Chapter 3

“Head to the Northwest”

Modern China’s Movement Westward

In August 1925, on his way back to China after studying at the Sorbonne for five years, Liu Bannong wrote a rambling letter to his friend Zhou Zuoren, who had been his comrade in arms during the May Fourth Movement in China in the previous decade. In the letter, Liu complained about a US archaeological expedition that was setting out to “excavate antiques” in Xinjiang, a frontier province in China’s Northwest (xibei). “How can we let the Americans dig at will in our Xinjiang?” he exclaimed. “Could Chinese go to America and explore if antiques were found in their land?” A sardonic line laced with dismay, Liu’s rhetorical question reflected Chinese intellectuals’ growing concern with China’s Northwest in the 1920s and 1930s. On a geographic periphery originating in the Central Asian frontier of the Qing empire, the northwestern frontier area of China, Xinjiang included, was also a political fringe of the young republic. Nevertheless, as Liu’s epistolary complaints indicate, the northwestern “hinterland” was far from obscure.

Although tourism development in the Northwest was not on their minds, Chinese intellectuals in the early Republican period were aware of the allure of the Northwest to Western explorers and travelers. Becoming known for its commercial, mining, and railway prospects, the Northwest attracted international adventurers who arrived to conduct surveys and gather data and artifacts beginning in the late nineteenth century. Consequently, when
CHAPTER 3

the new-style Chinese intellectuals found their way to Western metropoles, they encountered these Westerners’ field reports and collected objects, along with a novel concept—the “Silk Road”—which prompted them to pay attention to the geopolitical margins of their own country. Their encounters with these “Chinese” artifacts outside China also triggered a visceral sense of anxiety about China’s impotence in the face of foreign encroachment. Encompassing both the multiethnic borderlands and traditional Chinese heartland, xibei was reconfigured into a prominent site of Chinese civilization, as well as the geopolitical locus of China’s limited sovereignty. In other words, for these May Fourth intellectuals and the educated public on the east coast, the marginalized northwestern region was positioned at the center of their reimagining a Chinese nation-state and refashioning a Chinese national space.

In this historical context, travel and tourism become an important means for coastal Chinese to engage with the northwestern inland and frontier provinces. Chinese intellectuals, for one, dreamed of going to the Northwest themselves. Attracted though they were to xibei in the 1920s, however, Chinese intellectuals lacked material support from the state and academy. They were forced to team up with the very rivals they feared—foreign explorers. Nonetheless, in the tumultuous warlord era, Chinese academics based in Beijing spearheaded a westward movement through Sino-foreign joint explorations.

During the Nationalist rule, especially in the early 1930s, this inchoate westward movement gained new urgency. Not only did the Nationalists became more committed to incorporating the frontier provinces into their orbit of direct control, but the uncertain fate of the Northwest was brought to the forefront of Chinese elites’ concerns when the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and advancing encroachment in Inner Mongolia and North China ushered in an era of deepening frontier crisis. In this new climate, railway companies, commercial institutions, publishing companies, and ordinary urbanites were also drawn to this “westward movement.” Calling for their fellow countrymen to “head to the Northwest” (dao Xibei qu), coastal intellectuals and urbanites channeled their yearning for national strength into a fantasy of traveling to the nation’s margins.

This chapter sketches out this westward movement in modern China via three specific journeys: a lone Chinese scholar joining a US mission to Dunhuang in 1925; the negotiation and execution of a large-scale Sino-Swedish scientific expedition to Xinjiang in the early years of the Nanjing Decade; and the commercial travel writings on the northwestern frontier facilitated by the Ping-Sui and the Longhai Railways, the two major railway lines
connecting China’s eastern seaboard and the Northwest, in the mid-1930s. In their northwestward journeys and travel narratives of the Northwest, east coast–based Chinese travelers echoed old imperial spatial imaginations while incorporating new ideas of science, colonialism, and modernity. In the process, they formulated a spatial imagination of the Northwest as an integral part of the Chinese nation-state.

**Dunhuang, the Silk Road, and the Northwest**

In the Republican era, the Northwest usually included Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xinjiang. Associating the region with the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River, people often referred to Shanxi and western Inner Mongolia as part of the region as well. A broad swath of territory with a culturally diverse population, part of it—namely, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and most of Qinghai—had been brought into the Qing empire only in the eighteenth century. While the Qing policy of divide and rule had maintained the multiethnic and multireligious status quo of the region for two centuries, the Northwest became a key concern of the Qing frontier defense in the second half of the nineteenth century, leading to heavy-handed military campaigns and state-building projects. Despite these efforts, the Northwest turned chaotic soon after the fall of the Qing in 1911. Connecting China proper to Central Asia, the Northwest, especially Xinjiang, was also a venue for international rivalry at the turn of the twentieth century. The conflicts between British, Russian, and other powers for supremacy in Central Asia—and the international scramble for China—made the Northwest a volatile region within the fragile new Republic of China.

