

of essays that demonstrates the strengths of collaboration – research, activist, and otherwise – and sets the model of scholarly activism for years to come.

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Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism

KA-MING WU

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What is the contemporary meaning of “folk culture” in one of the most iconic rural places in modern China? This is the overarching question Ka-ming Wu asks in her excellent short ethnography of villages in Yan’an district, Shaanxi province, based on fieldwork conducted primarily in 2004 and 2008. She examines three arenas of “folk culture”: paper cuts, storytelling and spirit cults.

Yan’an, of course, was the revolutionary base area of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), where Edgar Snow interviewed Mao Zedong for *Red Star Over China*, and where Mao gave his famous 1942 lecture “Talks at the Yenan [Yan’an] Forum on Literature and Art” which set the agenda for cultural production to “serve the people” under the Party vanguard. In her introduction, Ka-ming Wu outlines this history, telling more about how during the Mao years Yan’an was represented as a utopian place and as a “revolutionary mecca.” She argues that now, “folk culture in Yan’an has shifted from a site of state control in Mao’s period to a site of contest in the late socialist period” (pp. 4–5). This “folk culture,” of what she calls the “hyper-folk” (inspired by Baudrillard’s “hyperreality”) – a representation detached from reality – is manipulated by the Party-state, tourism companies, urban intellectuals, foreign foundations and of course, villagers themselves. Curiously, in her introduction, Wu does not discuss the film *Yellow Earth*, released four decades after Mao’s Yan’an talks. Director Chen Kaige and cinematographer Zhang Yimou shocked the film world with their beautiful and poignant film set in Yan’an, which depicts villagers as living a poor, brutal life stuck in patriarchal tradition. The film raised much controversy not only for its style, but also for its intimacy that the CCP has failed the peasants, leading to the film being banned. Discussing the film would have allowed Wu to set up a tension between representations of Yan’an as a utopian or dystopian “folk” place.

Teachers of undergraduates might have students skip the introduction and jump right into the engaging ethnographic chapters. In chapter one, “Paper cuts in modern China,” Wu provides some of the history from the introduction in more specific detail. She tells how paper cuts, once used for ritual purposes – healing or bringing fertility or good fortune – were appropriated by the CCP for propaganda purposes. She then tells how, in the current “late socialist period,” few people are making paper cuts any more. Thus, urban intellectuals from Beijing, concerned that the folk tradition will die out, start training women to work in a small paper cutting factories to sell paper cuts to tourists.

My favorite chapter is the second one, where Wu discusses how intellectuals from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing decided to try to list a Yan’an village as a UNESCO world heritage site. However, since they were having difficulties finding a

village that practiced “living heritage,” they decided to create one. They found a scenic spot above the Yellow River, found some abandoned cave homes that they turned into a folk museum, and started training villagers nearby in paper cutting and ritual. Their efforts led to Ford Foundation funding and government efforts to improve infrastructure – roads, electricity and water. At first the villagers, especially women, started to profit from the tourists who followed the road – renting rooms and selling paper cuts directly to them – until the county government opened its own tourist hotel with a souvenir shop. Wu frames this chapter in terms of a “narrative battle” over the meaning of “heritage,” but the real strength of the chapter is in illustrating a battle over resources, especially women’s labor and tourist dollars.

Chapters three and four examine the practice of storytelling (*shuoshu*), which, like paper cutting, was once used for ritual, then harnessed for propaganda, and now is used for propaganda, company promotion and ritual. As in chapter two, Wu writes with a light ironic touch and narrates how three blind storytellers, after a clerk has refused to allow them to see a local manager of China Telecom, wage a kind of sit-in, demanding that they be given some work performing propaganda or promotion. One of the storytellers says to the clerk: “[w]e are still living in a socialist society. I would not come if we are [sic] living in a capitalist society. We all know that a capitalist society is a brutal one and no one cares about the other. But we are not living in a capitalist society yet, are we?” (pp. 112–13).

Chapter five investigates the rise of village spirit cults. Wu argues that given a “marginalization of rurality” the spirit cults have “created a new kind of social space where people mingle and share their experiences of inauspiciousness and health problems” (p. 133). While this rings true, it would have been interesting to learn more about storytellers and spirit cults from before 1949 to the end of the Mao era. Perhaps Wu will conduct oral histories for her next book.

Wu’s conclusion is somewhat cursory. Those of us who conduct research amongst the “folk” (*minzu*) of Yunnan would have liked to see more comparisons drawn. For example, in my own research in Dali (see *Displacing Desire: Travel and Popular Culture in China*, [University of Hawai’i Press, 2006]) there are striking parallels in the construction of “hyperreal” tourist places, the disappearance of farm land to infrastructure, the increase in traffic accidents, villagers finding solace in ritual, and a marginalization of village entrepreneurs.

But this is a minor criticism. Ka-ming Wu has written a lively, engaging ethnography that will be accessible to students in courses on contemporary China.

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Irony, Cynicism and the Chinese State

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This collection of essays, which grew out of two workshops attended by the contributors, represents an in-depth and ethnographically grounded look at irony and cynicism and their role in today’s China. As Michael Herzfeld points out in his afterword, “[t]he essays are all – for such is the power of ethnography – about real