

REFORMING THE LOCAL, CONSTRUCTING CHINA: Place Identity in a North China Province

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Abstract

Reform in the People's Republic of China has seen a dramatic change in the discourse of localism, which has now moved from being a political crime to being a technique for encouraging entrepreneurialism and economic development. One of the oft-cited arguments about the coincidence of economic growth and localism is that this might result in a weakening of central governments and even the agendas of the nation state. An investigation of place identity in Shanxi Province, North China, suggests to the contrary that the impact of new discourses of localism has actually strengthened the nationalist project through creating new and more integrated multiple place identities.

During the 1990s in Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi Province, one of the great economic success stories was the emergence of restaurants and eateries named after the province, its noodles, pancakes and pasta. These new enterprises came in all shapes and sizes: *Shanxi Noodle King*, *Shanxi Pasta World*, *Shanxi Noodles*, to name a few. This phenomenon was all the more remarkable because, while the territory of Shanxi had long been famous for its noodles, pancakes and flour-based food, they had not previously been marketed with specific reference to the name of the province. On the contrary, such foods were more likely to have place descriptors, where these existed at all, to more limited territories, such as towns and counties—for example, the Linfen *shuaibing* (a very large, thin, flat pancake, cooked folded in layers) or Wenshui *jubing* (a deep-fried doughy ball with a sweet filling)—and then only because they had become known (largely through sales) outside their area of origin.

The emergence of Shanxi noodles (and indeed a provincial cuisine of any kind) in the 1990s was part of the deliberate construction of a provincial identity by the Party-state, designed primarily to assist the cause of economic development. Shanxi was being identified as a new local imaginary that would help mobilise the enthusiasm, productivity and even the resources of its inhabitants. Indeed, both because the province is clearly a higher order of the “local” than the towns and counties that might be thought the more usual level of local identification and because the social construction of a specifically Shanxi identity emphasises the networks that bind its inhabitants, this result is perhaps better described as the emergence of a translocal imaginary. In this process of identity formation, the idea of the local was effectively reformed by the Party-state in two further regards: localism was being openly articulated and becoming politically respectable; and the province was being highlighted as the prime scale of identification.

The “local” as a focus of socio-political interaction had an undoubtedly ambiguous existence from the establishment of the People’s Republic of China [PRC] in 1949 to the start of the reform era in the 1980s. From the point of view of the Party-state created by the Chinese Communist Party [CCP], a strong center required the identification of the local, but necessarily only in subordinate positions. At least partly in consequence, the descriptor “local” was applied to everything from village to county, district and province. While the activism and voluntarism of local government at all these levels was encouraged, “localism” was a significant political crime that invariably resulted in loss of office (Teiwes 1979, p. 366ff.).

This started to change in the 1990s, as the Party-state built on the ambiguities resulting from the definition of local as both province and village and everything in between as part of its deliberate strategy to encourage development. Although the term “localism” has not been depoliticised, the negative attitude towards it has started to change with reform and the introduction of an effective state sponsored discourse of localism. There has been an emphasis on the importance of local feelings of identification by entrepreneurs and managers as motivators of economic behaviour. To rephrase a well-known description of capitalism in the USA, the implicit operating principle for economic development became “What’s good for Haizhou is good for China”. There has also been, in contrast to past practice, the crafting of explicitly provincial discourses of development by the Party-state itself (Oakes 2000, p. 667; Hendrischke and Feng, 1999; Goodman 1997).

Concerns about localism escaping the state are entirely understandable from a number of perspectives influencing the current leadership of the PRC, including China’s history of warlordism in the twentieth century and the implosion of the state in post-communist Russia and Eastern Europe. However, a series of interviews in Shanxi during 1999–2002, in particular the responses to questions about migration and perception of place, suggest that networks of translocalism may be more important and stronger than any more divisive identifications. During the 1990s, economic development was almost inherently localist, not least in response to the Party-state’s new discourse of development. Almost all those interviewed had lived in the province all their lives; the very few others had lived and worked there for almost all their adult lives; and there had clearly been very few social interactions with the rest of China. All the same, an apparently intense social localism would seem to have been offset to some considerable extent by the emergence of a provincial translocal imaginary that aids an even wider political cohesion.

Migration and mobility within Shanxi

Shanxi is a North China province that in 2000 had 32.97 million people, a GDP of 164.4 million *yuan* and a GDP per capita of 5,137 *yuan*.¹ Although it is, and has been for about eighty years, one of China’s major heavy industrial bases, with exceptionally large and high-quality resources of coal, its reputation within the PRC is one of poverty and peasant radicalism. It was the site of the major front-line base areas against Japanese

¹ Data for Shanxi and comparative national data, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from *Zhongguo tongji nianjian 2001*.

invasion during the War of Resistance of 1937–45; and the Mao-era model production brigade of Dazhai is located in the east of the province. Since the 1920s, Shanxi has been an established major center for heavy industry, and it currently produces large proportions of China's coal, coke, aluminum, electricity, and specialist steels. In the past, the lack of understanding of Shanxi's local conditions more generally was not too surprising, given its mountainous topography and lack of transport links with the rest of China. Other Chinese were effectively hindered from visiting Shanxi, let alone doing business there, until a massive road-building program made the province more accessible during the mid-1990s (Breslin 1989, p. 135; Gillin 1967; Goodman 1999, p. 323).