At this historical juncture, the Northwest also occupied a unique position in knowledge production after the concept of Silk Road was invented in Europe in the 1870s. As a historical narrative and developmental vision of East-West exchange, the conceptualization of the Silk Road signaled both the spatial and temporal significance of China’s Central Asian frontier. For example, because ancient artifacts and religious and secular manuscripts were excavated from a few Silk Road sites in China’s Northwest that “enabled a link to be made between philology, the study of comparative religions . . . and antiquities,” the region had attracted foreign explorers and archaeologists since the late Qing period. At the same time, the Euro-American obsession with the search for the origins of races and civilizations—including the origin of Chinese civilization—moved eastward to Central Asia, which was viewed as a crucial historical corridor of Eurasian exchange. From the Hungarian-born British archaeologist Aurel Stein to the French Sinologist
Paul Pelliot, and from the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin to the Russian Orientalist Sergei Oldenburg, foreign explorers surveyed deserts and valleys and pillaged temples, tombs, and ruins, carrying away priceless documents, fossils, and artifacts which would later be acquired by museums and libraries in Western metropoles. Among all the sites they explored in the Northwest, none could trigger more bitter feelings among Chinese intellectuals than Dunhuang, a place later regarded as a poignant chapter in “the sorrowful history of Chinese academics.”

In 1899, Wang Yuanlu, a Chinese Taoist priest and the abbot of the Mogao grottoes in Dunhuang, stumbled upon a sealed cave. Full of manuscripts and paintings enclosed shortly after the end of the first millennium CE, the cave made Dunhuang “the time capsule of Silk Road history.” Recognizing the value of the discovery, foreign explorers, especially Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot, managed to cajole the priest into selling them the majority of the collection and the art objects. Stein’s collection ended up in London; Pelliot shipped his acquisitions to Paris. As a result, while Western scholars could study the documents and artifacts in their home institutions, Chinese academics had to travel to London or Paris in order to copy them out by hand. Writing his dissertation in Paris, for example, Liu Bannong encountered the Pelliot collection of the Dunhuang manuscripts in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. These documents, dating from the fourth to the eleventh century and written in Chinese and multiple Central Asian languages, offered unparalleled resources on the religious and secular history of the areas along the old Silk Road. Interested in the folk literature, vernacular language, and everyday socioeconomy recorded in the Dunhuang collection, Liu Bannong painstakingly selected and copied more than a hundred items in Paris, which were later published in China. A nationalistic reaction to China’s humiliation at the loss of the Dunhuang collections to Western institutions, Liu’s endeavor to recover these materials from the West should also be positioned against the backdrop of the National Studies Movement (guoxue yundong), which was getting underway in 1920s Beijing.

The National Studies Movement was led by prominent Chinese thinkers like Hu Shi, who aimed to establish a discipline dedicated to studying Chinese traditional culture in a scientific way. Rather than a New Culturalist crusade, the mission was in fact shared by so-called cultural conservatives. Despite the ostensible differences between the two groups, both sides, as Lydia Liu has pointed out, shared a similar intellectual background and “were centrally preoccupied with the problem of Chinese national identity.” The New Culturalists in the movement, based at the National
Studies Department (guoxue men) at Beijing University, aspired to introduce Western scientific disciplines such as archaeology, geology, and paleontology into China’s classical studies. Loosely defining “national studies” as an umbrella term for all disciplines dealing with China’s past, they also inherited the May Fourth spirit of giving attention to the vernacular traditions in China. These guoxue scholars, Liu Bannong included, shifted their attention from annotated classics to local dialects, customs, and folklore. Meanwhile, the supposedly more conservative camp of the movement, including Liang Qichao, Wang Guowei, and Chen Yinke—who were the founding professors in the Research Institute of National Learning (guoxue yanjiu yuan) at Qinghua University—engaged in the revival of China’s traditional culture after they became disillusioned with Western civilization in the post–World War I era. While they rejected the notion of writing in vernacular Chinese, these Qinghua scholars were not more traditionalist than their counterparts at Beijing University in academic background and research methods. The politically conservative Chen Yinke, for instance, had spent his teens in Japan and later in Europe and the United States studying with famous Western Sinologists, making him a rare polyglot among Chinese academics. Wang Guowei, a classicist, was among the first group of Chinese scholars to recognize the value of the Dunhuang manuscripts. An advocate for the introduction of archaeology into China, Wang had also celebrated the field as a new scientific approach to discover China’s past. As their shared interests in the Dunhuang manuscripts have indicated, both the “radical” May Fourth intellectuals and the “conservative” classical scholars harbored a similar view. They believed that national studies should be understood as an indispensable part of the reorganization of China’s national heritage, which was crucial to the nation-building process. They also had in common the belief that China’s national studies should be as scientific as Western Sinology.

These intellectual developments in the early Republican era placed the Northwest at a center of knowledge production about China’s past. Epitomized by Dunhuang and the Silk Road, the significance of the Northwest in China’s historical connection with Central Asia and Europe marked a new direction in studying Chinese history and traditional culture. Moreover, two seemingly separate projects—a Western project of expanding knowledge of the “Orient” through exploration in Central Asia and a Chinese movement to establish a modernized national studies—converged at the Northwest. Recognized internationally as the prime site for studying a variety of disciplines, the Northwest was also a symbolic space pivotal to China’s national history and national identity for many Chinese intellectuals. They were not
entirely contradictory projects. As Fa-ti Fan has pointed out, the international cosmopolitanism embedded in modern science partly gave rise to the attention given to the issue of national sovereignty within scientific explorations. It was in this context that Chinese academics actively participated in explorative travels to the Northwest. Among all the possible destinations, Dunhuang was naturally the place they most coveted.

