinking game participants sing as they play. This phrase stems from a Chinese term usually translated as “friendship” or “friendly relations” (jiaoqing 交情), which can be further broken down linguistically into the verb jiao 交, meaning variously “to hand over,” “to meet or intersect with,” and “to reach,” and its object, qing 情, referring to feelings, sentiments, affection, etc. Wang contrasted the term “strengthening our feelings together” with another phrase that means “we come to hold a grudge against each other” (women ji le yi fan chou 我们记了一番仇). According to Wang, these terms reflect the ability of social events to both bring people closer together and push them further apart. Whereas there might be numerous reasons for enmities to grow between individuals, the “event” in question here for bringing them together is that of drinking:

This “strengthening our feelings together” means that after drinking together, we have become friends. Perhaps tomorrow everyone will have become very good friends. Perhaps by the next day, due to some reason or other, they will no longer... Then, it can only be said that they established friendly relations, that this thing happened, but it doesn’t mean... Some [friendships] last for a long time, depending on the circumstances, depending on the development of one’s character and the development of the overall state of affairs. Some, perhaps, only last for a day or just a short period of time. Before, those involved didn’t know each other, but through this drinking session, it feels as though the two people have formed a friendship.

这“交了一番情”就是因为在一起喝了一回酒，喝了一场酒，我们交了一场朋友。或许到明天，大家就成了好朋友了。或许到后天，大家都因为什么时候又没......那也只不过就是说，过去交过一场情，有这么一回事，而不是说这

144 In his study of entrepreneurial practices and urban development in a coastal city in southwestern China, Xin Liu notes a similar “sense of equality” achieved between entrepreneurs and government officials through the act of singing together in karaoke bars (Liu 2002: 62).
个就是......有的是长久了，根据情况，根据人品发展，事态的发展。有的或许就是那么一天，或者就那么一阵。以前谁都不认识谁，通过这一场喝酒，两个认识了，就像交了一场情一样。

The following song could also be sung during finger-guessing games. The humorous double entendre of the first stanza would undoubtedly contribute to the liveliness of a drinking occasion.

“With a Shoulder Pole That’s Soft and Flexible” 一条扁担软溜溜
(CD Track 25)

With a shoulder pole that’s soft and smooth,
I carry yellow millet down to Suzhou, ya me hu hei.
Suzhou loves my soft millet,
I love Suzhou’s girls, ya me hu hei.
一条扁担（那么）软溜溜，
担上黄米下苏州（呀么呼嘿）。
苏州爱我的软黄米，
我爱苏州的大闺女（呀么呼嘿）。

Two people get along, me hu er hai,
Four happinesses bring wealth, me hu er hai,
Six, six, lucky six, me hu er hai,
The Eight Immortals celebrate their longevity, me hu er hai.
二人相好（么呼儿嗨），
四喜来财（么呼儿嗨），
六六大顺（么呼儿嗨），
八仙庆寿（么呼儿嗨）。

In addition to drinking games, another custom related to drinking culture is toasting (jingjiu 敬酒). Individuals may toast each other, toast the group, or drink on behalf of someone else when that person is unable to drink for him/herself. Nowadays,
this toasting is often done through spoken word, sometimes involving a listing of reasons for the toast (i.e. stating that this is the first time the two individuals have met, praising the person, thanking them for some favor, etc.). Traditionally, individuals could also sing toasts to each other and to the host, although nowadays it is common in restaurant banquets to hire professional singers to perform such musical toasts.

The following such “toasting song” (jingjiu qu 敬酒曲) uses a melody originally from Inner Mongolia. Though such melodies were familiar to people in the area surrounding Wang’s hometown, given its close proximity to Inner Mongolia, Wang largely credits himself for introducing such melodies to the rest of northern Shaanxi and the Xi’an area.

“I Beg the Magnanimity of Our Host” 我请主人家多担待 (CD Track 27)

The second crop of Chinese leeks grows in full bunches,
It’s really hard for us to get together like this,
This cup of baijiu, please accept it,
Accept this baijiu and let’s have a good chat.
二茬茬韭菜（那）整（那）把把，
好不容易咱们遇到（那）一（了）搭搭，
这杯杯烧（那）酒（呀）你接下，
接下这烧（那）酒咱好（呀）好拉话。

A cup of baijiu and several dishes,
Thanks to our host for this warm reception,
I sing poorly, my voice is no good,
I beg the magnanimity of our host.
一杯杯（那）烧酒几碟碟（那）菜，
感谢咱主人家的好招待，
我唱的（那）不（那）好嗓子（那）赖，
我请（那）主人家您多（那）担待。
The close spacing of the second crop of Chinese leeks is comparing to the difficulty of assembling together the guests, and the connection between toasting, drinking, and talking freely is made explicit in the third and fourth lines of the first stanza. This again echoes Wang’s earlier comments about the use of drinking in deepening the feelings between individuals.

The second stanza, in addition to ritually thanking the host for the provisions, modestly claims that the singer has an awful voice. Ironically, like the rest of the singing, these lines are sung extremely well and at full volume. Here, we see echoes of Wang’s discussion of how individuals, unable to praise themselves, rely on each other to do it for them. This fits in well with Erving Goffman’s article, “On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction,” in which he posits that individuals will purposefully inflict damage to their own “face” in order to elicit others to respond by increasing their face through praise (Goffman 1967: 5-45).

While the ostensible purpose of drinking songs is to get banquet attendees to drink more, part of the singer’s job is to regulate the amount of drinking, as seen in the earlier discussion in the spirit medium tunes regarding the line “I urge the gods not to drink too much wine and tea.” Thus, in the following drinking song, the singer first praises the natural ingredients of baijiu and then warns of its potential noxious effects.

“I Urge You, Sir, to Drink Less” 我劝先生少饮酒 (CD Track 26)

Baijiu is made from, ya ha hei hei, the water of Five Grains, me yi ya hei,

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145 In this sense of the singer as supervisor, there is an interesting parallelism with lead singers of work songs in the past, who would essentially regulate the pace of labor (cf. Schimmelpenninck 1997: 41).
First it softens your arms, *ha hei hei*, and then it softens your legs, *hei ya hu hei*, *Eiiii!* Wine ruins a gentleman like water ruins a road, Even immortals can’t escape from the trap of liquor, I urge you, sir, *ai hei hei hei*, to drink less.

We might note, once again, the parallelism between people (“gentlemen”) and immortals in the third and fourth lines. The theme of singing used in the regulation and management of relations, between gods and humans alike, is further extended to different places and ethnic groups in the songs that follow.

**Mongol-Han Ditties**

Often referred to as “Mongol-Han ditties” (*Meng-Han diao* 蒙汉调) in northern Shaanxi, this song genre is generally considered to be most popular in the region known as Zhunge’erqi 淮格尔旗, the Jungar Banner in the easternmost part of the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia, where it is now called *manhandiao* 漫瀚调. This song genre is said to have evolved over time from Ordos Mongolian “short song” melodies (*duandiao* 短调), which were originally sung with fixed Mongolian lyrics, and later began to be sung in dialogue form with improvised Chinese lyrics, or a mixture of the two languages (E’erdunchaolu, et al. 1992: 1254-1277; Yang 2006: 70). Such mixed lyrics are nowadays poetically referred to as “wind mixing with snow” (*feng jiao xue* 风搅雪).
In writing about the history of this genre, Chinese scholars often frame it as evidence of “ethnic unity and cooperation” (E’erdunchaolu, et al. 1992: 20; YDW 1983), and there is often a narrative about how ethnic Mongols and Han, living in close proximity over a long period of time, began sharing their musical cultures and created this new genre together. One article writes, “Manhandiao’s coming-into-being is the crystallization of ethnic unity. It is an ‘exotic flower’ of art born through the continuous process of the blending of ethnic Mongol and ethnic Han folk culture” (Guo 2005: 75). The actual timeline of the history of this genre is unclear. Many scholars suggest it was formed sometime between the mid-19th and the early 20th centuries (Zhang 2005: 69), while at least one scholar believes that it took shape much later, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when Han suspicion of lyrics they couldn’t understand forced Mongolian singers to sing in Chinese.

The changing names surrounding this genre speak to a history that has developed over time. When Han migrants first arrived in Zhunge’erqi they called the Mongolian songs they heard “Mongolian tunes” (Menggu qu’er 蒙古曲儿) or “Mongolian short songs” (Menggu duandiao 蒙古短调). The various genres of regional songs that the Han brought with them were originally referred to by Mongolian singers as “mountain tunes” (shanqu’er 山曲儿), and that name is now still commonly used among the people to refer to songs sung in Chinese or a mixture of Chinese and Mongolian, many of which are based on earlier Mongolian tunes.\footnote{Nowadays, the genre is known as manhandiao 漫翰调, with the manhan sounding like the Mongolian word for “sand dunes,” and the Chinese characters used allude to a phrase meaning “vast and boundless.” These images refer to the geography of Zhunge’erqi, which is bordered by sand and deserts, and this term...}
Many of the villagers in Marugeda and the surrounding area would travel to and sometimes relocate to Inner Mongolia. Wang learned many of these songs from relatives who returned from Inner Mongolia for visits, as well as during summer trips he made to spend time with relatives in Inner Mongolia during the 1970s. He also worked for a while in an amateur *errentai* troupe in Inner Mongolia. Currently, he has several relatives, including an elderly aunt, who still live in Inner Mongolia.

While the first song below is not technically classified as a Mongol-Han tune, but rather a “mountain tune” (*shanqu* 山曲), it deals with issues of separation and reunion associated with the “going beyond the Western Pass” migratory cultural history. Thus, it is intimately connected with the ethnic interaction between Han Chinese and ethnic Mongols that provided the breeding ground for the development of Mongol-Han tunes. Whereas there are many songs about “going beyond the Western Pass” (see, for example, the *errentai* version above) that are usually tragic, this song focuses on the happiness associated with returning home to the one that one loves. Steeped in the memories of countless individuals who have left Wang’s home area for Inner Mongolia, this song has received a new layer of meaning in recent years. When Wang performs it on stage now, he points to Fugu’s rapid economic rise in the past few years, which he says has allowed those who left years ago due by poverty to return home.

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was heavily promoted by three influential scholars in the eighties and has become the official name of the genre after the national government named Zhunge’erqi as the “Heartland of Chinese Folk Art (Manhandiao)” in 1996.
“The One Who Has Walked Beyond the Western Pass Has Come Back”
走西口的人儿转回来（山曲）(CD Track 6)

Not at all big, ai hei, that little black horse, I feed it an extra two pints, A journey, ai hei, that’s three days—darling, I’ll make it in two.
不大大（哎嘿那个）小青马马那多喂上二升料，
三天的（哎嘿那个）路程（亲亲）我两（呀么）两天到。

The water flows, ai hei, a thousand li, dear, returning to the vast ocean, The one, ai hei, who has walked beyond the Western Pass, dear, I’ve turned around and come back.
水流流（哎嘿那个）千里（亲亲）归（呀那归）大海，
走西口（哎嘿那个）人儿（亲亲）我转（呀么转）回来。

Daqing Mountain, ai hei, is tall, dear, Wula Mountain, ai, is short, With a snap, ai hei, of the horse whip, dear, I return inside the Pass. With a snap, ai hei, of the horse whip, dear, I return inside the Pass.
大青山（哎嘿那个）高（来亲亲那）乌拉山（哎）低，
马鞭子（哎嘿那个）一甩（亲亲）我回（呀那回）口里。
马鞭子（哎嘿那个）一甩（亲亲）我回（呀么回）口里。

This was one of the songs that Wang chose to sing when he was invited back to his hometown area by the local government in December of 2011 for a New Year’s performance. Just like the nameless migrant farmworker embodied by the song’s persona, Wang too had returned after many years (see Chapter 3).

The next two songs are love songs—a typical theme for many of the Meng-Han tunes sung in northern Shaanxi.

“Happy in My Heart, A Smile on My Face” 心里头乐来脸脸上笑 (CD Track 33)

With happiness in my heart and a smile on my face, I can’t help but want to sing a Mongol-Han tune. Han little sister is pretty,
And Mongol older brother strikes a tall figure.
心里头乐来脸上笑，止不住想唱个蒙（了）汉调。
汉（那）家妹妹（怎）长得俏，蒙人哥哥（那）个头高。

You see your dear with fondness, I see Older Brother as a good person, Doing everything he can to be together with his Little Sister. Don’t be shy, I’m not ashamed, let’s go for a walk hand-in-hand to an out-of-the-way place.
你看亲亲亲（那）来我看哥哥好，一心一意和（那）妹妹交。
你不怕羞来我不害臊，咱手拉手在背圪佬佬走一遭。

The pine and cypress trees on Daqing Mountain have interconnected roots, Little Sister and I have interconnected hearts. Flesh sticks on bones and bones connect to tendons, in life and death we will never be separated. 
大青山松柏根连根，我和妹妹（那）心连心。
肉贴骨头骨连筋，要死要活咱永（那）不分。

In addition to the melody used for this song, various elements of its lyrics point to the embedded history of the border region that gave birth to these songs. The interethnic romance described in the first stanza belies the close proximity of both ethnic groups in this area, and Daqing Mountain was a key landmark for those who walked beyond the Western Pass. Thus, the “interconnected root” metaphor not only strengthens the overall theme of love, but also ties it to local place and history. The “camel” in the following love song also conjures up images of some of the desert land in Inner Mongolia, tying it to the land.

147 This “your dear” (qinqin 亲亲) is self-referential here to the singer, and could also be translated as “I” or “me.”
“You Are Older Brother’s Pretty-Eyed Gal” 你是哥哥的毛眼眼
(CD Track 34)

A long-necked camel, *ai le yo ai yo yo yo, ai le yo yo*, has, *ya*, spots, You are Older Brother’s, *ai le yo ai yo yo yo, ai yo ai yo*, pretty-eyed gal.*

长颈（那）骆（儿）（哎了哟哎哟哟哟哎哟）花（呀花）点点，
你是（那）哥哥的（哎了哟哎哟哟哟哎哟）毛（了）眼眼。

The second row of buttons, *ai hai yo ai yo yo yo, ai le yo yo*,
is stitched towards the heart,
You are the round button, *ai le yo ai yo yo yo, ai yo ai yo le*,
on Younger Sister’s bosom.
二道（那）扣子（哎嘿哟哎哟哟哟哎了哟哟）朝心（那个）缀，
你是（那）妹妹的（哎了哟哎哟哟哟哎哟）打（了）心锤。148

The sun rises in the sky, *ai hai yo ai yo yo yo, ai na yo yo*, a little dot of red,
You are the ache, *ai hai yo ai yo yo yo, ai yo ai yo na*, in Older Brother’s heart.
太阳（那）出来（哎嘿哟哎哟哟哟哎那哟哟）一点点（那）红，
你是（那）哥哥的（哎嘿哟哎哟哟哟哎哟）心（了）疼疼。

A shoulder pole, *ai hai yo ai yo yo yo, ai na yo yo*, is soft and trembles,
You are Younger Sister’s, *ai hai yo ai yo yo yo, ai yo ai yo na*, dear sweetheart.
一根（那）扁担（哎嘿哟哎哟哟哟哎那哟哟）软（呀软）颤颤，
你是（那）妹妹的（哎嘿哟哎哟哟哟哎哟）命（了）蛋蛋。

The big elm tree, *ai hai yo ai yo yo yo, ai na yo yo*, hairy bark,
You are Older Brother’s, *ai le yo ai yo yo yo, ai yo ai yo le*, delight.
大榆（那）树（哎嘿哟哎哟哟哟哎那哟哟）毛（呀毛）虫虫，
你是（那）哥哥的（哎嘿哟哎哟哟哟哎哟）吸（了）人人。
你是（那）哥哥的（哎嘿哟哎哟哟哟哎哟）吸（了）人人（哎）。

Wang himself put the following song arrangement together. While traditional

*manhandiao* singers in Inner Mongolia seem to have a strict rule that once started, one

must use the same melody for the remainder of a song, Wang chose to combine two

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148 In the old days in northern Shaanxi, handmade buttons were fashioned into small spheres, which would be passed through a fabric loop. The “heart button” (*xinchui*) refers to the button directly on top of one’s chest.
different melodies, shifting between the first and second stanzas. The “Two Mountain Ridges” in the title refers to the name of one of the melodies used (erdao geliang diao 二道圪梁调). Once again, this is a love song.

“Sing Our ‘Two Mountain Ridges’ Again” 再把咱二道圪梁唱上几声 (CD Track 35)

Warm up my voice, get it in tune, ai, Then sing a bit of our “Two Mountain Ridges.”
亮一亮（那个）嗓（啦）子我定一定（那个）音（哎）， 再把咱们（那个）二道圪梁（那）唱上（那）几声（啊）。

First, a mountain ridge, ai yo yo ai yo yo, second, a low-lying depression, Third, a mountain ridge, ai yo yo, ai de yo yo, let’s both ride horses together. 头一道圪梁（哎哟哟哎哟哟）二一道（那个）洼， 三一道（那个）圪（了）梁梁，（哎哟哟，哎得哟哟）咱双骑上马。

Second, there’s a mountain ridge, ai yo ai yo yo yo, third, there’s a gulley, In this spot, there’s no one, ai de yo yo, let’s kiss, In this spot, there’s no one, ai yo yo, ai de yo yo, let’s kiss. 二一道圪（了）梁（哎哟哟哎哟哟）三（了）道沟， 这哒哒（那个）没（了）人（哎得哟哟）咱亲（了）口口， 这哒哒（那个）没（了）人（哎哟哟，哎得哟哟）咱亲（了）口口。

The final stanza of this song shares a theme with “Happy in My Heart, A Smile on My Face” above—lovers searching for privacy, an “out-of-the-way place” beyond prying eyes. Taken together, the mountain tune and the three Mongol-Han ditties translated above all deal with aspects of love—coming together, returning together, and getting away together. However, it is a love firmly situated in the topography of the land and the history of its people.
The various genres presented here show us some of the diversity of the social and musical life in which Wang grew up. Different contexts, including temple festivals, home rituals for inviting the gods, drinking parties, etc., called for songs of different types with different contents. Using these songs as a window, we begin to see an outline of multiple facets of village life during the period when Wang was young—drinking culture and relationship management, folk belief, healing, and the hierarchy of the gods, historical interactions with other people and places, and more. One of the common denominators among all of these different songs seems to be the way in which they allow a singer, like Wang, to engage with past, present, and possibly future people, places, and gods.149

While in this chapter, I have attempted to relate Wang’s interpretations of the songs and their social backgrounds, the information covered tends toward the generalized memory and explanation. Dan Ben-Amos (1993) has suggested that there are two types of contexts for folklore: the “context of culture” and the “context of situation.” The “context of culture” appears to be closer to Wang’s interpretations as presented above (or at least they represent Wang’s vision [expressed on the occasions of our interviews] of the ‘context of culture’). Ben-Amos describes this as “the broadest contextual circle which embraces all other possible contexts” (Ben-Amos 1993: 216). It is “the reference to, and the representation of, the shared knowledge of speakers, their conventions of conduct, belief systems, language metaphors and speech genres, their historical awareness and ethical and judicial principles” (Ben-Amos 1993: 215-216).

149 Since Wang talked about how some of the gods were former ancestors, there is a more direct connection possible between deities and humans.
At the same time, we must consider the contexts of individual performances. Ben-Amos describes the “context of situation” as “the narrowest, most direct context” (Ben-Amos 1993: 216). This would include the specific time when the performance occurred, its physical location, who was present, and the reason that it was held (a deity’s birthday, ghost festival, funeral, etc.). Obviously, the two contexts (i.e. situation and culture) are interconnected. Sims and Stephens note, “Ben-Amos’ distinction between these narrow and broad perspectives demonstrates many overlapping contextual spheres” (Sims and Stephens 2005: 138). With that in mind, Chapter 3 will look at specific performances of songs by Wang on various occasions between 2011 and 2012, combining something of the “context of situations” with the “context of culture” provided in this chapter. Taken together, this chapter and the next will provide “bookends” of a sort for the remaining two chapters, which look at the transitional period that stretches from Wang’s childhood to the ethnographic present.
Chapter 3: Still So Much More to Say: Songs, Speech, People, and Places

During more than 10 months of fieldwork from 2011 to 2012, I observed and/or recorded Wang singing in over 14 performances. The performance contexts included weddings, business openings, Chinese New Year galas, Christmas concerts, hotel venues, government buildings, school anniversaries (both elementary school and university), and his elementary school classmate reunion. Two aspects of these performances are worthy of note: First, despite the wide variety of songs discussed in the previous chapter, each performance tended to include 2-4 songs selected from a group of 5 songs, with a couple of exceptions. Second, although known as a folksinger, Wang is a particularly eloquent speaker, and frequently spoke on stage before, after, and/or in between songs. Sometimes, these spoken interludes lasted a few minutes, and other times they developed into long speeches.

In this chapter, I attempt to do a close reading of Wang’s spoken introductions to his limited repertoire of actively performed songs, seeking to discern ways in which he adapts the multiform meaning of the songs to different contexts and different audiences. One issue that emerges is the way that Wang negotiates identity—local, regional, and national—back and forth as he jumps between social contexts. At times, he uses the “authentic flavor” of a local song to prove to his hometown audience that he hasn’t lost his roots, while the same song may signify something else during a performance in the
provincial capital. When he sings a song from another county in the region, he undercuts possible critiques of inauthenticity by playing up his regional credentials.

Through this examination, we can see a range of instances in which “traditional” Northern Shaanxi folksongs are performed and adapted in contemporary contexts. In addition to fleshing out the variety of possible meanings produced, this chapter also brings us up to date on the tensions and issues discussed during the process of social change, which will be described in Chapter 4.

**Issues of Representation**

There are various ways in which we might examine issues of representation, in terms of how Wang presents a persona on stage and rhetorically connects that persona to different geographical entities. One way is to look at instances of key words or phrases in his onstage speech. For example, the phrase “on behalf of” can be seen as a direct claim to symbolic representation of particular group, territory, etc. The word Wang uses to express this sense of “on behalf of” is daibiao 代表, which can be translated as “to represent,” “to stand for,” or “to symbolize.” Another related keyword can be variously translated as “to substitute for” or “to take the place of” (daiti 代替), in the sense of “standing in for something.” In addition, the notion of representation often implicitly suggests a certain authority or worthiness on behalf of the representative, and it is perhaps for this reason that words such as “real” or “authentic” (either didao 地道 or dididaodao 地地道道) often occur in the vicinity of the above terms of representation.
during Wang’s speeches on stage. Another related word is “truly” (shishizaizai de 实实在在), used in the sense of certain places “truly” existing—also a claim to authenticity.

On two occasions that I observed, both of which occurred in Fugu, Wang identified himself as representing Fugu people. At a midday banquet held for the opening of a new business, where the audience included several young bosses (laoban 老板) and their host of friends, Wang praised the rapid economic development Fugu had recently enjoyed, before introducing his American friend/student to sing several “Fugu folksongs” (Fugu min’ge 府谷民歌). After my performance, Wang said the following:

Dear elders and fellow villagers, on behalf of (daibiao) our Fugu people and on behalf of (daibiao) our elders and fellow villagers, I want to thank this young man. [applause] Because the fact that our songs can be loved by young generations of Americans or even generations to come, that means that our Fugu folksongs are unique and unparalleled in the world. Furthermore, our Fugu folksongs will go to the world arena! Yes, I will make sure that [the songs] are carried forward and that Fugu folksongs become global songs throughout the whole world. Wouldn’t that be even better? (emphasis added)

In this speech, Wang claimed himself as a representative of Fugu people in general, and the folk and elderly in particular, who might be considered as the standard bearers of

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150 Elsewhere, Wang would often tend to refer to them as “northern Shaanxi folksongs” (Shaanbei min’ge 陕北民歌), but on occasions more specifically directed towards the local Fugu audience, he would sometimes use this term to instill a sense of local pride.
tradition. This representation is enacted in relation to a perceived foreign/global presence, and, furthermore, Wang positions himself as the gatekeeper/transmitter to bring the local tradition (i.e. Fugu folksongs) to the global stage.

In the following excerpt, Wang was speaking at a wedding held in Fugu. Here, he initially framed himself as an individual in offering good wishes for Chinese New Year to the crowd. Given that the audience would have been mostly local, it would not have made sense for him to offer them such wishes on behalf of all Fugu people (especially since he does not live in Fugu). However, after offering good wishes to the bride and groom, he delineates his role as a representative of the older generation of Fugu people—an appropriate group that he can represent in offering blessings on a new marriage:

Greetings, relatives and fellow villagers. First of all, on behalf of (daibiao) myself, I would like to wish everyone an early Happy Chinese New Year, and to wish everyone an auspicious Year of the Dragon. Thank you all. ... [Lists wishes for the bride and groom, etc.] ... This is my blessing as a Fugu person of the older generation to the younger generation. Thank you all. (emphasis added)

In claiming various types of authority, Wang points to both his cultural authenticity and his age. In several of the performances I observed, Wang would allude to his age and/or explicitly mention that he was now sixty years old. Often, he would modestly say that he couldn’t sing as much as he used to when he was young, but his spirit was still that of a
young man. This element of age, with its associated connotations of wisdom and authority, could be combined with Wang’s presentation of cultural authenticity.¹⁵¹

In the following example, Wang was performing in a large-scale, televised Chinese New Year’s gala performance held in Mei County 眉县, Baoji City 宝鸡市, located in the western part of central Shaanxi (guanzhong 关中). No longer in Northern Shaanxi, he reverted to broader territorial claims in his representation, in part due to his apparent assumption that the local audience from central Shaanxi would be less familiar with the geography of Northern Shaanxi:

There are many songs that I want to sing. It just depends on whether or not the people of Mei County like Northern Shaanxi folksongs. [applause] [Wang laughs] First of all, on behalf of (daibiao) our Northern Shaanxi elders, I wish a Happy Chinese New Year to the elders, local people, and villagers of Mei County, the leaders, and the friends out there sitting in front of their televisions! (emphasis added)

我的歌多着呢。看咱们眉县的人民喜欢不喜欢这陕北民歌。[LAUGHS] [APPLAUSE] 那，我首先代表我们陕北的父老们也向咱眉县的父老乡亲、乡党们、领导们、电视机前的朋友们，大家过年好！

Unlike the aforementioned wedding in Fugu (which occurred the following day), where Wang could only offer New Year’s wishes from himself as an individual, here, he felt comfortable enough in representing the entire region of Northern Shaanxi. His specific mention that he is representing the elder generation of Northern Shaanxi people can be

¹⁵¹ CedarBough Tam Saeji, who has done research on traditional Korean dance performers, has talked about the idea of “age as a marker of authenticity,” and how the old age of a performer may, in the audience’s imagination, link them to the past, feeding into a nostalgic desire for history (Saeji 2013).
understood as combining his claims to age and cultural authority in order to be more
rhetorically persuasive and meaningful.

While it initially might seem that Wang claims a “Northern Shaanxi” identity only when outside of his home region, he also puts forward such claims when among audiences composed primarily of Northern Shaanxi people. At a wedding held in Xi’an where the bride and groom’s families were both from different parts of northern Shaanxi (Qingjian 清涧 and Zizhou 子洲), Wang used his claims to a broader geographical identity to bridge the gap between subregional differences and thus assume authority:

Thank you! Thank you! Dear fellow villagers, friends, and relatives from our Qingjian, from Zizhou, and all of those from Xi’an, good day to you! I [am speaking] both on behalf of (daibiao) of the groom’s family and on behalf of (daibiao) the bride’s family. Why? Because I am a real (didao de) Northern Shaanxi person. Our dear friends and relatives are here together with us to witness the happiness of the newlywed couple. I am extremely moved and very happy. Seeing everyone, I feel a deep familiarity and affection, so I wanted to come to help liven things up for everyone. There’s a lot I would like to say, but due to time constraints, I’ll use my song to represent (daibiao) my words and my conversation with everyone. Thank you all! (emphasis added)

谢谢！谢谢！各位老乡，咱们清涧的、子洲的、还有咱们西安所有的亲朋好友，大家中午好。额......既代表婆家又代表娘家。为啥？额是一个地道的陕北人。咱们这么好的亲朋好友和我们共同见证这小两口的新婚之喜。额非常激动，也非常高兴。看见大家可亲了，所以呢，额来给大家助个兴。有好多话想说，由于时间关系，那么，只用我的歌去代表我的语言和大家拉话的内容。谢谢大家！

His role as a “real” northern Shaanxi person bridges the gap between subregional distinctions between the two families involved (ignoring the fact that Wang is from a third, separate locality) and rhetorically brings him a level of perceived intimacy with the
entire audience. The issue of representation is then taken to another level. No longer is it just a person (i.e. Wang) representing a place (i.e. northern Shaanxi, Fugu, etc.), but now we have the idea of song representing the words that person would say if there was enough time. Wang frequently uses this trope of song expressing what words cannot in connection with the song “Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk,” discussed below.

In a second instance where Wang claimed to represent northern Shaanxi people, similar to the above bridging over subregional differences, it also seems to allow for a glossing over of any such differences and possible contradictions that may arise. This excerpt occurred when Wang introduced the song, “The East Is Red” ("Dongfang hong") to a group of bankers at a large annual company banquet in a fancy hotel in Yulin city. The song is commonly known to have originated in Jiaxian, one of the counties in northern Shaanxi. Since Wang is from another county, Fugu, his singing of the song could potentially be critiqued for a lack of local authenticity. Sensing this, Wang preemptively formulated a challenge for both himself and the audience—to see how authentically he could sing the song:

Everyone see how authentic (lit. “thick”) my Jiaxian flavor is. I am from Fugu, I should make that clear, but I am still... almost the same. When people ask where [I am from], I am a real (didao de) northern Shaanxi person. In fact, I am a real (didao de) Northern Shaanxi person, although I can’t represent other northern Shaanxi people. Thank you all. (emphasis added)

大家看我的佳县味道浓不浓。我是府谷人，首先说明，但是我还......差不多。人家问是哪，我是地道的......陕北人。其实呢，俺就是地道的陕北人，谁也代替不了。谢谢大家。

ADD something about Shijing – feeling, words, poem, song, dance progression.
Once again, the “northern Shaanxi” identity is used rhetorically to trump any subregional differences. While his ability to sing local Jiaxian songs could potentially be criticized as “not authentic” (bu didao 不地道), his larger claim as an “authentic” or “real” northern Shaanxi person offsets this. Unlike the previous example at the wedding where Wang said his northern Shaanxi identity made him worthy of representing everyone (both families, even though they were from different localities), here Wang offers some preemptive modesty, in order to defuse any potential criticisms that he is reaching beyond his proper geographical boundaries by trying to sing a song from a county outside of his own. However, in both cases, Wang appears to revert to the broader regional identity in order to avoid potential tensions rooted in different localities.

The unique, representable yet un-representable idea of northern Shaanxi is complemented by another, extreme notion of locality—the village in which Wang was born and grew up, Marugeda. Although likewise suffering from a difficulty in representation, Wang similarly makes claims to its authenticity and uniqueness, and extends those claims to surrounding Xinmin Town:

Our Xinmin, it is a part of China’s territory. Furthermore, it is a part that can’t be substituted for (daiti) by any other place. I often say that although the characters for Marugeda are not written on the globe, on any map, but it truly (shishizaizai de) exists. So then, our Xinmin also truly (shishizaizai de) exists. It exists on this piece of land in China, and furthermore, now it has developed so well. (emphasis added)

我们新民,它是中国土地的一块儿呀,而且是不可哪儿都不可代替的一块。我常说马茹疙瘩虽然在地球上,那个地图上,不写那几个字着,但是它实实在在存在,那么我们新民也就实实在在存在。在这个中国这块儿土地上存在着,而且呢,现在发展得这么好。
While clearly both notions—the regional (i.e. northern Shaanxi) and the local (e.g. Marugeda, Xinmin, etc.)—are constructed, “imagined” communities, Wang often feels compelled to emphasize their purity, their authenticity. Marugeda truly exists. Wang is a real northern Shaanxi person. The sense that these adverbs and adjectives give is that of a solid—read valuable—entity, appealing in its virtue and integrity.

One major means by which this essence, either local or regional, is expressed, is through performances that are perceived as embodying an authentic flavor (weir 味儿 or weidao 味道). We already saw above how Wang felt the need to preemptively defend his ability to authentically perform a rendition of “The East Is Red” with “Jiaxian flavor” (Jiaxian weidao 佳县味道). This is an example of one of two ways in which Wang uses the idea of “flavor” in the introduction of certain songs in certain contexts—claiming to be able to perform local songs from within his perceived region (northern Shaanxi), but outside of his own locality (Marugeda). In another performance, the opening of a hotel in Dingbian 定边, located in northwestern Shaanxi, Wang noted the fact that the song “Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk” originated in that area. After first singing “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River,” he said:

Thank you everyone. Next, I’m not leaving yet. I’ll also sing a real (dididaodao de) [one] that everyone has heard before (ershunengxiang de). Most importantly, it is a Sanbian folksong (Sanbian minge), a Dingbian, Jingbian folksong.

“Sheep stomach head rag with three lines of blue / It’s easy to see each other [but] hard to talk.” This is a Sanbian folksong. So, since today I have come to the

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153 Sanbian 三边 (lit. “three bian”) refers to three counties along the northwestern border of northern Shaanxi: Dingbian 定边, Jingbian 靖边, and Anbian 安边 (san 三 means “three” and each of the counties’ names end in the character bian 边, meaning “border” or “frontier”).
Sanbian area, I will present this song to our Sanbian elders, and ask the Sanbian elders to give their critique of me, to see whether or not what I sing has the **Sanbian flavor** (*Sanbian de weidao*). Thank you all. (emphasis added)

Out of the ten performances I witnessed where he sang this song, this was the only one where he mentioned its geographical provenance (and also the only performance I was able to observe him give in the Sanbian area). Much more often, he would relate the song’s title to his wish to have more time to chat with the audience.