Before 1992, provincial economic development had depended heavily on central government investment, growing fastest with that investment during the mid-1950s and mid-1980s. It was only during the mid-1990s that sustained, though still only extremely modest, above-national-average rates of growth were achieved without that support. During the last decade, Shanxi's economic structure has ceased to revolve solely around the central state sector, though it still plays a sizeable role in provincial development, not least through its control of energy prices. There has remained relatively little foreign interaction with the province though there has been considerable domestic investment from and trade with other parts of China, particularly in the development of the private sectors of the economy. By 2000, 10.9 per cent of the province's GDP was produced by the primary sector of the economy, compared to the national average of 15.9 per cent; 50.3 per cent of provincial GDP came from the secondary sector of the economy, compared to the national average of 50.9 per cent; and 38.7 per cent was derived from the tertiary sector, compared to the national average of 33.2 per cent. Heavy industry, centering on coal, coke and steel production, is the backbone of the provincial economy, with rapid growth in the new technologies, foodstuffs and textiles (*Touzi daokan* 1996). In 2000, about 10 per cent of GDP was derived from the foreign-funded sector of the economy, compared to a national average of about twice that figure.

In the context of another project, it has been necessary to try and collect social and demographic data as well as perceptions of place and culture from a more general sample of the Shanxi population.² As a group, those interviewed have been selected to reflect regional diversity across the province (drawing on people living in each of the province's eleven administrative districts), age and gender differences, as well as residence between rural and urban areas. In the process of creating a control group for comparison, information about migration, mobility and perceptions of place are readily available. The information discussed here is taken from those interviews, a group who predominantly might be described as the middle classes. The extent to which the sample of 210 interviewees is drawn from those social categories is apparent from a brief consideration

² The project is concerned with an investigation of Christianity in Shanxi, and has been supported by a research grant from the Australian Research Council. Professor Tian Youru of the Modern Shanxi Research Institute, and Li Xueqian of Shanxi University provided help and assistance without which this project would not have taken place. Neither they nor indeed anyone else in Shanxi who has contributed to this project, including those interviewed for this study, is in any way responsible for the interpretation or views expressed here.

of their current occupations and educational backgrounds. Ten per cent of those interviewed were businesspeople, 25 per cent teachers, 22 per cent worked in administrative positions of various kinds, 5 per cent described themselves more generally as workers, and 18 per cent were different kinds of professionals—doctors, nurses, accountants, engineers. Of the sample, 49 per cent were university educated; 23 per cent had completed a three-year college program; and 15 per cent were graduates of a two-year technical college.

An understanding of “home” is clearly central to any consideration of migration as well as the local in this context. However, “home” may well be a series of operations for those interviewed, with a complex set of interrelations. “Home” might be where someone was born (birthplace); the location of the interviewee’s parent’s long-term family home, certainly regarded as having been the major cultural identification of place in the past (native place); the place where the interviewee’s parent’s lived when they were growing up (parental home); and the place where the interviewee settled to live when they married and started their own family (family home).

Those interviewed during 1999–2002 were predominantly from Shanxi, in the sense that they were either born there, their parents’ native place was in the province, or they had grown up there. Eighty-nine per cent were born in Shanxi, and indeed the same percentage grew up there. Eighty-six per cent came from families whose native place was in the province. Even where people were not province-born, they had spent almost all the years since the late 1940s in Shanxi.

Perhaps more remarkable is the extent to which birthplace, native place and parental home location of those interviewed were identical and in Shanxi; as well as where birthplace, native place and parental home, though not identical, are located within the same district (district in this sense being the fundamental cultural sub-areas of the province: Central Shanxi, centered on the Taiyuan Basin; Southeast Shanxi, centered on Changzhi and Jincheng; Southern Shanxi, centered on Linfen and Yuncheng; North Shanxi centered on Datong; the Liuliang Mountains; and the area in the northeast of the province centered on Yuanping, Xinzhou and the Wutai Mountains).

Over half of those interviewed were born and grew up in their parents’ native place. In addition, more than a further quarter of all those interviewed had their birthplace, native place and parental home location all within Shanxi Province. Moreover, about two-thirds of all those interviewed had their birthplace, native place and parental home place all located within the same district of Shanxi.

Education is a significant determinant of migration and social mobility, particularly when attending university presents one of the first opportunities for the individual to move away from the parental home. Attendance at college is usually more local. Those interviewed were relatively highly educated. Seventy-two per cent had graduated from either a four- or three-year higher education award program, though there are clear gender and age differences. The middle-aged and the male were more likely to have attended university; the female to have graduated from three-year college programs.

Although the interviews revealed that native place remains an important cultural association for those interviewed, it would seem that it is less a determinant of economic behaviour than is the location of the parental home. While almost half of those

interviewed might have left the parental home to study for degrees and professional qualifications, just over half of all those interviewed ended up working in the location of their parental home. Fifty-three per cent of those interviewed were found to be working in the location of their parental home, while only 33 per cent were working in their parents' native place.