In 1925, an opportunity knocked at the doors of Beijing University. Although not many manuscripts were left in Dunhuang by the early 1920s, its spectacular caves with pre-eleventh-century murals and sculptures beckoned leading Western museums to send archaeologists and art collectors to China’s Northwest. A year after his first trip to Dunhuang, Langdon Warner, a US art historian and archaeologist, returned to China and prepared to set out on a second trip to the Mogao caves. Employed by the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard, Warner had first found his way to Dunhuang in the autumn of 1923 with Horace Jayne of the University Museum of Pennsylvania. Both Warner and Jayne took great interest in the ancient wall paintings decorating the grottoes there, most of which had been painted during the Tang dynasty. After bribing the abbot Wang to allow them to remove some of the murals, Warner tried to transfer them using cloth soaked in strong chemical adhesives. Warner and Jayne then returned to China a year later with a bigger team equipped with better recipes both for the fixative and for adhesives. This time, they also sought out a Chinese expert to help translate the inscriptions of the stone tablets and were introduced to the National Studies Department at Beijing University. As a research institute, the National Studies Department did not have the resources to fund field trips to the Northwest, so when Warner’s request arrived, the department welcomed the invitation and sent Chen Wanli to take part in the expedition.

A versatile young intellectual, Chen Wanli came from a medical background but taught himself photography and founded several photographers’ groups in Beijing. He was also an experienced traveler who studied local gazetteers and travelogues and was well versed in the knowledge of Buddhist statues, tablets, and other historical artifacts. Chen was very enthusiastic about the opportunity of travel to the Northwest, which he called “a dream I have not been able to forget for more than a decade.” Separate from the main group, Warner remained in Beijing a little longer and traveled alone, while the rest of the mission, including Chen Wanli, journeyed northwestward in February 1925. After a short train ride from Beijing to Taiyuan in Shanxi Province, the group moved on by means of horseback and cattle-drawn carts. Sharing rooms in mountain inns and sometimes traveling on foot to explore local villages, Chen and his US colleagues worked
side by side along the journey. Chen not only helped translate the scripts of the steles and tombstones they encountered but also took pictures of and notes on the Buddhist cave temples they visited in Shaanxi and Gansu Provinces. Shocked by how high the travel costs were, Chen acknowledged that without the Americans, it would be hard for a Chinese scholar to visit Dunhuang.24

Nevertheless, even a collaboration that seemed mutually beneficial could turn sour. Approaching Dunhuang, Chen started to hear rumors about the Americans’ last expedition. Local resentment about Warner’s “theft” of the murals in 1923–24 made the local officials extremely wary about the Americans’ reappearance. At first, the provincial government rejected the group’s request to remove more murals, even though Jayne claimed that they would be displayed in Beijing so both Chinese and foreign experts could study them.25 With little hope of gaining permission, Jayne asked to photograph the statues and murals inside the caves. Suspicious of the foreigners and concerned about the reaction from locals, officials refused the Americans’ request to stay for three months, and only allowed them to be on-site for two weeks. Moreover, they were not allowed to camp overnight inside the caves. Perhaps because they were forced to abandon the original removal plan, or because they were intimidated by the local hostility, Warner and Jayne resolved not to stay long. As a result, the team spent only three days in the Dunhuang caves, which frustrated Chen Wanli a great deal. Chen complained in his travel journal:

The members of this expedition had all hoped to stay in the caves of the thousand Buddhas for three months. However, because of Warner, [we] could only stay for three days. On top of that, [we had to] travel back and forth eighty li every day [between the caves and our lodging inside the town], which limited the actual time spent inside the caves to only five hours a day, a total of fifteen hours over three days. Getting only this [amount of time in the caves] after a journey lasting more than a hundred days was really not what I had expected.26

For Chen, Warner’s irresponsible actions of the previous year had robbed a Chinese scholar like himself of a chance to study the site thoroughly. Unable to figure out why the local authorities and villagers had turned hostile seven months after his last trip to Dunhuang, Warner suspected Chen of being the “fly in the ointment,” and thought it was Chen who had informed the locals of the true nature of their expedition.27 Perhaps perceiving the anger directed at him, Chen Wanli did not follow the expedition onward but returned to Beijing alone.28
As it turns out, it was not Chen Wanli who had derailed the expedition. According to the memoirs of William Hung, a professor and dean at Yenching University, it was Wang Jinren, the translator for both of Warner’s Dunhuang expeditions, who had caused the second visit to backfire. After his first journey to Dunhuang, Wang Jinren told his professor William Hung about Warner’s plunder in 1923–24. Despite his position as a dean at Yenching, a US missionary university with close ties to Harvard, Hung paid a secret visit to the vice-minister of education in the Beijing government. This was likely why both provincial and local governments forbade Warner to touch any historical relics in Dunhuang in 1925. Although it is not clear whether Chen Wanli or any Beijing University professors were aware of Professor Hung’s efforts and whether they were part of an attempt to stop Warner, in 1950, during the height of the Chinese Communist Party’s anti-US propaganda, Chen Wanli published an article hinting that the purpose of dispatching him to join the Dunhuang expedition was solely so that he could monitor the US imperialists and prevent them from stealing national treasures.  