In both cases—Jiaxian flavor and Sanbian flavor—Wang claims to be able to sing them authentically, while at the same time posing such a feat as a challenge. The rhetorical pattern used in both cases is similar to an instance of another way Wang used the concept of “flavor” in his introductions—claiming to have maintained his local Fugu authenticity. At the opening of a business in the county town of Fugu, Wang chose a song that he introduced as steeped in local flavor to end the outside section of his performance. After spending the earlier part of his performance projecting his local Fugu credentials to the audience, he now set up a rhetorical test for the audience, similar to those described above:

Last, I’ll sing for everyone *a cappella* our Fugu “mountain tune” (*shanqur*), “Yaosanbai.” Everyone listen and see, after I have been away for this many years, whether [I] have lost the **Fugu flavor** (*Fugu weidao*) or not. If I haven’t lost it,
everyone can clap again for me and it won’t be too late. If I’ve lost it, then don’t [clap]. Right. Thank you all. (emphasis added)

最后啊，再给大家哼哼上两声咱们府谷的山曲儿《摇三摆》，清唱给大家。大家听我看这多少年在外面，这府谷味道跑了没有。如果没跑了，大家再给我掌声不迟，抛了你就不要了。嗯。谢谢大家啊。

This notion of “losing flavor” seems to haunt singers like Wang, who often have left their home areas to join urban troupes and perform in other places. Earlier we saw the scholar Huo Xianggui’s concern over this issue, as well as Wang’s discussion that his accent may have changed somewhat after spending time with troupe members from other areas of Shaanxi. Another famous Chinese folksinger, now deceased, Zhu Zhonglu 朱仲禄 (1922-2007), is said to have also experienced a similar anxiety after spending a long time performing in an urban context, periodically returning back home to keep up his ties and nourish his art (Zhang 2004: 51).

One thing that is interesting about these claims to authentic flavor is that they change in response to different audiences and different locations. Whereas Wang introduces “Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk” as a Sanbian folksong when performing in Dingbian, when performing the same song for a group of elementary school students and teachers at a ten-year school anniversary in Xi’an, he referred to it as a “real, pure northern Shaanxi song” (didao de Shaanbei chunzheng de ge 地道的陕北纯正的歌).

Likewise, whereas elsewhere he claimed that “The East Is Red” was a Jiaxian folksong and “The Ninety-Nine Bends of the Yellow River” came from the Suide region, when performing those songs at a wedding in Shenmu (the county neighboring Fugu), he
referred to those two songs as “two of our real Shen-Fu songs” (*liang shou zan didao de Shen-Fu minge 献两首咱地道的神府民歌*). Like Suide and Mizhi, Shenmu and Fugu are often grouped together when discussing the various subregions of northern Shaanxi. While the latter two may share certain linguistic and cultural similarities with each other, there may also be certain animosities between the two, some of which may or may not be related to differences in economic development. A closer look at Wang’s introduction to the two songs at the wedding suggests that something of his own positioning may have influenced the geographical terminology he chose to use:

This morning I rushed back [to northern Shaanxi] from Xi’an especially for this occasion. Today is a good day, a happy day for our country, and also a good day that everyone here is paying attention to together. So, I have come back to present two of our real Shen-Fu songs. The feelings of the people, the feelings of the land, the feelings of the mountains, the feelings of the rivers—seeing our Shenmu and Fugu people, I feel such an affection and closeness. This is truly a fact.

From this excerpt, it is readily apparent that Wang is attempting to build up rhetorical intimacy with his audience, both those from Shenmu and those, like himself, from Fugu. The term “Shen-Fu folksong” serves to further stress a sense of shared heritage, like the poetic descriptions of feeling-evoking natural landscapes that surround them. Once again, three key elements are mentioned in one breath: people, land, and songs.

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154 Shen-Fu refers to the two counties, Shenmu 神木 and Fugu 府谷.
Representing Fugu

Of the performances that I observed during my fieldwork, Wang’s longest speeches on stage occurred in his home county of Fugu. I have chosen three of the lengthiest speeches to translate and discuss below, all of which deal to a certain degree with issues of what it means to be from Fugu and how that has changed since Wang was young. The three contexts—his first elementary school classmate reunion since the disruption of the Cultural Revolution, a New Year’s gathering held by the local Xinmin township government near his home village, and the opening of a new footbath/massage establishment in Fugu County Town—all involved the evoking of local identity, but tailored in each case to the unique makeup of the audience. In the first, there were former classmates, teachers, and fellow villagers. In the second, the audience included local government officials and prominent community members. In the third, there was a combination of Fugu County townspeople, employees of the new business, owners of the media company that hired Wang to perform at the occasion, and the owners of the new business, together with their friends.

Certain themes run throughout the three speeches. These include the poverty of the past as contrasted with the area’s present wealth, issues of leaving versus returning, past invisibility and shame versus present hyper-visibility and pride of place, and Wang’s relation to all these factors. Rather than addressing individual issues by looking at isolated excerpts, I have chosen to translate the entire speeches below, prefaced by a description of each performance context, so that the reader can observe how each theme flows naturally into the next during the emergent process of a public speech.
While speeches and songs might be considered as belonging to separate realms, scholars have suggested that different genres provide channels for different types of information (Bauman 2004: 7; Cashman 2011: 311), and Bauman suggests that the combination of various genres (e.g. speech and song) can add to an underlying message, whereby “the performative management of generic intertextuality and other modes of contextualization may be seen as parts of a unified expressive accomplishment in a specific oral performance” (Bauman 2004: 16). In this sense, the juxtaposition of Wang’s speeches and songs can be seen as one continuous performance in which he says different things through different means (cf. Bauman and Briggs 1990).

Not all folksong performers choose to add in speeches. By combining the two, Wang is able to elaborate more fully on the messages he wished to convey to each audience, while interacting more intimately with them. In the first performance, Wang saw the audience as old friends, and felt comfortable beginning directly with a speech, which was also more appropriate given the classmate reunion context. In the other two contexts, which were more public and formal in nature, Wang began by performing “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River,” which effectively evoked the local Yellow River culture, but in a dramatic, large-scale way that was appropriate even for national stages (the recorded version he used for the performance, which including his singing in a studio, had been taken from his MTV video). One could see the choice of this song to begin with as not only providing a dramatic start to the performance, but also appealing to the audiences’ pride in place, while at the same time firmly positioning Wang’s career and history of performances as an integral part of that pride.

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In all three speeches, Wang found ways to identify with the audience, emphasize shared roots and culture, and then outline a narrative of historical progress and praise for place. After each of the three initial speeches, Wang chose to sing “Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk,” a song that I will examine later on, which purportedly showed Wang’s desire to engage in intimate conversation with the audience, albeit in a heightened, performative manner.

**Elementary School Classmate Reunion**

On March 27, 2012, one of Wang’s former elementary school classmates, who had since become a wealthy coal boss, decided to put on a special reunion, contingent upon Wang’s attendance. In the weeks leading up to the gathering, Wang frequently spoke of the classmate reunion (tongxue juhui 同学聚会) with apparent anticipation. He hadn’t seen many of his classmates since their school was closed down at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Now, forty-six years later, they would meet once again.

When we arrived at the Yulin airport, one of his former classmates picked us up. Walking out the front door of the airport, the usual group of taxi and private drivers rushed up to offer their services, only to recognize Wang and slink back, with a wave and a respectful, “Teacher Wang.” They know by now that he always gets picked up when he returns.

On the drive over, Wang wondered aloud who would show up, hinting that some who had suffered during the Cultural Revolution might not. Arriving around noon, about
fifty older men and two women—sisters, whom Wang immediately recognized—had already gathered. Like Wang, these “old children” (Wang’s term) were all either already or about to turn sixty. There were smiles all around, but the event was bittersweet. Although the coal boss and Wang had managed to become successful, it seemed that the majority of the classmates had stayed life-long peasants. After the school had closed, unable to receive a high school diploma, there had been no other option for many of them.

The coal boss classmate rented out a hotel banquet hall and several rooms for long distance guests, and Wang spent the better part of the afternoon catching up with everyone. In the evening, there were even more people, family members included, and a small stage complete with sound system was set up. Wang sat at a table with the host, their former teachers, and a party secretary. Many speeches were given, various singers gave performances, and Wang gave a long speech. Mine was far from the only video camera documenting this event. The host had hired a videography crew to document the event and produce customized DVDs for all the attendees. He also elicited written personal histories of each classmate, which he planned to have compiled into a commemorative book. As Wang and others sang and spoke, there were also many in the audience recording the performances on their iPhones.

This is how Wang began speaking to his former classmates and former teachers, forty-six years after they had last met:

Esteemed Teacher Wei, esteemed Teacher He, esteemed Teacher Wang, esteemed Teacher He, and also Teacher He I saw here somewhere, our esteemed party
secretary, Party Secretary Yang... dear friends, fellow villagers, since we were little, all of us classmate grew up together, and being able to meet together here with everyone today, there are endless things I have to say, but in order to save time, I will just say a few things.

First, I want to thank XX for arranging to get together our old classmates from the class of 1966, these “old children” (lao ertongmen). [audience laughs] This year we are all over sixty, I checked. So, over forty years have passed, and we are able to meet here again. [Thanks the coal boss classmate who has taken the initiative to arrange the gathering.] I, as an old classmate, as the student of these respected teachers, have rushed back here from Xi’an. [Mentions that the organizer made Wang’s attendance a requisite for holding the event.] I said, given these circumstances, even if I was beaten to death, I would still come back for this. No matter how busy things are, I absolutely had to come back. Today’s date was chosen by me, so I thank everyone—at the ages of sixty, seventy, and eighty—for meeting together with our friends, fellow villagers, and most respected teachers. Really. First of all, I want to bow deeply to each of our teachers. Next, I bow again to each of our friends and classmates. Thank you all.

Next, I want to say... there is so much I want to say, but let’s all take a walk later and keep talking. There are endless things to say, but I will use my song... Everyone knows that Wang Xiangrong is a singer. In fact, those people who know me, and our classmates all know this—this singing of his was out of necessity. It was a way out for someone with no way out. Today, I told Teacher He, never mind the Cultural Revolution, as for Mao Zedong, I see him with both love and hate. Love because he was a great man. He really made an enormous contribution to New China’s Liberation. But then, he also did something terrible, and that was to make people struggle against each other. For over ten years, those who were most affected were our generation. We were caught in between—not early enough to succeed beforehand or late enough to catch up afterwards. So then, this generation is almost all peasants. I also spent half my life as a farmer, until later I had no choice but to leave. Being able to sing my way out, sure, I found a way to leave. …

At that time, everyone here knows what the living circumstances were like. With no other option, I used singing as a gateway to success and fame. Later on, our fellow Fugu people said that Wang Xiangrong brought honor to Fugu. I say, [laughing] …you can’t say I brought honor to it. I brought the mentality and character of Fugu people—what they use now in music conservatories and universities is from the blood of generations of fellow Fugu people living on this plot of land—using my words and my voice to convey this to those on the outside.

What is greatness? What is uniqueness? The more local something is, the closer it is to the people (minjian), the more it belongs to the entire world. I often say that with Fugu, maybe you can [find it on a map]. Marugeda, you will never ever find it on any map, but Marugeda, this place, does exist. You can’t say that just because you can’t find it on a map that this place doesn’t exist.
So then, this is a local thing. As for me, wherever I go, people say, "You should sing pop songs. That earns a lot of money." Sure, those people [i.e. pop singers] get performance fees of hundreds of thousands or millions. Wang Xiangrong cannot... it's not to say I am unable to sing those songs, with my big voice, if I were to sing these pop songs nowadays, even without trying I could sing them. I am completely able to do so, but I didn’t take that road, because I am the son of peasants (yige nongmin de erzi). I am a Fugu person. I only want to take my Fugu things and use them so that outsiders to get to know Fugu, to see our northern Shaanxi, to see our Marugeda. Thank you all. Next, I will sing, "Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk." Thank you all. (emphasis added)

尊敬的魏老师、尊敬的贺老师、尊敬的王老师、尊敬的贺老师、还有何老师我在那儿看见了……尊敬的我们的老党委书记杨书记……亲爱的各位朋友、各位老乡，最重要的是: 打娃娃出生，咱们在一块儿杨家的这一伙子同学，额能和大家紧紧的在这里相遇，有说不完的话，但是为了节省时间，额只讲几句。第一，感谢 XX 发起，把咱们六六届这些老同学、老儿童们 [LAUGHS], 今年都已经年过花甲了，我问了一下。那，四十几年过去了，又能在这儿相会，感谢他的发起，其次感谢咱的这个 XX，额们叫 XX，我叫 XX 我那个最亲，也最实在。所以啊，他，在这里给我们做坚强的后盾，给大家创造了这么好的一个平台。额，作为老同学，作为这几位尊敬的老师的学生，那么，从西安赶回来。当时，咱们的 YY，我听 ZZ 给我说，说是，向荣必须得回来，如果他不回来额就不办了。额说有这么个情况了，那么我就打死也要回来。所以啊，额就，无论怎么紧张，我要赶回来。这日子是我定的。感谢咱各位朋友，感谢各位老乡，感谢我们最最尊敬的各位老师能在年过花甲这个年龄，七十几、八十，能和大家相聚。真的，我在这里，首先向各位老师深深得鞠一躬。其次下来，我给各位朋友们、同学们再鞠上一躬。谢谢大家。

下面那，额要讲……有好多话呀，咱在转转上拉，有说不完的话，但是我用这个歌……谁也知道王向荣现在是个唱歌的，其实能了解我的人、我们班上的同学都知道了，他这唱歌是逼上梁山，是没办法的办法才唱出来。我今年给贺老师说，我说如果不用文化大革命，毛泽东我看见是又爱是又恨，嗯，爱的是他是一代伟人。他确实为新中国的解放，他的贡献是不小的。那么，他做了一件最大的坏事啊，就是啊，人斗人，整整斗了十几年。最受影响的也就是我们这一代人。我们这一代人是前赶不上前，后赶不上后。所以呢，这代人几乎全是农民。我也当了半辈子农民，后来没办法来，真的，还能唱歌所以我就出格来，嗯，想办法出格来。所以，这就是说，我对这个……当时，咱们在这个生活的那个环境大家都知道了。所以，是没办法，我在通过唱歌跳出龙门。后来，府谷老乡们说王向荣给咱府谷人争光了。我说， [LAUGHS] 这个是……不是说争光，额是把它，府谷人的心理、府谷人的性格...嗯，这个学院里边用的就是府谷这一块儿土地上祖祖辈辈生活的这个府谷老乡的这个血。嗯，用我的语言，用我的声音，表达给外面。什么是伟大的？什么是独一无二的？越是地方，越是民间，越就是世界的。我
常说府谷还可以，马茹疙瘩你在地图上永远找不到，但是马茹疙瘩这个地方就存在着呢，你不能说地图上找不到就没这么个地方。

所以，这个就是地方的东西。我呢，不管走哪里，人家说你唱流行歌，你唱通俗歌，那些挣钱。对，人家现在出场费几十万、上百万。王向荣不能……不说是我不唱了，我那个大嗓子要是唱它现在那些流行啊，额就不用嗓子就随便都可以用。我完全可以的，但是我没走这一条路，因为我是一个农民的儿子。我是府谷人。我只要拿我府谷的东西让你外面了解府谷，看咱们陕北，看咱马茹疙瘩。谢谢大家。下面，额把《羊肚肚手巾三道道蓝，咱见面面容易》[LAUGHS]拉话话实在难》，谢谢大家，哦。

Wang gave this speech in front of over fifty former classmates, many of whom had remained peasants their entire lives. They had shared the experiences of poverty during a difficult past, but had stayed, while Wang left. It seems that Wang feels the need to justify his rationale for leaving. On the one hand, he argues for the extreme difficulties of poverty, from which he was merely trying to escape. The majority of the audience, while they may not have been able to do the same, can at least identify with said suffering. On the other hand, Wang feels the need to further justify his leaving—he was not merely abandoning his home, but bringing the mentality and character of the Fugu people to share with those on the outside. This links to issues of the invisibility of small places—those that cannot be found on maps—and Wang presents his own self, his career, and the songs he sings as a means through which to affirm that such places exist, and to make them visible. He reaffirms his roots, stating that he is a Fugu person and the “son of peasants,” foregrounding and underlining a pride in place, while at the same time valorizing the choice he made to leave many years ago, so his efforts have helped the image of the place that he left.
In the following speech, many similar issues are broached, such as pride in place, leaving and returning, and (in)visibility, but the increased presence of government officials and prominent local entrepreneurs appears also to have influenced Wang’s words.

New Year’s Gathering at Xinmin Township Government

After having returned late the night before from another performance, Wang took an early flight from Xi’an to Yulin. Once there, he was driven to the government headquarters of Xinmin township, to which his hometown, Marugeda village, belonged. We arrived shortly before noon, and were ushered up a flight of stairs to a packed meeting room with rows of tables and chairs facing a medium-sized stage at the other end. This event was officially a “New Year’s” (yuandan 元旦) gathering, as indicated on a sign projected on the backdrop of the stage, although its close proximity to the approaching Chinese New Year seemed to hold a certain resonance, and its actual occurrence on Christmas Day, December 25, although not officially mentioned (except by Wang, see below), was also suggested by the presence of a small, fake Christmas tree placed on the left-hand side of the stage. An ambience of “festivity” was visually present in the air.

As Wang mentions in his speech, which I translate below, this was the first time since leaving Xinmin to become a professional singer in Yulin over thirty years ago that the local government had formally invited him back to attend this yearly gathering for local Xinmin notables and those who were now living in other places.
Beginning and ending with a recurrent theme of returning, this was one of the longest on-stage speeches I witnessed Wang give. He praises the region’s recent economic success, while placing it within a historical context of past poverty and invisibility, contrasted with present wealth and media coverage. This leads him to look to the future and ruminate on issues of staying and leaving, a theme that appears to have particular social relevance, both in Wang’s life and the lives of the audience members who were present.

Dear elders and fellow villagers, dear friends and relatives, and also our beloved “father-mother officials” (fumuguan), the New Year is almost here, so I wanted to wish you a happy new year. Today is also a foreign holiday for those foreigners, “Christmas.” So, already a couple of weeks ago, our town head contacted me and said that every year our Xinmin has a gathering, and all of the Xinmin people who have left and all of the prominent community members in Xinmin—the cream of every profession, outstanding figures—all meet together here, and he asked if I could come back. I said of course. In fact, if you all provide such an opportunity every year I would be even happier. I left over thirty years ago, and this is the first time that our town political commissar, town Communist Party committee, and town government formally invited me to participate in this gathering at Shagoucha.

Over behind Shagoucha, when they were laying the foundation, I was there using a pickax to prepare the ground. So, speaking frankly, no matter how high you soar or how far you go, nothing is more familiar than your own villagers. The moon is still the roundest here at home, and people are the most dear as well. Mountains—no matter whether they are luxuriant green with flowing water or desolate slopes of yellow earth—to me, the mountains here always look the best.

I often say when traveling—I’ve been to over fifteen... twenty-something countries—after I went to America a couple years ago, which is said to be the biggest, most powerful nation... I have been to many, many countries, and performed on a lot of big stages, but when I dream, I don’t dream about anywhere else—I just dream about Xinmin. When I sing errentai, I think of that old stage (lao xitai) in Xinmin. When I dream of people, those who are no longer here and

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155 A popular term for a county magistrate, here Wang uses it to address the local officials.
156 The town where Xinmin’s government offices are located.
those who are still here, I just dream about these people. In the outside, no matter how many talented people there are, I never dream about them. They don’t have much to do with me. This is the reason.

So, this area of land in Xinmin has raised generations of Xinmin people on this land. So, when I see this land, although I don’t come back often, but I value it tremendously. Every day in the news media, in the newspaper, I see how Xinmin has developed and how Fugu has developed. Last year, I saw our Fugu is now one of the top hundred counties in the nation. In the past, Shenmu County [the neighboring county] was stronger than us, but last year, suddenly our Fugu became stronger than them! It was so sudden, I was shocked... [audience laughter]

Hahaha, let’s see. I am a Xinmin person. I am a Fugu person. Back then, I didn’t have enough to eat or enough clothes to keep out the cold. Why did I leave? In fact, it’s not that Wang Xiangrong has a great skill at making a living, no. At that time, due to my family’s poverty... At that time, this place of ours, due to various reasons, hadn’t yet begun to develop. This place was poor, you could also say, and I wanted to try my best to “jump out of the Dragon Gate” [i.e. travel to another place to seek professional development], to see how things were in the outside. Well, honestly, after I left and began to “eat from the public rice bowl” (chi gongjia na yi wan fan), what do you know, after all these years, Shagoucha and Xinmin have moved heaven and earth. All those former laborers from the past are now trillionaires. I’m jealous, but being jealous does no good, since I can’t come back now. I can’t come back, but my heart is here. Although I can’t come back, now our Xinmin has this many entrepreneurs—old entrepreneurs, new entrepreneurs, small entrepreneurs—and furthermore, I often say, Xinmin is ours and it is also yours, but at the end of the day, it is yours. [audience laughter]

Yes... our Town Head Li called me. I had a thought. I felt that this generation of leaders in the town government and the town Communist Party committee, their ideas and thinking have improved and been upgraded. Why do they hold a gathering every year together with those Xinmin people who have left, a chance to exchange thoughts and feelings, to link together politics, economics, and culture?

Our Xinmin, it is a part of China’s territory. Furthermore, it is a part that can’t be substituted for by any other place. I often say that although the characters for Marugeda are not written on the globe, on any map, but it truly exists. So then, our Xinmin also truly exists. It exists on this piece of land in China, and furthermore, now it has developed this well. So, to be frank, I a great

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157 The term “jump through the Dragon Gate” (tiao longmen 跳龙门) traditionally meant to pass the civil-service examinations in pre-modern times, but Wang uses it here more colloquially to refer to trying his luck at a career away from home.

158 i.e. work on the government payroll (after he joined the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe).

159 This is based on a speech Mao Zedong gave in 1957 (cf. [http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/7955/7958/20020422/714354.html](http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/7955/7958/20020422/714354.html) [accessed April 14, 2013]).
deal of hope for this generation of our leaders, and given the way they run things, my heart is at ease. I am their older generation. They call me... Town Head Li calls me, “Uncle, uncle.” That made me very happy.

[I hope that] the generation after me, and the generation after that produce more officials. The more officials the better, and the higher the positions the better. When I say this, many people might say you don’t have any political position, but in fact, I am now a committee member in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (Zheng-Xie). Although I don’t hold the power of the Communist Party, but I do have the authority to offer advice and make suggestions to the Communist Party.

In fact, this generation of young people are now leading the generations of elders and fellow townsmen in their hometown. If we can stick together and make joint efforts [literally, “twist different fibers into a single rope”], our hearts and minds will become united in our thoughts and feelings, and our strength and energy will come to be used together, including entrepreneurs, like XX. These are my two brothers-in-law [gestures to them in the audience]—him and his eldest maternal uncle. I said I am your second eldest uncle... [audience laughter].

Now, we are familiar with each other. I also know... every day I read the newspaper. The People’s Congress representatives—every year when the “Two Meetings” (liang hui) are held—we are over there at Zhangbagou, and they are over here at the People’s Mansion. Every year during the Two Meetings we often meet with each other, these people who have also left Xinmin. No matter whether they deal with business, politics, or all sorts of things, they always come out. Day after day and year after year, they emerge in a rush, group after group after group. So then, those of us in the older generation feel that Xinmin has hope. Fugu has hope. The next generation has hope.

Now, our natural resources—they have a limit. I heard XX and others, with Xinmin headed by XX, they say it’s not just about mining coal. After the coal is mined, you have to find a way to convert what has been mined into our own wealth. Now, this area of ours is a large county, and he wants to spend the money earned on this area of land in Xinmin. Tackling the problem in a comprehensive way, working in a comprehensive way for Xinmin, making the contributions that businesses and entrepreneurs should make. I heard that a new farming village has been constructed, and the people have been moved there. Those who needed to move have been moved, and those that needed assistance have gotten assistance. What I’m trying to say is, after these natural resources have run out, the younger generations of people shouldn’t leave for the outside. Even I regret that I left. So, our next generation, and the generations to come shouldn’t leave Xinmin, this area of land. At this time, the responsibility now belongs to our town’s Communist Party Committee, the town government, and the next group [of officials] and the following groups. The weight on the shoulders of you leaders is very heavy. It’s not as simple as just digging up coal pits. After it has all been dug up, you still have to fill it back up again. And then, the water, the roads, the mountains, you have make them green again, so that we
preserve the ecological balance, so that generations upon generations of our people will live peaceful, happy, and harmonious lives. This is the big project, a big project spanning many generations. Having already started from now, I am extremely gratified...

Now then, in terms of cultural affairs, if Xinmin, if Fugu needs me to contribute for everyone by pulling some strings and roping in some people, I might be able to figure out some ways to help. At the provincial level I can... I know some people. Don’t just think because I’m not so big, not tall enough... I have already met the secretary of the provincial party committee and the governor of the older generation, and I know them all. When I get in touch with them now, they also recognize me, so certain things can even easily be done. As for whether these specific things can get done, I will try to the best of my abilities.

So, I am very happy to be together with everyone today and have you listen to my songs. Frankly, several decades ago when I was working on the production team, I could jump up on that plank and sing songs from Marugeda. At that time I was young. Now, when you listen to my songs, the local flavor is still there, but there is a limit to my energy. That’s the way things go.

Next, I’ll try to keep it short. Later, we can take our time and have a nice, long chat. Today, I will use my song to express all of my words and feelings for everyone... with one of my songs, “Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk.”

Everyone, have a listen. Thank you, thank you.

亲爱的父老乡亲, 亲爱的亲戚朋友, 还有咱情爱的家乡的父母官, 你们新年好马上就到了。今天又是人家外国人的洋节, 是那个圣诞节。所以呢, 咱们镇长前十几天就给额通知了, 说咱新民啊, 每年搞一次聚会, 走出去的新民人和在新民的所有的头头脑脑、各行各业的尖子、领军人物都在这儿聚会, 说你能不能回来, 说我回来啊。其实啊, 你们每年给我创造上这么一个机会我更高兴。我走出去三十多年了, 这是第一回以咱们镇政府、镇党委、镇政府正儿八经地邀请我回来在参加沙沟岔。我沙沟岔后面啊, 打地基的时候啊......我还搞得个洋镐打地基。所以呢, 我, 说实话, 不管你飞得多高, 你走得多远, 这亲不亲父乡人, 月亮还是咱家里的这个月亮圆, 那个人啊还是咱家里的这个人亲。山, 不管它是青山绿水, 还是黄土高坡, 但是就看见咱这个山好。我经常出去说, 我把国际上, 十几、二十多国家都跑了, 美国前年我去了以后, 那...... 也说世界上最强大的一个国家的, 好多国家我都走了, 大舞台上得不少, 但是呢, 在梦中, 特别是夜晚做梦的时候, 哪里也梦不见, 就梦见个新民。就是...... 唱歌, 唱二人台, 就那新民那老戏台。梦见人啊......是新民走了的, 现在的, 就梦个这些人。外面不管有多少高人, 我梦不见, 跟我没多大的关系, 就是那个道理。所以说是新民这一块儿土地养育了新民这一块儿土地上祖祖辈辈的人。所以啊, 看见咱这一块儿土地啊, 我虽然经常不回来, 但我非常重视, 一天在那新闻媒体上, 在那报纸上看新民发展得咋样, 府谷发展得咋样。去年, 我一看说我们府谷现在是百强, 全国的百强县。人家神木过去比我们高, 去年一下说我们府谷比它高, 我一下就头震
得......[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] 哈哈哈，我看。我这个，就是新民人，我就是府谷人。当时我啊，吃不饱穿不暖，我往出走的原因是什么？其实，不是说是王向荣有多大的这个吃“天”本事，不是的。那时候啊，因为家穷，咱这地方啊，因为这个方方面面那时候还没有发展起来，地方也穷，可以说，想尽办法跳出龙门，看外面这个吃世事呀。唉，那么，实实在在的呀，就是啊，吃公家那一碗饭，挨，等我出去以后，过多少年，沙沟岔、新民天翻地覆，过去那些人现在都是亿万富翁，我眼红了，眼红我也不行，因为我回不来了，回不来了，但是我这心在这儿哩，我虽然回不来了，但是我们新民现在有这么多的企业家，老企业家、新企业家、小企业家，而且呢，我常说这新民是我们的，也是你们的，但归根结底是你们的。[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] 哎......我们说，咱李镇长给我打电话，我有一个想法，我觉得，我们这一代的这个镇......镇政府、镇党委这个领导啊，他的观念，他的思想提高了一步，更新了一步，他为什么这样做每年有个......和大家走出的新民人在一搭聚会，思想感情的这一个交流，政治经济文化的这个联系，我们新民，它是中土地的一块儿呀，而且是不可替代的一块。我常说马茹疙瘩，虽然在地球上，那个地图上，不写那几个字着，但是它实实在在存在，那么我们新民也就实实在在存在，在这个中国这块儿土地上存在着，而且呢，现在发展得这么好。所以呢，我们这一代领导人，我很希望，说实在话，这时我心里很踏实，他们现在这种做法，所作所为，我心里边放心的。我是他们的上一辈，他们叫我叔叔，李镇长说“叔，叔”。我心里边可高兴。我下一辈、下下一辈，多出上些官，官出的越多越好，越大越好。这个话呀，好多人可能是说你这个不带政治，其实我现在是一个政协委员，我虽然不执共产党权，但我有给共产党献言献策的权力。说实在话呢，就是我们这一代的年轻人，他把他的家乡，带领他的家乡的一代一代人，父老乡亲们。唉，拧成一股绳、心往一处想、劲往一处使，企业家们，像 XX。这个是我的俩“连襟”。他还该叫他大姨夫，他大姨夫。我说我是你二姨夫。[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] 现在咱们联系得熟了，我也知道，我不是，一天我也在看报纸。人大代表......这个这个......每年的两会，他们在......我们在丈八沟呢，他们在人民大厦这边儿呢。每年两会经常还见一见，就是这新民已出的这人呀，不管是企业家、不管是政治上、不管是这个方方面面，就出来这些，一天一天，一年一年，往出涌上，一批一批又一批，那么，我们上一辈的人啊，就感觉啊，新民有希望，府谷有希望，下一代有希望。现在，我们的资源啊，它是有完的......唉，我听见啊，XX 嘛这些啊，以 XX 为首的它新民哦，这些东西呢，它们现在说光不是挖煤，挖完煤，你想办法把它挖了的东西给咱变成咱的财富。那么，像这个咱们是个大县，那么，他又把挣下来的钱花到新民这一块儿土地。综合治理，为新民的综合治理，做企业家应该做的贡献。我听说，新农村也建起了，啊，把群众又安排的这一个、该迁的迁、该安置的安置。我的意思啊，就是说，这个资源完了以后，我们一代人一代人不要往外走。我走出去都后悔了。所以呢，我们这一代
代人，代代人不要离开新民这块儿土地。所以，这个时候，担子就落实到，我们现在呢，镇党委书记、政府和下一届、下一届，你们这些带头人的这个肩膀上了，你们担子非常重。光不像挖煤炭那么简单，那，挖完了以后，再要往起填。然后，这个水啊、这个路呀、山啊，叫它绿化，啊，让我们保持生态平衡，让我们祖祖辈辈人过上安生、幸福、和和美美的生活，这可是个大工程，是多少代人的大工程，先从现在开始做起，我非常欣慰......那么，在文化上，如果新民，如果府谷需要我给大家做一点儿贡献或者忽悠忽悠......哦［LAUGHS］，“忽悠”是东北话，我用它的地方话说，就我给你henghan henghan，嗯，把它拉拢拉拢，额也还有点儿，有点儿办法了。嗯，省上还会......也认识些人了。你，你不要看我人不大大，这个个子不够高.....那...嗯......过去咱这一代的省委书记、省长都认得了......那个......额...额现在跟他们联系，他们也认我了，所以一些事情它还好弄的。嗯，就是能不能......这个事情具体......也就是说尽我最大的本事。所以，我今天非常高兴和大家在一起，听我的歌，这样，说实在话了，就是过去几十年前，那那那......我在专业队干活儿的时候，一上那端木，唱起声我马茹疙瘩唱的，那时候人年轻，现在就说你听我的歌，那么这个韵味还在，那时候精力它是有限的，这是自然规律。下面呢，我就不多说了，咱以后慢儿慢儿放到后面说。所以，今天我以歌把我的所有的话和情，用我的一首歌《羊肚肚手巾三道道蓝，咱见面面容易拉话话难》献给大家。大家听一下，哦。嗯，谢谢，谢谢。

Similar to Wang’s speech at his classmate reunion, here again we find an emphasis on pride in place and praise for home. Whereas the classmate reunion was held in a hotel in the county town (rather distant from Wang’s home village), perhaps this event’s proximity to the mountains and rivers of home led Wang to wax more poetic about the local geography and people. Once again, Wang described the poverty of the past as a reason that he and others were forced to leave, but here, he contrasted that with the recent economic boom, leading to a new wealth that would keep the younger generations from emigrating.

160 This is a local dialect term, and I have not been able to find the appropriate characters for it, so I have substituted pinyin instead.
After singing the second song, Wang continued by introducing his “American friend.” In this part of his speech, Wang points to my presence and interest in the local songs as evidence for the effects of his bringing the songs to the exterior, and their attraction to outsiders. The additional discussion of cultural interactions related to the close timing of Christmas and Chinese New Year appears to be rhetorically linked to ideas of dialogue—political, cultural, economic, and even military. As discussed in Chapter 4, songs here seem to be portrayed as windows onto place—they had brought me, a foreigner, all the way to Wang’s hometown, after all.

Thank you. How about this, let me rest for a minute. I brought an American friend. He has come to China for three years already. He’s a graduate student from an American university. If you ask me, I don’t have any great talent, I’m just able to sing local folksongs. The only small contribution that I have made to northern Shaanxi culture, Fugu culture, Xinmin culture, is that I brought our songs to the exterior. This young fellow heard my solo concert in Taipei, and he saw my concert in America. Now, after going to Beijing and Shanghai, this year is his third year, and he has come to Xi’an. Every day, as long as he has time, he follows me around. Now he is doing research. He is not a professional singer, but he has been drawn in (xiyin guolai) by northern Shaanxi folksongs and Fugu folksongs. So, as a university graduate student, now he brought his wife... a foreign wife, to live in Xi’an. All day long, he follows me around. When he heard that I was coming back to my hometown, he said, “Teacher Wang, can I come along?” I said of course. I... if I say so, of course he could. Our town government and our town Communist Party committee will certainly welcome him, since today—I calculated—today is Christmas. That Christmas is like Chinese New Year for those foreigners. It’s not our Chinese Chinese New Year. However, we just happened to put our gathering on Christmas.