The provincial boundaries of migration would also seem to be strongly indicated by the information available on the relationships between birthplace, native place, parental home and family home location. While not (quite) all those interviewed might have regarded Shanxi as "home", all were long-term residents of the province. The overwhelming majority had been born in the province, had their native place there, and had grown up there too. Though the dominant pattern is an identity of birthplace, native place and parental home, there is additionally a secondary pattern of mobility within the province, with individuals moving for education and work.

As might be expected, given both the provincial socio-economic trends of the last decade and the results of other surveys also focussing on the Shanxi middle classes (Goodman 2001, p. 132), those interviewed appear to have been generally upwardly mobile in socio-economic terms. Other surveys in Shanxi have highlighted a number of different routes to socio-economic advance during the 1990s with urbanisation; the development of light industry, particularly in suburban villages and townships; and the growth of service industries. While people (and their children) from social categories previously excluded from social and political advance have played a significant role in the creation of new businesses, parental levels of education and participation in the leadership of the Party-state (especially at the local level) have also played important roles in the creation of the new middle classes of the reform era in Shanxi (Goodman 1998, p. 39; 2003, p. 187). A survey of leading cadres suggested a three generation pattern of peasant to cadre to business person: while the cadres themselves had been recruited overwhelmingly from the ranks of the poor and less privileged, their children went on to become the backbone of the business middle class (Goodman 2000, p. 180).

A higher percentage of the fathers of those interviewed were either peasants or workers (42 per cent) compared to the interviewees themselves (9 per cent). Although only a third of the fathers of those interviewed had been white collar workers, well over three-quarters of the interviewees were. Significantly, a large number of those interviewed had fathers who had been cadres, though not necessarily leading cadres.

A migration pattern that is almost completely within the province, with a closer relationship to the place of growing up, rather than native place as such, is further indicated by the location of the family home established once those interviewed had married and settled down. Only just under half of those interviewed had established their own family home in the place where they had grown up, and where their parental home was located. On the other hand, less than a quarter of those interviewed had settled in their family's native place.

Constructing the provincial

These trends are part of the essential context for examining the emergence of a translocal imaginary. Another is the development of a provincial discourse of development by the leadership of the Shanxi Party-state during the mid-1990s, which explicitly attempted to

construct a provincial identity that would create wider feelings of solidarity and mobilise local economic activism (Goodman 2002, p. 837). The new distinctive Shanxi identity of the 1990s was constructed from local cultures and practices in an often very confused and *ad hoc* way. In one or two cases, it was possible to highlight a near-common characteristic for much of the province, as with the identification of noodles or vinegar as provincial cultural icons. Sometimes a specific cultural element of one locality was transformed into a provincial trope, as with the transformation of Fenyang County's *Fenjiu*—a sorghum-based liqueur—into the provincial drink; or with the recognition of local opera and theatre traditions. There was even the creation of a completely new “tradition” as a provincial characteristic through the elaboration of a previously highly localised cultural practice, as with the development of Drum and Gong Troupes.

The provincial discourse of development was promoted in and after 1992 under the slogan of “A Prosperous Shanxi and a Wealthy People”. The legitimacy for this approach was grounded in the length of the history of the area of today's province. The sense of history was often quite exaggerated: the media and provincial leaders were quite capable of describing anything since the Tang Dynasty as “recent” or “modern” (*Linfen ribao* 1996, p. 2; *Shanxi ribao* 1996, p. 8). Linguistically, Shanxi was often referred to as *San Jin* (Three or Tripartite Shanxi) or *Jin* (the classical Chinese character for the province) rather than the modern Shanxi, thereby reinforcing the notion of a long heritage. The description of the province as *San Jin* refers to the Warring States period that started around 453 BCE. At that time, today's Shanxi south of the Beiyue Mountains (that is everything except the region centered on Datong in the north) was divided into three principalities, corresponding to the areas around today's Yuncheng, Changzhi and Taiyuan.

In practical terms, a sense of Shanxi identity was cultivated through the media as part of the reform agenda. The propaganda system of the provincial government produced a whole series of publications dedicated to the promotion of local culture. These included magazines such as the bi-monthly *Materials on Shanxi's Literature and History*; culturally broad magazines such as *Vicissitudes* and more literary journals such as *Yellow River*, *Spark*, *The Wind on the Beiyue Mountains* and *Metropolis*, as well as a series of compendia, such as the 52-volume *Shanxi Encyclopedia*.

A determined encouragement of the reconstructed Shanxi identity was to be found in the regular media—the radio, television and newspapers—which carried stories and items of local content. Where the more establishment newspapers and programs carried stories of strategic interest in terms of economic development, the more popular media concentrated on items of more cultural or general interest. Thus, not surprisingly, the CCP's *Shanxi Daily* featured development of the Shanxi coal industry (Zhao Shurong 1996, p. 4) as well as the development of other industries. Papers such as the *Taiyuan Evening News* and *Morning Life* concentrated on issues such as local foods, vinegar consumption and local history, both ancient and modern (Zheng Sheng 1996, p. 6; Qu Shaosheng 1996, p. 8; Liu Fang 1998, p. 3; Kang Yuqin 1998, p. 7).