Irrespective of what had stirred the antagonistic attitude among locals, the premature ending of this cooperation should not be understood simply as a conflict of national interests between Chen and Warner. Rather, it can be seen as an instance of the predicament Chinese scientific travelers faced in international ventures: the irreconcilable conflict between the pursuit of scientific knowledge on the one hand, and the claim of sovereignty on the other. Chen Wanli, although disheartened by the wretched condition of the Dunhuang caves, seemed to be more disgruntled by his lost opportunity to conduct research in the Northwest. As a Chinese, he could not side with the Americans and object to local officials’ decisions. But as the first Chinese academic traveler to visit Dunhuang, he yearned for the liberty to conduct research without interference, a liberty many Western and Japanese explorers had previously enjoyed. His nationalistic commitment to survey China’s hinterland and his professional desire to pursue scientific projects in cooperation with international explorers—both of which had propelled this westward journey—were tightly interlocked. But for Chen, like many Chinese intellectuals of the time, the sense of national belonging could collide with a belief in the universal value of science.

Another incident that occurred on the way to Dunhuang also illustrated this implicit discordance. In Jingzhou, Shaanxi Province, the expedition stumbled across a cave temple from the Northern Wei period (386–534) called the South Grotto Temple (Nan shiku si), the same temple the Liangyou Nationwide Photographic Tour encountered in 1932–33. In 1925, the sculptures and
other historical artifacts in the temple had gone missing or been damaged. One of Warner’s justifications for removing the frescoes from Dunhuang was the damage he witnessed in the Mogao grottoes in 1924. Although this did not explain why he had prepared cloth and strong adhesives even before witnessing the damage, Warner stated that the only way to save the Dunhuang grottoes was to remove the artifacts from China. Echoing his US colleagues’ logic, Chen Wanli believed that the only way to safeguard the valuable treasures at the South Grotto Temple was to carry them to Beijing. Jayne and other US members concurred and suggested that Chen demand that local authorities keep some of the sculptures from another site for him to carry back east to Beijing University.32

But the episode at the South Grotto Temple was fraught. Just as Chen was assisting the Americans in using axes to chop away the contoured mud covering the original sculptures, twenty or so local villagers showed up at the caves. Furious, they blocked the caves and demanded that the Americans restore the statues they had “destroyed.” With their limited language skills, Jayne and the other Americans struggled to respond. Seeing that the confrontation was escalating, Chen became afraid that it would turn into “an international incident.” He came forward and acted as a mediator, and later resolved the dispute by promising a small indemnity for each statue they had uncovered. At the same time, he managed to sneak out a stone tablet.33

Commenting on this confrontation in his travel journal, Chen found himself in a very uncomfortable position, as he considered the Americans’ approach to the statues to be an “appropriate research method.” “I agreed [with their method] wholeheartedly,” Chen wrote, “and I even helped them.” But he regretted that the confrontation had happened, lamenting that “people from a friendly country” had become embroiled in a heated dispute. Nevertheless, Chen was hesitant to blame the villagers for their “ignorance.” Trying to attend to their concerns, Chen further pinpointed the villagers’ misstep as lying in the extreme methods of protest they used: besieging the caves and attempting to search the foreigners. Chen emphasized that the central issue was not the question of sovereignty. “It is one thing to claim [the possession of the temple caves],” Chen concluded, “but the misuse of methods would instantly result in disputes.” Identifying this incident as the biggest lesson people should learn “when traveling in inland regions,” Chen blamed the local villagers’ xenophobia for the unexpected obstruction.34

Chen’s 1925 journey to Dunhuang reflects the complex self-positioning Chinese scientific travelers had to engage in when they joined Sino-foreign joint expeditions to the Northwest. The use of Western-inspired scientific methods to study China had universal appeal to both Chinese and foreign
explorers. As shown in Chen Wanli’s assistance to the Americans, as well as the Americans’ suggestion that they help Beijing University obtain some of the historical artifacts they encountered in Shaanxi, Chinese and foreign members of such expeditions shared a sense of obligation to rescue historical objects from backward local populations. Gu Jiegang, a historian at Beijing University, touched on the incident at the South Grotto Temple in the preface he wrote for Chen’s travel journal. Gu simply pointed out different attitudes toward antiquities, attitudes bifurcated between “us” and “others.” He wrote,

As to the antiquities, I truly feel that ourselves and others stand in two worlds. Statues, murals, and suchlike, in our opinion, are only regarded as antiquities, art, and history, and we always want to study them; however, in other people’s eyes, they simply represent the concept of deity, and thus should be protected for worship. . . . There is no way to reconcile these absolutely different views. Because their purpose was “use,” [they could only] save [the antiquities] or destroy [them], or even steal and sell them for profit. . . . [T]he abbot Wang from the Thousand Buddha Temple, who had been stealing and selling antiquities for ten years, is one good example. 35

Gu viewed the local villagers in Shaanxi and the abbot Wang in Dunhuang as similarly backward and ignorant, even though the villagers prevented the foreigners from carrying away any statues, while Wang had allowed Warner to peel away murals. For Gu and his fellow Beijing scholars, the demarcation between “us” and “others” was more complicated than whether one protected Chinese antiquities from foreigners. The division lay in whether one viewed these artifacts as objects for scientific research. Chen Wanli and his colleagues in Beijing aligned themselves with their Western colleagues and considered the locals as “others” who had hindered their scientific research. This otherness of the locals, in their opinion, was also the framing condition of China’s lagging modernization vis-à-vis the unceasing penetration by imperialists.