So, nowadays, in terms of politics, we have been making attempts at dialogue with America and all the countries of the world, engaging in a dialogue concerning military affairs and economic interaction. Now then, my bringing him here means that today, our Xinmin elders and fellow townspeople can celebrate their [i.e. the foreigners’] year together with a young foreign fellow—that is to say, Christmas, and we can also celebrate the arrival of our new year and this gathering, this celebration held by our town Communist party committee and our town government. So, this holds a very special meaning. For that reason, I said,
“Young fellow, although you aren’t a professional singer,” but he loves northern Shaanxi folksongs so much. Even when he’s sleeping... the whole day, he has that... especially Wang Xiangrong’s album, playing in his head. Don’t just listen to me drivel on and on, you all have a listen. After he says a few words and sings a couple lines, everyone can examine [his performance] and see how the fact that a foreigner can reach this level is extremely difficult and rare. Everyone have a listen. His name... his Chinese name is Ge Rong. [applause]

Gibbs: Thank you, Teacher Wang.

Wang: Sing your heart out for these nice people. [audience laughs]

谢谢。这样, 请我歇个一下。我带了一个美国的朋友。他过来中国三年了。他是美国大学的一个研究生。我说我大......我再没有多大的本事，就会唱它地方民歌。我为陕北的文化、府谷的文化、新民的文化做了一点点贡献，就是咱们的歌带到了国外。小伙子在台北听过我的独唱音乐会，在美国也看过我的演出。那么，到北京，到上海，今年是第三年了，到了西安。他一天只要有空就跟着我。他是做研究的，他不是唱歌的。他就对陕北民歌、府谷民歌给吸引过来了。所以呢，他是一个大学研究生。现在带着媳妇，外国......洋媳妇，现在在西安住着呢。成天跟着我。听说我回老家来啊，他说王老师，我能不能跟，我说当然。我......我说了就能了。我们镇政府，我们镇党委肯定欢迎着，因为今天呢，我就算计了一下，今天是个圣诞节。圣诞节是洋人的过年，不是咱们中国过年。但是我们偏偏把这个聚会放到圣诞节。那么，这就说现在从政治上，我们跟美国和世界各国的这个......也在眉来眉去地对话，军事上对话，经济上互相来往。那么，我把他带来，那么，就是我们新民，今天的父老乡亲和一个外国小伙子一块儿共度他们的元旦，他们的年，也就是圣诞，也共度我们的这个新年的到来和我们的这个联欢晚会，我们镇党委、镇政府的这个联欢晚会。所以呢，我说，小伙子，你虽然不是一个唱歌的，但是他爱陕北民歌爱得不得了。他就睡时......一天，他的那个......特别是王向荣那带子就在他头底放着呢。你们不要听我在这儿胡说，你们听一听，你看他那一个上了说两句和他唱两句，大家检验一下一个外国人能做到这一点儿非常不容易。大家听一听。[APPLAUSE] 他的名字，中国名字叫葛融。[APPLAUSE]

葛：谢谢，王老师。

王：好好给唱两声。[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER/APPLAUSE]

After I sang a couple of songs, Wang continued:
How about it, fellow townsmen? Just now, I wasn’t talking nonsense, was I? [applause and shouts of “Bravo!”] I’ve never lied in my entire life. I would never say any “empty words.” [laughs] Next, I will sing another song, since after all, I have come back. Especially those in the older generation, those that have left... many have left. The young people now—I don’t know any of them. However, there are still those around my age—fifty-something, sixty-something—I know all of these people, because in Marugeda we had a group that got together to work, so we knew each other. So, when you’re young, you’re young. Now, although I’m old, when you get old, you can come back. They all say they know... no matter what you say, they all know he [i.e. Wang] is a singer. So then, everyone wants to hear whether my hometown accent is still there. Just now, I already spoke a lot. Those groups of people who left before, they all want to come back, because Shagoucha has totally changed. Our Xinmin has changed. In the past, it was always one group leaving after the other, including myself, thinking of a way to get out. Now, all of those who left want to come back. So, next I will sing “Those Who Went Beyond the Western Pass Have Returned” a cappella for everyone. Thank you. [applause]

 хороший, городняк? Я вчера не лукавил, правда? [АППЛАУС И ВЫКРИКИ “Браво!”] Я никогда не лгал всю жизнь. Я никогда бы не сказал ни слова “пустяковые”. [САМЫЕ НЕЗНАКОМЫЕ ШАРМОЧКИ] Дальше, я буду петь еще одну песню, так как приехала. Особенно старшие поколения, те, что ушли... многие ушли. Молодые люди сейчас—я их не знаю. Однако, есть те, что окрестности моего возраста—тридцать пять-тридцать шесть—я знаю всех этих людей, ведь в Marugeda у нас была группа, которая собиралась работать, и мы знали друг друга. Так как вы молоды, вы молоды. Теперь, я стар, когда вы становитесь старше, вы можете вернуться. Они все говорят — не важно, что вы говорите, они все знают, что я [так говорил]. Так что, все хотят услышать, сохраняется ли мой родной акцент. Только что я все рассказал много. Группы людей, которые ушли раньше, они все хотят вернуться, потому что Shagoucha изменился. Наш Xinmin изменился. В прошлом всегда была одна группа уходила, а потом другая, включая меня, думая о том, как уехать. Теперь, все те, кто ушел, хотят вернуться. Так что, дальше я буду петь “Те, кто перешли за Восточную Скалу, вернулись” без гармонии для всех. Спасибо. [АППЛАУС]

Here, Wang identifies himself with an older generation of a bygone era, and rhetorically connects his leaving and returning with the historical migratory phenomenon known as “going beyond the Western Pass” (zou xikou 走西口), through which large numbers of the population were forced to leave for other lands. The song he sings, in a sense, uses a
traditional form to write a new page in history. It implies that, now that the local economy is so successful, all those who fled due to poverty now desire to return, and, in this sense, it embodies a strong validation of place.

In looking at the three speeches Wang gave at this occasion, together with the three songs he sang and the other two by his “American friend,” we can piece together an interesting narrative of place, history, and individual lives. Affirming his own roots in this place, Wang contrasts his past poverty (and that of the place itself) with the current wealth. The invisibility of the past is contrasted with the current visibility, brought on by elements of local value—natural resources and folksongs. The latter have proven attractive at a global level, “confirmed” by the guest performance of a young foreigner, and the increased value of the region has led not only to increased visibility, but a desire among those who left to return once again.

Several of these themes—past poverty versus present wealth, invisibility versus visibility—are also present in the following performance, although the less political and more commercial nature of the event lead Wang to tailor his speech more specifically to local entrepreneurs and potential consumers.

**Business Opening in Fugu County Town**

Wang is frequently invited to perform at business openings. The performances often include two parts: one outside performance on a large stage, meant to attract locals and advertise the opening itself, and another performance at a large banquet inside, where
prominent locals, officials, and friends of the owners are invited for an elaborate lunch with entertainment.

This particular occasion, which occurred on November 12, 2011, was for a new footbath/Chinese foot massage venue opening in the new investment and development zone of Fugu County Town. The new business was located on one floor of a multi-floor building that also included a restaurant (where the subsequent banquet was held), karaoke, a teahouse, etc. Wang’s performance was brokered by a new media company, who served as the liaison to hire Wang for the new company’s event, and also hired an advertising agency to drive around town with a large LCD screen mounted on a truck, which displayed Wang’s picture and the details of the event.

The first part of the event began with Wang performing “The Yellow River Has Ninety-Nine Bends” on the stage outside to a crowd that had gathered in front of the business. After that, Wang spoke to the crowd:

Dear elders and fellow villagers, dear friends and relatives from our Fugu, dear bosses and employees of Huawan Foot Bath, good afternoon to you all! I came back yesterday to our Fugu especially for the opening of our Huayu Foot Bath Business, which is extremely good and beneficial for the health of us Fugu people, with its health nourishing (yangshen), body improving (jianmei), and foot bath (zuyu). I came to cheer on their success, to liven things up, and most importantly, to see everyone here. As for me, I’m not here to do an advertisement, because I am one of our Fugu people. All of the generations of my ancestors grew up on this piece of land. So, I wanted to come back and see everyone and have a chat. Furthermore, this is a great opportunity, because I am already sixty this year. Every day I am out performing. Frankly speaking, in the past I didn’t have enough to eat or enough clothes to keep out the cold. With such a life, there is no way to survive, so I left. In the past, who could afford to take good care of one’s health (baoyang)? Now, my life has improved, just like the lives of our Fugu people and of everyone. Now, the economy has risen, life has improved, people have money, they have houses—but, we have to pay attention to our health. One
has to make sure to take care of one’s own health, so that one live an extra thirty or fifty years. This [i.e. health] is the good fortune needed by all.

Lately, during the past few years, I’ll tell you the truth, every week I go get a foot massage at least two or three times per week. Why do I get foot massages? Because I heard all of the doctors say that, out of all of the acupuncture points on the body, the feet contain the most. And, everyone knows, we all soak two feet, so if you take good care of your two feet, you will absolutely be able to work and live happily, in good health, cheerfully and with exuberance.

So, I think that this Huayu of ours, opening today for the first day, will prove to be an excellent service for everyone: all of our Fugu elders, fellow townsmen—men, women, old, and young—as well as those who come to our Fugu for travel or to do business. It will bring harmony, satisfaction, happiness, and good health, which is the most important. With good health, one has everything. Everyone knows this, since we live in this world, and it isn’t easy to get here. We are only here for a short time—just a few decades or a century—so we have to take advantage of the present. So, if everyone can live on this earth for a day, you have to make certain to live happily. Now that everyone has money, everyone should take good care of their own health and add on a few years to their life, while improving the quality of life. This is the most important. I only now have come to realize this point. In the past, I didn’t pay attention to taking care of my health. But look, today I am sixty, and my health is very good. I think that is because I have been getting footbaths and foot massages very often for the last few years. Both my health and my mental outlook are in excellent shape. So, I urge everyone, our Fugu elders and fellow townsmen, when you are free, after you have finished the busy affairs of the day, carve out a bit of time in the evening... in the midst of the busyness of running around, find some time to take care of your own health. This is the most important. With good health, health is everything.

Next, there are still many things I want to say to everyone, but due to time, and look, everyone is out here freezing... Coming back and seeing this many people standing out here, I really want to say a few more words to everyone, but let’s continue talking later on inside. When we have time, we can talk more, since today’s weather is rather cold. I will sing another of our northern Shaanxi folksongs, “Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk.” Thank you all.
济上来啦，生活过好啦，金钱有啦，房子有啦，但是呢，我们要注意我们的身体。这一定要把自己的身体保护好，多活上它个三十年、五十年，这是大家的福气。我这最近啊，这几年，说实在话，真的，我一个礼拜最少两次、三次在做。做这个足浴。为啥要做这个足浴呢？因为我所听过，所有的大夫说，脚上啊，这个浑身的穴位，脚上最多。而且呢，大家都知道，咱们这一家三都泡着两只脚，所以这两只脚保护好，你绝对，你就能幸幸福福、安安康康、高高兴兴、浑身畅快地去工作、去生活。所以呢，我想，我们这个华宛，这个足浴店的开张，为我们府谷所有的父老乡亲男男女女老老少少和来我们府谷旅游的、办事的，嗯，所有的人，这是一个非常非常好的一个服务项目，让大家和谐、美满、幸福、身体健康，这是最主要的。有了健康才有了一切，这是大家都知道的。因为我们生活在这个世界上呀，来得很不容易，短短暂暂也就是那么几十年，一百来年，这就撑死。所以呢，大家在这个世上生活一天，一定生活得愉愉快快。有钱啦，大家一定要把自己保养好，多补上几年，把生活质量提高，这是最主要的。我现在才......体会到这一点儿，过去自己不注意保养。唉，你看我今天六十岁了，我现在身体很好，我想我这几年就是做这个足浴啊，洗脚啊，经常弄啊。我这个身体情况和我这个精神面貌非常好的。所以，我在这儿劝大家，也就是我们府谷的父老乡亲，你们没事啦，把今天这个烦忙的事情都弄完啦，晚上抽点儿时间......这个万忙之中抽出一点儿时间来把自己保养好，这是最主要的。有了健康，健康就是一切。下面呢，我[nge?]还有很多话想和大家说，但是由于时间关系，大家你看冷得也不行，额也回来看见大家在这儿站得这么多的人，想多说两句话，咱们以后回那房房里边再说，咱有空咱再拉，因为今天这个天气也比较凉。我再给大家哼哼上两声咱们陕北民歌，《咱见面容易拉话难》。谢谢大家。

In this performance, the audience was mainly composed of local inhabitants of Fugu County Town who had perhaps seen the ads for the event on the LCD truck that drove around earlier (the town only has two major streets), or heard about it from acquaintances. Being from Fugu, Wang is something of a local celebrity, and his performance was seen as the key draw, preceded by other performances that included pop singers and comedy routines. In addition to these local inhabitants, who were possibly viewed as the potential consumers to whom the event was addressed, there were also...
those involved in putting on the event—the bosses and employees of the new business, the media company that had organized the performances, etc.

Whereas the event at the Xinmin government building had been largely directed at local officials—praising them for their enlightened leadership and urging them to preserve the local wealth and environment for generations to come—this outside portion of Wang’s speech at the business opening seemed to be aimed at the improved conditions of the local townspeople.

As in the other speeches, Wang uses his local childhood and formative years to identify himself with the local people, here suggesting that he is “not really doing an advertisement,” since he is “one of them.” Once again, he describes the poverty he personally experienced in the past, but notes that his own life, like those of all of the Fugu people in the audience, has improved over the past few years. This narrative of progress, which in the Xinmin speech was linked more to issues of place (i.e. people wanted to return) and leadership (i.e. the younger generation of officials had done a good job), here is related to personal wealth and material comfort. In a sense, after improvements in living conditions, housing, transportation, etc., Wang posits that the next logical step is to ensure that one’s health is taken care of, highlighting the purported medicinal qualities of retroflex foot massages and herbal foot baths as a key means to do so.

After his outdoor performance, Wang was ushered up to the restaurant banquet inside the building in one of the upper floors, where he was sat at a table next to the stage, which contained a large LCD screen projecting pictures of Wang and photos of the
new businesses facilities. The banquet attendees included company bosses and
employees, as well as prominent locals, other businessmen, etc. At various points
throughout the banquet, guests would come up and ask to have pictures taken with Wang.

After posing for several pictures, eating a bit of food, and having a few cigarettes,
Wang was handed the microphone and gave the following speech:

Friends and relatives, it’s not easy to get a chance to meet together. Being able to
see everyone today, speaking from the heart, I truly feel very close (feichang qin)
to everyone, because, as we say, “Mountains are close, rivers are close, but people
are even closer.” As soon as I hear the accent of our Fugu people, when I am out
and about, I can’t help but want to ask, “Where are you from? Are you from our
Fugu?” And I see if they are from Fugu’s Qiangtou or Qingshui, and whether
they are from Zhaowujiawan or Dacha. Whenever I hear Fugu people talking, I
can’t help myself. It’s already been... over thirty years since I left. In the past
few years, our economy here has developed so quickly. Having seen it in the
newspapers and in news reports, it makes me so happy I can hardly contain
myself, to tell you the truth.

Wherever you go, in the past you wouldn’t dare say you were from
northern Shaanxi, but even if you didn’t dare to say, as soon as you opened your
mouth, there [i.e. in your accent] was northern Shaanxi. Now, no matter where I
go, the first thing I say is “I am from northern Shaanxi, and furthermore, from
Fugu.” In the past, people had never heard of Fugu. In the outside, they didn’t
know about Fugu. They weren’t even familiar with Yulin. When you mentioned
northern Shaanxi, they only knew about Yan’an. They didn’t even know about
Yulin! Nowadays, Shenmu and Fugu... no matter where you go, as soon as you
mention them, even if they have never been here, they say right away, “Yes! I
have heard of them. They were in the news.” Fugu and Shenmu are now number
one in Shaanxi province.

So, I am proud. Wherever I go, I stick my pigtail up like a peacock, and
hold my head up high. Frankly speaking, in the past you [i.e. people from other
places, perhaps referring to central Shaanxi?] looked down on us, now I look
down on you. [audience laughter] Haha... it’s just this sort of feeling.

Although I am not the boss of a company, I belong to this land. When this
region does well, I bask in its glory. That is also the glory of Fugu people,
and the glory of the Yellow River basin. So, just now out below, I sang “The Infinite
Bends of the Yellow River.” I also sang an authentic (didao) “Yaosanbai” from
our Fugu for everyone. This “Yaosanbai,” my mother and them used to sing it
back then. So, I especially sang these two songs just now. In addition, I had
originally had a lot of things that I wanted to tell everyone, but there wasn’t enough time, so it was “Sheep Stomach Towel Rag Three Lines of Blue, Seeing Each Other Is Easy, But Talking Is Difficult.” For us to get together and have a chat is truly difficult, because everyone is busy with his or her own business.

Frankly speaking, these young bosses of our Huawan, they look very young to me. In the past, Mao Zedong had a saying, “This world is yours and it is also mine, but at the end of the day, it is yours—you, the young people.” Full of youthful vigor and vitality, they are like the morning sun at eight or nine o’clock. China’s hope, China’s future, the future of the Motherland, the future of the Yellow River... all depend on you. So, I see that now this young generation of bosses have come up... In the old days in Fugu, we only knew about [lists the prominent figures of old] and those people. Now, as far as I know, what everyone here carries around in their pants pocket is not less than the riches of [those figures of old]. Haha... it is much more, not less. I hope that everyone sitting here, whether you are a boss or not a boss—if you are currently not a boss, who knows, perhaps in the future you will become an even bigger boss—that we all take care of business in a satisfactory way, take care of all of the matters pertaining to Fugu, and make sure this entire region becomes prosperous and strong, developed, flourishing, and booming—this is my heartfelt wish, because I am sixty this year. Perhaps I won’t be able to see much more, but at least I will be confident in the future.

As soon as one talks about Fugu people, I know the natural disposition and personality of Fugu people, men and women, all even-tempered. I firmly believe this, because I myself am a Fugu person. If you treat me with respect or if you look down on me, I will still do a good job, and make sure to come to understand what a Fugu person really is, what kind of person a Fugu person is. [applause] This point I firmly believe without a doubt. I hope... I also really believe our younger generations will do a good job for Fugu.

Next, I would like to... I brought an American friend... [similar introduction to the one in Xinmin] 各位亲戚朋友，好不容易遇到一搭搭里来。今天呢我在这儿和大家见面，确实，说一句心里话，真的是看见大家非常亲，因为咱们讲这“山亲水亲人更亲”。一听见咱府谷人这口音啊，我就....在那外面啊，就想、由不得想问你是哪来的，是不是咱府谷的，看是府谷是墙头的啊，还是清水的，然后是赵五家湾的，还是大岔的。因为，我就经常一听见府谷人说话，这就不由我，已经是....出去三十多年了....咱们的那个，这几年这个经济发展得这么快，我在报纸上，在报道上，已经看啊....高兴得可不得了了，说实在话....走到哪儿....过去不敢说陕北，但是你不敢说，你那一出口还是陕北。现在呢....我....不管走到哪里，第一句话：“额是陕北的，而且是府谷的”。过去府谷人不知到....外面不知道府谷，连榆林也不晓得，一说起陕北咱只知道个延安, 连榆林都不知到。现在神木、府谷....你不管走到哪里一说....它就是没有来说“哎! 听见过，报道过。”这府谷、神木现在是在....陕西是第一....第
一家......所以呢我趾高气扬......走到哪咋......这个辫子翘得高高地......把头抬起......说实在话，过去你们看不起额们这儿人，额现在还看不起你们

[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]......哈哈......就这种感觉......[APPLAUSE]......虽然这个......我不是老板，但是我是这块儿土地的 人......这块儿土地搞好了，这就是我的荣耀，也是府谷人的荣耀，是黄河的荣耀。所以呢，刚才我在下面给大家唱了《天下黄河九十九道弯儿》，也给大家唱了咱们府谷地道的《摇三摆》......这《摇三摆》啊，自我妈手上那时候他们就会唱。所以呢，我刚才专门唱了这两首歌。另外就是和大家本来有好多话要说，但是没有时间，所以是《羊肚肚手巾三道道蓝，见面面容易拉话话难》。咱们走到一块儿拉话确实不容易，因为大家都在忙自己的事情。说实在话，咱们华菀这几个小老板，我一看他们很年轻。毛泽东过去说过一句话，这世界是你们的也是我们的，但是归根究底是你们的。你们年轻人朝气蓬勃，好像早晨八、九点钟的太阳。这中国的希望、中国的前途、祖国的前途、黄河的前途、黄河的希望......就在你们身上。所以，我看到啊......咱们现在这年轻一代老板上来了......过去府谷啊，只知道有个 XX 这些......现在啊，我所知道啊现在所有的这在座的大家......那库里边那钱不比他们少啊......哈哈......只比他们多，不比他们少......我希望，就说是所有在座的大家和......是老板的，不是老板的，现在不是老板将来说不定是更大的老板......所以啊......就说我们把事情做好，把我们府谷的事情办好，把我们府谷真正的......这一块儿土地，让他富强、发达、兴旺、繁荣，这是我的衷心希望，因为我今年六十岁了......或许我也看不多少，但是我心里边有数。只要说成府谷人，我知道府谷人这种率性、这种个性，男的女的，不嗔不恼，这一点儿我深信，因为我就府谷人......你看起来也罢，你看起来我也罢，但是我把我的事情做好，又让你们知道什么叫府谷人，什么是府谷人......啊唉......[APPLAUSE]......这个......这一点儿我是......我是深信不疑......我希望......我也很相信我们后辈人一定能把府谷的事情办好。下面呢......我这样......我带了一个美国的朋友，芝加哥的......他......这个......到中国已经三年了，年头，前几年来这儿，我认识......后来他爱上了陕北民歌，爱上了府谷民歌，也爱上了府谷人。后来呢，他在......到中国留学，他现在是研究生，在西安音乐学院......这个，已经呆几年，现在还有一年多了相近二年，还要在咱......咱这边弄。他主要研究的是陕北民歌。下面呢，我就让......我这又是我的朋友也是我的学生......他唱了我好多咱们府谷民歌，让他给咱哼哼两句，大家看他唱的怎么样......嘿，葛融......

Once again, Wang begins by establishing his intimacy with audience (i.e. the close feeling he experiences when hearing local dialect) and identifies himself with the local people. He highlights past invisibility and poverty, but here associates the current
economic growth and responsibility for the future primarily with the younger generation of entrepreneurs in the audience.

In looking at the different ways in which Wang presents a narrativized Fugu identity on stage, we can see how he tailors an underlying progression from past poverty/invisibility to present wealth/visibility to accommodate the makeup of each particular audience, which represent certain sectors of society. In his speech to his former classmates, many of who have remained lifelong farmers, Wang chose to emphasize the cultural capital of the place, rather than its material riches, the latter of which did not evenly touch all of the people in the audience. In the speech at the Xinmin government, Wang praised the natural environment and people, highlighting his ability to share elements of local culture (i.e. folksongs) with the outside world, and ended by celebrating recent local economic development and its ability to attract those who had left in the past. Finally, in the business opening, Wang created two complementary narratives in his indoor and outdoor speeches, outlining a narrative of progression for the local townspeople, which would include personal wealth and end in health, and then rhetorically attributing such economic growth and future responsibilities to the younger generation of local entrepreneurs. To be sure, all three groups—local townspeople, officials, and entrepreneurs—are involved in this narrative of success, so Wang’s adaptations in each circumstance can be seen as merely reflecting his ability to read and respond to his audience.

In the section below, I look at the specific songs that Wang frequently performs, together with bits of speech that help to contextualize them and provide a lens through
which to understand them—including both onstage introductions and excerpts from interviews. Selected from a large repertoire, Wang is able to use these songs to do several different things, in part, because of his spoken interactions with the audience.

“The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River”

This song, also known as “The Song of the Yellow River Boatman,” appears on the first track of Wang’s CD, and the liner notes suggest that the piece has become part of his basic repertoire and a “must-sing” for every performance that he gives (mei chang bi chang de jiben jiemu 每场必唱的基本节目) (Wang 2006). Out of fourteen performances that I documented, Wang performed this song ten times, and it was always first. This was one of the songs he had become famous for and highly identified with, following his appearance in a music video of the song in the 1990s, as well as other TV and film appearances. The song provided a dramatic beginning to any appearance, and since he would always perform the song lip-synching to a recording of the 1990s MTV, it gave him a chance to warm up his voice as he progressed from pre-recorded to accompanied to unaccompanied songs during a performance.

Originally from the Suide-Mizhi region, this song was performed by Li Zhiwen in the early 1980s on recordings, TV programs, and films. Wang first heard the song from Li at that time. Later, around 1984 and 1985, the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe where Wang was employed started a “Folk Arts Class” (minjian yishu ke 民间艺术课), and Li Zhiwen was invited as a guest teacher, and lived with the troupe for a while. During that time,

161 For a further discussion of the history of this song, see Chapter 4.
Wang says he experienced the song in a new way—recordings and live performance have different sorts of impacts—and he learned from Li’s version and feeling, eventually developing his own feeling and version of the song. Wang noted that his version has basically the same melody as Li’s, just with some changes to the beginning and the ending. Later on, various television stations, including CCTV and Shaanxi TV, decided to reproduce a few versions of the song done by Wang.

Suggesting that each performer has his own unique interpretation and understanding of the song, Wang said that from the time he first heard the song used as a theme song in a TV program (chaqu 插曲), he began to understand it as a statement about the history and collective experience of the Yellow River Basin, and of China itself. When I asked whether he felt like he was performing the role of a boatman (chuanfu 船夫) when he sang this song, he replied:

This depends on one’s own feelings in understanding the lyrics. [It’s] a kind of artistic conception. Some people see it as an old boatman on the Yellow River—standing on the bow, ferrying the boat—this kind of feeling. Now then, as for myself, I see it more as the boatman and the world of the Yellow River representing the hardships and the difficulties in the lives of all the people who have lived in the Yellow River Basin. Generation after generation, they have traveled down countless winding paths, not smooth at all, just like the numerous, tortuous paths that the Chinese people have traveled during modern times. One could say this is embodied through an expression of deep distress—my understanding of this song is mainly from this point of view. This is because Chinese people call the Yellow River “Mother River,” and the Yellow River Basin and the Yellow Earth comprise the birthplace of the Chinese nation. That is to say, Chinese people believe that they originated from the Yellow River Basin area, and when humankind first appeared in China, they lived on the banks of the Yellow River. Therefore, I see the “Song of the Yellow River Boatman” as the history of China—the history of the Yellow River, China’s history, and the human
Whereas earlier versions of the only contained the first stanza that asks the questions (ZMWY 1953: 11), Wang’s version, like Li Zhiwen’s version in the film mentioned earlier, adds on a second stanza that responds to each question. By just replacing two characters—the “you” (ni 你) in “do you know” becomes the “I” (wo 我) in “I know,” and the phrase “how many” (jishiji 几十几) becomes “ninety-nine” (jiushijiu 九十九), not only does the song now draw on the classic tradition of “questions and answers” (wendashi 问答式), but, more importantly it provides a semblance of definitive answers to questions about Chinese history (Qiao 2002 [1]: 2). The “ninety-nine” in each answer is not meant to represent a specific number, but in the Chinese context refers to abundance.

One could argue that a fundamental shift has occurred between the older single stanza version and the newer “question and answer” version. The older version seems to have a much more subdued mood. It asks question after question—without answers—not unlike the classic chuci piece, “Heavenly Questions” (“Tianwen” 天问), attributed to Qu
Yuan 屈原 (370-278 BCE), which poses questions about how the world began. In the “Song of the Yellow River Boatman,” there is a sense of an unknown multitude of boatmen, anonymous in nature, suffering in obscurity during the millennia of China’s bitter past. Instead of laying out a statement concerning their difficult fate, the singer, in the persona of a boatman, poses questions that shift the weight of contemplation to the listener—do you know how many boatman there are, and how many bends of the Yellow River (read Chinese history at large) they have been through? The overall effect is a cry out, perhaps both in pain and defiance, though any sense of defiance is somewhat muted by lack of explicit answers. Perhaps one could feel a sense of respect for these anonymous boatmen (representative of an idealized “People” [laobaixing 老百姓] at large), in line with the common theme of esteeming those who are able to “eat bitterness” (chiku 吃苦) or suffer in silence, but the aftereffect of the lyrics seems to effectively say that the common people have had a tough lot throughout history, although that history may be great.

In the newer version that Wang sings, the original first stanza is paired with a second stanza that answers each question raised:

Do you know—
In the whole world, how many bends does the Yellow River have, ai?
And how many boats are on those bends, ai?
And how many poles are on those boats, ai?
And how many boatmen, yo ho, move those boats? Ai hai—!
你晓得
天下的黄河几十几道湾哎?
几十几道湾上几十几只船哎?
几十几只船上几十几根竿哎?
几十年那艄公哟嗬来把船来扳？哎嘿！

I know—
In the whole world, there are ninety-nine bends in the Yellow River, *ai*,
There are ninety-nine boats on those bends, *ai*,
There are ninety-nine poles on those boats, *ai*,
And there are ninety-nine boatmen, *yo ho*, moving those boats?
*Ai hai! Ai hai! Ai hai—!*

俺晓得
天下黄河九十九道湾哎，
九十九道湾上，九十九只船哎，
九十九只船上，九十九根竿哎，
九十九个那艄公哟嗬来把船来扳，哎嘿！哎嘿！哎嘿！

Whereas the earlier version left the listener to mull over the questions raised during the silence that followed, in this version, the answers are given, and the statements are forcefully and proudly made. In the broadcast recording of a large-scale concert in Yulin in 2009 when Wang sang this song, during the answers of the second stanza, the camera cut to a shot of members of the audience waving glow sticks and singing along, with smiles on their faces.¹⁶² Not only is the music and rhythm quicker and more upbeat during the second stanza, which I will discuss further below, but Wang uses the standard northern Shaanxi pronunciation of the word “I” to sing “I know”—*nge* 额 instead of the standard Mandarin *wo* 我. Different audiences could read the use of this widely recognized dialect word in different ways. To those from northern Shaanxi, there is no doubt a sense of familiarity, perhaps combined with the linking together of regional identity to the whole of Chinese history and Chineseness at large (see Chapter 5). For those from other parts of China, the dialect word might evoke broader notions of the

“Folk”—after all, folk material from northern Shaanxi was some of the first to be used by the CCP during the revolutionary period in Yan’an. In this latter sense, one could see this as an emphasis that everyone in China, including the peasants, have arrived, that China’s present and future is bright, etc. The last three sung exclamations of “Ai hai!” seem to encapsulate the entire narrative of struggle and overcoming of obstacles. The first two are shorter, more abortive alternations between a lower note on “ai” and a higher note on “hai,” whereas in the final shout, the “hai” is sustained and the melodic progression of the musical accompaniment ends in a resolved chord, giving a sense of stability and peace. It is ending on a high note, but in a way that allows one to relax and breathe a sigh of relief and contentment.

In addition to the lyrics themselves, several factors contribute to creating various experiences of the song in different contexts. Whereas earlier versions of the song were sung a cappella, the prerecorded version Wang now uses has extensive instrumental and choral accompaniment. The extended musical introduction and accompaniment provide a space for Wang to insert additional gestures during his performances, which allow for additional layers of meaning. Furthermore, the physical arrangement of different venues, including backdrops and other decorations, as well as the nature of the events in which the performance take place (e.g. weddings, business openings, Chinese New Year celebrations, etc.) also create different “frames” through which to read the song (Bauman 1984: 9; cf. Goffman 1974).

The instrumental prelude to Wang’s recorded version of the song begins with a three-note water-like circular melody that alternates between ascending and descending,
creating a wave-like baseline in the background. Paired with the tinkle of wind chimes at the beginning, which evoke a semi-dreamlike effect—not unlike mist rising from the Yellow River after the spring thaw—the sound of synthesizer-produced deep wind instrument sets out four notes that rise, over and over, perhaps foreshadowing the questions to be asked in the first stanza. This deeper wind instrument gives way to a higher-pitched whistle or flute-like synthesizer instrument, accompanied by a percussive rhythm, creating a clearer and sharper sound. A brief interlude with more chimes gives way to the powerful string session of an orchestra, followed by rising arpeggios of a piano, heard over the suspended tone of a synthesizer. The piano hits the high note, followed by what sound like four notes struck on ancient Chinese bianzhong编钟 bells (a symbol of tradition), and then Wang begins to sing.

During the first stanza, Wang’s voice is accompanied by what sounds like a MIDI synthesizer, together with a simple, slow-paced percussive accompaniment. After Wang sings each question, a choir of children repeats the same question, perhaps meant to evoke a sense of youthful wonder. In places where Wang’s pronunciation varies from that of standard Mandarin, the lines that the children repeat phrase it in standard Mandarin. The various questions are repeated with the same melody, in a rhythm reflecting the rowing movement of boatmen, in a way that Qiao Jianzhong suggests “appear like a cry out, a question posed, and a deep sigh to oneself all rolled into one, as if pouring out all at once all of the five thousand years of changes our nation/people has

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163 For example, in the line that asks how many boats are on the bends of the Yellow River, Wang sings the measure word for boats (只) as zi, while the children echo the line using the standard Mandarin pronunciation of zhi.
been through” (si huhuan, si shewen, you ru zitan, fangfu yao ba women minzu wuqian nian de cangsang yixieerjin 似呼唤，似设问，又如自叹，仿佛要把我们民族五千年的沧桑一泻而尽) (Qiao 2002 [1]: 2). The melody changes in the last question about how many boatmen move the boats, ascending to a high note on the final “Ai hai!” The drum rhythm then quickens, together with a flourish of short, fast notes on the violins, which swell and drop, leaving a driving beat that defines the upbeat mood of the second stanza. Now, instead of having his questions echoed afterwards by the children’s choir, he sings the answers together with a choir of adult male baritones, punctuated by the powerful blast of the horn section after the end of each phrase. Listening to this section, I hear a sense of authority, of pride, of certainty. The final three high-noted cries of “ai hei!” seem to say, “We made it! We made it! We maaaaaaaade it!”