To support this construction of the new translocal identity, the provincial leadership ensured the development of a whole network of institutes, study groups and associations dedicated to popularising the idea of Shanxi. These included a Shanxi Culture Research Association and a Shanxi Overseas Exchange Committee. The provincial leadership also

established a Shanxi Research Institute under its Provincial CCP Committee, with an initial staff of just under a hundred people. Perhaps even more remarkably, it also appointed 165 local historians in different locations around the province. In absolute terms this figure is clearly not large, in a population of some 30 million but, given the other challenges that were facing the provincial leadership at the time, and that required funding, these appointments reflect the importance attached to the development of provincial (and inherently translocal) knowledge. A major feature of the work of these historians was to supply news stories of various kinds to the official media.

The new idea of Shanxi being created in these ways was not intended to represent a radical break with either the recent past or the idea of China as a whole. The distinctiveness of Shanxi people was described very much in terms of social characteristics and cultural practices, with little if any attempt to identify core values as the basis of solidarity. In particular, considerable attention was paid to food, especially noodles and vinegar, as well as music and folk traditions.

The centrality of food in general and noodles in particular to an identification of Shanxi is not hard to understand, since this is an aspect of life in the province that (though varied) is different to much of the rest of China, especially to the South and East (Li Defu 1998, p. 3). Agriculture is largely dry-land farming, with almost no rice cultivation and considerable grazing land. Except in the far southwest, where there is rice, the major staples are millet, sorghum, wheat and oats, as well as potatoes. All grains, and also potatoes, are often ground and their flour used to make noodles, as well as dumplings, griddlecakes and breads. Stews and casseroles are commonplace, and lamb is the meat of choice.

The transformation of noodles and pancakes, and indeed all flour products, from everyday, highly localised and commonplace to iconic status in public culture has been a major feature of the 1990s. The media have been full of stories and articles that have raised the profile of “noodle culture”, not only generally but more specifically as part of Shanxi distinctiveness (Yi Fan 1998, p. 2). Numerous books about noodles of different kinds have been published (Dou, Jia and Li, 1992; Wang and Ya 1994) and, as already noted, the province has seen the emergence of specialist noodle restaurants in quite some numbers. In the process, types of noodle once thought of as specific to a town or county—such as Yuanping’s potato flour noodles or Shangdang’s fried, red sorghum flour noodles, eaten cold with a spicy sauce—have now become “provincialised”.

The consumption of noodles is one explanation often advanced for Shanxi’s high vinegar consumption, which has also come to be regarded as a mark of provincial distinctiveness. Vinegar consumption in Shanxi is officially regarded as such an essential part of the diet that its price remains state-controlled, if through devolution to the Qingxu County authorities, a major center for vinegar production. Vinegar is said to aid the digestion of noodles.

The promotion of Shanxi distinctiveness in these ways was very much part of a process of province building. There had not, for example, previously been a specifically designated “Shanxi cuisine” before the provincial leadership encouraged its promotion. Nor had there been restaurants named specifically for the province before the 1990s though these now started to proliferate. On the contrary, within Shanxi it was (and

remains) often explicitly recognised that the province is characterised by its intense localism (Fan Changjiang 1937, p. 21). It is, for example, commonly accepted that people from adjacent counties are almost certain to speak distinctly different languages and to have difficulties in communication. Though they are usually somewhat too heavy to be used as guidebooks, many county gazetteers in Shanxi provide a fairly lengthy section on the local language used in each county, and particularly its distinct characteristics.

Far from a single provincial cuisine, there had been (and remain, even if perceptions are changing) different food traditions, tastes and special foods and dishes characteristic of various parts of the province. To the end of developing a provincial identity, these were all brought together and described as “Shanxi” dishes (Li Binhu 1998, p. 3). Vinegar, too, remains locally differentiated, with many counties having their own traditions of production, even though *Laochencu* vinegar from Qingxu remains privileged as the provincial brand. Around the province the grains used to make vinegar vary, as does the process of production (Li Jianyong 1998, p. 86).

Beyond noodles and vinegar, the idea of Shanxi was also extended to theatre, music, folk traditions and literature, though more through the celebration of the local within the province. As in other provinces during the 1980s and 1990s, the plethora of new literary and cultural magazines produced in the province stressed their provincial focus, and provided a site where a specifically Shanxi culture and local identity could be explored. For theatre and music this was not difficult. Shanxi has a rich history of local opera and theatre forms. However, these are all highly localised and mostly not general across the province (Shi and Zhi 1996, p. 62). In the 1990s search for a Shanxi identity, all were encouraged and resurrected after their suppression during the Cultural Revolution, with some such as *Puju* (an opera form from Shanxi’s southwest corner) and Shangdang Theatre (the local theatre tradition of Changzhi and the province’s southeast) being recognised and often described as provincial opera and theatre respectively (Zheng Xiaoyu 1996, p. 2).