Although far from becoming a popular tourist destination, Dunhuang, especially the mural art in the Mogao caves, gained wider recognition after Chen Wanli published his travel writing and photographs.36 In the 1930s, government officials on inspection tours and journalists conducting reporting trips in the Northwest made concerted efforts to visit Dunhuang.37 During the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–45), coastal artists, who had relocated to western provinces because of the war, also found their way to the Thousand Buddha caves. Among them, the preeminent Chinese painter
Zhang Daqian spent almost three years studying and hand-copying hundreds of Dunhuang murals. Zhang’s copies were later exhibited in the wartime capital, Chongqing, and the Dunhuang mural art once again astounded the public audience. Introducing the Chinese public to the history and art of Dunhuang, Chen Wanli’s 1925 trip also helped establish the notion of “backward locals,” which would shape tourist experiences in the Northwest in the mid-1930s. Whereas urbanites from coastal regions searched for national myths and histories by touring the Chinese heartland, tourism in the Northwest would also operate on the assumption that traveling to these remote provinces helped middle-class tourists assert their autonomy, cosmopolitanism, and superiority over the “backward locals,” who were less educated, less mobile, and unable to fully appreciate China’s national essence.

Influenced by the nationalist movements in the early twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals were acutely aware of the controversies involved in foreign-led explorations on Chinese soil. Whereas the Chinese travelers to the Northwest recognized that the value behind such scientific missions was not geographically bound and their discoveries should be appreciated by all modern-minded people globally, it was also self-evidently important for them to assert Chinese sovereignty over the Northwest by participating in these joint projects and bringing the discoveries back to Beijing or Shanghai, rather than to Paris or London.

This inner conflict between a bifurcated self-positioning as a “scientist” and as a “Chinese” was not uncommon. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Liu Bannong voiced his objections to a rumored US expedition to the Northwest. In fact, Liu’s letter was triggered by the exact news of Chen Wanli’s participation in Warner’s expedition. Although Chen and his colleagues at Beijing University considered it an unprecedented opportunity for Chinese to break the barrier of foreign monopoly on expeditions to the Northwest, Liu was concerned about the possible harm that could be caused by imperialist explorations. In the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the Chinese intellectuals who had made possible the joint explorations of the Northwest usually had to play the dual role of universal scientists and nationalistic patriots. Upon his return to Beijing from Paris, Liu Bannong himself was soon to become a representative figure in such stories.

**Negotiating a Common Ground**

As demonstrated by Chen Wanli’s 1925 trip to Dunhuang, Chinese academics in Beijing became more involved in the exploratory travels to the Northwest in the 1920s. Several factors contributed to this development.
in the 1910s, a community of international elite scientists had made Beijing their home base. Preparing for their impending expeditions to the Northwest and Central Asia or serving alongside Chinese colleagues in scientific associations and institutions of higher education, they engaged many Western-trained Chinese intellectuals in popularizing the practice of fieldwork in disciplines such as geology and paleoanthropology.\textsuperscript{19} At the same time, Chinese intellectuals who had been trained in Euro-American and Japanese metropoles returned to China and took over the professionalization of Chinese academia. Like Liu Bannong, they were exposed to European science and Sinology as well as library and museum collections of Chinese and Central Asian historical documents and artifacts during their study abroad. Modern disciplines such as archaeology, geology, and paleontology entered Chinese academia with the return of these professionalized scholars. With the deepening of the National Studies Movement in the late 1920s, the need for scientific methods to study China’s past were broadly discussed and became accepted in academia. The mission of the movement also entered the popular consciousness. Lastly, in the late 1910s and 1920s, there was a rising tide of Chinese nationalistic movements in urban areas, and intellectuals also became more vocal about their objections to explorations in the Northwest led wholly by foreigners.

Two years after Chen Wanli’s groundbreaking trip, a larger-scale Sino-Swedish expedition departed from Beijing for Xinjiang in May 1927. This Scientific Mission to the Northwestern Provinces (\textit{Xibei kexue kaochatuan}) was led by Sven Hedin. A prominent traveler who had made three monumental journeys crossing the Gobi desert in Xinjiang and the Himalayan range in Tibet at the turn of the twentieth century, Hedin returned to China in the winter of 1926.\textsuperscript{40} Commissioned by Lufthansa German Airlines, Hedin convened a team of scientific explorers and technicians to revisit China’s Central Asia and investigate prospects of opening an air route for Lufthansa between Berlin and Beijing via Urumqi (known as Dihua in Chinese at the time). Hedin’s team planned to set up meteorological stations and survey the terrain for landing sites, which required comprehensive surveys not only on the ground but also from the air.

However, just as Hedin’s plan was green-lighted by the warlord government, a newspaper in Beijing reported his impending expedition. Questioning Hedin’s intentions, the news media soon painted this mission as another barely disguised foreign looting of Chinese antiquities, which would be conveniently shipped abroad by aircraft.\textsuperscript{41} Beijing academics reacted immediately. A meeting was called at Beijing University, to which twelve academic organizations in Beijing, including Beijing University, Qinghua University,
the History Museum, and the Beijing Library, sent representatives. As a result, the Association of Chinese Learned Societies (Zhongguo xueshu tuanti xiehui) was formed, and Liu Bannong, who was then teaching at Beijing University, led a committee to renegotiate with Hedin.