During the initial instrumental prelude, Wang usually would stand offstage to the side. In venues where the lighting could be controlled, the house lights would usually be dark at this point, with only the large LCD or projection screen behind the stage lit up. At the section of the overture where the strings begin to play, he would walk, in measured pace, towards the center, and gaze deeply at whatever image was present at the back of the stage. When the piano began to play, rising in a crescendo, the house lights and stage lights would brighten, as Wang would turn around towards the audience and begin singing, “Do you know...?” With the upbeat accompanying music that begins with the line “I know...” Wang lifts his head high. If anyone from the audience is going to present

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164 Part of my impression of this section is influenced by my observation of broad smiles on the faces of wedding guests as they stood and kneeled in a semi-circle in front of the stage, recording Wang’s performance on their iPhones.
him a bouquet of flowers, this is usually when they do so. In addition, if there is a runway-like walkway protruding from the front of the stage, Wang will begin to walk forward, into the middle of the audience. In general, his gestures during this second stanza are more “forward”-oriented. At the end of the song, Wang gazes forward into the distance (or upwards) and waves his right hand (with or without flowers).

Aside from the music itself, which is prerecorded and essentially does not change from performance to performance, and Wang’s stage gestures, which seem to follow a general pattern with variations, one of the major visual differences between performances involve the venue itself: These include the backdrops or projection screens at the back of the stage, objects and/or decorations at the sides, and banners above or below the stage.

In those venues that had the equipment, footage of the rushing waters of the Yellow River, some of which was contained on the CDs and VCDs that Wang brought with him in a bag to performances, would be projected onto the back or sides of the stage. At a Chinese New Year’s gala in Baoji (an hour or two west of Xi’an), this imagery of rushing waters was displayed on multiple large screen at the back and to the side. When Wang walked out, he gazed back at the waters, appearing to be standing on a boat, or perhaps on the river’s bank, before he turned around as the house lights came on and he began to sing. Midway through the performance, bubbles also appeared—a common feature of many performances nowadays, along with onstage smoke machines.

At an annual banquet for a group of bank employees and their guests in Yulin, Wang performed before a similar video of the rushing Yellow River, which then morphed into a rising red sun after the beginning of the second stanza—the dramatic section where
in other appearances he would tend to be offered flowers. The video then cut to light rays emitting from clouds, and Wang ended on the high notes by looking upwards as he waved his hand.

At a Christmas gala held on December 24, 2011, at a five-star hotel in Yulin, I was struck by the way the two hosts introduced Christmas and the evening’s performances as a “romantic” (langman de 浪漫的) evening. During Wang’s performance, which, as usual, appeared at the end of the show, the centerpiece started with the image of a sun floated on a red background, with the two smaller, vertical rectangular screens to the sides also red, with yellow hammer and sickles (like the Chinese flag). Below the stage, there was a panel of yellow flowers mixed in with red flowers, spelling “Merry Christmas” in Chinese (shengdan kuaile 圣诞快乐). The sun image in the center screen soon dissolved into a panning shot of a carved stone mural of what appeared to be a monument to revolutionary martyrs, possibly the base of the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tianamen Square. This was the image on screen when the string section of the musical intro began to play, and Wang walked on stage. He gazed back at the revolutionary martyrs, before turning toward the audience at the sound of the piano. After he began to sing, the background changed again, to the words “Merry Christmas” in English, with the Chinese equivalent above them, and the list of sponsors below (including a bank and the name of the hotel). Afterwards, an image of a blue sky sprinkled with clouds and the sun shining appeared at the center, and the side panels morphed into images of Chinese flags waving in the wind. This was followed by the rushing Yellow River, bubbles (of course), and a brief interlude where a live video of
Wang’s face was projected on the background as he sang. After that, there was more footage of the Yellow River.

While at first, the juxtaposition of a romanticized conception of Christmas and various patriotic imagery seemed a bit eclectic, to say the least, after some thought, one might see that the idea of “romance,” or perhaps romantic nostalgia, could be seen as tying the various elements together. Romantic notions of Western elegance (here, Christmas), revolutionary and national history, the profound heritage of the Chinese people (i.e. the Yellow River), and their bright present and future. The latter element seemed to be suggested not only by the steep ticket prices for the combined dinner banquet and show (reflecting the wealthy status of the audience), but also the imagery of the sun shining in the blue sky, and the lyrics to the second stanza of the song. In this sense, nostalgia for the past might be fused with excitement for the present and hope for the future.

At another performance, at the wedding of an extremely wealthy couple in Shenmu, the center projection panel had a wedding photo of the young newlyweds. Typical of the current trend for glamorous wedding portraits, the couple, dressed all in white, was sitting on the edge of a hill under the green leaves of a tree, gazing left at a nearby pond. The side panels projected images of scenic mountains, green plains, and flowing rivers. When the song began, Wang stood at the side of the stage, looking back thoughtfully at the photo of the couple. At the sound of the string section, he walked towards center stage, as the side panels cut to images of flowers. He gazed back at the couple, then began singing “Do you know...” as he slowly turned around to face the
audience. This wedding banquet was held on the top floor of an upscale hotel, and the stage had a protruding walkway running down the center of the room. At the start of the second stanza, Wang began walking forward, down the walkway and in the midst of the audience, singing “I know...” and listing all the items of which there were “ninety-nine”—forward-moving gestures and lyrics for a forward-looking present and future.\footnote{Wang performed at a large-scale concert in Yulin in 2009 that had a similarly shaped stage (with a long walkway protruding from the center), and he also began to walk down it, in the middle of the audience, after the start of the second stanza. This could certainly be seen as characteristic of many songs performed on stage, where the first stanza is slower and the second switches to a more upbeat, rapid pace, and performers perhaps tend to make more use of such walkways. Further observation on such gestural aspects of performance is required. For a video of the Yulin concert, see: http://my.tv.sohu.com/u/vw/2615283 (accessed February 20, 2013).}

While the choice of digital backdrops in this wedding were clearly made by the media company, wedding company, etc. involved, who also arranged the decorations, hired the performers and MC, and contracted the film crew to produce the wedding DVD, one can still read this performance as an audiovisual text. Wang, as a symbol of the older generation of northern Shaanxi people, in singing a song that ties images of local culture and history to a larger history of the Chinese nation, gazes back at the couple getting married. As one of the key rites of passage in the lives of young Chinese, this forming of a new union seems like a natural moment for reflection on both the past and the future. Rhetorically speaking, Wang’s performance could be seen on one level as connecting the couple to a sense of tradition and the flow of history. In this sense, the performance can be seen as a bridge between the past and future that says, in effect, “This is where you come from, and this is where you are going.”

In venues where there are no animated projection screens, Wang’s performance was framed by whatever backdrop had been set up for the entirety of the event. At the
opening of a new hotel in Jingbian, the far wall of the stage contained four large characters in an arch that read “Great Fortune in Starting a Business” (kaiye daji 開业大吉), with the circular logo of the hotel beneath. At a wedding in Xi’an, there was a pink satin curtain with a small oval sign that read “Wedding” in English. At a New Year’s event in his hometown, a sign on the back of the stage read “Artistic Gathering to Welcome the New Year” (ying xinnian wenyi lianhuanhui 迎新年文艺联欢会), and it was surrounded on the same wall with yellow balloons spelling “New Year” (yuandan 元旦) surrounded by red balloons, as well as a small, bare tree with pink lights placed on the left-hand side of the stage, and a plastic Christmas tree with flashing red lights to the left of that. At the opening of the foot massage business in Fugu, there was an LCD screen at the back of the outdoor stage that displayed a photo of Wang performing with microphone in hand, along with the date and time for his performance listed below. Above the stage, there were two giant red balloon arches announcing the opening of the business and the appearance of “The Northern Shaanxi Song King, Wang Xiangrong,” and a dozen canons were lined up in front of the stage to offer a thunderous salute to the new enterprise.

Although each of these venues had a unique theme and audience, each event can be seen, in a sense, as a new rite of passage—the birth of a new business, the union of two individuals in marriage, and the beginning of a new year. In these contexts, one might argue that the double message of a great past and a greater present and future is highly applicable to a wide range of such events. Any enterprise, couple, or local
government might hope both to be connected to a rich history of greatness and to a future filled with prosperity.

“The East Is Red”166

Wang currently performs two different versions of “The East Is Red,” depending on the occasion. One version, which he developed in the 1990s, was produced for a televised music video. Wang refers to this as the “MTV East Is Red” (“MTV Dongfang hong” MTV 东方红).167 Originally staged with a multitude of dancers, the MTV version contains both orchestral and choral accompaniment, together with a driving rhythm in the middle section. With its upbeat tempo and pulsing cadence, the MTV version appears to be a key example of what Gregory Lee refers to as “Maoist disco-beat musical eulogies” (Lee 1995: 102). People I met tended to point to one line in this version that they characterized as reflecting Wang’s style: Instead of the classic “The East is red, the sun has risen” (Dongfang hong, taiyang sheng 东方红，太阳升), Wang prefaces each statement with two words, “I say...” (nge shuo 额说), where the “I” is pronounced in the popularly understood northern Shaanxi dialect pronunciation, nge 额. In addition, Wang adds in the emphatic particle, jiu 就, followed by the adverbial phrase, nage 那个 (meaning “that,” as is “that red”), which result in the following lines:

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166 For an additional discussion of the history of this song, see Chapter 4.
167 In at least one television presentation of this version, the famous composer, Li Huanzhi 李焕之 is listed in the credits for arranging this version. See: http://xiyou.cntv.cn/v-eee71f66-bc1e-11e0-b474-a4badb4689bc.html (accessed February 23, 2013).
I say the East you are that red,
I say the sun you have risen. (emphasis added)

Nge shuo dongfang ni jiu nage hong,
Nge shuo taiyang ni jiu nage sheng.

After the MTV version was produced, the TV station that put it together gave Wang a complete recording on CD that included his recorded voice. When Wang performs this version, he uses the recorded version, essentially lip-syncing, as he does with the recorded MTV version of “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River” (see above). On a few occasions, I asked Wang why he didn’t sing this version live. On one occasion, he said that the TV station hadn’t given him a copy that just included the background orchestra and choir. On another, he said that it was difficult for certain sound techs to successfully balance the background choir and his voice if it was live-miked.

The second version, which is a cappella, was developed during the early 2000s, and is much longer, running around six or seven stanzas. In this version, Wang attempts to lay out a history of the development of the song, which is metonymically linked to the history of the region and of China itself, by singing separate stanzas evoking different historical periods. Whereas the MTV version is usually sung at the beginning of Wang’s performances, the a cappella version most often is sung at the end, as a finale.

The choice of which version to sing in a particular performance has a lot to do with Wang’s estimation of the composition of the audience and the nature of the occasion. When I asked how he decides which version to sing in a given context, he said,
If there are many people [in the audience] who are involved with music, or if it’s a gathering with friends, singing the *a cappella* version is more suitable. For those who are professionally engaged in music appreciation or musicians, they prefer things to be sung *a cappella*. Now, as for the MTV-style format, most often when I perform the official “East Is Red,” people [i.e. the event organizers] specifically ask for this music. When you say, “The East Is Red,” then it must be sung according to that version. That version is most often sung for political occasions... performances of a political nature.

这就比如说是一些......搞音乐的多或者说搞一些这个......朋友聚会，用清唱的这种比较合适，也比较好一点儿。专门从事音乐爱好者或者音乐人，那么，这个他更喜欢清唱的这个东西。那，比如说是 MTV 的这种形式，一般一演很正的这种《东方红》，他是......人家是固定的这个音乐。你叫成《东方红》，那就必须按那一个，它那一个版本唱。这种一般都是政治性的。嗯，带有政治性的这种演出用。

In the eleven performances where I observed Wang perform “The East Is Red,” he sang the MTV version three times, and the *a cappella* version eight times. Two of the MTV version performances were at formal celebrations commemorating the anniversaries of educational institutions, with references to their revolutionary history. One of these was for the eightieth year anniversary of a university located on the outskirts of Xi’an, where Wang’s performance was included in a sort of revolutionary medley, culminating at the end with Wang finishing the song while a gigantic portrait of Chairman Mao was projected on the screen at the back of the stage. The other was at the tenth anniversary of an elementary school in Xi’an associated with a prestigious local university. Both of these specifically asked for the song. A third occasion where he sang the MTV version was a wedding held in Xi’an, where a crescent-shaped crowd of guests stood before the stage and recorded Wang’s performance with their cell phones, while the MC brought up
the bride and groom, best man and maid of honor, etc. in succession for photo opportunities while Wang was performing the song.

Whereas the MTV version tended to be the first (or only) song performed in certain venues, the *a cappella* version was always sung either last, or second to last. In addition, whereas the three MTV version performances all occurred in the vicinity of Xi’an, five of the eight *a cappella* version performances occurred in northern Shaanxi. There were two weddings (in Shenmu and Fugu), a Christmas performance at the People’s Mansion Hotel in Yulin, an annual company party for a bank held at the same venue, and Wang’s elementary classmate reunion in Fugu. Of the other three, one could argue that they all contained “music experts” of some kind: At an annual concert of the Northern Shaanxi *Xintianyou* Promotion Society in Xianyang (near Xi’an), where the audience included other singers, fans of Northern Shaanxi folksongs, and many people from northern Shaanxi, Wang sang the *a cappella* version as his finale. As a special guest performance at the regional finals for a nationally televised singing competition, *Starlight Highway (Xingguang dadao 星光大道)*, where there were judges and producers for the show, Wang also sang the *a cappella* version. In addition, at the locally televised Chinese New Year’s gala performance in Baoji where the organizers specifically asked him to sing *a cappella*, he sang the *a cappella* version as his finale.

Unlike the prerecorded MTV version, Wang’s *a cappella* version of “The East Is Red” has a flexible length, with a variable amount of stanzas. Before each performance of this song, Wang tended to give a spoken introduction, of variable length, that outlined something of the historical process through which this song developed. When pressed for
time, such as in the following example from a wedding in Shenmu where there were many invited performers and Wang had to finish quickly, he gave a bare-bones outline of the development of the song:

I will sing another song, *a cappella*, for everyone. Since I’ve come back, I’ll take “The East Is Red,” a Jiaxiang folksong, from a *xintianyou* to “Migration Song” (“Yimin ge”) and then on to “The East Is Red”—this history of development—and sing a stanza for each historical period. Everyone can listen to the flavor of our old home...

I will sing another song, *a cappella*, for everyone. Since I’ve come back, I’ll take “The East Is Red,” a Jiaxiang folksong, from a *xintianyou* to “Migration Song” (“Yimin ge”) and then on to “The East Is Red”—this history of development—and sing a stanza for each historical period. Everyone can listen to the flavor of our old home...

At a wedding in Fugu where things were a bit more relaxed, he introduced the song at greater length:

“The East Is Red” is a Jiaxian love song. [With that melody] one could sing about love between men and women and *whatever* one wanted to. Whatever you saw, you could sing about it, and whatever you thought, you could sing about it too. When Chairman Mao Zedong brought the Central Red Army to northern Shaanxi, only then did it become a revolutionary folksong. During the War of Resistance Against Japan Period, it was called “White Horse Melody” (“Baima diao”). [recites lyrics from that version] During the Great Leap Forward...

[recites lyrics from that version] In the period just before the founding of the People’s Republic of China, it was finally named “The East Is Red.” I will take the history of the development of “The East Is Red” and sing a bit from each historical period. Everyone can hear a little bit of the flavor. ...
This introduction is almost word-for-word the same with the way he introduced it at the regional song contest finals in Liquan County in central Shaanxi. However, in the latter, instead of introducing it as a “Jiaxian love song,” he introduced it as a “northern Shaanxi love song” (May 15, 2012).

In addition to outlining a historical chronology to the song’s development, there is also a geographical progression as well. It begins as a local, Jiaxian love song, “emigrates” from Jiaxian to Yan’an, and then becomes the nationally recognized “final version” around the time that the new nation is established. During one performance, at a five-star hotel Christmas concert in Yulin, Wang took the geographical expansion of the song even further, setting up a dialectic between “how the common people of Jiaxian sang it in the past” (Jiaxian laobaixing guoqu shi zenme chang de 佳县老百姓过去是怎么唱的) and how “later became a global song across the whole world” (houlai zhe biancheng yige quanqiu de qiuge 后来这变成一个全球的球歌). This introduction can be understood as both outlining Wang’s intention to sketch a history of the song (and the associated history of the region and nation), while at the same time pointing to his own artistic and creative talent.

In pursuing Wang’s onstage claim that the song developed from a flexible, improvised love song melody to a revolutionary song, with each stanza representing a
historical period, I showed him a printed version of the lyrics he sang and asked him to talk about the context of each stanza:  

In the bright, blue sky floats a cluster of clouds,  
Today, Third Elder Brother is setting off for a journey a long way from home,  
But the blowing wind, the pouring rain, the rumbling thunder,  
Make Younger Sister feel uneasy.  
蓝格莹莹天飘来一格扌壢扌壢云，  
三哥哥今天要出远门，  
刮风下雨响雷声，  
倒叫我妹妹不放心。

The sesame oil lamp is clear and bright,  
Cabbage hearts braised in sesame oil.  
Red string beans with the fibers removed,  
Neither of us can disregard our own conscience.  
麻油灯亮又明，  
芝麻油烩了些白菜心。  
红豆角角双抽了筋，  
谁也不能昧良心。  

Snow-white buckwheat flowers,  
Third Younger Sister is truly beautiful,  
With glistening, beautiful eyes,  
When I see Older Brother, my emotions are stirred.  
荞麦花白生生，  
三妹妹长得实在是俊，  
毛花眼眼水格灵灵，  
看得哥哥我动了格情。

The mountains and rivers are beautiful and Heaven and Earth are at peace,  
Chairman Mao has come to our Shaan-gan-ning.  

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168 This version, which differs slightly from Wang’s various performances in terms of order and number of stanzas, appears in the appendix of his older brother’s book under the title of “Riding a White Horse and Carrying a Foreign Gun Over One’s Shoulder” (“Qi baima gua yangqiang (min’ge)” 骑白马挎洋枪(民歌)) (Wang 2011: 304).

169 Shaan-gan-ning: An abbreviation for an earlier geographical region, comprised of three provinces: Shaanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia.
Leading us poor people to fight for emancipation,
Our border region, a stretch of red.
山川秀天地平，
毛主席来到咱陕甘宁，
领导咱穷人闹翻身，
咱们边区一片红。

Riding a white horse, carrying a foreign gun,
Third Elder Brother has eaten the Eighth Route Army’s provisions,
He has it in mind to return home to see his girl,
But fighting the Japanese, he cannot make it back.
骑白马挎洋枪，
三哥哥吃了八路军的粮，
有心回家看姑娘，
打日本就顾不上。

The East is red, the sun has risen,
China has produced a Mao Zedong.
He works for the happiness of the People,
He is the Great Liberator of the People.
东方红太阳升，
中国出了个毛泽东，
他为人民谋幸福，
他是人民大救星。

The Communist Part is like the sun,
Wherever it shines, it becomes bright,
Wherever there is the Communist Party,
The People will be liberated.
共产党像太阳，
照到哪里哪里亮，
哪里有了共产党，
哪里人民得解放。(Wang 2011: 304)

In examining the seven stanzas on the printed page, Wang drew a line between the third and fourth stanzas (see below), saying that the first three stanzas were before the revolution, while the last four were after. The first three “were completely in the
xintianyou style” (wanquan shi xintianyou fengge 完全是信天游风格), which involved “local reflections of love between a man and a woman” (bentu fanying nannü aiqing 本土反映男女爱情) and “did not touch at all on politics” (bu sheji dao zhengzhi 不涉及到任何政治). After the line he drew, beginning with the fourth stanza, they enter the Revolutionary Period (geming shidai 革命时代). Broadly understood, Wang saw the stanzas following the line as belonging to the Yan’an period, and characterized by praising the Communist Party and Mao Zedong. He noted that the fifth stanza reflects the War of Resistance Against Japan (kangri zhanzheng 抗日战争) period, while the sixth and seventh stanzas are firmly situated after the Revolution succeeded (geming shengli 革命胜利), after the entire country had been liberated. Although it did not appeared in the published lyrics I showed him, sometimes he would add an additional stanza, which detailed earlier government policies encouraging emigration to the Yan’an area. Wang classified this stanza as belonging to the Army and People Large-Scale Production Period (junmin da shengchan shiqi 军民大生产时期).

The notion of a progression from romantic love to revolutionary fervor, or perhaps love/appreciation for the revolutionary leadership, is interesting and has been discussed before (cf. Lee 2007). While the later stanzas all have been documented in various scholarship on the development of “The East Is Red” (see Chapter 4), Wang noted that the first stanza was composed by himself and could not be found in earlier

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170 Elsewhere, he referred to these lyrics as belonging to “original ecology traditional folksongs” (yuanshengtai de chuangtong min’ge 原生态的传统民歌).
171 This also relates to Freud’s notion of a connection between the “sublimation of instinct” and “cultural development,” the former of which “makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life” (Freud 1989: 51).
versions, although one could argue that is partly pieced together from traditional oral
formulae. There is an implicit ambiguity in this stanza with regards to where Third Older
Brother (again, a standard trope in northern Shaanxi folksongs) is headed. It merely says
he is going “on a long journey.” While he seemed to deny that, given the chronological
order of the stanzas, this long journey could have anything to do with the revolution,
there are numerous traditional songs about men leaving to join the army, often textually
similar to those about men “going beyond the Western Pass.”

The imagery unveiled line by line in this stanza is striking. Beginning with the
“deep blue sky,” one who is expecting the rosy colored sky of the song’s title is presented
with an unexpected twist. The billowy clump of clouds rises high in what a second ago
was serene emptiness. At this point, the emoting nature of the clouds is not yet
pronounced. For all we know, they are softly floating high in the distance. The second
line tells us that Third Older Brother is leaving today to go on a long journey. Now, the
clouds could be understood as a metaphor for movement, for travel. Like birds, the
imagery of clouds implies an ability to move great distances. By the third line, the nature
of the clouds is unveiled, darkening the mood of the stanza, with the ill omens portended
by wind, rain, and thunder. Broadly understood, these can be seen as embodying the
multitude of potential dangers that Third Elder Brother might encounter on the road. The
final line introduces to us his beloved and shows us her concern for his fate. Seen in a
long line of song lyrics equating concern for a traveling lover with affection, the
underlying theme of love is introduced, while at the same time, the dangers facing the
traveler are reinforced.
The use of alternating lines that introduce images from nature that evoke elements of the human actions and emotions that follow has both a traditional precedent and reflects Wang’s own creative molding. While on one level evoking love and concerned for a loved one, the simplicity, combined with the relative anonymity of the two people presented and accented by Wang’s evocative vocalization of this stanza, seem to suggest levels of deeper metaphor at work. Who does Third Elder Brother represent and where in time and space might his destination symbolize? Numerous interpretations seem possible, including national allegory.

“Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk”

This was another one of Wang’s most frequently performed songs. It is variously referred to as “Sheep Stomach” (“Yang duzi” 羊肚子 or “Yang dudu” 羊肚肚), “Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk” (“Jianmian rongyi lahua nan” 见面容易拉话难), and “Tears Fall on the Desert Brush” (“Lei dandan pao zai shahaohao lin” 泪蛋蛋抛在沙蒿蒿林), each referring to different lines in the song. Wang would always refer to it on stage as “Meeting Is Easy, But It’s Hard to Talk,” and we will see why below. He sang this song in ten out of fourteen performances that I documented, and it was usually second (eight times) or first (two times). Although essentially a love song, based on my observations of the ways in which Wang introduced this song, he appears to have used it as a means of rhetorically connecting with the audience, often focusing on the lines “Meeting is easy, but it’s hard to talk.”
Though originally of flexible length, as far as I can tell, this song came to have the following three-stanza version after it was adapted by a well-known northern Shaanxi folksong scholar and teacher, Bai Bingquan 白秉权. Bai taught the song to a folksinger from Shenmu, Sun Zhikuan 孙志宽 (another member of the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe along with Wang, see Chapter 1), who performed it and won a national prize in 1986, thus publicizing the version. Now it is often sung by professional and amateur folksingers alike, and various karaoke versions are available to accompany the singers. The three stanzas as Wang sings them are:

“Tears Fall on the Desert Brush” 泪蛋抛在沙蒿蒿林 (CD Track 4)

Sheep stomach head rag with three lines of blue,
It’s easy to see each other, aïya, but hard to talk with you.
羊（啦）肚子（儿）手巾（儿呦）三道道蓝，
咱见（啦）面（那）容易（哎呀这）话（格）难（嗯）。

One of us is on the mountain and the other is in the gulley,
If we can’t talk together, aïya, let’s wave our hands thusly.
一个在（那）山上（呦）一个在（那）沟，
咱拉不上（那）话（儿）（哎呀）一招（的）手（嗯）。

I can see the village, but I don’t see that person,
My tears fall on, aïyaya, the desert brush.
我了得见（那）村（呦）了不见（那）人，
我泪（格）蛋蛋抛在（哎呀呀哪）沙蒿蒿（的）林（嗯）。

On one level, this is a classic love song. It brings to mind a time when segregation of the sexes in the countryside still precluded the chance for members of the opposite sex to talk
with each other in public without igniting the gossip machine of fellow villagers. The “sheep stomach head rag” (*yang duzi shoujin* 羊肚子手巾), while not easily translated into English, refers to the white towel, the texture of which appears like that of the inside of a sheep’s stomach (hence the name), which northern Shaanxi men traditionally wore on their heads, tied with a decorative knot.\(^{172}\) Nowadays, such towels make up part of the distinctive wardrobe worn by male northern Shaanxi folksingers on stage.

While it may have developed as a love song, Wang frequently used it as a metaphor for his desire to sit down for a long conversation with members of the audience. On one occasion, he said,

> Next, I have a lot of things I would like to say to everyone, but due to time, I will use my song to **stand in for** (*daiti*) my words. “Sheep stomach head rag with three lines of blue / It’s easy to see each other [but] hard to talk.” Thank you. (emphasis added)

下面呢，我有好多话想向大家说，但由于时间关系，咱就用歌声去**代替**额的话。《羊肚肚手巾三道道蓝，见面面容易咱拉话话难》。谢谢。

On another occasion, he noted that “everyone was busy” with work, so there was no time to have a real chat. In this context, it seems that Wang presents the song as a means to increase a sense of intimacy with the audience, while at the same time harkening back nostalgically to more simple times, when the local people may have not been as wealthy, but there was time to sit and chat.

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\(^{172}\) The northern Shaanxi poet and scholar, Cao Guxi 曹谷溪, has suggested that many of these towels had three blue stripes on each end, separated by the completely white middle section of towel, which he believes can be seen as a metaphor for the separation described in the song. He also notes that the towels themselves and the knotting technique used had their own aesthetic aspects in the construction of male attractiveness, perhaps not unlike the use of ties in the West (Cao Guxi, personal communication).
“Yaosanbai” 摇三摆

The name of this song literally refers to the swaying movement back and forth of a woman when she walks down the road. Some say that the name was given to a particular woman, calling her Yaosanbai. Although varying versions can be found throughout areas of northern Shaanxi, I have observed Wang perform two versions. The version below was recorded during the 1994 recording session, and appears as Track 14 on his CD.

Big red rooster, *ai der ai der yo*, lying on the wall,
Although your feet are big, *ai der ai der yo*, [those are some] fashionable goods.

大红公鸡（哎得儿哎得儿哟）墙（那）头上卧（呀）
虽然你脚（那）大（哎得儿哎得儿哟）时兴的货。

Big red rooster, *ai der ai der yo*, [with its] hairy legs,
The sky is dark, it’s raining, *ai der ai der yo*, and I’ve come to see you.

大（那）红公（那）鸡（哎得儿哎嘿哟）毛（那）腿腿
天阴（那）下雨（摇那三的摆）瞧（那）你呢。

The second time I came to see you, *ai der ai der yo*, you weren’t there,
You were out in the field, *ai der ai der yo*, picking bitter vegetables.
二一回（那）瞧你（哎得儿哎得儿哟）你（那）不（那）在
你在（那）地（那）里（那摇那三的摆）挽（那）苦菜。

Wang claims that he came up with the line, “Although your feet are big, *ai der ai der yo*, [those are some] fashionable goods,” of which he seems rather proud. In discussing it at length, it seems that the Chinese word translated here as “fashionable” (*shixing* 时兴) itself grew in popularity and common use during the time when Wang was young.
Furthermore, he suggests that the relocation of corporal aesthetic appreciation from the feet to other parts of the body marked something of a modern turn. Bound feet were now a thing of the past (although his mother still had them), and notions of beauty evolved over time.

Earlier, I translated a passage of Wang’s onstage banter where he used this song as a marker of local authenticity—if he still sang it well, the audience could clap; if not, they need not do so. Indeed, he tended to use this song in such a way when he performed it in northern Shaanxi, and often sang it as a finale or right before the finale. However, when I observed him singing it at a performance in central Shaanxi, in a town near Xi’an, he simply presented it as a humorous song about love between a man and a woman (nannü aiqing de 男女爱情的).

**Mongolian Version of a Cultural Revolution Era Song**

Another song that Wang would use as a finale is a Mongolian language version of the Cultural Revolution period song, “Sailing in the Ocean We Rely on the Great Helmsman” (“Dahai hangxing kao duoshou” 大海航行靠舵手). Wang learned this piece when he was young from relatives who were living in Inner Mongolia, during their visits home to Marugeda.\(^\text{173}\) The song appears to embody a unique mixture of the familiar and the exotic, in that it is tune that many of the older generation would recognize immediately, but sung in a language that is incomprehensible to virtually everyone in the audience. Although I was only able to observe Wang perform this song on three

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\(^\text{173}\) Wang also spent several summers visiting relatives in Inner Mongolia during his youth, so he may have been exposed to such songs during those times as well.
occasions (in addition to another performance during an interview in 2010), the variety of manners in which he introduced the song and related it both to the previous flow of the performance and to the specific contexts in which he was performing point to the adaptability of this song and Wang’s creative negotiations as a performer. The original Chinese version of the song, upon which the Mongolian lyrics Wang sings are based, are as follows:

Sailing in the ocean one relies on the helmsman,
The growth of all living things depends on the sun,
Seedling are strengthened by the moisture of rain and dew,
Carrying out the revolution depends on Mao Zedong Thought.

大海航行靠舵手，
万物生长靠太阳，
雨露滋润禾苗壮，
干革命靠的毛泽东思想。

Fish cannot leave the water,
Melons cannot leave the vine,
The Revolutionary Masses cannot leave the Communist Party,
Mao Zedong Thought is the sun that never sets.

鱼儿离不开水呀，
瓜儿离不开秧，
革命群众离不开共产党，
毛泽东思想是不落的太阳。^{174}

At the indoor banquet held by the young executives of the new footbath establishment in Fugu, mentioned above, Wang was able to connect the song to the flow of emergent performance, which involved not only his own singing, but that of this young foreign researcher, combined with the requests of the audience. After I sang a second piece, an aria from the errentai, “Ten Mile Marker” (“Shili dun”十里墩), which I had

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learned from his album, he used the praise of my level of proficiency in singing in the local dialect to thank “this young American fellow” on behalf of the Fugu people, to make the point that the ability of these songs to attract such a foreigner suggests their uniqueness (along with implied value) in the world. Just as Wang marveled about the possibility of Fugu songs becoming “global songs” (qiuge 球歌), one of the inebriated bosses from the audience walked up to Wang, put his arm around his shoulder, and asked Wang to have me sing a Fugu song in English. 175 While giving me a few moments to come up with some lyrics, Wang pointed out the inherent difficulty in translating between two vastly distinct languages—perhaps the globalization of Fugu songs would not happen spontaneously in an improvised performance. After I struggled through an impromptu translation of the first stanza of “Sheepskin Towel Rag Three Lines of Blue,” Wang stressed my straightforward, honest nature—“He’s unable to fool others; If he knows, he knows, and if he doesn’t know, he doesn’t know”—and reiterated the difficulty of translation. He pointed out that scholarly research was an extremely serious endeavor, and one couldn’t get away with fooling others. Here, he used the concept of “fooling others” (huluan nong 胡乱弄) to transition to the song.

...In general, I... [laughs] Fugu people’s personality is one that doesn’t try to fool others. Since I spent some time in Inner Mongolia in the sixties, now I will sing for everyone—I’m not kidding you—I’ll use Mongolian to sing a song that all of the older people here will recognize, “Sailing in the Ocean We Rely on the Great Helmsman / Carrying Out the Revolution We Rely on Mao Zedong Thought.” [applause] “Fish cannot leave the water / Melons cannot leave the vine / The Revolutionary Masses cannot leave the Communist Party / Mao Zedong Thought is the sun that never sets”—these are the Chinese [lyrics]. I will use Mongolian

175 For a selected transcription of the gentleman’s words, see Chapter 4.
Wang’s introduction in this instance can be understood as touching on several interconnected themes. In looking at the broader context of the emergent flow of performance, there seems to be a relation to the exotic nature of a Fugu folksong sung in English and a Chinese revolutionary song sung in Mongolian. Tied as both songs are to their original language, hearing the familiar melody juxtaposed with the quite unfamiliar lyrics disrupts, in one sense, the previous flow of performance, which was limited to familiar songs with familiar, intelligible lyrics. The ability to translate the familiar into “exotic” languages can be seen as a feat that is, to a certain degree, beyond belief. The “unbelievable” aspect of this endeavor is highlighted by Wang’s use of the term “to fool someone” (huluan nong 胡乱弄), stressing that, while this achievement is so impressive that it is practically beyond belief, he really is that good. At the same time, the ambiguity in Wang’s speech as to whether he is really able to sing in real Mongolian, or whether he in fact is “pulling a fast one” on the audience keeps the audience’s attention as they shift
between belief and disbelief.\textsuperscript{176} When leading up to the song, Wang verbally introduces the possibility that he could be tricking them, although he denies that he is doing so, and the performance of the song in “Mongolian” in one sense provides the evidence that he is telling the truth. However, given that most likely no one in the audience could understand Mongolian, lingering questions of how linguistically “authentic” his performance was may remain.