The search for a distinctive Shanxi folk tradition that could be promoted as part of the new provincial identity led straight to a process not unknown in other localities seeking to identify and market their own unique cultural representation. A highly localised and disparate folk tradition was made more formal and structured (Vickers 1997), in this case with the emergence of Drum and Gong Troupes. Folk music in southwest and southeast Shanxi had long centered around the playing of drums, though each locality has its own traditions of drum, drumming and accompanying percussion. A more structured and marketable approach to this kind of folk drumming, albeit related to North Shaanxi, had been demonstrated in the film *Yellow Earth* during the 1980s. Where in Beijing the organisation of *Yangge* folk-dance teams was promoted during the 1990s as a popular, community-building form of participatory culture, Shanxi saw the emergence of Drum and Gong Troupes. They rapidly proved themselves to be a very popular and fairly lucrative activity, with their public performances, especially at weekends outside stores and restaurants, and for special occasions. For example, a dozen Drum and Gong Troupes, each in action separately, participated in the opening ceremony for the newly built Yingze Road Bridge over the Fen River in the center of Taiyuan on 1 October 1998.

Apart from food, drama and music, the newly emergent provincial identity also drew on “traditions” authenticated by the CCP and appeals to popular history. Shanxi’s role as a

heavy industry center for China was re-emphasised with the expansion of the electricity generation industry and aluminium production (Zhao Shurong 1996, p. 4; Zheng, Gao and Chang 1997, p. 1). Similarly, Shanxi's role in the formation of CCP authority, especially during the period of the War of Resistance to Japan, continued to be publicised. This was also part of a process, typical in the construction of collective identity, to establish an uninterrupted history from an earliest, often mythic, age to the present-day (Tian Qizhi 1993). The essence of the message was clearly to emphasise Shanxi's long-term centrality to the project of China, as well as to appeal to provincial pride.

The origin of Chinese civilisation was found in the large number of pre-historic settlements—a quarter of all those known in the PRC—located in Shanxi's southwest, in particular around Linfen. From these origins, Shanxi's place at the heart of the later development of Chineseness was repeatedly emphasised in a number of ways. For example, a “Three Kingdoms City” was built in Qingxu (to the south of Taiyuan) as a theme park to commemorate the Chinese classic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* written by Qingxu native Luo Guanzhong about the period in Chinese history from 220–265 CE. Inside, a temple was built and dedicated to one of the heroes of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Guan Yu (later immortalised and widely worshipped as Guan Di) who was also a native of the current provincial area, from Haizhou in present-day Yuncheng. Elsewhere, Hongtong County, in the Linfen District of southern Shanxi, was promoted as the mythical site of origin of Han Chinese, building on its role as a source of migration to the rest of China.³ (Zhao Fulong 1999, p. 4) More generally, Shanxi's architecture, especially in its smaller towns and villages, was publicised as “traditionally Chinese”, (Li Yuxiang 1994) and its villages and rural landscapes used in television programs and films for that reason. Most notably, the award-winning *Raise the Red Lantern* was filmed at the Qiao Family Mansion in Qixian.

Shanxi's role as a “living museum” of Chinese culture was repeatedly stressed, partly in line with the provincial leadership's goal of developing tourism in the province but partly also to emphasise Shanxi's role in the development of a wider Chinese culture. The more obvious sites of historical and cultural interest include Wutaishan, the entry point of Buddhism into China; the UNESCO-listed World Heritage sites of Pingyao's walled city and the Yungang Grottoes outside Datong; the Daoist frescoes of the Yongle Gong; and the life-size funerary figures at Jinci. The claim was often made that Shanxi had more temples, frescoes and pagodas than other provinces (Tian Lei 1996, p. 1).

Identifying the translocal

Somewhat paradoxically, the claim that Shanxi Province lies at the heart of China's development was matched by a recognition within the province that it was not well-connected, other than politically, with the rest of the country. Indeed its poor physical integration both internally and with the rest of the country led to a massive road-building campaign during the 1990s (Gong Guoqiang 1998, p. 1). There has clearly been only a

³ After the An Lushan Rebellion and during the Ming Dynasty the repopulation of parts of China was officially organised in Hongtong. The names of those who migrated are recorded on its Scholar Trees that are now a place of pilgrimage for many Chinese.

very limited migration into Shanxi from the rest of China, and only a muted migration around the province even for the middle classes. Nonetheless, the evidence from interviews during 1999–2002 is that a new, translocal imaginary has begun to emerge since the mid-1990s.

In order to attempt to assess their understandings of local characteristics, and generally their perception of and identification with place—the immediately local, the provincial and China—those interviewed were asked a series of questions about different aspects of popular culture, in particular about food, music and dance. Interviewees were asked, amongst other questions, to nominate three foods they saw as typical of, separately, Shanxi, China as a whole, the world outside China, and their home location; as well as to identify typical musical forms and dances similarly for Shanxi, China, the rest of the world, and their home location.