In Hedin’s memoir, Liu Bannong was the “real soul” of the Beijing committee overseeing the negotiation, during which Liu and his Chinese colleagues emphasized the issue of sovereignty. As Hedin soon found out, Liu “considered Western interference as a danger and a threat to the hegemony of Chinese science in China.”42 Liu insisted that not only should Chinese participate in the expedition, but they should also have a Chinese field director who would be equal to Hedin in the decision-making process. Every artifact collected in China would have to remain in China. Hedin and other European members of this expedition would not be allowed to publish meteorological data, maps, and other scientific statistics without China’s permission, a rule that also applied to photographs and films. Furthermore, the travel routes, once determined and approved by the Chinese committee, could not be altered. Hedin, although hesitant, finally agreed to the proposals Liu and his colleagues made.

As we can see, the demands of the Chinese committee exceeded the realm of scientific research per se. Some of the terms were directly linked to their concerns over Chinese territoriality. For example, they prohibited Hedin from drawing maps to a scale more detailed than 1:300,000; nor should meteorological observations be used for any military purposes. Even the word “expedition” (yuanzheng, or tanxian) was disallowed and replaced by “mission,” because “expeditions,” as Liu Bannong and his Chinese colleagues understood them, were carried out among the “blacks and savages,” and it would be insulting to use the term in China, a country with an ancient culture.43 The hard negotiation resulted in a nineteen-article agreement, detailing the responsibilities and rights of both Chinese and foreign team members.44 This contract marked a triumph for Chinese academia in forging an equal collaboration with foreign explorers.

What made this collaboration possible, however, was not simply the unyielding demands made by the Chinese. The negotiation happened in the middle of the Nationalists’ United Front campaign against the northern warlords, which, as Hedin observed, had stirred a wave of nationalistic and antiforeign sentiments among urbanites in China. Because of the Chinese press’s attack on Hedin’s expedition, another expedition led by Roy Chapman Andrews, an explorer dispatched by the American Museum of Natural History, came under attack, and Hedin’s fellow Swedish geologist Johan Gunnar Andersson, the discoverer of Peking Man, was also subject to criticism.
Sensing a possible renewal of the Chinese state through the Nationalist campaign, Chinese academics protested pending foreign expeditions in the firmest terms. The uncompromising attitude even prompted Hedin to question Liu Bannong at one point as to whether the Chinese scholars were imposing “a Treaty of Versailles” on him.\textsuperscript{45} Even though Hedin had obtained permission from the warlord government, he discerned that without support from and affiliation with Chinese institutions, his costly expedition would be truncated if regime change occurred in China.

Aside from the political climate, his Chinese opponents also impressed Hedin. Both Liu Bannong and his colleague Xu Xusheng (also known as Xu Bingchang), a history professor and philosopher from Beijing University who later served as the Chinese field director of the expedition from 1927 to 1928, spoke fluent French after years of study at the Sorbonne.\textsuperscript{46} Yuan Fuli, another US-educated Chinese scholar from Qinghua University who later joined Hedin’s expedition, was “an extremely learned and skillful geologist, paleontologist, archaeologist and topographer who spoke perfect English.”\textsuperscript{47} The fact that these Chinese opponents “had been in touch with the modern methods of Western science” was considered proof of their legitimacy.\textsuperscript{48} Furthermore, as a great admirer of Wilhelmian Germany and its statist nationalism, Hedin sympathized with the “nationalistic attitude” of the Chinese scholars. He told Liu Bannong that he himself was a nationalist in his own country.\textsuperscript{49} He argued that the Chinese claim to all archaeological objects found during the expedition “was in complete conformity with the legal regulations in all civilized countries.”\textsuperscript{50} He explained further to his Western audience not only that “knowledge transcends political frontiers and the prejudices of the different races,” but also that the “Chinese would enjoy the same rights as the Europeans,” because they “were in their own country, at home; we, on the other hand, were guests.”\textsuperscript{51}

On the Chinese side, Xu Xusheng, the head of the Chinese contingent of the expedition team, expressed a slightly different opinion when detailing the motivations that had driven Chinese intellectuals to be involved in Hedin’s expedition. While Xu concurred with Hedin that “knowledge and science” should be “international” and “borderless,” he highlighted that the material objects and individual researchers involved in knowledge production processes belonged to their nation. He added,

As for the foreigners, utilizing their superior financial resources, they take away scientific materials from our country as they please and without limit. With respect to invaluable sources that are hard to come by, they extort them by trickery or by force, and carry them out
of China secretly! If we cannot redeem this situation, the academic future of our country will suffer great losses. . . . As to the foreigners themselves, we will welcome cooperators with friendship but think up a method to resist those who want to invade us culturally and plunder our invaluable scientific materials, so that they will not harm our country.\textsuperscript{52}

If for Hedin the universal value of science and the shared belief in nationalism formed the common ground on which he and his Chinese opponents could reach mutual understanding, Chinese academics like Xu Xusheng did not romanticize the seemingly egalitarian impulses behind joint expeditions. Hedin believed that Chinese academics' embrace of Western scientific methods lent them an equal footing in their collaboration and had elevated China to the rank and order of civilized nations. While not questioning this Eurocentric view of science and knowledge production, Xu Xusheng was still deeply aware of the imbalanced power dynamics between foreign explorers and Chinese academics. The Chinese scholars' insistence on the issue of territoriality and strictly equal status was their effort to balance the power dynamic in an uneven relationship. In the same paragraph, Xu Xusheng used the word "friendship"—which was also mentioned by Chen Wanli and Hedin—to evoke an amicable spirit. But it could also be interpreted as a euphemism for mutual interests and advantages.\textsuperscript{53} Chinese researchers needed foreign funding, equipment, and expertise to practice professional techniques and carry out explorations in the hinterlands.\textsuperscript{54} At the same time, Western explorers could only pursue their ambitious missions by avoiding direct conflict with the increasingly nationalistic educated class in China.