At the same time, the juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar in both songs can be seen as an experience that plays with the sense of self and other. Does hearing a Fugu folksong in English, for someone who is not fluent in English, sound like what the song in Chinese would sound like for someone who does not understand Chinese? Does allowing the song to be purposefully exotified through changing the text play a game of distancing the local in a prelude to more extensive self-reflections on issues of identity? One might think of Freud’s famous example of his grandson’s \textit{fort} and \textit{da} game, where a child purposefully distances a valued object from itself in order to both learn to deal with separation, and perhaps, to gain a new sense of self (Freud 1955: 15-16).

Another level of meaning that might be read into the juxtaposition of these two songs is the idea of Chinese values spreading to and being found attractive by the world at large. Just as the inspiration produced by Mao Zedong Thought was so attractive that the song was translated into Mongolian and other languages, and purportedly sung in

\textsuperscript{176}Mark Bender notes how “shifting” between performance registers can serve to sustain audience attention through longer performances, an idea which could be extended to performances which purposefully lead audiences to oscillate between questioning and validating a performance’s authenticity (Bender 1997).
over 100 foreign countries, Fugu culture, as embodied by Fugu folksongs, is presented as similarly attractive to the broader world, and worthy of increased translation and circulation.\textsuperscript{177}

At a second event where Wang performed the Mongolian version of “Sailing in the Ocean We Rely on the Great Helmsman,” the key theme that he used to link it to the previous flow of performance was its categorization as a Cultural Revolution period piece. At a wedding held in Xi’an, mentioned earlier, Wang had just finished his third song, the MTV version of “The East Is Red.” Perhaps inspired by revolutionary nostalgia, a VIP from the front table in the audience asked the MC to announce that he would like to sing a duet with Wang. Wang graciously accepted, and the VIP chose the song, “The World Is Yours” (“Shijie shi nimen de” 世界是你们的), a song from the Cultural Revolution, whose lyrics run:

\begin{quote}
The world is yours,  
It is also ours,  
But at the end of the day, it is yours.  
You young people, full of youthful vigor and vitality,  
Are at the most flourishing period of your life,  
Like the morning sun between eight and nine,  
All hopes are placed on your shoulders.  
世界是你们的，也是我们的，  
但是，归根结底是你们的。

你们青年人，朝气蓬勃，正在兴旺时期，
好象早晨八九点钟的太阳，希望寄托在你们身上。\textsuperscript{178}
\end{quote}


After singing along with the VIP, Wang continued, “This is a song from our Cultural Revolution \[laughs\], a song from the quotations of Mao Zedong. In fact... how about this? I have another song, “Sailing in the Ocean We Rely on the Great Helmsman,” which is sung in Mongolian. It says... \[sings the song\].” Just as in the performance for the Fugu footbath business executives, Wang used this song as his finale, while here he was able to connect it quite seamlessly with the previous piece due to the historical period in which it was composed. Nevertheless, the exotic element—its language—is still there, and Wang’s proficiency and creative talent as a performer is still exhibited. Interestingly, he followed this song by introducing the foreign scholar once more, this time rhetorically linking me to a (dubbed) video of Obama offering congratulations to the newlyweds that had been shown at the beginning of the wedding festivities. Now, I became an “emissary sent by Obama” to congratulate the happy couple.

A third instance of this song occurred during Wang’s elementary school reunion in Fugu, mentioned earlier. After being urged by the audience to sing “just one more song,” Wang introduced his final performance of the night with the following:

...A song from the Cultural Revolution era. Sung throughout the country, it almost became a new national anthem, “Sailing Through the Vast Ocean, We Rely on the Helmsman.” “In carrying out the Revolution, we rely on Mao Zedong Thought.” I will sing it in Mongolian for everyone. Today, if Teacher He hadn’t asked me, I would have forgotten, but today at lunch, Teacher He brought this up, so, once again, I will make one of Teacher He’s dreams come true.\[179\] \[Wang laughs and the audience applauds.\] He brought us to every school

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\[179\] When I interviewed Teacher He briefly before lunch that day, he mentioned to me his astonishment that Wang had been able to sing “The East Is Red” in Mongolian as a child. It seems possible that the reference
to do propaganda, singing songs of celebration. The first atomic bomb of our People’s Republic of China was successful. ‘Sixty-four. Yes, it brought a mushroom cloud piercing upwards, and whole country celebrated. So, at that time, Teacher He brought several of us to many places to do propaganda and celebrate. I sang a Mongolian language-version of “Sailing Through the Vast Ocean, We Rely on the Helmsman.” Teacher He said, “Wha...?! How can you sing in Mongolian? How did you learn Mongolian?” I said this was the result of my going beyond the Western Pass (zou xikou). In the past, all around here, especially in our Fugu, everyone went beyond the Western Pass. Those among us who left were more than those of us who are still here. That is to say, relatives who went to Inner Mongolia, older brothers and sisters, cousins, all were in Inner Mongolia. So, when they came back to visit, they brought these things [i.e. songs]. I can sing many of them, but today I will sing “Sailing Through the Vast Ocean, We Rely on the Helmsman” for everyone, and for Teacher He. [sings]
......文化革命时期的一首歌。全国唱响的几乎快变成国歌《大海航行靠舵手》。“干革命靠的是毛泽东思想”。我用蒙语给大家唱。贺老师今天啊，不问我，我还想不起来。贺老师今天中午专门提这个问题，所以啊，我再给贺老师圆一个梦。[LAUGHS] [AUDIENCE APPLAUSE] 他带着我们到各学校去搞这个宣传，庆歌。咱们中华人民共和国的第一颗原子弹成功。六四年。嗯，带一个蘑菇云又往上钻，全国欢庆。所以，那时候的贺老师带着我、我们几位同学到各个地方去做宣传，搞庆贺。所以我就给唱了一个蒙语的《大海航行靠舵手》。贺老师说“唉，你怎么能用蒙语？你咋会蒙语？”我说这就是我走西口的结果。过去，我们这周围啊，特别是我们府谷的都走西口啊。我们村走出那儿的人 [比] 现在的人多，也就是到内蒙的亲戚、哥儿姐全都在内蒙。所以，他们回来，带回来了这些东西。我会唱很多，但是我今天来一个《大海航行靠舵手》。再唱给大家，唱给贺老师。[SINGS]

Here, the performance of the song is presented as fulfilling the wishes of an honored member of the audience, Teacher He. In keeping with the overall theme of the elementary school reunion, Wang implicitly connects the current performance, which is being listened to by the former classmates and teachers attending the banquet, and the
performances he gave as a schoolboy, back in 1964. In a sense, the song could be envisioned as a link between their school days and the present, highlighting the nostalgic goals of the reunion. Furthermore, in the earlier lengthy speech that Wang gave to his classmates (see above), he mentioned the ambivalence that could be felt towards Chairman Mao, who did both good and bad things, and unfortunately, led to many of those present remaining peasants all of their lives through the closing of the schools. While on the one hand, this finale of Wang’s served to nostalgically connect the audience to their past, its upbeat lyrics and melody (even though sung in incomprehensible Mongolian) serve to reinforce the positive element of that ambivalence. Given the celebratory nature of the event, it is only fitting that such a finale performance end on a high note. One might also argue that, by taking everyone back to 1964, two years before the schools were closed in 1966—and to an inherently celebratory event at that, the successful detonation of China’s first atom bomb—Wang could bring the audience back to a time of youthful optimism, back when he, like others, had dreams of going to college, of becoming officials or famous writers, etc. Last, but not least, Wang connects the song to the experience of “going beyond the Western Pass” (zou xikou), which is shared by Wang and other local people, and is often portrayed as a defining element of local culture. Thus, although the Mongolian language aspect of the song remains exotic in the sense of being unintelligible, at the same time, the combination of a Chinese song with Mongolian lyrics is part of a more broadly familiar trend. Cases in point are the “Mongol-Han tunes” discussed in Chapter 2, which merge Mongolian tunes with largely Chinese lyrics.
As we can see from the three examples above, Wang’s use of this song—as a finale in each case—provides a colorful way to end each performance that links to some element of the overall flow of song and speech up to that point. Given that the song has a diverse range of aspects, including its categorization as a Cultural Revolution period song, its exotic, “unbelievable” quality, its links to an extended history of Mongol-Han ethnic relations and the “going beyond the Western Pass” migratory phenomenon, and its positive, nostalgic feel, Wang is able to use his creative rhetorical skills to connect this song to various themes as they arise during a performance, assuring an overall continuity that links together songs, regardless of differences in language.

As we can see from the above discussion of Wang’s speeches and song performances, various levels of representation can be discerned. A person (like Wang) can represent a place (like Marugeda, Xinmin, Fugu, Yulin, northern Shaanxi, or even China). Songs, in turn, can be presented as representing one’s words and feelings (surely a traditional idea in classical Chinese poetry) as well as places. Through the songs and speech, Wang attempts to connect with each audience, providing a bridge between past, present, and future, as well as a sense of home, tradition, region, and nation.

Although on the surface, it appears that Wang has drastically limited his active repertoire, especially when compared with the large number and diverse genres of songs he knows and/or has sung in the past, nevertheless, from the above analysis and discussion, we can see that he accomplishes a great deal with these few songs. Nevertheless, the question remains: How does a song come to represent a place, especially a larger place? What is the process through which such songs come into being

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and evolve? In the following chapter, I will look at how economic changes after the Cultural Revolution led to new types of performance arenas that necessitated new, additional, and/or adapted songs. I will examine case studies of the development of several such adapted songs, including two of the songs discussed in this chapter, explore some of the difficulties encountered in the process of adaptation, and discuss Wang’s reflections on choosing songs appropriate for each audience.
Chapter 4: Representing the Region: Social Changes and Different Stages

The post-Cultural Revolution Opening Up and Reform in the late 1970s and 1980s not only allowed for new economic development, but also opened doors for new content to be performed. Folk music gala performances (*huiyan 汇演*) in the late 1970s both encouraged presentations of regional identities and allowed musicians to learn new pieces from neighboring regions. In this chapter, I examine how certain government-organized showcases and the establishment of regional song and dance troupes both stimulated and affected growing regional identity. These new troupes brought new types of stages into existence, requiring new types of performances—performances that would be able to capture and symbolize an entire region, no longer just providing local entertainment.

One of the effects of the *huiyan* and the formation of regional troupes was to introduce singers to the repertoires of other singers from other areas. After examining the goals and subsequent needs of one of these troupes, I look briefly at ways in which Wang’s repertoire was geographically augmented during his time participating in various *huiyan* and in the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe. However, the dearth of suitable material for the new stages produced by the Troupe could not be filled by borrowing alone—local material also had to be transformed into pieces worthy of the regional stage. In order to examine more closely this process of turning the local into the regional, I begin by
looking at a song that Wang adapted from a bawdy, small-scale, local festival song into a
grandiose, large-scale piece that could represent the entire region and be presented on
regional, national, and international stages. Building on the issues raised by Wang in this
case study, I explore similar cases in which other songs were adapted, including an
examination of the iconic local folksong turned regional and then national symbol—“The
East Is Red” (“Dongfang hong” 东方红). A further discussion of alternative variants of
the songs suggest that the coming into being of multiple stages and performance contexts
in recent years has required a variety of content suitable for each situation.

New Stages: Establishing the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe

After earlier efforts involving the collection and adaptation of folk music during
the Yan’an era and the early 1950s, attempts to recover and preserve such traditions
started once again in the late period of the Cultural Revolution. According to Shang
Airen 尚爱仁, who held various prominent positions in the arts and cultural spheres of
Shaanxi province, organized efforts to collect and arrange regional folk art materials
began in 1974, and by 1982, works on various genres, including northern Shaanxi
folksongs, daoqing 道情, suona 唢呐 music, errentai folk opera, wanwanqiang 碗碗腔,
and Yulin little ditties (Yulin xiaojie 榆林小曲), had been completed (Shang 1996c: 244).
This work was conducted in several ways. One was to send cultural workers on specific
missions to collect certain genres from certain geographical areas. For example, in 1977,
Li Shibin 李世斌 and Yang Guangjin 杨光进 went to Shenmu, Fugu, Inner Mongolia,
and northwestern Shanxi province in order to complete Errentai Music (Errentai yinyue
Another means was through various symposiums (zuotanhui 座谈会), performance selections (diaoyan 调演), and galas where groups from different localities performed (huiyan 汇演). One symposium was held in the spring of 1975 in Yulin. Entitled a “Symposium on Northern Shaanxi Folk Music and Dance Reform” (Shaanbei minjian yinyue, wudao gaige zuotanhui 陕北民间音乐、舞蹈改革座谈会), the conference invited 46 elderly folk artists, as well as over forty experts from various Shaanxi song and dance troupes and the Lanzhou Military Arts Work Troupe (Shang 1996c: 245). According to Li Shibin, the title of the symposium was largely a cover used to hide the fact that politically questionable “traditional” material was also being collected (Li, personal communication). In addition to collecting a large amount of material on folk music and dance, “the main door of the auditorium was closed, the army ordered to stand guard, and the old artists were secretly allowed to perform traditional music and dance pieces, after which they taught the professional literature and art workers folk art performance techniques” (Shang 1996c: 245).

During that period, over ten folk art performance selections (diaoyan) were held, including large-scale events and individual performances. These “not only dug up a wide variety of folk arts, but also discovered quite a few talented artists,” including the “donkey-rider,” Zhang Youwan 张有万 (whom I observed performing in 2006 and 2010), singers such as Wang Xiangrong and Sun Zhikuan 孙志宽 (see Chapter 1),
dancers including Gao Xulai 高旭来 and Zhang Jifu 张继赋, and others (Shang 1996c: 245). Many of the artists who would later perform at the opening performances of the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe were discovered at this time (Shang 1996c: 245).

In 1981, Shaanxi province held a folk music and dance performance, after which two officials from the Culture Bureau praised the group representing Yulin and suggested that, with further improvements, they would recommend them for a performance in Beijing. Shortly afterwards, Shang Ailin and the others received an official notice that they were to perform in Beijing after the Spring Festival in 1982. With this impetus, the regional officials in Yulin gathered funds and performers, and experts to coach them. From February 15-22, 1982, the Yulin group, still classified as “amateur” (veyu 业余), performed seven times in Beijing for high-ranking officials and experts, receiving high praise (Shang 1996c: 245-246). After the Beijing success, in October they attended the “UNESCO Seminar on the Preservation and Development of Traditional Folk Dance in Asia” (lianheguo jiaokewen zuzhi yazhou diqu baohu yu fazhan minjian chuantong wudao taolunhui 联合国教科文组织亚洲地区保护与发展民间传统舞蹈讨论会). Each of these events increased the need for an established troupe to be formed. Finally, on July 1, 1984, the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe (Yulin minjian yishutuan) was officially established (Shang 1996c: 247).

Though established in the mid-1980s, the underlying motivations for forming such a troupe stem from much earlier. In discussing an abortive attempt in 1970 by the Yulin prefecture song and dance troupe (diqu wengongtuan 地区文工团, an earlier and
presumably less developed group) to set up a professional song and dance troupe, Shang Airen notes the motives for founding such an ensemble:

At that time, we recognized that northern Shaanxi folk arts are very rich and colorful, an invaluable artistic wealth that has been left behind to us from our ancestors, and we have the responsibility to seek out, sort, reform and improve these treasures. At the same time, we also realized some of the famous folk artists had already passed away and others were old and sick, and with no one to continue on these traditions, their skills would be lost. Therefore, we believed that it was extremely necessary to have a professional art team to rescue, inherit and develop northern Shaanxi folk art. (Shang 1996c: 246-247)

The fact that unsuccessful attempts at forming such a troupe were made earlier suggests that the timing of the Troupe’s establishment was to some degree related to larger historical trends. Shang Airen posits that although the desire was there earlier, there was a lack of both material and talent. He writes that performance material is the lifeblood of a troupe, and thus, the limited repertoire of the Cultural Revolution failed to supply sufficient nourishment (Shang 1996c). It was not until the anthologies made between 1974 and 1982 had been completed and new talent had been discovered through galas and performance selections that the conditions were right for the establishment of such a troupe. In addition, as we will see in Chapter 5, the drive to established regional song and dance troupes also had to do with increased needs to showcase provincial identities in response to economic decentralization policies that accompanied market reform.

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Expanding the Region: A Growing Repertoire

Whereas earlier on, Wang’s repertoire was mainly based on songs and tunes he heard near his hometown and *errentai* folk opera that was performed in the surrounding region (see Chapter 2), during the late 1970s, he had the opportunity to learn songs from across the Yellow River (neighboring Shanxi province) while attending several gala performances (*huiyan*). In the process of adopting and adapting these into his repertoire, some of the songs have since become part of the standard northern Shaanxi folksong repertoire.

At a gala performance (*huiyan*) in Qiangtou 墙头 held in 1977, Wang heard the following two songs from Yang Zhongqing 杨仲青, a singer from Baode 保德 County in Shanxi province, which lies directly across the Yellow River from Fugu County Town. Although in recent years the two are connected by two bridges that can be crossed in less than a minute, when Wang was young the river could only be crossed by ferry, which were few and far between.

In the following version, Wang added in a few of his own stanzas, and later went on to produce an MTV version of this song.

“Lighting a Lamp on East Mountain, West Mountain Becomes Bright”
东山上点灯西山上明 (*CD Track 8*)

Lighting a lamp on East Mountain, West Mountain becomes bright,
One horse on an empty plain, *ya*, dear Little Sis, no person to be seen.

东山上（那个）点（了）灯西山上（那个）明（啊）,
一马马（那个）平（了）川（呀亲妹子）了不见（个）人。
You, in your house, have become sick, ya, I, in my house, am distraught, 
In your body you are sick, ya, dear Little Sis, in my heart I am pained.
你在你家里得（了）病（呀）我在我家里闷，
你身上（那个）有（了）病（呀亲妹子）我心上（个）疼。

Thinking of my sweetheart, I can only stare blankly,
I gather up some pears, ya, dear Little Sis, but cannot send them to your door.
想亲亲（那个）想的我直愣愣（的那个）神，
称上（那个）梨（儿呀哪亲妹子）送不上你家的门。

When I think of you while in front of others, ya, I force a face full of smiles,
When I think of you and no one’s looking, ya, dear Little Sis,
my tears begin to roll.
When I think of you and no one’s looking, ya, dear Little Sis,
my tears begin to roll.
人面前（那个）想（了）你（呀）装出一脸脸的笑，
人背后（那个）想（了）你（呀亲妹子）泪蛋蛋（格）抛。
人背后（那个）想（了）你（呀亲妹子）泪蛋蛋（格）抛。

The following song has since come to be considered a northern Shaanxi folksong, 
despite its Shanxi origins. Wang was instrumental in introducing it to the region, and
now many singers do variations of it, including one with a “folk rock” feel.

“Who Is That?” 那是一个谁 (CD Track 7)

Across the way on that other ridge, ya, who is that? 
That’s my Second Younger Sister, who’ll be the death of me.
On the hillside there grow ten kinds of grasses,
Seeing ten kinds, Little Sister is better than nine.
I stand on this ridge, Little Sister, you are in that gulley,
If you choose me, Little Sis, wave your hand.
If you choose me, Little Sis, wave your hand.
对畔畔（那个）圪梁梁上那是一个（呀）谁？
那就是我（那）要命的（个）二妹妹。
山坡坡上长着（那个）十（呀那）十样样草，
Wang suggested that younger singers could readily relate to this type of song, with its simple message of love, conveyed in a bold declaration. With regards to the line, “Seeing ten kinds, Little Sister is better than nine,” Wang suggested that true love overlooks one’s personal faults, so that even if someone is only ninety percent good, their beloved accepts them one hundred percent.

His repertoire was further expanded after joining the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe in 1984. Through close study with an older folksinger, Li Zhiwen 李志文 (see Chapter 1), hired by the Troupe as a consultant, Wang learned several “classic” northern Shaanxi folksongs from the Suide/Mizhi area, often touted as the most “representative” region of northern Shaanxi, but one which Wang, who grew up in the extreme northern section near Inner Mongolia, had not been familiar with earlier on in his life. It was through this older singer that Wang learned such songs as “Song of the Muleteer” (“Jiaofu diao” 脚夫调), “Herding Livestock” (“Gan shengling” 赶牲灵), and “Song of the Yellow River Boatman” (“Huanghe chuanfu qu” 黄河船夫曲).180

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180 The “Song of the Yellow River Boatman” is also referred to as “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River” (“Tianxia huanghe jiushijiu dao wan” 天下黄河九十九道湾). See Chapter 3 for more about recent performance of this song by Wang.
“Song of the Muleteer” 脚夫调 (CD Track 2)

(Say) A forty-mile long ravine, Lamb Mountain,
(Say) good women come from our Zhang Family Field.
Starting out from Zhang Family Field, I stop at Liu Family Hill,
(Say) At the bottom of the hill, I go down to visit a friend.
(Say) At the bottom of the hill, I go down to visit a friend.
If you don’t sing mountain tunes, it’s hard to get by.
When I sing (that) mountain tune, I think of my love.
When I sing (that) mountain tune, I think of my love.

(说)四十里（那）长涧（哎）羊羔山，
（说）好婆姨出在我们张家（呀）畔。
张家畔起身（儿）刘家峁站，
（说）峁底里下去我把朋友（呀）看。
（说）峁底里下去我把朋友（呀）看。
不唱了（那个）山曲（儿）我不好盛，
我唱上了（那个）山曲（儿）我就想亲（呀）人。
我唱上了（那个）山曲（儿）我就想亲（呀）人。

“The Herding Livestock” 赶牲灵 (CD Track 5)

The mule at the head of the train, three small lamps.
Aiya, the bells it wears make a ringing sound.
The Pekinese dog with the white neck faces south and barks,
Aiya, the man who drives the draft animals has come.

走头头的（那个）骡子（儿哟）三盏（儿）盏（儿的那个）灯，
（哎呀）带上了（那个）铃子（儿哟）哇（儿），哇（儿）的（那个）声。
白脖子的（那个）哈巴（哟）朝（呀）朝南（的）那个咬，
（哎呀）赶牲灵的（那个）人（儿哟）过（呀）来了。

If you are my Older Brother (i.e. sweetheart), wave your hand,
Aiya, if you aren’t my Older Brother, walk your line.
Aiya, if you aren’t my Older Brother, walk your line.

你若是我的哥哥（哟）招一招（的那个）手，
（哎呀）你不是我的哥（儿）哥（儿哟）走你的（那个）路。
（哎呀）你不是我的哥（儿）哥（儿哟）走你的（那个）路。

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As the “Song of the Yellow River Boatman” relates to a broader trend of turning the local into representations of the region, a detailed discussion of the song follows in the next section.

**Adapting the Local to Represent the Region**

During the late 1980s, a TV series entitled “Lilies on a Cliff” (“Xueya baihe” 悬崖百合) was being filmed in Yan’an, and the director asked Wang to sing on its soundtrack. In addition to using Wang’s renditions of popular northern Shaanxi folksongs like “The East Is Red” and “Thirty-Mile Inn” (“Sanshi li pu” 三十里铺), the director had Wang write a piece for the serie’s theme song. The series dealt with a well-known orphanage in Yan’an where the children of revolutionary soldiers and martyrs lived, which was described in Edgar Snow’s *Red Star Over China*. Wang became familiar with the plot and the background of the show’s story, and the director explained to him what sort of things he wanted the song to express. Wang first came up with the music, adapting a festival tune he had known from childhood to make it more profound and sorrowful. Those involved with the show liked it, and the director told him to come up with whatever lyrics he thought would be good, assuming that his experience as a folksinger would guarantee something with an authentic feel.

In addition to the immediate impetus for the song brought on by the director’s request, Wang had his own motivations as well, partly influenced by his role as a singer in the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe. He said,
...Because I had heard this melody sung by common people during rural festival (shehuo 社火) performances since I was little. In this [song I composed] I enlarged upon it (fangda le 放大了), because when you look at it in a small way, it’s a little tune used for a “boat on dry land” (hanchuan 旱船) skit, but when you magnify and amplify it, it becomes a great music that captures this entire region of land. A very big... momentous music... [sings the melody]. This [music], depending on what means you use to develop it, where you are standing and what direction you are moving it towards. At the time, I said to myself that, in my memory, those performers were [just] having fun. They didn’t... to speak frankly, everything they did was to entertain all the people around them. It was just for the festivities when everyone was together during the Lantern Festival (on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month), and they would use this old, traditional tune. They didn’t have such a deep feeling, and didn’t think that much about it, but were just taking a woman in their boat as a joke. So, although the music they sang seems to be the same, it feels different [from my song]...

[sings]:
“If you say I have it hard, I really have it hard,
I steered my boat down to Jiangnan,
In Jiangnan, there was her sweetheart,
And she left me, this old boatman, out in the cold.”

It’s [sung] completely to provoke laughter and amuse, for fun, playing around, joking. However, at that time, I had already started working in the [Folk] Arts Troupe. After arriving there, it was very... there weren’t many large-scale pieces dealing with the land of the Yellow Earth [i.e. northern Shaanxi], and stage performances need this type of song, ...need more dignified... solemn and dignified (cangliang houzhong de 苍凉厚重的) pieces. Therefore, I used a solemn and dignified male voice to cry out this song, and I feel it is completely different from the shehuo festival tune...

因为我从小听的那个闹社火的时候,这些老百姓们唱的这个调子,我这个......把它放大了, 一个很大......气势很大的一个音乐[SINGS THE MELODY]。它这个......你把它,看用什么方式去衍绎它。你站到什么角度上衍绎它。我当时我就说在我的忆念中,那些艺人们玩儿呢,他并没有,说实在话,当时那些艺人们,他完全是为了逗大家乐,也就是正月十五大家在一起红火热闹闹社火......他就用这个老的传统的曲子。他也没有这么深情、他也没有想那么多,只不过就是搬了个女人在那儿玩儿......所以他的......唱出来的这个感觉,虽然是一个音乐,但感觉不对......

说我难,我真也难,
搬上那水船下江南,
江南有她的男子汉，
把我这老艄公就圪超转。

它完全是逗趣儿的。......嗯......在玩儿、嬉耍耍、玩儿耍的，但是，我当时的
就是说因为我已经到了这个艺术团了。到艺术团以后因有很......不多这个......
嗯......关于黄土地上的一些大的题材需要舞台上......需要这些曲子，要......需
要比较厚重、苍凉厚重的。那么，我把它用一个苍凉厚重的男声去把它呐喊
出来，感觉它就和这一个闹社火完全不同......

This desire to create new, more large-scale pieces that were more worthy of the stage,
together with the assumption that stage-worthy pieces for the northern Shaanxi region
should be more “solemn and dignified,” are presented as Wang’s own feelings and views,
while at the same time he acknowledges the influence of his work context, i.e. the Yulin
Folk Arts Troupe. There is an implicit sense of dissatisfaction with the earlier festival-
type performance in Wang’s use of the word “small” (xiao 小) in the terms “when you
look at it in a small way” (fangxiao le 放小了) and “little tune” (xiao quzi 小曲子), and
perhaps this begs the questions: When did he begin to feel this way and what factors
influenced this idea?

In recounting his creative process, Wang related his version of the traditional
story relating to the festival (shehuo) song. According to Wang, the story performed was
one of a “made-up” nature with bawdy elements. He refers to it variously as a “meaty
story” (hun gushi 荤故事) and a “sour story” (suan gushi 酸故事), both of which imply
an erotic element. The old boatman sings about an attractive young woman he proudly
brought with him as a traveling companion/lover on a trip south to the Jiangnan 江南
region, only to find her promptly leave him for another younger man when they arrive.
the song, a colloquial dialect term—*ge chao zhuan* 埬转 (“leave someone in the cold”)—is used to refer to his being “dumped,” and Wang classifies the story as primarily about “love,” but with the intended goal of provoking laughter and amusing the audience (*douqu* 逗趣).

Wang contrasts this type of fictional, frivolous, bawdy song with his composition, “Steering Ferries Throughout the Year” (“Yi nian siji ban shuichuan” 一年四季扳水船), which he says is sung from the point of view of an old boatman (*shaogong* 艄公) who has experienced great hardship as he ferries a boat back and forth across the Yellow River:

**“Pulling Ferries Throughout the Year” 一年四季扳水船 (CD Track 23)**

When you mention my hometown, *ai*, it’s known throughout the land,
On the banks of the Yellow River—Qileng Village.
For generations, [we] have endured poverty,
I steer my boat and ferry, passing the time.
提起我家(哎)家有名,
黄河(那)畔上(这)碛楞村。
祖祖(那)辈辈受贫穷,
我扳船(那)摆渡过上(那)光景。

If you say I have it hard, I truly have it hard,
*Ai*, throughout the year, in every season, steering my boat.
The scorching sun on the top of my head, my foot pressed on the plank,
*Ai*, in the wind and in the rain, I bore through the waves.
*Ai hai ai hai ai hai ya,*
In the wind and in the rain, I bore through the waves.
说我难我真也难,
(哎)一年(那)四季(呀)扳水船。
头顶上烈日我脚踏上板,
(哎)风里(那)雨里在浪里头钻。
(哎嘿嘿嘿嘿嘿呀)，风里(那)雨里在浪里头钻。
Rowing is hard, ferrying is difficult,
My feet are planted on two worlds—Yin and Yang.
The wind blows, rain pours, the waves billow to the sky.
Ai, a boatload of people float on the crest of a big wave.
Ai hai ai hai ai hai ya,
A boatload of people float on the crest of a big wave.

划船（那）苦，摆渡难，
脚踏（那）阴阳（这）两世界。 
刮风（那）下雨（这）浪滔天。 
（哎）一船人浮在（这）大浪尖。 
（哎嘿嘿嘿嘿嘿嘿呀），一船人浮在（这）大浪尖。

In discussing the lyrics to this song, Wang pointed out multiple layers of meaning. 

On one level, they evoke the living conditions of an old boatman on the Yellow River—a figure both specific and generalized—whose life is hard (buyi 不易), and whose personality Wang described as strong, valiant, and tenacious, putting his heart and soul into everything he does (jiexin 竭心), no matter how much he suffers. At the same time, the anonymity of this lone figure lends itself to symbolizing all of the boatmen on the Yellow River, who themselves are already figures of the past, since the presence of bridges now precludes the necessity of man-powered ferries to cross from one shore to the other. Beyond this multitude of boatmen, Wang suggested the singular figure in the song also represents the generations of people who have lived on the banks of the Yellow River. They too have experienced suffering and a lack of certainty, just like the boatman who battles waves to cross from one bank to the other.

Wang also referred to the boatman as representing the people of the Yellow Earth (huang tudi ren 黄土地人), referring to the inhabitants of the Loess Plateau in northern
Shaanxi, and even the entire area of land itself (zhe yi kuaier tudi 这一块儿土地). Given the centrality of the Yellow River basin and the Loess Plateau in narratives about the origins of the Chinese nation, Wang also suggested that the boatman, when understood in a bigger way (shuoda le 说大了), symbolized the Chinese people and the Chinese nation (Zhonghua minzu 中华民族). They likewise had experienced a difficult history, and had their ups and downs. Wang cited the flourishing of the Tang dynasty as an example of the former, and the weakness of the late Qing and subsequent invasions by foreign powers as examples of the latter. In talking about this, he compared the various predicaments in which the Chinese people found themselves during the earlier part of the twentieth century to both mire and choppy waters. Mentioning the invasions of the Eight-Power Allied Forces of 1900 (baguo lianjun 八国联军) and Japan during World War II, Wang said, “All of the Chinese people were stuck in the mud, were on top of this wave. When things went well, they were good, and when they went badly, they died” (全中国人都在泥里边，在这个浪上呢。好了就好了，不好了就死了).

Though seemingly dissimilar metaphors, both mud and waves refer here to the delicate predicament in which the Chinese people found themselves. But the concept of being on the crest of a wave embodies a symbolically powerful liminal ambiguity—the wave may bring a boat’s occupants safely and expediently to the other shore, or capsize the vessel and drown everyone. This liminal sentiment is echoed in the compelling poetry of the final stanza’s second line: “My feet are planted on two worlds—Yin and Yang.” According to Wang, the yin and yang refer to death and life—daily possibilities
for the boatman, who may or may not return every time he sets out. Citing Chinese
mythology, he spoke of how in life, one was ruled by whomever the current emperor was,
be it Li Shimin, Wu Zetian, or more recently, Jiang Zemin, while in death, one had to go
report to Yama, King of Hell (yanwang 阎王). Each group represented a different
territory of rulership, and boatman, poised on the crest of waves, stood in a liminal space
between the two.181

In addition to individuals, groups of people, places, and nations, Wang also said
that the boatman could represent the leaders of those people, places, and nations. In this
light, the boatman can be sent as a helmsman (zhangduo de ren 掌舵的人), one who
“steers the boat.” He compared the boatman to a helmsman, saying that both Jiang
Zemin and Hu Jintao were such helmsmen. “Nowadays, Hu Jintao, he is the one steering
the boat,” Wang said. Such leaders decided the direction of the country, and were
responsible for the Chinese people’s lot (Zhongguoren de shenshi 中国人的身世). Like
the boatman, their success or failure depended both on individual skill and the “weather.”
Elsewhere, Wang mentioned that the boat could have just a few people, or several tens of
people, or several hundred people. This numerical variability further highlights the
flexibility of the boat and boatman metaphor, which can be variously applied to an
individual, a region, and a nation.

Summing up, Wang concluded:

181 In addition to the two “imperial systems” mentioned here, namely, that of the Chinese emperor and that
of the King of Hell, Wang also mentioned the religious belief of Westerners, which he characterized as
“going to report to Jesus after one died.” The similarity of this phrase with going to report to Yama
suggested a vision of another sort of “imperial system” populated by foreigners, and echoes the discussion
in Chapter 2 about how different local gods oversaw different territories. Apparently, Jesus, as a “foreign
god,” would be allocated a similar territory in the larger scheme of things.
This [image of the boatman] points to many different things. One thing it points to is the hardships experienced by the boatman, for example, the difficulty of being a leader, for example, the head of this area of land, he also has a difficult life. He carries a responsibility. Now then, in addition, speaking from my own thoughts and feelings, the common people (laobaixing) have a difficult life. The people in this land have a difficult life, and must give their all—it’s not easy. These meanings, all of the meanings I have mentioned, the things [the boatman] embodies—at the same time it is this piece of land, and it is also the entire nation of people, the whole society.

In this way, what was originally a local, bawdy, festival song was “transformed” into a panegyric song evoking the history of the larger region and even the nation itself.