The interview sample was divided into four categories of respondents, reflecting degrees of migration, possible perceived social mobility and distance from their origins. The first, “Local”, category refers to those whose movement was most restricted in these terms. This category includes people who still live and work in their native place, which was also the place where they had been born and grown up. The second, “District”, category identifies those whose movement in terms of birthplace, native place, parental home and family home is within the boundaries of one of Shanxi’s administrative districts, but excludes those already classified in the Local categorisation. The third, “Provincial”, category includes those whose movement in terms of birthplace, native place, parental home and family home has taken place within the province, but who have moved either in their youth or through their career away from their provincial administrative district of origin. The fourth and final, “External”, category refers to anyone who was born, has a native place, or grew up outside the province. Of those interviewed, 37 per cent were in the Local category, 20 per cent in the District category, 25 per cent in the Provincial category, and 18 per cent were External.⁴

Those interviewed were asked to nominate up to three items of food they identified as most typical of Shanxi Province. Almost everyone nominated noodles at least once; some rather enthusiastically even additionally nominated specific kinds of noodles. Well over 80 per cent of those interviewed recognised the existence of the “Shanxi noodle culture” much promoted during the 1990s. Perhaps more surprisingly, only 40 per cent of respondents also nominated vinegar as typically from Shanxi. Given that almost every county has its own vinegar plant and tradition of vinegar making, this relatively low rating may well be because some interviewees did not regard vinegar as a “food”. Equally as remarkable, no other single item was nominated by even a quarter of respondents, though potatoes were so recognised by more than one in five.

The interviewees were also asked to nominate up to three items of food most typical of food elsewhere in China. Unsurprisingly seafood (72 per cent) and rice (69 per cent) head the list. Shanxi is not only well inland, but until the recent advent of airfreight rarely had

⁴ For those interviewees who were not married, family home and parental home were assumed to be identical.

fish, let alone other fresh seafood. In the past it was customary for wealthy families to place a highly decorated wooden fish on a banquet table—not least to encourage good fortune (*youyu* homophonically can be read as to have either “fish” or “a surplus” which has become by extension “good fortune”)—in the absence of more edible varieties. With economic development and increased communications (including air freight for fresh seafood from Australia) since the mid-1990s a large number of seafood restaurants have emerged, not least to cater for the expanding tastes of the provincial new rich. Similarly, as already noted, Shanxi’s agriculture is dry-land farming, and rice is both not a provincial staple and fairly uncommon outside the far southwest. In addition, those interviewed also nominated (Beijing) Roast Duck (30 per cent) and Sichuan (or Chongqing) Hot Pot (28 per cent) in relatively large numbers.

When interviewees were asked to nominate food types that typified (for them) the world outside China, “the world” was clearly equated in their mind’s eye with the USA. The hamburger was nominated by over two-thirds of interviewees as a typical food outside China. Almost a quarter indicated that salad was also typical, followed in lesser quantities by sandwiches, chocolate and coffee. A feature of the responses to this question was not only the predominance of fast food associated with the USA as the marker for the “Rest of the World” but also the emergence of known brands originating in the USA. While this was not at all surprising, it was interesting to see confirmation that McDonalds (32 per cent), KFC (11 per cent) and Coca Cola (25 per cent) were lodged in the collective consciousness, though it may be that these results are exaggerated by the middle class bias of the interview sample and their greater real disposable income.

In order to test whether interviewees had different perceptions of the provincial and the more local (in this context, county or town), they were also asked to nominate typical food (and later music and dance) for their home locations. These nominations were then subsequently compared to those made as typical of the province, to examine the degree of identification.

When asked to specify the three most typical foods from their home locations, the interviewees responded overwhelmingly in terms of noodles. Unsurprisingly, given the culinary environment in Shanxi, the most nominated items were noodles (76 per cent) dishes made with noodles (47 per cent) and steamed bread (37 per cent). In addition, other flour-based dishes, made (as with noodles and breads) from a variety of grains, but including maize, wheat, potatoes, oats, buckwheat, sorghum, and millet, were also mentioned in large numbers.

Table 1 provides an index derived from comparing the responses of interviewees asked to nominate three typical provincial types of food and three typical local types of food, to see whether there was overlap in the perception of the provincial and the more local. Where all three items were the same in the answers to both questions, a score of three was recorded; where two were identical, a two; and so on. The data presented in Table 1 suggest a distribution centered around an overlap factor of one item. Given the predominance of noodles as a factor in any consideration of Shanxi cuisine, this is probably not a high degree of overlap at all. Indeed, though several highly localised food items—for example, and most famously, Pingyao Beef, Taigu Cakes, Qingxu grapes—were mentioned by respondents when asked to nominate food typical of Shanxi, they were never suggested by individuals who had connections of birthplace, native place,

parental or family home with those specific locations. At the same time, the responses when asked to nominate foods typical of the interviewee’s home location suggest a more clearly expressed sense of local cuisine than at the provincial level, with greater variety and complexity.