The emphasis on friendship also underlined the shared politics animating these joint ventures. At the outset, this negotiation between Hedin and Beijing academics seemed to be a mission impossible, as it was between two irreconcilable interests: an imperialist industrial project energized by global capitalism, and a struggle for national salvation that was intrinsically anti-imperialist. However, the Han Chinese resistance against foreign exploration was also informed by their own desire to penetrate the multiethnic frontier provinces in the Northwest. After the westward conquest in the eighteenth century, the Manchus had fashioned themselves as a fellow Central Asian steppe people to exert a more personalized rather than centralized rule over the Mongols, Tibetans, Uyghurs, and other nomadic peoples in the region. Yet shortly after the Qing empire collapsed in 1911, the Republican regime faced separatist movements not only in Outer Mongolia and
Tibet but also among the multiethnic peoples in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. The central government in Beijing had only nominal control over the local warlords in the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia area within larger xibei, some of whom were from or had close relationships with the Chinese-speaking Muslim communities in the Northwest. As the Nationalist revolutionaries and Han Chinese intellectuals further linked these “separatist” movements to foreign imperialist influences, they justified the Qing borders as vital to the legitimacy of a Nationalist republic and saw the formal incorporation of the Northwest into the nation-state as a pressing issue. The nation-building effort embedded in the Chinese participation in joint explorations of the Northwest reflected both Chinese resistance against foreign imperialism and their rejection of the prospect of relinquishing the Qing colonial frontiers.

Han Chinese intellectuals did not view their desire to shore up the nation by strengthening Han control over the frontiers and their intense anti-imperialist sentiment as contradictory. Their stance was in tune with the development of colonialism and nationalism globally. The US westward expansion showcased how the majority nation formation could include incorporating lands and peoples in their close proximity. In Germany, Britain, France, and Russia, colonial, racial, and nationalistic policies were often spearheaded by explorers and geographers. While late Qing and Republican Chinese seldom equated the Qing westward expansion with the European overseas colonial possessions, some did liken Chinese rule over Xinjiang to Japan’s colonization of Hokkaido and Taiwan. Further, colonial expansion was not considered a bad idea if Chinese were conducting the colonizing.

When Xu Xusheng and his colleagues joined Hedin’s exploration in 1927, the idea of zhibian (frontier colonization) had also been circulating among Han Chinese officials and intellectuals, a school of thought that would gain a broad resonance nationally in the early 1930s. In short, in the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese discourses of the Northwest were informed by the Qing expansion movement, Western and Japanese colonialism, as well as a nation-building vision largely based on a majority nationality group’s design.

From this angle, the Han Chinese desire to participate in the exploration of the Northwest may bear resemblance to Hedin’s urges to explore Central Asia. In both cases, the region was viewed as an “empty” and wide-open space, waiting to be explored and developed. Both groups considered themselves civilizing forces vis-à-vis the backward local populations. By professing a common faith in modern (European) science and a high regard
for nationalism, the two sides recognized that science had major political implications for constructing nationalistic and imperialist sets of knowledge. Even as Chinese academics decried the term “expedition” (yuanzheng) and removed it from the mission’s formal title, it was not the idea of racial hierarchy per se they were protesting. The perceived insult lay in where the Westerners had located Chinese on the racial hierarchy. Whereas Chinese academics eventually convinced Hedin that they were intellectually—and perhaps racially—equal to Western explorers, these Beijing scholars had no qualm about considering the non-Han peoples in the Northwest as less civilized. In the same vein, what set the two sides apart was the question of which geopolitical center and whose imperialist or nationalistic orbit the Northwest should revolve around. As a colonial technique, the practice of exploration and travel played a key role in aiding colonial and imperialist powers. For the Chinese intellectuals striving to unite a national space based on its imperial legacy, this colonial technique fit neatly into their nation-building endeavor.

It was because of this common ground that this hastily formed joint exploration initiated by Hedin turned out to be a lasting mission that continued on and off from 1927 to 1935. When the original plan to survey Xinjiang from the air was denied by the Xinjiang authorities in 1928, the main sponsor of the mission, Lufthansa, pulled their funding and called back their experts. Hedin and the Association of Chinese Learned Societies appealed to the Swedish and Chinese (by then led by the Nationalists) governments respectively, which granted extra funding to extend the exploration and sent scientists from China and Sweden to join the second phase of the mission. After this second stage concluded in late 1933, Hedin gained the ear of top figures in the Nationalist government, including Chiang Kai-shek, who appointed him to be an advisor to the Ministry of Railways and outfitted him for an expedition to investigate the potential for modern transport routes between Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang in 1934–36.\textsuperscript{60} The fact that an imperialist exploration inspired by European scientific ambitions and industrial capitalist interests in Asia could eventually morph into a frontier expedition endorsed by the Chinese Nationalist government underlines how intimately the travel circuits of colonialism and nationalism overlapped in the Northwest.