Wang’s notion of “amplifying” local festival tunes into large-scale stage performances can be further discerned in the following two case studies, “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River” and “The East Is Red.”

“The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River”

While “Pulling Ferries Throughout the Year” was used as the theme song of the TV drama mentioned earlier and in performances staged by the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe, the following two songs have appeared in numerous TV programs, films, music videos, etc., and continue to be frequently sung to this day.\(^{182}\)

\(^{182}\) For a description and analysis of recent performances of these two songs by Wang, see Chapter 3.
This second song, variously titled “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River” (“Tianxia huanghe jiushijiu dao wan” 天下黄河九十九道湾) and “The Song of the Yellow River Boatman” (“Huanghe chuanfu qu” 黄河船夫曲), also uses images of boatmen on the Yellow River to evoke larger themes dealing with place, history, and nation. Unlike “Pulling Ferries,” it does not focus on an image of an individual boatman (although it is questionable whether the singer’s onstage persona can be construed by some as a singing boatman), but rather an anonymous—and therefore powerfully symbolic—multitude of boatmen, boats, oars, and bends in river.

“The Infinite Bends of the Yellow Rivers” 天下黄河九十九道湾
(CD Track 1)

Do you know, ya, how many curves does the Yellow River have, ai, And how many boats float on how many curves, ai, And how many poles are on those boats, ai, And how many boatmen, yoho, row those boats, How many boatmen row those boats? Ai hai ai hai yo, ai hai ai hai yo. 你晓得（呀）天下黄河几十几道湾（哎），几十几道湾里几十几支船（哎），几十几支船上几十几根竿（哎），几十几个艄公（哟嗬）把船（那个）搬，几十几个艄公把船来搬（哎嘿哎嘿哟，哎嘿哎嘿哟）?

This song has become one of the most emblematic and representative pieces both for Wang and northern Shaanxi, and, for those who see the Yellow River region as the source of Chinese culture, it can be understood as a deeply national symbol as well. Often listed as the first song in folksong anthologies and taught to conservatory students
across China, this piece became intertwined with Wang’s image, and is one of his most frequently performed pieces (Yang 2007: 12).

As mentioned earlier, Wang learned this piece from an older singer who served as a consultant for the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe, Li Zhiwen, in the 1980s. Li sang a version of this piece, arranged by the Xi’an Film Studio composer, Xu Youfu 许友夫, as the theme song to the 1984 film, *Life (Rensheng 人生)* (Yang 1995: 32). The film, directed by Wu Tianming 吴天明 and based on a novella of the same name by the famous writer, Lu Yao 路遙, won the Hundred Flowers Award for best picture and the Golden Rooster Award for best music in 1985.

An earlier version of this song was published in the 1953 collection, entitled *An Anthology of Folksongs from the Shaanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia Old Revolutionary Base Area* (ZMWY 1953: 11). The table of contents lists the song as number 23, collected by An Bo 安波 in the fourth month of 1942 (ZMWY 1953: 1). A footnote to the song reads, “This piece was an original composition of an old Yellow River boatman, Li Simin. Li is already sixty, and has many compositions” (ZMWY 1953: 11). The anthology also claimed that the piece was popular all along the region surrounding the Yellow River (*Huanghe yi dai liuxing 黄河一带流行*) (ZMWY 1953: 11).

Li Simin 李思敏(李思命) was born in 1891 in a village in Jiaxian 佳县 County, northern Shaanxi province. He adapted and wrote “The Boatman’s Song” (“Chuanfu

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183 He Yutang, the other national bearer of ICH for northern Shaanxi folksongs, also sings this song frequently, and included it as the first song in his published anthology, crediting himself with the arrangement of that version (He 2007).

184 For a description of Li Zhiwen’s version of the piece, see Yang 1995: 32-33.

and the musician An Bo 安波 collected this song in 1942 and published it in the 1950s anthology mentioned above (Yang 2007: 14). Yang Cui stresses the point that, while Li Simin was a boatman in real life, there is an aesthetic element in the song that transcends the mere description of one person’s experience (Yang 2007: 14). She suggests that this arose from Li’s dual identity as a boatman (chuangong 船工) and a lead performer in Chinese New Year Northern Shaanxi yangge performances (Shaanbei chunjie yangge de dangjia bashi 陕北春节秧歌的当家把式) (Yang 2007: 14).

According to Yang, the combination of Li Simin’s place of origin, work experience, and festival participation allowed him to create this unique song:

His hometown was closely connected to the Yellow River, and year in and year out he floated on the waves of the Yellow River. He knew the many curves and bends of the Yellow River like the back of his hand, and at the same time, he had the yangge songs ringing in his ears. Thus, he was able to, on his own, in the spur of the moment, spontaneously pick up “The Two Wives”, affectionately adjust it in composing “The Boatman’s Song.” Furthermore, he first sang it on an occasion during a Spring Festival when yangge were being performed. (Yang 2007: 14)

In noting the unique duality of Li Simin’s relationship with the boatman profession, she points out that, while he was in fact a real boatman, he also portrayed one fictitiously in festivals (Yang 2007: 14).

Based on melodic comparisons, Yang Cui speculates that “The Song of the Yellow River Boatman” may have been based on an earlier bawdy festival tune, called

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186 This festival tune will be discussed further below.
“The Two Wives,” which I discuss below. The process in which Yang describes the development of the later song from this earlier bawdy tune bears a certain similarity with Wang’s rhetoric of “little festival tunes” and his desire to “enlarge upon” their meaning. Yang writes, “This piece, ‘Two Wives,’ was a small piece performed in small gatherings of yang ‘ge’” (Yang 2007: 12, italics added). The repetition of the word “small” (xiao 小) clearly indicates a derogatory/dismissive attitude towards the song, as the word has been often used to describe non-elite art forms, often with implications of immorality and/or bawdiness (e.g. novels [xiaoshuo 小说, lit. “small speech”], folk plays [xiaoxi 小戏, lit. “small plays,” as contrasted against large-scale, mainstream productions, like Beijing opera, etc.], pornographic films [xiao dianying 小电影, lit. “little movies”], etc.). Yang suggests that the song exhibits evidence of feudal problems and “ugly customs,” while also suggesting that it may have functioned as “satirical educational entertainment” (Yang 2007). At the same time, the “small” can also be understood as referring to a geographically limited scope, similar to Wang’s discussion of “small” pieces in need of being expanded geographically.

Yang continues that different social and historical contexts produced different versions of the songs. “With a new frame of mind and a new composition of content, a new folksong with an utterly different nature and form from ‘The Two Wives’ was produced—‘The Boatman’s Song’” (Yang 2007: 13). Further emphasizing the “total” transformation of the nature of the song, she writes, “[f]rom ‘The Two Wives’ to ‘The

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187 The idea that folksongs can exhibit problems within society dates back to the May Fourth era, and further back to Confucian ideas connecting folksongs and public morality.
Boatman’s Song,’ evolving from an ordinary yang’ge little ditty (xiaodiao 小调) into a
great musical masterpiece (mingqu 名曲), [this] can be called a qualitative leap” (Yang
2007: 14).

Thus, by the time Wang learned this song from Li Zhiwen, it had already made
the “qualitative leap” that would allow it to represent the region, with the potential to do
the same for the nation as a whole. In addition to the 1984 film mentioned above, the
song also appeared in the controversial six-part documentary series, River Elegy
(Heshang 河殇), broadcast on China Central Television in 1988 (Su and Wang 1991:
101).

“The East Is Red”

Perhaps one of the songs that best epitomize this transition of local to regional
(and on to national) is “The East Is Red” (Dongfang hong 东方红). It is described as an
“unrefined folksong” (yuanshen zhengtai de min’ge 原生状态的民歌) that, through
the process of being continually sung and passed down, became “a powerful, dignified,
revolutionary ode” (yi shou xiongwei zhuangyan de geming songge 一首雄伟庄严的革命颂歌) (Wei 2004: 65). Zhao Shimin 赵世民, suggests that “The East Is Red”
developed from a folk tune (lit. “little ditty” xiaodiao 小调) into a “solemn, dignified,
stately ode” (zhuangyan songge 庄严颂歌), further paralleling the song’s journey with
that of Chairman Mao: “Mao Zedong also went from being an ordinary person to
becoming a giant” (Zhao 1994: 79).
Like the process through which Wang Xiangrong transformed the local festival tune into “Steering Ferries Throughout the Year,” the creation and refinement of “The East Is Red” involved changes in both music and lyrics. Referring to the final version of the song, one scholar wrote, “This song expressed the extreme love and respect of the People of every ethnic group throughout all of China towards the great leader, Mao Zedong, and the Chinese Communist Party. It is a heartfelt statement of the feelings of millions upon millions of Chinese people” (Wang 1998: 85). The use of the music to “The East Is Red” on a radio frequency broadcast from China’s first man-made satellite (Wang 1998: 85) suggests that its music would literally reach beyond the nation to the ends of the Earth and the universe beyond.

Similar to the changes in tempo and mood that Wang made during the composition of “Pulling Ferries Throughout the Year,” “The East Is Red” also experienced changes in tempo, rhythm, and ornamentation along with changes to its lyrics (Wang 1998: 84-85). What interests us here is how the lyrics were adapted to represent the entire population of China.

Although some scholars now question the primary stanza’s attribution to Li Youyuan, part of the legend surrounding his creative process relates to issues raised above concerning “enlarging upon” (fangda) lyrics. As related in several accounts, including his own, Li had long desired to write a song reflecting the proletariat masses’ feelings that praised Mao and the CCP (Su 2007: 48; Wang 1998: 83). He had previously used the term, “Emperor Yao” (Tang Yao 唐堯), referring to a legendary Chinese ruler, as a metaphor for Mao, but sought a better analogy (Su 2007: 48; Zhen, et al. 2003: 54).
Inspiration came when Li heard the lyrics of another *yangge* leader, Qu Shicai 屈士才, during the Spring Festival of 1942, who sang:

*Chairman Mao is just like a lamp,*
*Casting light that makes the whole house bright.*

(Quoted in Su 2007: 48)

While Li found this metaphor fresh and new, he also found it lacking: a lamp could only illuminate a cave dwelling (*yaodong* 窑洞, a typical style of home in northern Shaanxi province), one household (Su 2007: 48), and thus could not reflect the greatness of Chairman Mao (Su 2007: 48). In the story narrated by Su Jian 苏简, he writes,

> At night, Li Youyuan went home and sat beneath the light of an oil lamp. Lost in thought, he took off his hat and covered the lamp. Right away, the interior of his cave dwelling was immersed in darkness. He thought, “If a lamp can be extinguished this easily, how can it be compared to Chairman Mao?” He made a decision to himself to write a *yangge* song praising Chairman Mao that was better and more fitting. (Su 2007: 48)

Like the “Emperor Yao” metaphor before it, the “lamp” metaphor was also found lacking (Zhen, et al. 2003: 54).

There are several versions of what happened next, and how Li came upon the metaphor that would better capture the essence of Chairman Mao’s greatness:
According to a 1952 article, “On a winter’s night in 1942, as Li Youyuan rested after carrying buckets of excrement on a shoulder pole, his body shivered with cold. Just at that moment, a huge red sun rose from the East, casting a bright-red light over the entire earth, casting its warm rays over Li Youyuan. Inspired by this, he composed, ‘The East is red, the sun has risen, China has produced a Mao Zedong...’” (Wei 1994: 36).

李有源编《东方红》的动机是什么，他本人有三种说法：在 1952 年的文章中说“1942 年的一个冬夜，李有源担粪休息时、身上发冷，就在此时，一轮红日从东方升起，照得大地红彤彤的，照得李有源身上暖呼呼的，由此得到启发，就编了东方红，太阳升，中国出了个毛泽东⋯⋯” (Wei 1994: 36)

One morning in the early winter in 1942, Li Youyuan woke up at dawn and carried a set of buckets into the city. When he had almost arrived at the county town, suddenly, he saw that the East was bright red. A huge, majestic red sun emerged from the clouds, rising slowly. It shined on the old city of Jiaxian, shined on the Northern Shaanxi plateau, shined on the entire Motherland, causing him to feel warm all over. (Su 2007: 48, emphasis added)

1942 年初冬的一个早晨，李有源一大早起来，担着一副桶担进城。当他快要到县城时，忽然看见东方一片彤红，一轮红日从云层中磅礴而出，冉冉升起，照亮了佳县古城，照亮了陕北高原，照亮了祖国大地，照得他浑身暖洋洋的。 (Su 2007: 48)

This morning, as Li Youyuan climbed from the western slope to the summit of a loess ridge, just then, a huge red sun arouse from the East. This scene and this feeling sparked an inspiration in a folksinger talented both in composition and singing. Moved by the scenery, what a beautiful and magnificent mood it was! Look—the sun slowly rose from the East, bright red and exceedingly dazzling in its splendor, shining on Li Youyuan and filling him with happiness. He put down the hoe he had been carrying, held his breath, and focused in appreciation at the sight of the sunrise. The golden sunlight shined at an angle on the thousands of mountains and hillsides of the loess plateau... As he looked and looked, a spirit of absolute sincerity surged in his bosom, and he burst forth in song. Using the melody from “Riding a White Horse,” he sang out, “The East is red, the sun has risen; China has produced a Mao Zedong...” (Wang 1998: 84)

这天早晨，李有源从西坡爬上黄土梁的山顶时，正值一轮红日从东方升起，此情此景对于一个善编能唱的民歌歌手，激发了灵感。他触景生情，多么美丽壮观的意境啊！看吧：太阳从东边慢慢升起，红彤彤的极为耀眼光华，照得李有源心花怒放。他放下扛着的镢头，凝神屏气地观赏日出，金色的阳光斜射着黄土高原的千山万坡⋯⋯。看着看着，李有源胸腔中一颗赤诚的心灵涌动起来，

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188 One verse of “Riding a White Horse” appeared in the 1953 anthology mentioned earlier (ZMWY 1953: 304).
In the winter of 1943, on the way to sell vegetables in the city, Li Youyuan saw a huge red sun slowly rising, casting rays of light in all directions... and he sang, “The East is red, the sun has risen...” (Wei 1994: 36)

One morning in the winter of 1942, he went again to the county town of Jiaxian. As he walked on the road, the sun had just risen from the East. Its red light illuminated the entire land (dadi 大地). He suddenly thought, “Nothing could be better than comparing Chairman Mao to the sun.” (Zhen, et al. 2003: 54)

At one point, the well-known musician, Ma Ke 马可, interviewed Li Youyuan about his motivation in composing “The East Is Red,” and in the resulting article, Ma describes how Li stood on the steep mountains of northern Shaanxi and saw the red sky in the East, with the sun rising. Cherishing the Great Leader, he was filled with a deep emotion and composed the lyrics “The East is red, the sun has risen” (Wei 1994: 36).

The power of the sun imagery can be understood by looking at several aspects of these accounts. In each of these narratives, Li Youyuan is always alone—no other people are mentioned, aside from Chairman Mao. The smallness of this lone figure is contrasted by the grandeur of the surrounding scenery, replete with the numerous mountains and slopes of the loess plateau. While the key moment of the narratives seems to be Li’s witnessing the sudden appearance of the sun and his subsequent improvised song, subtle
details are included to connect Li to the peasant class that he is seen as representing. Whether he is carrying night soil (Wei 1994: 36), carrying buckets with unnamed contents (Su 2007: 48), grasping a hoe (Wang 1998: 84), or on his way to sell vegetables in the county town (Wei 1994: 36), these actions connect him with idealized notions of the People, consistent with Li’s epithet of “The People’s Singer” (renmin geshou 人民歌手) (Wei 1994: 35).

The sun metaphor proved superior to the “lamp” metaphor for several reasons. Most obviously, the magnitude and reach of its brightness was far superior. Instead of merely illuminating the interior of one cave home, it could shine down on “the thousands of mountains and hillsides of the loess plateau” (huangtu gaoyuan de qianshanwanpo 黄土高原的千山万坡) (Wang 1998: 84). This immediately brings to mind a strong connection with the land of northern Shaanxi. The term “loess” (in Chinese, literally “yellow earth” or huangtu 黄土) is strongly associated with the geography of this region, as well as its history of droughts and poverty, which would now be washed over by the “redness” of the sun’s light. Two of the accounts mention the coldness that causes Li to shiver—cold being another trope of poverty—and the subsequent warmth and comfort brought on by the sun (Wei 1994: 36; Su 2007: 48). This adds a tactile dimension (and full body tactility at that) lacking in the lamp metaphor.

However, the sun does not stop there. Bursting beyond the reaches of the region, its rays reach what might either be translated as “the entire nation” or the entire “earth” (dadi 大地) (Wei 1994: 36; Zhen, et al. 2003: 54). The account that most closely
coincides with Wang Xiangrong’s description of “enlargement” progresses from the local to the regional to the national reach of the sun’s rays: “It shined on the old city of Jiaxian, shined on the Northern Shaanxi plateau, shined on the entire Motherland” (Su 2007: 48). In this way, it reaches the level of providing a “sonic dimension” of nationalism, as described by Sue Tuohy, wherein music functions as “performances of the social imaginary” (Tuohy 2001: 108, 124).

**Contradictions in Turning Local Into Regional: Decentering the Center**

In the process of turning the local into the regional, certain contradictions emerge, which I suggest may be related to subregional differentiations that show cracks in the “imagined community” of the region (Anderson 1991). While the task of representing the region requires singers to perform songs from throughout the region, individual singers from individual localities are often initially unfamiliar with songs from other localities in the region. Wang’s background, coming from the extreme northern tip of the region and bordering on neighboring Shanxi province and Inner Mongolia, throws into question the accepted center/periphery folksong and dialect mapping that scholars have suggested for the region, threatening to decenter/re-center the tradition.

Given Wang’s title as the “King of Northern Shaanxi Folksongs,” I was somewhat surprised to read the following in an article manuscript written in 2012 by a prominent northern Shaanxi folksong scholar who has worked with Wang since the late 1970s:
We hope Wang Xiangrong will make an additional effort to learn and use the Northern Shaanxi dialect, in order to enrich the style and form of the pieces that he performs, especially with regards to the aspect of inheritance and transmission (chuancheng) of the folksongs... (Huo 2012)

我们希望王向荣在学习运用陕北方言上再下功夫, 在演唱曲目的体裁与形式上更加丰富, 尤其在民歌的传承方面......

When I asked the scholar in question, Huo Xianggui 霍向贵, about this, he began by voicing a common concern often applied to many folksingers about the possibility of losing one’s “authenticity.” This suggestion at the end of his article was meant to give Wang “a little pressure” (gei ta zaocheng yizhong yali 给他造成一种压力) (Huo Xianggui, personal communication). “Perhaps the original stuff... perhaps he will lose his original style (yuanlai de fengge 原来的风格)” (ibid.).

Huo stated that this concern of his had roots in a performance he accompanied Wang to in Beijing in the 1990s. After the performance, one of Huo’s old classmates, an actor, waited for Huo at the entrance with an elderly, female literary and arts worker. The 90-something-year-old woman was also originally from northern Shaanxi, but had lived in Beijing since around the time of the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. The feedback they gave Huo clearly left a strong impression in his mind and led him to compare Wang to other singers from a different part of the northern Shaanxi region:

At first, they talked about the performance, giving their appraisal, oh, how wonderful it was, etc. After that, they mentioned that [we] should bring several performers who really sing northern Shaanxi folksongs well (haohao chang Shaanbei min’ge yanyuan 好好唱陕北民歌的演员). They brought up Wang Xiangrong, saying that was not northern Shaanxi. I said that Fugu people are from northern Shaanxi. They said they knew Fugu was part of northern Shaanxi,
but Fugu’s dialect could not represent northern Shaanxi. They also stressed that [the place] that could completely represent northern Shaanxi (zhengzheng daibiao Shaanbei 整整代表陕北) was Suide and Mizhi. However, I think that it is not easy to change one’s dialect. After all, so much of his life was spent in the Fugu region. Why do I want to add this statement at the end? Since the time he learned those songs from Li Zhiwen, [I realized that] if you are going to learn [the songs], you must learn [the dialect pronunciation]. ... In Suide, there is [a singer] called Luo Shengjun 雒胜军. As for Luo Shengjun, after Li Zhiwen, he is one of the best singers I have ever heard. Of course, he is a real, authentic Suide person (dididaodao de Suide ren 地地道道绥德人). Think about it, when he performed in Beijing, from the moment he opened his mouth, the audience never stopped clapping. That is very rare on such an occasion. The audience couldn’t contain themselves. I just wish that you, Wang Xiangrong... even if I just pick the song “Pulling the Camel” (“La luotuo” 拉罗陀), I definitely have to pick the right song, after the audience heard the song, they wouldn’t know he was from Fugu, and would believe he was from Suide. It’s not necessary that he sings many songs, just this one. When I sing a song, for example, a folksong from Qingjian, I use Qingjian dialect. Perhaps this way would make his singing more rich and diverse. (Huo Xianggui, personal communication, emphasis added)

This statement further complicates the above notion of Wang’s authenticity. It is no longer merely an issue of Wang having been away too long and losing his “original style” (an idea which, as we will see later, Wang is himself conscious of), but also a question of
geography. The area that Wang is from, while technically a part of northern Shaanxi, cannot represent the region as a whole. However, Huo’s discussion seems somewhat complicated after that. While he seemed at first to imply that the best, most representative Northern Shaanxi folksingers were from Suide and Mizhi, he later seems to temper this argument by suggesting that singers should sing each song with its local dialect pronunciation (depending on where the song is from), and that even if Wang learned just one song with the proper Suide pronunciation, that would be enough to show something of the diversity of the region.

As Huo saw it, the main thrust of the two people’s argument was that Wang’s dialect was “too northern” (tai kaobei le 太靠北了) (Huo Xianggui, personal communication). During our conversations, Huo referred to the idea that the Suide dialect should be understood as the “standard language” (putonghua 普通话) of Northern Shaanxi dialects, drawing parallels to Mandarin’s institutionalization as the national “standard language.” (Huo Xianggui, personal communication)

This [idea] comes from people outside of this area. There is a general consensus. The most typical, representative northern Shaanxi dialect is from Suide and Mizhi. Therefore, when performing folksongs, one takes this language as the standard one. (Huo Xianggui, personal communication)

189 Mandarin Chinese is commonly referred to as “common speech” or “standard language,” both translations of the term putonghua, which Huo used metaphorically to apply to Suide dialect’s position within the northern Shaanxi region.
For this reason, Huo had repeatedly urged Wang to work hard at learning the Suide dialect pronunciation, most recently ending the manuscript mentioned above with such exhortations. During our conversation, Huo added,

There are several singers, when they teach northern Shaanxi folksongs, they all use the Suide and Mizhi dialects as standards. Now there are less, but before there were many. Now, famous singers, as well as professors bringing students all go to northern Shaanxi to collect folksongs. They go down [to the countryside] to experience life. Face to face with [folk] artists, they learn [the pronunciation] line by line. (Huo Xianggui, personal communication)

Clearly, Huo was contrasting this with Wang’s failure to master the Suide/Mizhi dialect, and perhaps by extension to regard it as a “standard language” in his performances.

Elsewhere in our conversation, Huo noted the difficulty he witnessed in Wang’s attempts to alter his accent for certain songs.

...Yan’an put together a cassette, which had the song, “The East Is Red” (“Dongfang hong”). Later on, Wang Xiangrong took this as part of his repertoire, and performed it wherever he went. However, in the lyrics of the song, there were the meaningless “filler words” (chenci 衬词) hu er hai hai yo. He was unable to pronounce the hu er. He pronounced it completely according to his Fugu dialect pronunciation. He sang it as hua er—hua er hai yo. Later on, I mentioned this to him. I said, “If you can change it, change it over [to the correct pronunciation].” Ai, he said that that was his style, but, in fact, he was unable to change it! [laughs] (Huo Xianggui, personal communication)

......延安弄了一盘，其中就有个《东方红》。王向荣呢，以后就把它作为他的曲目，到处演唱。但是，其中有个......这个衬词里边“呼儿嗨嗨哟”，这个“呼儿”他读不出来，他就纯粹按他的府谷的方言去读的。他读的是“花
The importance Huo places on using Suide dialect pronunciation in performance
connects with an underlying notion of the centrality of the Suide area in Northern
Shaanxi geography and culture. During our discussion, he clearly outlined it with the
following:

...Speaking of the whole region of northern Shaanxi, at it earliest it had three
sections. Yan’an was one, Suide was another, and Yulin was the third. ...Suide
was in the middle, so at the time, when people went to work or migrated to
Yan’an, they called it “going down the southern route” (zou nanlu 走南路).
That’s what it referred to, going south of Suide. Going to the north part of Yulin
was called, “going to the grassland regions (zou cao diqu 走草地区), since up
there, north of the line of the Great Wall, near Inner Mongolia, there was a lot of
herding. (Huo Xianggui, personal communication)
......整个陕北来讲, 最早以前是它三个地区。延安是一个, 绥德是一个, 榆
林是一个。......绥德在中间, 所以当时候到延安去......下去打工的或者移民的
都叫“走南路“。“走南路”就是这个意思，在绥德南边儿的。往榆林北面儿走
的话叫“走草地区”, 因为它上面儿......象这个长城线的以北呢，靠近内蒙,
这都是放牧的多。

This version of history clearly places Suide as a separate region surrounded by peripheral
areas.\textsuperscript{190} It also implies the influence of contact with ethnic minorities through its
reference to herding and such phrases as “north of the Great Wall.”

Although Huo often points to the opinions of other notables when discussing the
idea of Suide’s centrality, including his narrative about the two “leaders” in Beijing, and

\textsuperscript{190} Pauline B. Keating has suggested that Suide’s relative natural advantages made it a “core region” in
relation to the surrounding “peripheral” areas (Keating 1997: 22).
his reference to the “general consensus” about this from “people outside of the area” (waidiren 外地人), one could see this as a rhetorical means through which to further an idea he himself wishes to promote. When I mentioned to Wang later on that Huo had mentioned certain “leaders” in Beijing suggesting that his accent was “too northern” and that he should learn more Suide dialect, he responded,

That wasn’t said by leaders. That was... I think that was Huo Xianggui and them, since Huo Xianggui is from Suide. I think that those who said this were he and the others around him in Beijing who are also from Suide and Mizhi—it’s based on their point of view. When they say this, in fact what they are saying is, hey, if we let Wang Xiangrong sing all of the Northern Shaanxi folksongs, to their ears, Wang Xiangrong will forever be close to the northern tip of Northern Shaanxi, far from Suide and Mizhi. So, after Wang Xiangrong sings these songs, bringing them up to the North, it’s as if they give recognition to this area of land where Wang Xiangrong is from. Following this, [it means that] they don’t give recognition to the Suide and Mizhi [laughs] area of land. As I see it, this is mainly their own personal opinion, not the opinion of leaders in Beijing. How many Beijing leaders could tell the difference between Suide dialect and Fugu dialect? Only Suide people and Fugu people can be clear about what is standard Suide dialect and what is standard Fugu dialect. Only local people can clearly distinguish this. So, I think that when he says “many people,” this “many people” of his refers to people from that part (i.e. Suide), and doesn’t mean all the people from Yulin prefecture and Yan’an prefecture.191 If all Northern Shaanxi folksongs should be sung according to the kind of language from Suide and Mizhi, does that mean Yan’an songs should also be sung in those dialects? Yan’an has so many red songs (i.e. revolutionary songs), so does that mean that people from Ansai in Yan’an shouldn’t sing at all? Zichang County in Yan’an, where Feng Xiaohong is from, that is also a central region! Qingjian County, Qingjian dialect is even harder to understand, but that is Northern Shaanxi! Furthermore, it is a central region of northern Shaanxi. You can’t say that only Suide and Mizhi are the central regions of northern Shaanxi. Suide and Mizhi are not the center! Open a map and take a look—are Suide and Mizhi the center of Northern Shaanxi?

那不是领导说的。那是......我认为那是霍向贵么，他们，因为霍向贵是个绥德人。我认为这话就是以他和他们周围的这些在北京住的这些绥德米脂人,

191 The two major divisions within the northern Shaanxi region. Suide and Mizhi form part of the Yulin prefecture.
是他们的观点为核心的。他们讲这个话实际他说是，嘿，这陕北民歌都让王
向荣这样唱啦，那么，在他们听起来，王向荣永远是靠近陕北的最北端，和
绥德米脂是有一定的距离。那么，这些歌，让王向荣一唱以后啊，靠北，那
么，好象就是承认了王向荣的这一块儿土地。那么，就不承认绥德米脂的
[LAUGHS]这一块儿土地啦。我讲更多的成分是他们自己本人的观点，而不
是北京领导的观点。北京领导有几个人能分辨清楚是绥德话和府谷话哪儿不
一样？只有绥德人和府谷人才清楚绥德话哪些是标准的绥德话，哪些是标准
的府谷话。那，只有本地人能分别清。那么，我想他说的好多人，他这“好
多人”指的就是他们那一块儿的人，而不是指的所有榆林地区和延安地区的人。
......陕北民歌都要按照绥德米脂这种语言去唱，那么，难道延安的歌就
非用按绥德米脂的去唱吗？ 延安有那么多的红歌，那么，延安安塞的人就
不要唱歌啦？延安子长，冯小红么他们家里边，他们家这一块儿，那也属于
中心地带啊！清涧啊，那，清涧的话更难懂，但是它是陕北啊！而且，它又
是陕北的中心地带。你不能说陕北就是绥德米脂是中心地带，绥德米脂不是
中心地带！你打开地图，你一看，绥德米脂是陕北的中心吗？

Wang calls into question Huo’s claim that there is a general consensus among outsiders
about Suide’s centrality. He sees it more as a subregional power play, which he then
attempts to problematize by pointing out other areas that could be considered even more
“central” and alluding to the fact that Suide and Mizhi are not actually geographically
central, at least according to maps. Elsewhere, Wang points out the absurdity of having
such a small area represent the entire region.

...The Yan’an prefecture has thirteen counties, while Yulin District has twelve
counties. Now then, if you just take Mizhi and Suide as the center of Northern
Shaanxi, what does that make the entire area of Yan’an? In that case, does that
mean Yan’an’s thirteen counties don’t count as Northern Shaanxi? Furthermore,
in Yulin, only two out of twelve counties are northern Shaanxi? Can this persuade
anyone?
......延安地区有十三个县，榆林地区十二个县。那么，你光把米脂绥德作为
陕北的中心，那么，延安人家那一大块儿是算哪儿啊？那么，延安这十三个
县就不算陕北啦？那么，榆林十二个县只有两个县是陕北？这能说通吗？
Huo’s mention of the section of northern Shaanxi that is north of the line of the Great Wall, with its prominent herding, clearly carries undertones of the influence of ethnic minorities, an aspect reinforced by the center-periphery discourse he outlined with Suide and Mizhi at the center. Once again, Wang problematizes this claim, arguing that Suide cannot profess to be culturally unique from the rest of northern Shaanxi. He points out its close proximity to other areas that it avows to be separate from, and notes that during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, large sections of both what is now Suide County and Mizhi County were controlled by ethnic minorities.\(^{192}\)

If you want to say that Shenmu and Fugu were controlled by ethnic minorities, you also were. If you want to say that you belong to the Han, these other areas all belong to the Han. You can’t say that your area is an exception, say that when the ethnic minorities had control, your area was a separate country. [It wasn’t that] in all of northern Shaanxi, only Suide and Mizhi followed the Qin Emperor [i.e. the way of the Chinese emperor], and all the other areas were dominated by ethnic minorities.\(^{193}\) This doesn’t hold up, such history doesn’t exist! [*lights cigarette*]

要说神木、府谷这些是少数民族统治，你也是少数民族统治着。要说你归大汉啦，人家这些地方也都归大汉啦。而不是说你这一块儿是另的。嗯，说在少数民族统治的时候，你这一块儿是另外的一个国家。......陕北就是一个绥德米脂是秦始皇陵道者呢，再下来的都是少数民族的统治者呢。这个说不过去，没有这个历史吧！[*LIGHTS CIGARETTE*]

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\(^{192}\) One might add that during the Yuan dynasty, almost all of “Chinese” territory was in Mongol hands.

\(^{193}\) In another discussion with Wang on the topic of bawdy songs, he mentioned an idea he had encountered in conversation with certain people from Xi’an suggesting that they were geographically closer to the historical capital of China and thus more “civilized,” while those from northern Shaanxi were closer to ethnic minority areas and thus more “wild” and sexually open, allowing them to sing suggestive songs that Xi’an people would not be able to sing. Such a notion ties into the trope of minority sexual freedom as a foil for Han conservatism (Gladney 2004: 65).
In addition to questions of singer identity, the local diversity of song genres can be seen as another obstacle to regional representation. Which songs can represent the region, and chosen from which locality?

“Regional” Singers’ Unfamiliarity With Other Subregions

When Wang took on his first two disciples, Feng Xiaohong and Li Chunru (see Chapter 1), in 2008, he attempted to teach them several songs. A few were common, popular northern Shaanxi folksongs that they would have already known. Several were from a regional opera tradition (errentai 二人台) popular in Wang’s home region in the northern tip of northern Shaanxi, but basically unknown in the regions where the two singers where from in the West and Southeast. Wang wrote out the cipher notation and lyrics for several songs, gave these to the singers, and had them record him singing the pieces. While they learned a couple of the songs, there were several others that they failed to learn. The reason for this appears to be a combination of subregional differences and the influence of the market.

There were certain songs that are commonly performed throughout the region, and Feng and Li had heard these before. However, songs from the errentai genre tend to be most popular mainly in the northeastern part of northern Shaanxi, which borders on both Inner Mongolia and neighboring Shanxi province (where the genre is also popular). Feng and Li, who are from the west and southeast of the region, respectively, in many cases had never heard these melodies and were not familiar with them. In other cases, a song, such as “Hanging the Red Lantern” (“Gua hongdeng” 挂红灯), might have several
regional variants, so that the one that Wang was teaching was different from the one Feng had learned previously.

When I went through a list of songs in Wang’s repertoire, attempting to see which Feng had learned and which he hadn’t, he concluded by saying, “there are many of them that I can’t sing. For many of them, it’s because they are from Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Ordos… ai, for a lot of them, when he [Wang] sang them, I had never even heard the melody before” (Feng Xiaohong, personal communication).