Table 1
Shanxi interviews, 1999–2002: Local and provincial food

Number and (per cent)

Index of identification of home county/town food with provincial description

	Degrees of identity				Total
	Three	Two	One	None	
Migration status					
Local		12	58	9	77
District	3	16	17	6	42
Provincial	3	16	31	3	53
External		3	19	16	38
Total	6 (2.9)	45 (21.4)	125 (59.5)	34 (16.2)	210

Similar patterns in the perception of the world outside China, Shanxi, and the local county or town attend the interviewees’ responses to questions about music and dance, though the clarity of understanding about the world beyond the borders of the PRC is often a little suspect. Almost half of those interviewed identified Shanxi Theatre (as already noted, a local popular opera, originating in the southeast of the province, and sometimes also known as Wuxiang Theatre after its county base in the Changzhi District) as typical of the province. Just under half (40 per cent) of those interviewed also identified *Jinju* (an opera form often associated with the southwest of the province). It is more than likely that the existence of the provincial name (Shanxi or *Jin*) as descriptor reinforces identification of these musical forms with the province as a whole in the minds of those interviewed. *Puju* (as previously noted, another and older high culture opera form also associated with the southwest of the province) was also nominated by a substantial number of respondents. Asked to nominate musical forms most typical of China outside Shanxi, respondents mentioned Peking Opera most frequently (60 per cent) and, somewhat surprisingly, TV variety shows (52 per cent). Somewhat vague references to “Western classical music” and “Western popular music”, often filled out with specialist knowledge of individual composers and performers, were provided in response to requests for nomination of music typical of the world outside China.

Table 2 presents an attempt to indicate the extent to which nominations of typical music types of county and town, on the one hand, and the province, on the other, overlap. Once again this evidence, crude as it must inevitably be, suggests that interviewees were able to distinguish between the musical forms of their home location and of the province more generally. Only a little over a quarter of respondents identified the music type of their home location with that of the province. Given that the Party–state’s construction of a provincial identity has indeed built on local musical forms and turned them into

provincialised concepts, these comparative figures would seem to suggest that those interviewed might even have some consciousness of the process of identity formation.

Table 2
Shanxi interviews, 1999–2002: Local and provincial musical performance

Number and (per cent)

Identification of local with provincial musical form			
	Yes	No	Incomplete
Migration status			
Local	29	43	5
District	15	24	3
Provincial	10	41	2
External	3	34	1
Total	57 (27.1)	142 (67.6)	11 (5.2)

When asked to nominate dance forms typical of the province, those interviewed overwhelmingly specified the *Yangge* (77 per cent). No other dance form was chosen by more than one in ten of respondents, though a fairly large variety of nominations were made for various different kinds of lion dances, dragon dances and waist-drumming. The *Yangge* also featured highly in the number of nominations from respondents as a dance form typical of China though not to quite the same extent as at the provincial level of identification (38 per cent). On the other hand, almost half of those interviewed nominated the lion dance as typical of China as a whole (48 per cent). Ballroom dancing was the most frequently nominated as a dance form typical of the world outside China, by a long way, chosen by over two-thirds of all respondents.

Table 3 extends the attempt to assess the extent to which interviewees equate their local experience with the provincial identity, by comparing the overlap in perceptions of typical local and provincial dance forms. On the whole, it indicates that those interviewed were well able to distinguish between the local and the provincial. However, it also suggests that slightly more respondents than was the case with perceptions of music forms saw the dance form nominated as typical of their home location as also typical of the province. The explanation of this difference, muted though it may be, is undoubtedly a function of the sense of either identification with (or ownership of) the *Yangge*.

The nomination of the *Yangge* stands in interesting contrast to the perception of Drum and Gong troupes. As already noted, the emergence and activities of Drum and Gong troupes have been encouraged by the provincial Party–state since the mid-1990s, very much as part of its construction of a new provincial identity. It is even clear that Drum and Gong troupes have become a popular participant activity for some urban residents in the bigger cities, as well as a popular event to be observed by others. Nonetheless, very few of those interviewed during 1999–2002 saw them as most typical of Shanxi, either as music or as dance.

Table 3

Shanxi interviews, 1999–2002: Local and provincial dance

Number and (per cent)

	Identification of local with provincial dance form		
	Yes	No	Incomplete
Migration status			
Local	34	40	3
District	14	26	2
Provincial	17	33	3
External	7	30	1
Total	72 (34.3)	129 (61.4)	9 (4.3)

Reforming the local

Caution would clearly be prudent in drawing conclusions from a survey based on a fairly limited sample, largely drawn from the middle classes, in one North China province. Nonetheless, the evidence from this examination of Shanxi during 1999–2002 would seem to indicate fairly certainly that the idea of the “local” has been or is in the process of being reformed quite radically, compared to the Mao-dominated era of China’s politics, by both the Party–state and by those who live in the province. From the Party–state’s perspective, one startling indicator of change is the extent to which discourses of localism are now acceptable; another is the extent to which the provincial has become emphasised as the prime translocal level of identification. However, a third and potentially more important way in which the local has been reformed is with the emergence of a new translocal imaginary. To be sure, the Party–state’s actions in attempting to create a new provincial identity have played a central role in that process, but they do not provide a complete explanation of these new networks of understanding.

Shanxi’s development since 1992 has most definitely been driven by a strong and state-sponsored discourse of localism which has attempted to create a new provincial identity and in the process remind society of its past entrepreneurial practices, emphasise the importance of investing in one’s place of residence, and provide opportunities for local networking. There is a creative tension in this new provincial discourse of development. Local identity is clearly being provincialised, but in that process the local is being privileged almost as much as the provincial. Sometimes the provincial Party–state has attempted to develop new provincial tropes (either *ab initio* or by selection of existing specific local manifestations) but equally, sometimes simply emphasizing the local in general has been seen as adequate provincialisation. The result is neither a new local identity nor a new provincial identity alone, but rather a new translocal scale of identity, based on an emergent spatial network of ideas.

These complex relationships highlight the emergence of a translocal imaginary, not least because of the Party–state’s acceptance and encouragement of multiple and scale-transcending groundings. Clearly, though, explaining the development of a translocal

imaginary solely in terms of the Party–state’s interventions and its creation of a new provincial identity does not tell the whole story. It almost certainly fails to engage with the long-term importance of a new translocal imaginary, not linked to any short-term regime configuration, and hence likely to be more a permanent feature of social politics in Shanxi. Increased communications and interactions within Shanxi have provided the necessary contrasts that lead to more, greater and wider (not to say overlapping) understandings of place, and have highlighted the role of networks in identity formation.

Analysis of the interviews undertaken in the province during 1999–2002 suggests three more specific sets of conclusions about the emergence of the new translocal imaginary in Shanxi. The first, and most obvious, is that those interviewed have a fairly well articulated sense of place, that differentiates while associating the PRC, Shanxi and their home county or town. While knowledge of the world outside China is clearly more limited, there are definite perceptual differences maintained between the idea of China and that of the rest of the world. There are also strong distinctions made between Shanxi and the rest of China, though these are often more sharply etched about the identification of the rest of China than of the province itself. As might be expected, given both the intensity of the Party–state sponsored discourse of localism and increased communications within the province, the result is a commitment to a translocal Shanxi identity that is built upon a network of multiple local identities.

A second set of conclusions relates to the impact of the Party–state’s intervention in identity formation. Most importantly, it is clear that the emerging Shanxi provincial identity is not simply a product of the Party–state’s publicity machine during the 1990s. Some of the directions about provincial identity which the Party–state and the media have produced during the last decade certainly seem to have entered the public consciousness. The identification of “Shanxi noodle culture” and its attendant emphasis on vinegar production are clear examples. Though not discussed in this chapter, another is a long-term provincial tradition of commercialism, associated with the “Exchange Shops” of Central Shanxi (Pingyao, Taigu and Qixian in particular) and a native banking tradition, which were a significant part of social and political life in Shanxi during the nineteenth century. The Party–state has publicised this “tradition” during the second half of the 1990s to emphasise, not least to local citizens, that Shanxi has not always been characterised in terms of either the less economically outgoing and adventurous era of Yan Xishan’s corporatist warlord state during the 1920s and 1930s or the state socialism of the PRC after 1949 (Goodman 2004).

At the same time, it is also clear that there are levels of popular culture and consciousness that are not so easily manipulated by the Party–state, while remaining inherently translocal. The most obvious example from the information generated in the interviews is the identification of the *Yangge* folk dance as the most frequently cited typical Shanxi dance. During the 1990s, little publicity was given to the *Yangge* in Shanxi. To the contrary, as already indicated, there has been an attempt through the construction of a new Shanxi identity to emphasise the role of “Drum and Gong” troupes as a popular form of performance, which has indeed been very successful. Nonetheless, the identification of the *Yangge* as distinctively provincial remains a clearly articulated aspect of public consciousness. It is possible that the strength of provincial identification with the *Yangge* results from its popularisation in Shanxi through the more “revolutionary” reminiscent

phases of the PRC when the CCP was emphasising the legacy of the War against Japan. At that earlier time the CCP was not only, as already noted, particularly active in Shanxi, but had also adopted the *Yangge* as a popular art form for propaganda and mobilisation purposes (Holm 1983, p. 3; Holm 1991, p. 115 ff.). Another explanation may be that, even before the CCP came to Shanxi in large numbers, Yan Xishan had similarly popularised the *Yangge* as a mobilisatory device, building on the dance forms of the southern Taihang Mountains (Gillin 1967, p. 169; *Zhongguo xiqujuzhong dacidian* 1995, p. 268 ff.).

A third set of conclusions relates to the relationship between migration and translocality, and is perhaps the most important in terms of understanding the dynamics of translocalism. It indicates that migration is of itself not a necessary ingredient for the emergence of a translocal imaginary, even though spatial networks and some forms of mobility (especially of ideas) may be. The interviews suggest that there is little difference in translocal imaginary for the various categories of those interviewed. Those who have moved around the province share an almost identical translocal imaginary with those who still live where they initially grew up. Perception of place is always determined by contrast with elsewhere, and clearly in many ways can be considered a translocal process. However, in the case of the interviews considered here, such contrasts result very little from the movement of people, which has been both clearly relatively limited and not very important in shaping alternative local identities in Shanxi. Rather, strong local identities are being shaped by networks linked to other places. A clear demonstration of this network determination of the translocal imaginary is found in the observation that Shanxi foods were rarely identified as typically provincial by those who themselves come from the places of origin of those food types. The idea of the “local” has always been ambiguous under the PRC. The experience of Shanxi since the mid-1990s would suggest that it has shifted yet again, not this time in terms of the relations between the center and the local so much as in the emergence of a multiple-place-based “translocal” for the province.

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