Feng is not alone in feeling unfamiliar with songs from other parts of the region. During my interviews with Wang, he also mentioned how he had initially never heard certain melodies from the Suide/Mizhi region in the southeastern part of northern Shaanxi—the area that scholars and linguists often describe as the most “representative” of northern Shaanxi as a whole—and how they sounded strange and unfamiliar to him at first. In hindsight, he says that learning these songs and learning to appreciate them is part and parcel of becoming an inheritor of the broader tradition. James Fernandez refers to the broader phenomenon involved here, which relates to “the way that one place, which is simply a part of a much larger place… comes to stand for a whole place,” as “metonymic misrepresentation” (Fernandez 1988: 22).

In addition to subregional factors, nowadays there seems to be a definite influence of the market on song selection and performance. The two disciples mentioned above worked for several years at a local restaurant on the payroll of a regional liquor company, and now provide contractual entertainment for a real estate mogul. In both work
environments, they noted the tendency for patrons to only request songs with which they were familiar, limiting the chances to perform less well-known songs.\footnote{Wang contrasts those two disciples, who both have young children and need to support their families, with an older disciple who is “economically stable” enough that he can devote time to learning a wider range of songs, and thus better “receive” the tradition.}

Often times those who host a banquet, wedding, or private party are giving the option of picking which songs to hear, and there is something of a cycle whereby people pick songs that they are familiar with, having heard them before, so the total number of songs requested and performed reaches an equilibrium. Wang’s disciple, Feng Xiaohong, referred to these as “familiar songs” (shuge 熟歌), saying,

> What the audiences like are familiar [songs]. Familiar ones are those that they know how to sing as well, familiar songs (shuge 熟歌 or shugequ 熟歌曲), for example... (Feng Xiaohong, personal communication)

His singing partner, Li Chunru, expressed a similar view that audience members pick the songs they know, since they are able to understand the lyrics. She said that while she also knows other less commonly performed songs, she only sings these for herself, since the audience probably wouldn’t understand (tingbudong 听不懂) the lyrics.

Nevertheless, she noted that there does seem to be some sense of shift over time, where songs that were not popular earlier on gain popularity via exposure in musicals, TV song contests, etc. (Li Chunru, personal communication).
Sour Tunes: A Question of Degree

In addition to contradictions involving singer and song identities in the attempt to represent the region, during the process of performing on new regional and national stages, Wang and other singers have constantly had to negotiate what is appropriate, or “stage-worthy,” for each performance context. While certain songs, whose content might be deemed too erotic or superstitious for large-scale public performances, may not be considered appropriate for the Yulin stage, they may find other venues in the context of scholarly anthologies or private parties among friends. I argue that this issue of “stage-worthiness” reflects inherent tensions both between rural and urban moral worldviews and the transition from local- to regional-based identity.

One example of this would be Wang's performance history of “spirit medium songs,” where he only performed them for folksong collectors, and never on the public stage (see Chapter 2). A second example, which I explore below, involves the category of bawdy songs referred to as “sour tunes” (suanqu 酸曲). The existence of alternative, bawdy versions of the grandiose, region-representing songs discussed earlier suggests that different stages require different songs, once again relating to the different expectations of different audiences. Thus, the examination of these additional versions serves to further nuance the discussion of the transition from local to regional and/or national songs.

To begin with, besides the “solemn and dignified” version of “Pulling Ferries Throughout the Year” that Wang produced for the TV drama, I discovered another version of this song that he would only sing in intimate gatherings with friends. This
version also uses some of the same lyrics, but presents the singer’s persona as a bravado playboy intent on having an affair with his wife’s sister. When a group of folksong collectors visited Wang in 2011 and asked him to sing a bawdy one—locally referred to as a “sour tune” (suanqu)—this was the song he sang for them:

“Boat Rowing Melody” 《扳船调》

When you mention my hometown, it’s known throughout the land, On the banks of the Yellow River—Qileng Village. For generation after generation, [we] have endured poverty, Ai, I steer my boat and ferry, passing the time. 提起我家，家有名
黄河那畔上七楞村
祖祖那辈辈受贫穷
哎扳船那摆渡我过上了光景

In my boat, there sits a white peony, I take you, Peony, south to Jiangnan. In Jiangnan, there’s her man, And she dumps this old boatman, Ai hai ai hai hai hai yo, And she dumps this old boatman. 我船里坐得个白牡丹
我扳上个牡丹你下江南
江南那有她的男子汉
把我这老艄公就圪超转
哎嘿哎嘿嘿嘿哟
把我这老艄公就各朝转

That white cloth shirt opens at the chest, Exposing a pair of white breasts. I have it in mind to give them a squeeze, But I’m afraid someone outside might see, Ai hai ai hai hai hai yo, But I’m afraid someone outside might see.

195 This version was recorded by Professor Huang Hu 黄虎 in Xi’an on July 20, 2011. I would like to thank Professor Huang for sharing his recording and lyric transcription with me.
Ai, sorghum is growing in that millet field,
In my bosom, the one I’m hugging is my wife’s sister,
[I] call to her, “Sister-in-law, don’t be shy,
I’m the same as brother-in-law [your husband],
Ai hai ai hai hai hai yo,
I’m the same as brother-in-law.”
哎,高粱长在那谷子地
我怀里边抱了个她姨姨
叫她姨你不要羞
我和那他姨夫是一样的
哎嘿嘿嘿嘿哟
我和那他姨夫是一样的

Similarly, as mentioned earlier, in analyzing the possible origins of melody used in “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River,” Yang Cui 杨璀, the eminent scholar and collector of northern Shaanxi folksongs, proposed that it was based on another song, which earlier on was frequently performed during the Spring Festival, entitled, “The Two Wives” (“Daxiao laopo” 大小老婆) (Yang 2007). The lyrics describe a wealthy man who marries two wives in order to ensure that he will have descendants to succeed him, but soon realizes the problematic position in which he has placed himself:

“The Two Wives” 《大小老婆》

Being wealthy without progeny, yo, is truly, yo me, worrisome,
Truly, yo me, worrisome,
In order to get sons and daughters I married two wives.

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First I married the first and then I married the second,
   Then I married the second,
And in less than half a month they kicked up a row.
先娶过（的那）大来（哟）后娶过（那）小，后娶过（那）小，
未过（你的哪）半个月吵吵闹闹。（Yang 2007: 12)

In addition, during the folksong collection efforts that began anew during the late 1970s,
a song with a similar melody to “The East Is Red” was recorded that described an
incestuous relationship between an uncle and his niece. 196

“The Uncle Carries His Niece” 《舅舅挎外甥》 197

In all of China, there are thirteen provinces,
Never have I seen an uncle with his arm around his niece.
The Pekinese dog barks facing the outside,
The unscrupulous uncle has come again.

Opening the window curtain and looking out,
I see Uncle coming.
Down the steep-sided hills he’s coming toward me,
Crossing the dark waters of the moat.

196 The violence and grim nature of this song give it the appearance of the closest thing to a Child ballad
that I have observed in China.
197 The version of the lyrics provided here was taken from
the character 跨 instead of 挎 (both are pronounced kua), saying that in northern Shaanxi dialect, it refers to
“taking possession of a female” (zhanyou nüxing 占有女性) and having extramarital sexual relations
瞧见舅舅走来了。
对面了峁峁下来了，
青水壕壕过来了。

He comes up the slope of pebbles,
Enters the patterned gate.
Ties the horse to the trough,
And puts the saddle on the grindstone.

石子坡坡上来了，
花花大门进来了。
马儿拴在槽头上人，
鞍儿搁在磨顶上。

My hand pushes the window frame out,
With a murderous glare, Uncle holds a knife in his hands.
“If you want to go, go with Uncle,
If you want to die, die at Uncle’s hand.”

手搬了窗棂往外照，
舅舅发凶手拿着刀。
你要了走来跟着舅舅走，
你死来死在舅舅手。

I tell my uncle, “Won’t you listen?
My aunt is much better than I,”
He calls to his niece, “You listen to me,
Your aunt is not as young as you.”

叫一声舅舅你试听，
我妗子比我强十分，
叫一声外甥你试听，
你妗子不如你年轻。

I tell my uncle, “Won’t you listen?
My ma and you were born of the same mother,”
He calls to his niece, “You listen to me,
Human affairs in the Qing dynasty have no principles.”

叫一声舅舅你试听，
我妈和你是一娘生。
叫一声外甥你试听，
清朝世事没理论。

You ride a mule, I’ll ride a horse.
Together, we—uncle and niece—will go up to Guihua city.
On the way, if people ask,  
Just say Uncle came to get his niece.
你骑上骡子我骑马,  
咱舅舅外甥上归化。  
走上了有人盘问咱,  
你就说舅舅叫外甥。

While scholars may refer to this type of songs as “sour tunes,” highlighting their erotic, bawdy nature, Wang noted that such naming practices reflect a worldview different from that of the rural singers who perform these songs.¹⁹⁸ When I asked Wang to explain his understanding of the term “sour tunes,” he said the following:

_Suanqu_ (“sour tunes”), outsiders call them _suanqu_. Local folk artists and local people don’t consider them to be _suanqu_. What does “sour” (_suan_)? It just means something that’s undisguised/explicit/straightforward. …In the past during the period of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese people called them “yellow [i.e. pornographic] ditties/tunes.” In fact, the melodies are nothing special, it mainly has to do with the content, the lyrics. Simply put, the reason that outsiders chose to call certain traditional northern Shaanxi songs _suanqu_ was due to the fact that their content touched on the issues of the relationship between men and women and sex. Directly expressing what is on one’s mind in an undisguised manner, without covering up anything, singing with the most simple, plain, and straightforward language possible—these are called _suanqu_.

The existence of different versions in different contexts—the rural festival, the large-scale public stage performance, the intimate gathering with friends, and the interaction

¹⁹⁸ The term “sour tunes” (_suanqu_) is sometimes used to refer to love songs in general, but more often to those that are considered licentious and/or pornographic. Perhaps the distinction in terms of conflicting naming practices and categories is most succinctly displayed in a scene in Chen Kaige’s 1984 film, _The Yellow Earth_, where a PLA soldier who has come to collect “northern Shaanxi folksongs” (_Shaanbei de min’ge_), is rebuffed by an old peasant. “The old man laughs: ‘What folksongs?! [Sha min’ge]. Sour tunes _[suanqu’r]_’” (Tuohy 1999: 45).
with folksong collectors—suggests that singers must negotiate what fits each circumstance. With reference to songs of a bawdy nature, Wang stressed that there is a question of “degree,” or du 度. “Some things can only be done, but cannot be talked about. Especially in public occasions, in front of large, formal audiences, [these things] cannot be talked about,” and here, singing is equated with speaking. “However,” he later added,

...if you want to take [these songs] to a formal stage, with an audience of many people from both towns and the countryside, then you should have a measure or “degree” (du 度). This degree must be grasped. If properly grasped, the song becomes a traditional, classic folksong. If you don’t grasp it properly—if, for example, the lyrics you sing are too explicit and you use specific language to describe relations between men and women, especially touching on sexual relations—then, you must avoid that. If you just barely touch on it, but go no further, that is okay/good. If you talk about it more deeply, more frankly, then it becomes dregs, it becomes “sour” (suan 酸). This is the distinction.

During my fieldwork in the region since 2006, this seems to coincide with what I have observed: rather than a clear dichotomy between “dirty” and “clean” versions of songs, there is a wide spectrum, with nuanced sexual metaphor somewhere in the middle and explicit references to anatomy at one end. Tastes vary and different individuals and audiences prefer certain types and degrees.199 Wang’s discussion of “degree” relates more generally to the interaction between artist and audience in emergent performance,

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199 Elsewhere, I have suggested that the process of folksong collection, adaptation, and performance involves the juxtaposition of differing moral worldviews, etc. Along the same line, in her research on northern Shaanxi “sour tunes” (suanqu), Zhang Ruiting argues that a song’s classification as a “sour tune” varies on an individual basis, depending on a person’s views concerning sex and whether the content of a song makes them feel embarrassed (Zhang 2009: 27). This individual variability seems to coincide with Wang’s notion of “degree” (du).
which has been discussed by Henry Glassie, Albert Lord, Sandra Stahl, Patrick Mullen, Richard Bauman and others. It involves the ability to size up one’s audience and respond accordingly.\(^{200}\)

The varying versions of each song performed in different contexts, combined with Wang’s discussion of the notion of degree, suggests that singers must constantly negotiate what songs are “stage-worthy” for each performance, by which I mean which songs are appropriate in which types of performance contexts. As the types of performance contexts have changed and evolved over the years with the growth of regional song and dance troupes presenting large-scale performances on a large-scale stage, as well as the rise of the culture market in such contexts as paid wedding performances and restaurant *baijiu* folksinger serenades, singers continue to negotiate what is stage-worthy or appropriate in each situation.\(^ {201}\)

\(^{200}\) Glassie (1970) offers a particularly interesting account of one singer’s ongoing composition of a racist, though ambiguously humorous song over multiple performances to different audiences. “After the composition of each new stanza it was presented in a performance of the whole song to his audience. Generally, if it received the correct reaction—laughter—it was retained in the song... if sour or blank looks followed the new stanza, it was eliminated... His audience... maintained a broad control over its content which acted to prevent it from becoming a totally personal statement and to keep it acceptable; specifically, his audience rejected the most stereotypic and directly offensive of the stanzas... because, on the whole, his audience was less prejudiced, less violent than he” (Glassie 1970: 29-30). In addition, a storyteller may, for example, alter his wording based on the listener’s gender, and may even select both a different repertoire and different persona for all-male and all-female audiences respectively (Stahl 1989: 73; Mullen 1981: 270-271, 274).

\(^{201}\) This process of negotiating appropriate performance repertoires in response to changing audiences and venues can be seen as a phenomenon that spans both time and space. In her study of *Yue* opera (*Yueju* 越剧) in Anhui and Shanghai, Jin Jiang notes the intense cultural transformations that were playing out in China in the early Republican period as a context for the transformations in the *Yue* opera tradition from a rural to an urban form (Jiang 2009: 26). Similarly, Zhao Liang looks at different ways that earlier legends about the “song goddess” Third Sister Liu (*Liu sanjie* 刘三姐) have been adapted in different geographical areas and time periods, leading to live shows designed by a famous film director and large-scale singing contests (Liang 2009).
In the following chapter, I examine how the rise of regional troupes and economic changes since the 1980s have been intimately tied to Wang’s professional career and the fate of northern Shaanxi folksongs.
Chapter 5: Individual and Collective Faces of Tradition: Economics, Culture, and Visibility

Wang sees the height of his fame occurring from 1994 to roughly 2005 or 2006. Far from merely a marker of individual virtuosity and the passing whims of audiences, his rise during this period is intimately connected to larger economic and media forces. In addition to artistic maturity resulting from many years of experience, he attributes at least three reasons contributing to his 1994 leap into national fame. First, after a long period of relative isolation from the rest of the country, along with its economic development, Yulin prefecture began to place more importance on advertising itself (xuanchuan ziji 宣传自己). Northern Shaanxi folksongs were used as a “window” (chuangkou 窗口) through which to become familiar with the region. According to Wang,

First, you would become familiar with northern Shaanxi folksongs. Through a means of culture, [the people promoting Yulin] would first get close to you and set up an exchange. Then, they would get you to learn more about Yulin, and finally about Yulin’s economy. The slogan at the time was “Culture paves the way, and economics comes to sing the opera” (wenhua pulu, jingji changxi). Right, that means that culture first paves the road nice and good, and then the people who get things done, that is, economic... it means that culture serves as a kind of medium, yes, as a weapon for exchange. Right, first it would be through song and dance. We would go to your Shanghai or your Xi’an, or your Yunnan, or to Beijing. In order to advertise the region of Yulin, first we would bring songs and dances from Yulin. Now then, after that... things from Yulin would gradually
A second factor Wang cites is his increased exposure outside of the region. Before 1994, he considers that he was mainly just locally famous, saying that not many people outside of Yulin knew about him. Although by that time he had already performed internationally, from 1987/1988 to 1991/1992, he mainly “followed the Troupe” (sui tuan 随团). After he began to travel more and became more well-known, other places would begin to invite him. Thus, certain key concerts in Beijing were soon followed by Hong Kong, Taipei, Qingdao, and other locations.

In addition to increased exposure through concerts, Wang also began to appear on national television. He had performed in Chinese New Year’s performances on Shaanxi province television, shot locally in Xi’an, since the 1980s. Some of these would be shown in excerpts by CCTV, the national television station, in the days immediately following the New Year. In this manner, certain directors in Beijing became familiar with the regional performances, and in 1994, Wang performed in the CCTV “Spring Festival Song and Dance Gala” (Chunjie gewu wanhui 春节歌舞晚会) in Beijing.²⁰²

²⁰² There were two parts of the Chinese New Year program: The “Song and Dance Gala” (Gewu wanhui 歌舞晚会) was the professional part, broadcast on CCTV 3, the channel for professional performances (专业
Wang had been in several film and TV drama productions starting in the 1980s, and one that was particularly influential at a national level in the period leading up to 1994 was a 12-episode television documentary called “Gazing at the Great Wall” (“Wang changcheng” 望长城), in which his mother also appeared. Broadcast in 1991, the program was produced jointly by Japan and China, following the length of the Great Wall, from Shanhaiguan in the East to Jiayuguan in the West, with stories at different points along the way. Some people have suggested that Wang’s appearance in this documentary helped contribute to his later regional and national fame.203

Following his 1994 CCTV performance, Wang appeared in the CCTV “Hearts Connected” (Xin lian xin 心连心) program, beginning in 1996. Together with the “Hearts Connected” Arts Troupe (Xin lian xin yishutuan 心连心艺术团), Wang traveled to various provinces to give performances. He also appeared on other CCTV programs and twice on Hong Kong satellite television.

Wang points to the influence of television as a third major factor in his rising fame, or more specifically, the growth of regional satellite TV stations. Prior to the 1990s, regional satellite TV stations that could be seen in other regions of the country were almost non-existent. Beginning with Hong Kong satellite TV (Xianggang weishi 香港卫视), which began to be available in the early 1990s in Mainland China, various

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203 See, for example, the online discussion concerning the documentary at http://www.baike.com/wiki/望长城 (accessed December 12, 2012).
regional satellite channels sprouted up, which allowed for an unprecedented degree of national exposure that, except for the nationally received CCTV, was unavailable earlier.

In his narration of the reasons for his rise to fame, Wang connected the growth of regional satellite TV with the economic drive for regional self-promotion. He said that, in advertising Yulin, it was not possible to bring everyone to the region to see it firsthand, so instead, Yulin had to use representative things to send out as advertisements. Wang’s performances on TV programs that were broadcast across China can be viewed, in part, as such advertisements.

At the same time, the increase in regionally-based satellite networks allowed for an increased visibility of local and regional performers that was also unprecedented. Referring to the period in the 1980s before the increase in satellite networks, Wang said,

Back in our time, even if you sang for ten years, people still wouldn’t know you. They could only hear your voice, but they wouldn’t know who was singing and what he looked like. Yeah, even if you wanted to find out more about [the singer], you wouldn’t even know where to begin looking.

在我们那个年代,几乎你唱十年都不知道你,只能听见你的声音,但还不知道是谁,他长得啥样。嗯,要了解他,还真不知道去哪儿去了解他。

He contrasted this with the current generation of young singers, some of whom are able to become famous overnight, in large part due to television and the internet, both of which facilitate an immediate visible presence that extends all over the country and even throughout the world.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Wang pointed out how nowadays, with TV singing contests like Starlight Road (Xingguang dadao 星光大道), TV stations will promote new artists all the time—today, focusing on this group, tomorrow,
The interrelation between increased visibility and media is nicely illustrated by the narration of a professor at the Xi’an Conservatory of Music concerning how he came to know about Wang. Speaking in 2011, he told me that the first time he had heard Wang singing was in the 1989 film, *Ballad of the Yellow River* (*Huanghe yao* 黄河谣, directed by Teng Wenji 滕文骥), where he sang the song, “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River” (“Tianxia huanghe jiushijiu dao wan” 天下黄河九十九道湾). However, at the time, he didn’t know who was singing the song, but was merely struck by the style of the song and its voice. Much later, probably around the turn of the century, this professor saw several television programs introducing Wang Xiangrong, which would mention the song, and have him sing it. Only at this point did the professor connect Wang’s face with the song, and know who he was. When the professor went with a group of colleagues and students to northern Shaanxi in 2002 to collect folk music, he made sure to record Wang singing that song (Liu Xiaoshan, December 7, 2011).

Interestingly, the version of the song sung in the 1989 film was done by Li Zhiwen, the older singer who taught it to Wang (Yang 1995: 32). The fact that, to this day, the professor continues to believe it was Wang’s singing relates to a broader lack of media attention on individual singers at the time. If credited at all, Wang’s name was not readily connected to the song he sang (or didn’t sing), and in the pre-Internet era, it was difficult to find out the identity of the singer. The professor’s description of how he came to associate Wang’s face with his name and his song is an excellent example of how focusing on that group. He suggested that, given the marketing power of such TV stations and various “culture companies” (*wenhua gongsi* 文化公司), singers like him could no longer compete with such large-scale image promotion.
The increase in visibility experienced by folksingers along with changes in the media (including satellite channels, TV song contests, and Internet) appears to be part of a larger cultural trend. In her analysis of turn-of-the-century “beauty writers” (mei
zuojia 美女作家), Yang Xin discusses how the rise of mass media and the market economy led these writers to become “highly visible” figures who, unlike the previous generation of writers, had to maintain “the high-profile image of the media star” (Yang 2011: 10). Yang sees this “heightened emphasis on the visual” as “an expression of the intensified levels of commodification generated by global capitalism” (Yang 2011: 11).

Along with increased “emphasis on the visual,” the growth of the Chinese culture market (wenhua shichang 文化市场) and commercial performances (shangyexing de yanchu 商业性的演出), the changing demographics of consumer demand now have a larger influence on what gets performed and who becomes famous. As Wang sees it, most consumers nowadays are young people who don’t care much for traditional music and dance, but instead prefer artistic forms popular now in China and abroad. Given that the main audience for folk and ethnic music is mostly older, more educated people, opportunities to produce such music in commercial performances are limited. While the country is attempting to support folk music traditions, for example through intangible

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205 While Wang himself does not have a webpage, other singers, such as A Bao, have online fan clubs, and at least one of Wang’s disciples, Zhou Jinping, has his own blog. While Wang may not promote himself via the Internet, numerous videos of his performances and audio recordings are available for streaming online through various search engines, such as www.baidu.com.
cultural heritage preservation, such genres still only occupy a small portion of the market, media, Internet, etc.

**Economics**

The “heightened emphasis on the visual” and the “intensified levels of commodification generated by global capitalism” mentioned above relate to the economic forces alluded to earlier by Wang. The economic history of Shaanxi province is mixed. Having become a “relative backwater” in late imperial times, it became “the heart of revolutionary change” during the Yan’an period, only for the Base Area in Yan’an to be abandoned once again in 1946 (Watson, et al. 1999: 75). However, given its revolutionary history and geographical placement in relation to the Northwest, it continued to be “a major focus for planned development in the early planning period. Some 24 of the 156 key projects of the First Five Year Plan were located in Shaanxi, and the province became the centre of large military, textile, electrical machinery and machine-building industries” (Watson, et al. 1999: 75).206 Policies in the 1960s and early 1970s continued to benefit Shaanxi by focusing on “building up the ‘rear areas’ and developing the ‘Third Front’ as a strategic goal of dispersing industrial development” (Watson, et al. 1999: 75; cf. Vermeer 2004: 400). By the late 1970s, its industrial output formed a significant part of the national economy, but “[e]conomic reform after 1978

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206 According to Vermeer, “Shaanxi has a considerable industrial tradition. China’s first civil aeroplane, first integrated circuit, pay-load rocket and colour television tube were produced in the province” (Vermeer 2004: 417). Nevertheless, the majority of this earlier industrial growth appears to have been located primarily in the central Shaanxi region, not in northern Shaanxi.
gradually undermined Shaanxi’s status in the planning system and turned the advantage of a large state investment into a burden of inefficiency” (Watson, et al. 1999: 75).

Beginning with the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in December 1978, two key initiatives included “the decentralisation of economic management” and “the development of a more market-oriented and market-determined economy” (Goodman 1994: 4-5). This focus on decentralization was enacted through “an explicit regional policy, in which some regions [were] positively encouraged to become wealthy before others” (Goodman 1994: 1). Localized economic growth was now seen to be largely determined by proving each province’s localized comparative advantage (Goodman 1994: 17). Now burdened by comparatively inefficient industries set up under the planning system, the shifting of national attention and investment to the coast, with its “booming growth... based on the import of new technology” led Shaanxi’s accumulated equipment and skills to rapidly become seen as obsolete (Watson, et al. 1999: 75). During the reform period, Shaanxi was thus required “to identify a strategy for growth by searching for new comparative advantage in an evolving market system” (Watson, et al. 1999: 76).

This brings us back to Wang’s statement about culture paving the road for economics. With the expansion of global capitalism, local cultural practices have come to be seen as an important part of tailored marketing (Oakes 2000: 672). In his work on Chinese provincial identities, Tim Oakes writes, “These strategies are no longer based on an assumed ‘modern’ mass-produced identity firmly situated within the space of the West or even the nation-state, but rather on local and regional identities that may retain cultural
elements of the ‘traditional’ and the ‘folk’ that are often non-Western and subnational” (Oakes 2000: 672). The desire for such local and regional identities has become so strong, Oakes suggests, that local regions often feel compelled to exhibit and/or create them in order to attract investment:

Not only does capital increasingly look for localities where a “regional culture” seems to facilitate development and innovation, but localities themselves have realized that if a “regional culture” of dynamic entrepreneurialism does not exist in the eyes of the potential investor, then one must be created. (Oakes 2000: 673)

Thus, in seeking to attract outside economic interest, in addition to presenting favorable economic opportunities, cultural elements are often seen as a crucial part of the entire “package”:

Localities not only struggle to offer an attractive package of political-economic incentives, including a disciplined labor force and a liberalized regulatory environment. They also struggle to package themselves as attractive and dynamic cultures. ... Local cultural diversity and difference are no longer regarded as obstacles to capitalist development, but rather have become core features of the expansion of the commodity form. (Oakes 2000: 671)

“Local” here has a somewhat ambiguous meaning. It does not always refer to small, tightly-knit groups, like villages and counties, but instead “has been applied to anywhere outside the political centre and below the national level of interaction” (Goodman 2002: 839). In terms of its use in the above discussion, it fits into a general trend in China during the 1990s of increased regionalism, which required individual provinces to
promote provincial cultural identities (Oakes 2000: 674). This resulted in a general movement whereby the rise of the local/regional in some senses displaced the nation-state in terms of economic attractiveness. According to Oakes, “[c]ultural expressions and articulations of identity have apparently shifted scale. ‘The local’ and ‘the regional’ are now regarded as more salient scales for asserting cultural identity than the nation-state...” (Oakes 2000: 670). He argues that “global localism” is “a two-way process: while transnational corporations seek to manipulate local culture to naturalize the consumption of a particular product, localities themselves seek to create a local culture that is attractive to global capital” (Oakes 2000: 674).

Oakes examines three case studies of provinces that sought to bolster their provincial images in order to attract investment (Oakes 2000). All three were “located in China’s interior, ...relatively poor, with economies primarily dependent on agriculture and natural resource extraction” (Oakes 2000: 675). According to Oakes, “[t]he identity-constructions offered by elites in each of these provinces claim a foundation on ancient, unique, and attractive regional cultures that, at the same time, can be called upon to spur a dynamic, innovative entrepreneurialism and sense of self-confidence” (Oakes 2000: 675). However, the claims go beyond a regional culture in and of itself with no national ties. “Each also claims to be a traditional holdout of an essential Chineseness lost to the more developed coastal regions in their rush toward Western-oriented modernization.
One could argue that in this way they distinguish themselves from the coast in order to directly link themselves with a ‘Greater China’ investment market” (Oakes 2000: 675).207

First, Oakes describes how, during the 1990s, the provincial Party Secretary of Shanxi, Hu Fuguo, promoted a “consciously ‘pan-local’” Shanxi culture (Oakes 2000: 676). Local diversity was glossed over in the presentation of “Shanxi cuisine” in themed restaurants, and ties to national and cultural history were emphasized, portraying Shanxi as “a hearth of ancient Han culture,” the heartland of “Yellow River culture,” etc. (Oakes 2000: 676). In addition, earlier images of “Shanxi bankers” were carefully cultivated to present a tradition of fiscal prudence that would be attractive to outside investment, while at the same time tying into the national ideology of marketization and entrepreneurship (Oakes 2000: 676).208

This emphasis on the “pan-local” also occurred in Anhui, where Oakes notes that despite “striking cultural diversity,” there was “considerable scholarly effort toward defining Anhui as a coherent cultural entity” (Oakes 2000: 678-679). Furthermore, as effort was made “to represent Anhui as a quintessentially Chinese province” (Oakes 2000: 679). Like Shanxi’s claim to its Han cultural roots, Anhui seized on the fact that various famous philosophers and intellectuals had been born there to promote its “philosophy culture” (Oakes 2000: 679). Also, like the promotion of “Shanxi bankers,” Anhui drew “on reinvented folk myths that suggest both ‘traditional values’ and dynamic

207 Whereas Oakes highlights provincial appropriation of Chineseness for purposes of self-promotion, Frederick Lau points out that “[r]egional cultures... are sometimes appropriated into national culture for political purposes” (Lau 2008: 60). A good example of this is the song, “The East Is Red,” discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

208 Oakes notes that Skinner (1976: 345-347) has pointed out that image of the “Shanxi banker” can mainly be attributed to just three counties in Shanxi, although now it was being applied to the entire province.
entrepreneurialism,” choosing to showcase its Confucian “merchant culture” (*rushang* 儒商) (Oakes 2000: 678).

Oakes then goes on to look at Guizhou, where key industries included tourism and liquor production. The slogan used in conceptualizing the place of tourism in Guizhou’s economy is “trade performing on a stage built by tourism” (*liuyou datai, jingji chanxing* 旅游搭台，经济唱戏) (Oakes 2000: 680). Given its large ethnic minority population, historical claims at being inheritors of mainstream Chinese traditions might seem problematic, but Oakes describes how minorities are presented as “living fossils” (*huo huashi* 活化石), noting that “[a]t one Miao ethnic tourist village in Southeast Guizhou, villagers were told by a visiting delegation from the state cultural bureau in Beijing that they are the ‘Chinese of the Tang Dynasty’” (Oakes 2000: 681).

The claim to preserving elements of Tang Dynasty culture, like Anhui’s claims to “philosophy culture” and Shanxi’s claims to ancient Han culture relate to a trend of provincial identities claiming to possess an authentic Chineseness that has since been lost by other more prosperous, often coastal areas. Like these other three provinces, Shaanxi also makes its claims to Chineseness, whether through its connections to early dynasties

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209 As we can see, this slogan is extremely similar to the one Wang mentioned was used in northern Shaanxi, “Culture paves the way, and economics comes to sing the opera” (*wenhua pulu, jingji changxi* 文化铺路，经济唱戏), although Guizhou’s slogan specifically emphasizes tourism, while northern Shaanxi’s suggests a more generalized notion of “culture” (*wenhua* 文化). The similarity between these slogans suggests the need for future scholarship to examine inter-provincial influence in provincial advertisements.

210 This term has also been used to describe an octogenarian folksinger in northern Shaanxi province, Chai Gen (b. 1924), calling him the “The ‘Living Fossil’ of Northern Shaanxi Folksongs” (*Shaanbei min’ge de huo huashi* 陕北民歌的活化石) (Xue, et al. 2008).

211 For more on the commodification of ethnic cultures in China, see Schein 2000. The commodification of both “folk” cultures and ethnic cultures relates to Bourdieu’s idea of “symbolic goods” and how things get turned into commodities (Bourdieu 1993).
(the provincial capital, Xi’an, formerly Chang’an 长安, was the capital during the Tang Dynasty), or its location bordering on the Yellow River, idealized as the mother of Chinese civilization. Wang explicitly connected the northern Shaanxi folksong tradition with Chineseness while recounting the reactions of Europeans during his performances in Switzerland and France in 1988, saying that Western audience members would come up to him after performances and say that his singing was “real Chinese culture,” unlike other sorts of pop songs that might be popular in China.

According to Oakes, “Chineseness counters a legacy of internal colonialism, marginalization, and dominant narratives of ‘backward culture,’” while at the same time, “promoting Chineseness is part of a strategy whereby local elites attempt to promote a cultural identity attractive to the ‘flexible accumulation’ of global capitalism” (Oakes 2000: 676, 669). In addition, Goodman argues that provincial identity is not mutually exclusive with other types of identity, but rather,

...provincial identity was seen as one of a series of multiple and overlapping identities. In particular, the new provincial identity was structured within a hierarchy of place and identity that reached down to and interacted with the more local levels of county and village, as well as up to the national level. (Goodman 2002: 839)\footnote{In a similar line of thought, though focusing specifically on music, Lau suggests that regional music and national music in China are “mutually constituted” (Lau 2008: 61).}

He notes that provincial leaders essentially had to negotiate between two constituencies—the center and the province (Goodman 2002: 839). Thus, the appeal to Chinese tradition can, at one level, be understood as linking together the local
(provincial) and the national. At the same time, considering the attempt to attract foreign investment, many lesser-known provinces, in competition with each other for comparative advantage, might use the claim of Chineseness as a way to make the unknown knowable. That is, although foreign capital may initially be relatively unfamiliar with a particular locality, they are bound to have some nebulous concept of China and Chinese culture. By linking the locality to that concept, while at the same time arguing that their Chinese is more pure or “authentic” than that of other localities, it could be expected that they will attract more investments and bring increased interest to those localities. In addition to attracting outside interest, claims to regional culture and connections to larger notions of Chineseness can also be seen as a matter of pride for locals, especially in cases where they wish to overcome previous impoverished images (Oakes 2000: 683).

In recent years, various large-scale events have been held in Yulin prefecture that purport to establish folksongs and folksingers as a key cultural attraction for the region. In 2006, they held an international conference and fieldwork project jointly with the European Chinese music journal, *CHIME*, on northern Shaanxi folk music. This was followed by not one, but two televised singing contests in search of the “Ten Greatest Northern Shaanxi Folksong Kings,” of whom there are now twenty. In 2007, the Second Yulin International Folk Songs Festival showcased northern Shaanxi folksongs as one of three major world song traditions, along with Russian and African American folksongs. The “African American folksongs” section was represented by the American blues and R&B singer, Bobby Rush. More recently, in 2009, northern Shaanxi folksongs were
declared a national-level item of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and Wang was chosen as one of two national-level bearers for the tradition.\footnote{There have also been two academic conferences held on the translation of northern Shaanxi folksong lyrics into languages including English, French, Arabic, Korean, German, and Italian.}

Behind each of these events is an underlying motivation to share this form of cultural expression with the world at large. During my recent fieldwork from 2011 to 2012, as I would travel with Wang from performance to performance, he would often introduce me on stage and have me sing a song or two, emphasizing to the audience that my fascination with these songs was compelling evidence for their attraction to a global audience. During one such occasion, after Wang performed at a opening of a new business, he spoke to the audience, marveling about the possibility of Fugu songs becoming “global songs” (qiuge 球歌), when one of the inebriated bosses from the audience walked up, put his arm around Wang’s shoulder, and asked Wang to have me sing a Fugu song in English:

Teacher Wang, these Fugu people present here have never heard English used to sing our Fugu folksongs. [audience laughter] Let’s have this American friend use English to sing one of our Fugu folksongs, so that we can enjoy the beauty of English, and the beauty of this American friend. [applause]

王老师，在座的府谷人从来没有听过用英语唱咱府谷民歌。[AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] 让他的美国朋友给咱用英语唱上一首咱府谷民歌，让我们也感受一下这个英语的美丽，美国朋友的美丽。[APPLAUSE]

This was hardly an isolated incident. In fact, there is a Chinese English teacher in Yan’an who has been making a name for himself in recent years by singing his English translations of classic northern Shaanxi folksongs. Similar performances of Beijing
Opera in English have been performed at various venues in the U.S. In Shaanxi province, there have also been two academic conferences held on the translation of northern Shaanxi folksong lyrics into languages including English, French, Arabic, Korean, German, and Italian.214

One of the driving forces behind these efforts is the idea that these songs are windows onto places, that what was once invisible might be put on the map of the world’s mental register. This use of terms like “window” and “bridge” are found elsewhere in recent discourse as well. Initial joint ventures in areas of interior China have been referred to as “window enterprises” (Oakes 1999: 45), in that they may later attract additional future investment. In another example, as Beth Notar points out, one of Jin Yong’s martial arts novels has effectively served as a “bridge” increasing outside interest in the city of Dali 大理, in Yunnan province, and leading to transformations of the place itself (Notar 2006: 4). Notar notes that one Chinese scholar compared the novel “to a spatial and temporal bridge, between Dali and the outside, the local and the global, the underdeveloped and the economically developed,” saying that “[t]his literary text would allow the place and people of Dali to cross over into prosperity” (Notar 2006: 4, emphasis added).215

These examples seem to fit in with the slogan mentioned by Wang that “culture paves the way, and economics comes to sing the opera” (wenhua pulu, jingji changxi). However, the question of how this works on a practical level might appear more elusive.

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214 See Shoujie shaanbei min’ge yijie quanguo xueshu yantaohui. 2009.
215 In addition to a bridge, the Chinese scholar also compared Jin Yong’s novel “to a traditional matchmaker who arranges a marriage between locals and tourists....” (Notar 2006: 4).
How exactly is the road laid? In order to look at one way in which northern Shaanxi folksongs are being presented and used, I briefly describe Wang’s performance repertoire during international performances, a case of region-to-region cultural and economic interaction that Wang participated in in Japan, and his most recent international performance in the U.S. in 2008.

**Going Out Into the World**

Interestingly, when he performed abroad, Wang did not sing any of the grandiose, region-representing songs mentioned earlier, but instead mainly sang the local folk operatic errentai, which he says was “pure folk and ethnic” (chun minzu minjian de 纯民族民间的) in nature, representing love between men and women, the latter of which he framed as something fundamental to all cultures. He did not perform “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River” or “The East Is Red,” or any other piece that was seen as linked to politics, since he said that the purpose of such artistic exchange (yishu jiaoliu 艺术交流) was to bring people together, not to serve as a catalyst that would amplify any contradictions that might already exist.

**Japan Trip**

Wang’s international performances offer specific examples of how culture can pave the way for economics, establishing relationships in a globalized era. In 1992, Wang traveled in a group of seven or eight members of the Yulin Folk Arts to Kobe prefecture in Japan. They were invited by a “cultural consortium” (wenhua caituan 文化
财团) based in Kobe, and the trip was half officially orchestrated and half non-
governmentally organized. In describing the trip, Wang stressed that it was not an
official visit between the two countries, but rather “contact between one region and
another” (yī ge dìqu he yī ge dìqu de láiwǎng 一个地区和一个地区的来往). It was seen
as an artistic exchange between Yulin prefecture and Kobe prefecture. The direct contact
between districts at an international level can be seen as an extension of direct economic
interaction between different parts of China that became possible in the 1990s with
emerging market relationships (Watson et al. 1999: 98).

Later on in the latter half of the 1990s, the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe also made trips
to South Africa, Brazil, and Singapore, although Wang was unable to accompany them
due to his busy schedule. Instead, he says, they sent prepared mostly dance performances
for those trips.

**Culture as a Bridge for Economics: Dow and the “Human Touch”**

The last international performance that Wang attended, in 2008, provides an
excellent example of how culture gets commodified in the market economy. Earlier on,
The Dow Chemical Company had shown interest in setting up a joint coal-related project
with Yulin prefecture, known for its extensive coal deposits.216 During the process of
establishing this relationship, Dow funded a four-month celebration of China’s rich

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216 Andrew Watson, Yang Xueyi, and Jiao Xingguo note, “Shaanxi forms part of the Shanxi—Shaanxi—
Inner Mongolia coal field, which holds over 50 per cent of China’s total coal reserves. Them emphasis on
the energy sector adopted as part of the revision of national industrial stategy in 1994 was seen as a
significant gain for the province, and especially as an avenue of development for the poor north” (Watson,
et al. 1999: 80).
cultural heritage, entitled “A Celebration of China: Far East Meets West,” in Midland, Michigan, Dow’s global headquarters. This included an exhibit centered around two terracotta warriors and other ancient relics, sent on loan from Shaanxi province, as well as several performances. The exhibit, entitled “Timeless Warriors & Relics: 1500 Years of Ancient China” in English and “Yellow River Culture” (Huanghe wenhua 黄河文化) in Chinese was put on display at the Alden B. Dow Museum of Science and Art of Midland Center for the Arts from January 20, 2008 to April 13, 2008. A symphony concert featuring two Chinese pianists, Angela Cheng and Alvin Chow, was held together with the Midland Symphony Orchestra on March 1, 2008. They played Verdi, Mozart, and Dvorak. The Yulin Folk Arts Troupe gave several performances for regional public schools, leading up to “a special ticketed public performance” on March 26, 2008. This final performance, entitled “Reflections of the Yellow River” in English and “Huanghe feng—Huangtu qing” 《黄河风·黄土情》 (“Winds of the Yellow River—Sentiments of the Yellow Earth”) in Chinese, was billed as “a series of traditional Chinese performances featuring dance, acrobatics, folk songs and music.” An ad posted on the venue’s website read, “The Yulin Folk Art Troupe from the Chinese Province of Shaanxi will transport you to a land of beauty and enchantment through

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\[\text{219} \text{ “Event Calendar.”}
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\[\text{221} \text{ In Chinese, the characters } feng \text{ ("wind") and } qing \text{ ("feelings/sentiments"), when combined into the word } fengqing \text{ 风情, can mean both "local conditions and customs" and "fine taste; refined feelings."}
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\[\text{222} \text{ “Event Calendar.”}
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‘Reflections of the Yellow River,’ a series of traditional Chinese performances featuring dance, acrobatics, and music.” During the final performance, Wang sang the errentai duet, “Flowers Bloom in May” (“Wuyue sanhua” 五月散花).

Figure 6. Wang Sings the Errentai Duet, "Flowers Bloom in May," in Midland, Michigan, in March 2008

Andrew Liveris, the CEO of Dow, and his wife, Paula, hosted the opening celebration for the exhibit, with Zhang Wen, deputy director of the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau as the honored guest. On the Chinese side, the relics exhibition was sponsored by the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau, the Museum of Emperor Qin Shihuang’s Terracotta Warriors and Horses, the Shaanxi Provincial Institute

223 “Celebrate China: Reflections of the Yellow River.”


of Archaeology, and the Shaanxi Cultural Heritage Promotion Center. American sponsors included The Dow Chemical Company, Northwest Airlines, Dow Corning Corporation, McKay Press, as well as local television and media. Northwest Airlines funded transportation costs for the 40-member Yulin Folk Art Troupe. According to its corporate newsletter, “Northwest co-sponsored the festival with key corporate customer Dow Chemical, investing in the communities we jointly serve.” The newsletter also noted that, “[d]emonstrating Northwest’s support of this cultural exhibit, Steve Sear, vice president sales and customer care, attended ‘Reflections of the Yellow River,’ a program of traditional Chinese performances.”

Given the relative ambiguity of such slogans as “culture providing a bridge for economics,” the example of this 2008 exhibit and concert series and their aftereffects provide an excellent case study to examine some of the specific rhetoric involved, and how such events are conceptualized on both sides and in the media. On Dow’s website, an article about this “cultural exchange,” entitled, “Terracotta Warriors to Spend Chinese New Year in the U.S.: Dow Contributes to Cultural Exchange Between U.S. and China,” contained the following excerpt:

Two authentic Chinese terracotta warriors have arrived in Midland, Michigan, the global headquarters of The Dow Chemical Company, as the centerpiece of a four-month celebration of the rich heritage of China. The 2200-year-old warriors will

226 “Timeless Warriors & Relics.”
227 “Timeless Warriors & Relics.”
228 “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China.”
230 “Northwest Sponsors ‘A Celebration of China’ Cultural Festival.”
spend their first Chinese New Year in the U.S., and will be cultural ambassadors, sharing stories of the rich history of China.

The event - "A Celebration of China: Far East Meets West" - is hosted by the Alden B. Dow Museum of Science and Art of Midland Center for the Arts in Midland, to strengthen cultural ties and increase understanding between U.S.A. and China. It is sponsored by The Dow Chemical Company, with great support from the Shaanxi Provincial People’s Government of China. The warriors were accompanied by 48 other artifacts and relics, ancient treasures that span three dynasties. In addition to the display, the celebration also features a series of cultural activities including speeches and presentation, contemporary art exhibit, authentic Chinese performance, an appreciation ceremony, and a business forum.

“As a global company with growing operations in China, east is meeting west in many exciting ways,” said Andrew Liveris, Chairman and CEO of The Dow Chemical Company, “We are pleased to be able to sponsor this cultural exchange as a way to share some of China’s important heritage with the people of this region.”

The rest of the article frames the terracotta warriors as “one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of the 20th century” and a link to “the ancient culture of China,” and suggests that, by seeing them, visitors from all over the Midwest will have a chance “to come and learn about the mysterious Chinese culture first hand...” Dow’s role is introduced as well, describing itself as “a diversified chemical company that combines the power of science and technology with the ‘Human Element’ to constantly improved what is essential to human progress.”

In this article, Dow appears to be presenting itself as a broker of cultural exchange, bringing elements of Chinese culture, history, tradition, etc. to Americans, and

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232 “Terracotta Warriors to Spend Chinese New Year in the U.S.”
233 “Terracotta Warriors to Spend Chinese New Year in the U.S.”
more specifically, the community surrounding Dow’s global headquarters—the region of the Midwest. This is also evident from the article about the exhibit and events in its newsletter, *Around Dow*, entitled, “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China,” which contains various section headings with titles such as “Employees Get a Taste of Tradition” and “Midwest Meets Terracotta Warriors.” In addition to the exhibit, cultural exchange was also enacted through food. Dow’s Asian Diversity Network (ADN) hosted a Chinese New Year’s lunch for Dow employees at the Dow Cafeteria.

Dow’s emphasis on what it calls the “Human Element” clearly speaks to global trends of giving back to the community, while at the same time appearing to fuse economic and cultural interests. Interestingly, whereas Wang used the term “culture laying the road, economics coming to sing the opera,” Dow’s rhetoric appears to describe a flow in the opposite direction—economics facilitating cultural exchange. Certain elements of the exhibit’s description seem to portray Chinese culture as a scarce commodity, emphasizing its “ancientness” and “mysteriousness.” This is echoed in the ad on the Midland Center for the Arts’ website, quoted earlier, suggesting that the performance by the Yulin Folk Art Troupe would “transport you to a land of beauty and enchantment.” There are also references to the “authenticity” of the cultural elements being presented: The terracotta warriors are referred to as “authentic” and “ancient

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234 “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China.”
235 “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China.”
236 “Celebrate China: Reflections of the Yellow River.”
treasures," while the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe performance is described as “an authentic Chinese art performance.”\textsuperscript{237}

Whereas the above article, “Terracotta Warriors to Spend Chinese New Year in the U.S.: Dow Contributes to Cultural Exchange Between U.S. and China,” emphasizes Dow’s strength in facilitating cultural exchange, the company’s newsletter article, “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China,” stressed the benefits of such cultural exchange to Dow. While in the former article, Dow Chairman and CEO Andrew Liveris is quoted as expressing the company’s pleasure at being able to bring about such cultural exchange, the latter contains the following quote:

“Building a strong relationship with China is a top priority for Dow, and the benefits of this relationship can’t be measured,” says Dow Chairman and CEO Andrew Liveris. “That relationship is built as we share our strengths with each other. This kind of cultural exchange, based on trust and goodwill, lays the groundwork for a valuable, long-term relationship.”\textsuperscript{238}

Here, the rhetoric is much closer to the idea of “culture as a bridge for economics.”

On the Chinese side, the party secretary of the Yulin Municipal Party Committee and director of the Yulin Municipal People’s Congress Standing Committee, Li Jinzhu 李金柱, gave a speech before the final performance by the Yulin Folk Arts Troupe, with officials from Dow and Northwest Airlines in attendance, summarized in the following excerpt translated from \textit{Yulin Daily}:

\textsuperscript{237} “Terracotta Warriors to Spend Chinese New Year”; “Far East Meets West.”
\textsuperscript{238} “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China.”

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During the closing ceremony of the Arts Festival, Li Jinzhu gave a speech expressing a warm welcome and heartfelt thanks to all of the friends who had attended. He said, China and the U.S.A. are separated by vast oceans and have completely different historical backgrounds and social systems. However, for a long time, the people of these two countries have held deep feelings of mutual interest and friendship. **Yulin is situated in the northern part of Shaanxi. In addition to having a long history and a deep-seated culture, it also possesses abundant mineral products, energy sources, tourism and human resources, and is a national-level energy and chemical engineering base.** Our collaboration with The Dow Chemical Company has already drawn back the curtain, and we look forward to having more interest and participation from American businesses. At the same time, we also hope to develop a wide-ranging exchange with all walks of life in the U.S.

Li Jinzhu said, culture is a window that reflects a nation’s historical heritage and inner, spiritual world. It is also the best bridge for promoting mutual understanding between different peoples and communicating the heart and soul of the people. Our presentation today for everyone, “Winds of the Yellow River—Sentiments of the Yellow Earth,” is an artistic performance with rich, local color. Simple and unadorned, straightforward and uninhibited, bold and powerful—this is the folk song and dance of the plateaus in the northern part of Shaanxi province, which amply reflects the northern Shaanxi people’s attitude of exerting oneself. The graceful, traditional ethnic music reflects the long-term accumulated of northern Shaanxi’s long history and culture. This evening performance will help the American people to gain a deeper understanding of China, and promote exchange and collaboration between the two great nations of China and America. (Wang 2008, emphasis added)

在艺术节闭幕式上，李金柱致辞对各位朋友的光临表示热烈的欢迎和诚挚的谢意。他说，中美两国远隔重洋，有着完全不同的历史背景和社会制度。但是，长期以来，中美两国人民一直相互抱有浓厚的兴趣和友好的感情。榆林位于陕北北部，历史悠久，文化底蕴深厚，并拥有丰富的矿产、能源、旅游和人力资源，是国家级能源化工基地。我们与陶氏化学公司的合作已经拉开帷幕，并期待着有更多的美国企业的关注和参与。同时也希望与美国各界开展广泛的交流。

李金柱说，文化是反映一个民族历史文化精神世界的窗口，文化也是增进不同民族相互了解和沟通人民心灵的最好的桥梁。今天为大家呈现的《黄河风·黄土情》文艺演出，是一台具有浓郁地方特色的文艺演出，质朴、粗犷和豪放的陕北北部高原的民间歌舞，充分反映了陕北人民奋发向上

The juxtaposition of themes in Li Jinzhu’s speech seems to relate to many of the issues discussed earlier relating to regionalism, globalization, and culture as a bridge for economics. While stressing the vast differences both historically and culturally between China and the U.S., Li reaffirms that cultural exchange can bring the two together. He then immediately transitions to an advertisement for Yulin prefecture, emphasizing its “long history” and “deep-seated culture,” as well as its abundant natural resources. Here, we see echoes of the earlier discussion of established local culture and business opportunities as the attractive combination of choice for global industries (Oakes 2000). Once again, we see culture portrayed as a “window” and “bridge” through which contact with the locality (i.e. Yulin) can be made.

There is also a striking similarity between the way in which northern Shaanxi’s culture is presented as a starting point for (economic) entry into the locality, while at the same time, Yulin’s collaboration with Dow is seen as a jumping board for increased “interest and participation from American businesses.” According to Yulin Daily, before his speech at the concert in Midland, Michigan, on March 26, 2008, Li Jinzhu had just led a delegation from Yulin on a “goodwill mission,” from March 24 to 25, to establish sister city relations with Baytown, Texas (which is home to ExxonMobil and Chevron.
In a sense, culture leads to economic development, which then leads to further economic development.

During Li’s speech, he presented the Midland Center for the Arts with two full-size terracotta warrior replicas to “serve as a reminder of the unique cultural exchange that enriched Midland in 2008.”

A photo published in Dow’s newsletter seems laden with meaning. (Image of Li Jinzhu, the party secretary of Yulin City, Shaanxi Province, shaking hands with Mike Gambrell, executive vice president, Basic Plastics and Chemicals, Manufacturing & Engineering.)

Figure 7. "Far East Meets West," p. 6

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241 “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China.”
with symbolism—in the foreground, the party secretary of Yulin City and a Dow executive vice president shake hands, signaling the beginning of a beneficial relationship, while behind the handshake stands a lone terracotta warrior, looking on in approval. Truly, culture is a bridge for economics. However, in order to see what effect these performances, in which Wang participated, had in the grander scale of things, we must look at what happened afterwards.

**Aftereffects**

The Dow newsletter article commemorating the Midland exhibit and performances, “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China,” concluded with the following: “The end of the Chinese festival actually marks the beginning of another cultural exchange. Party Secretary Li invited Dow to Shaanxi Province in 2009, to share U.S. culture with our Asian counterparts. It is too soon to say what that effort will be, but employees can be sure it will represent the company and the United States in true Dow fashion.”

The way in which Dow decided to share U.S. culture with their Chinese counterparts was to fund the 2009 Asia Tour of the National Symphony Orchestra (NSO) of The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, based in Washington D.C., which held concerts in Beijing, Xi’an, and Shanghai, as well as Macau and South Korea. While mainly funded by Dow with the purpose of establishing relations for the

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242 “Far East Meets West: Dow Celebrates Relationship with China.”
proposed joint venture, the trip was imbued with multiple levels of meaning. The NSO was officially invited by the Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China in order to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the P.R.C. and the U.S. and “to further Sino-U.S. diplomatic relations.”

Andrew Liveris, Chairman and CEO of Dow, in speaking of the tour, said, “This year not only marks the historic anniversary of engaged and positive Sino-U.S. relations, but also the 30th anniversary of Dow’s operations in mainland China. As a global company and as a long-standing member of the Chinese business community, Dow is pleased to be a supporter of this tour to showcase the strong cultural ties and increased understanding between China and the United States.”

The tour had several layers of official symbolism. In addition to celebrating the 30th anniversary of the start of diplomatic relations between the two countries, it was also exactly ten years since the NSO’s first tour to China in 1999, when it had been invited by Jiang Zemin after he heard it during his visit to Washington, D.C. in 1997. The NSO itself has a strong history of being associated with U.S. national affairs, including presidential inaugurations and diplomatic goodwill missions.

Thus, on the day of the first performance in Beijing, both Chinese President Hu Jintao and President Barack Obama sent congratulatory messages to the NSO. According


247 “National Symphony Orchestra, Iván Fischer, Principal Conductor, to Tour China and Republic of Korea June 2009.”
to the Chinese Embassy’s website, in addition to welcoming the orchestra, President Hu
“pointed out that music can help to refine sentiment of humankind and promote
communication between people's hearts of different countries.” He also said, “I'm
convinced that music from across the Pacific Ocean will enhance the mutual
understanding between the two peoples and compose a new chapter in the long run of
friendship [sic] between us.”

In addition, according to the posting on the Chinese Embassy’s website,

President Obama said in his message that he sincerely welcomed all those
attending the performance of the National Symphony Orchestra as it tours the
People's Republic of China for the second time. Music is a common language of
the world that builds up intercultural bridges, pushes forward relations among
peoples and nations, strengthens our understanding of history and tradition, and
enriches our lives and communities. He said he was pleased and honored to share
with the world the innovative works of the U.S. National Symphony Orchestra.
He was convinced that such rich and colorful cultural and artistic exchanges
between the United States and China will further narrow down the distance
between the two peoples.

On the evening of June 14, 2009, the NSO performed at the People’s Mansion
(renmin dasha 人民大厦) in Xi’an. Numerous Shaanxi provincial officials attended the
performance, and earlier in the day, Zhao Zhengyong 赵正永, a member of the Provincial
Party Standing Committe, met with a delegation of Dow executives for its Asia Pacific,
Middle East, and Africa regions. According to an article about the concert, Zhao said that the Shenhua-Dow Coal-to-Chemicals Project was a signature project for Shaanxi’s energy and chemical engineering base, with all of the preparatory work moving along at a rapid pace.

While the cooperation between Dow and Shenhua Group had begun earlier, with the two signing a letter of intent (LOI) in December 2004, and a detailed Cooperation Agreement (CoA) in May 2007, the Midland concert in March 2008 and the subsequent NSO concert in Xi’an in June 2009 appear to have occurred at a key moment in the deepening of their relationship.

A little over one month after the concert in Midland, in May 2008, an outside company hired by Dow began to conduct a feasibility study for the proposed joint project. According to the company, not only would the proposed project create a “world-scale coal-to-chemicals complex in Shaanxi province,” but the it would also “be the largest foreign investment project in China.” On November 3, 2009, the foundation laying ceremony was held, with the joint venture billed as “the world’s largest chemical


252 Zhang 2009.

253 More specifically, its subsidiary, China Shenhua Coal Liquefaction Corporation Limited, also referred to as China Shenhua Coal to Liquid and Chemical Company Limited.


project.”256 The event was attended by the American ambassador and commerce secretary, who “pointed out that [the] Shenhua Dow Project was the embodiment of high-level economic cooperation between China and America.”257 Li Jinzhu, the party secretary who had spoken at Midland, and Zhao Zhengyong, the official who met with the Dow delegation before the Xi’an NSO conference, also attended, as did numerous other officials. The ceremony marked the beginning of the phase in which national approval from the Chinese government was sought for the construction project. A year later, on November 2, 2010, Dow and the Shenhua Group announced “that they [had] taken another important step forward by submitting [a] Project Application Report (PAR) to the Chinese government for its approval to build and operate a world scale integrated complex of coal, power and chemicals in Yulin city, Shaanxi province.”258 Early estimates suggest that the coal-chemical complex at Yulin could be operational by 2016.259

While the joint venture project is still in the process of obtaining government approval, Yulin’s economy has clearly grown in recent years. On May 24, 2012, the World Coal Association (WCA) announced the appointment of the Chairman of the Shenhua Group, Dr. Zhang Xiwu, as its new Chairman, the first time in almost thirty years. 

years that the WCA would be led by a Chinese coal producer.\textsuperscript{260} No doubt due to economic expansion brought on by large-scale deals like that between Shenhua and Dow, the mayor of Yulin presided over a meeting on December 17, 2012, where it was announced that “[s]tudents in Yulin... will enjoy totally free education from preschool through high school starting in 2013.”\textsuperscript{261}

Apparently pleased with the results that cultural exchange can bring to business, Dow once again sponsored an international tour for the NSO in 2012—this time to Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, Argentina, Uruguay, and Rio de Janeiro.\textsuperscript{262} According to Andrew Liveris, “After the resounding success of the \textit{Asia Tour}, Dow is pleased to continue our partnership with the NSO for the \textit{Americas Tour}.” He continued, “It is an honor to collaborate with Whirlpool to bring one of the great national treasures of the United States—the \textit{National Symphony Orchestra}—to our employees, customers and other community members throughout this region.”\textsuperscript{263} It is interesting to note that the NSO’s first international tour, in 1959, and included “19 Latin and South American countries, undertaken as part of President Eisenhower’s Program for Cultural Presentations, a project of the U.S. State Department, for the purpose of building goodwill throughout the region.”\textsuperscript{264}

\textsuperscript{260} “World Coal Association Elects New Chairman.” www.worldcoal.org (May 24, 2012)
\textsuperscript{261} “Local Governments Offer Free Education.” www.globaltimes.cn (December 23, 2012).
\textsuperscript{263} “Americas Tour.”
\textsuperscript{264} “Americas Tour.”

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Why Local?

The above example clearly shows how Wang’s performance of northern Shaanxi folksongs, while not bringing about global mergers in itself, was certainly involved in the process. The question that remains is why. Why are such cultural performances necessary at all? After all, business deals take place behind closed doors in conference rooms, and at one level, it would appear that such deals will occur regardless of which song and dance troupe or symphony orchestra performs where for however many groups of schoolchildren. Furthermore, why are these performances frequently described as “traditional” and linked to the respective histories of the lands from which they arrive?

In suggesting possible answers to the above questions, I would ask the reader to consider three images, all observed in the area around Columbus, Ohio, in March 2013. First, picture a Coca Cola delivery truck, parked next to the English Department at The Ohio State University. On the back of the truck, there was a photo of a local, Mid-Ohio sporting event, with the words “Congratulations MOSCC Champs!”265 The endorsement of local sporting events by large, multinational beverage companies is nothing new, and one can easily envision delivery trucks in hundreds of cities congratulating hundreds of champs. Second, picture a heavyset man with a country accent and cowboy hat, standing at the meat and poultry section of a newly opened Whole Foods supermarket, handing out colorful brochures detailing the long history and natural practices of his farm, which produces the beef that a Whole Foods employee standing next to him is diligently

cooking for customers to sample. Third, in a Cup O’ Joe franchise in the German Village section of Columbus—itself steeped in storied, tourist-attracting tradition—there is a wall selling Cup O’ Joe t-shirts and memorabilia. Beneath the t-shirts on a small display, there are several books, including one entitled *Columbus: Past, Present, and Future*. Again, one can easily imagine hundreds of other franchise locations, where similar books—perhaps *Cleveland: Past, Present, and Future*, *Milwaukee: Past, Present and Future*, and *Duluth: Past, Present, and Future*—might be sold as well.

We have already seen earlier how global capital and multinational corporations prefer to enter into established local cultures in order to take advantage of such “infrastructures” in disseminating advertising and other propaganda. However, if we think about the last example mentioned above, the Cup O’ Joe, and how it sits in a neighborhood that prides itself on local history and local uniqueness, we can imagine that part of the struggle to assimilate itself within the good graces of local residents (while also catering to tourists) might involve the allaying of fears concerning some sort of “invasion” by heartless, placeless, and cultureless gigantic corporations—corporations whose influence could potentially lead to the “watering down” of local culture and uniqueness. Something that could potentially allay such fears is the presentation of “local” culture—either from the place the business is located, or the place it is coming from.

Going back to the example of Wang’s trip to Midland, Michigan, the entire four-month “Far East Meets the Midwest” exhibit, together with Wang’s performance, could be seen as a statement that the potential Chinese partners are not part of some faceless
global machine, but are firmly rooted in a local place, with a local culture, just like the
good people of Midland and the surrounding areas. This may or may not lead to the
difference between statements like “the Chinese are invading” or “the Americans are
invading” and an increase in “mutual understanding” and the passive approval that goes
with it. Furthermore, the emphasis on producing cultural exchanges for schoolchildren
could be seen as securely positive cultural images among large segments of the
population for years to come, as those children grow into adults.

Whereas Chapter 4 looked at how Wang’s speeches and performances embodied
issues of negotiation between individual, regional, and national identities, set in the midst
of ongoing performer-audience interactions, this chapter examined how the northern
Shaanxi region has been presented through song to other parts of China and abroad.
Regardless of the underlying motivations behind the use of such cultural performances in
establishing economic relations, I have shown how many of Wang’s performances have
been embedded in larger economic and social transformations, including the economic
decentralization in the 1980s that led to increased provincial regionalism, as well as the
engagement of the local with the global—including global multinationals—that followed.
Conclusion

In looking at the life and songs sung by Wang Xiangrong, my lense has been focused on the interaction of an individual and a tradition. At times zooming in to examine particular events that happened to him or his interpretation of a particular line in a song, we have also zoomed out to look at how a song can play a part in bringing together distant regions in a joint venture involving a large multinational corporation and Wang’s home area.

Songs can serve both as a means of personal expression and as communal memory and “desired truths” (Fong 1990: 459). They can be a way to reflect upon and socialize one’s personal and collective experience as well as a “purposeful communication” (Porter and Gower 1995; DuBois 2006: 3). Just as the songs Wang sings can embody both personal and social meanings, his life too can be understood in such a light.

With elements of both celebrity and public figure, Wang’s life can be seen as a site for cultural dialogue. One the one hand, he actively presents his interpretations of the folksong tradition and the region’s history, both through his performances, and through lectures such as the ones he gives at conservatories, universities, and military academies. On the other hand, like the other celebrities featured in programs like “One Hundred
“Years of Love and Marriage,” details of Wang’s life can serve as fodder for debates on cultural change.

While desiring to separate private life from the public stage, Wang’s discussion of the accumulated experience that nourishes artistic expression by no means precludes using the personal in the creation of something public, but it is also not limited to it. Just as one can infuse a song with personal meaning related to an unrequited love from the past, one can also build on emotional reactions to things that happened to people one knew or heard about, such as Wang’s older female cousin who died before he was born. In some sense, stories that one hears about others are not vastly different from stories heard in movies or TV dramas, and emotional reactions to the latter can also provide material for performative interpretation of a song.

At the same time, the telling of the story of Wang’s life and songs is both personal and social. Just as the version of his life that I presented in Chapter 1 is both dialogic (in the sense that it was based on conversations with Wang, as well as my readings of other articles and books about Wang, which, in turn, were based on conversations Wang had with other people) and subjective (in that it was based on the material I had available, selectively presented in keeping with theoretical frameworks accumulated through academic coursework and readings), the presentation of the genres, songs, and interpretations in Chapter 2 and 3, as well as how the songs have changed over time (Chapter 4), are all framed by conclusions I have drawn with the finite amount of material I have assembled up to this moment in time. James Clifford writes that “[e]thnographic truths are... inherently partial” (Clifford 1986: 7, italics in original), and,
as Wang Xiangrong once remarked to me during a discussion about various articles that described his life, only he could get it right.

His desire to control his public image is certainly understandable, but it is also intriguing to consider the interest others have in representing that image. Depending on which elements are focused on, his life could represent a rags-to-riches story of success (or “shepherd boy to folksong king,” if you will), evidence of changing (or declining, depending on one’s point of view) notions of love and marriage, the continuity of tradition or its dilution (once again depending on one’s point of view).

Amidst all of this, Wang seems to feel most comfortable presenting himself, at least to a scholar like myself, as a mediator between rural and urban, “folk” and elite, lesser educated and highly educated, local, regional and national, and past, present, and future. Indeed, with the influx of migrant workers from the countryside to China’s cities in recent years, the ability of Wang’s songs to represent places and times past allows him to negotiate, together with each audience, their relationship with the past and attitude towards the future.

As we can see from the earlier discussion of Wang’s speeches and song performances, various levels of representation appear to be occurring. A person (such as Wang) can represent a place (such as Marugeda, Xinmin, Fugu, Yulin, northern Shaanxi, or even China). Songs, in turn, can represent one’s words and feelings (surely a traditional idea in classical Chinese poetry), as well as places. Through songs and speeches, Wang attempts to connect with each audience, providing a bridge between past, present, and future, as well as a sense of home, tradition, region, and nation.
While a more detailed investigation into audience responses to Wang’s performances awaits further research, several of the themes raised in Wang’s speeches in Fugu suggest possible metaphorical links between his own life and the region’s success. Certain themes that run through the three longer speeches that I analyzed include the poverty of the past as contrasted with the area’s present wealth, issues of leaving versus returning, past invisibility and shame versus present hyper-visibility and pride of place, and Wang’s relation to all these factors. One could see Wang’s impoverished origins and his rise to success as a metaphor for the economic success of the region.

In this light, Wang’s performances carry with them an added authority, with Wang representing the elder generation. Songs that he sings like “The Infinite Bends of the Yellow River” and “The East Is Red” can be seen as offering a romantic nostalgia that is able to fuse the romance of a revolutionary past with the romance of a commercialized successful present (including ticketed five-star hotel Christmas extravaganzas). This nostalgia provides an anchor to the past for a variety of contexts—the birth of a new business, the union of two individuals in marriage, and the beginning of a new year—all of which can be understood as rites of passage. In such contexts, Wang’s songs connect the audiences and their hosts to a great past, and an even greater present and future. They also bestow them with a region, the birthplace of a nation, and the nation itself.

While awaiting further research on the other prominent and less prominent folksingers of the northern Shaanxi tradition, this dissertation attempts to paint a complex picture of Wang as an individual, as well as one of the “faces of tradition” for northern
Shaanxi folksong. While Wang’s life cannot be claimed as completely representative of other peoples’ lives, it does reflect elements of historical and social change during the past sixty years, and the songs he has sung serve to negotiate relations with real and imagined people and gods from the past, present, and future.
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