**Locating the Northwest in China**

On May 9, 1927, families and friends gathered at the Xizhimen train station in Beijing to bid farewell to the departing Scientific Mission to the
Northwestern Provinces. They were heading to Baotou via the Ping-Sui Railway, where the joint team, consisting of eighteen Europeans and ten Chinese researchers, along with twenty-two Mongolian and twelve Chinese servants, and more than two hundred camels, would proceed by caravan through western Inner Mongolia to Xinjiang. The geologist Yuan Fuli, the archaeologist Huang Wenbi, the geologist and paleoanthropologist Ding Daoheng, the cartographer Zhan Fanxun, and the photographer Gong Yuanzhong were among the Chinese contingent. The Europeans, consisting of Hedin’s old associates and aviation and meteorology experts sent by Lufthansa, were from Sweden, Denmark, and Germany. Xu Xusheng, a Sorbonne-trained philosopher who had never done any fieldwork or traveled to the Northwest, volunteered to be the Chinese field director. Xu was enthusiastic despite his lack of experience. In a photograph taken at the train station, he wore a Sun Yat-sen suit with a telescope or water bottle strap over one shoulder, along with puttees and leather ankle boots. The outfit was completed by a fedora hat and a walking stick, mirroring his senior colleague Sven Hedin. Posing awkwardly alongside the three-piece-suit-clad Hedin and the Swedish ambassador, Xu looked both overprepared and ill-suited for the exploration.

As a nonscientist, Xu played more a symbolic than a practical role in the expedition. Unlike his scientist colleagues, he had no responsibility for the surveys, excavations, or experiments. Nor did he engage in any day-to-day tasks such as managing the camels, searching for fresh water, or cooking meals, with which the many unnamed helpers were tasked. However, as a field director and an eyewitness to the first stage of the mission, Xu wrote in his journal every day. After his return in 1929, Xu published his travel diary with encouragement from Eastern Miscellany magazine and his friend Lu Xun. Rather than editing his travel journal into a “popular form,” as Sven Hedin did in his rendition for the general reader, Xu kept the original style and presented a day-to-day account of their journey: from their departure from Beijing toward Baotou to the difficult journey to the oasis of Etsin-gol in the Gobi Desert, and from their entry into Xinjiang at the town of Hami to their eventual advance to Urumqi in late 1928. Xu’s field notes offered readers a sense of what it was like to be a modern explorer on the northwestern frontier.

In the West, Central Asia evoked a fabled image because of Marco Polo’s legendary traversing of its oases and deserts in order to reach China. Similarly, Han Chinese elites had associated the Northwest with the vague notion of xiyu (the western regions). A loosely defined western domain that could be found in both dynastic histories and popular literature, it
referred to a region that lay beyond the pale of civilization. Paradoxically, in the 1920s and 1930s, the name Central Asia or the Northwest connoted a sense of the “unknown” to Westerners and Chinese alike. Its extreme natural conditions, diverse ethnic and religious makeup, and political chaos perpetuated a mysterious image, at least when viewed from the outside. The locations of many sites mentioned in historical travel accounts were lost after being buried under the desert, while at the same time the native knowledge of the region was largely discredited as hearsay by Western and later Han Chinese explorers and disregarded by the educated public in the metropoles. In short, in the opinion of Western explorers and Chinese academics, because the Northwest had yet to be scrutinized through the lens of modern science, its largely uncharted territories still needed to be discovered or rediscovered.

Aside from setting up temporary meteorological stations to collect atmospheric data for Lufthansa, the main focus of this joint expedition was to do topographical, geological, paleontological, and archaeological surveys while collecting ethnological and ethnographical information by measuring, photographing, and filming the local peoples. Though not a scientist, Xu Xusheng clearly viewed himself as a fellow explorer. He consciously maintained a “scientific” style in his travel journal. For example, as their caravan meandered through the Gobi Desert, Xu recorded the names of places they encountered. Since many of the oases, trading spots, and mountain passes were only locally known and often referred to in Mongolian, Uyghur, or other non-Han languages, Xu painstakingly transliterated the names into phonetic symbols with their possible meanings in Chinese, instead of just using Chinese characters. Scientific data, such as altitudes and the highest and lowest temperatures of the day, were often included in his daily entries. Sometimes, Xu also put down a code consisting of numbers and letters. One of the earliest such code reads “3,988; N. 76, 30 W.” In order for readers to decipher it, Xu explained that the first number indicated the distance the caravan had progressed that day, and the rest pointed to the exact direction in which they traveled. “All based on Mr. Hedin’s calculations,” Xu added.

Xu also described some of the experiments carried out by Hedin and others in his travel journal. To investigate upper air currents, the expedition conducted balloon observations between June 1927 and October 1929. Xu watched the initial series of balloon releases with great interest. He even copied in his diary what was written on the note attached to each of the released balloons. It asked the finders of the balloons to record “the date, location, nearby population density and distance to main roads of the find”
and to return them to Qinghua University in Beijing in order to receive a reward.\textsuperscript{69} Even though Xu was a layman where natural science is concerned, he still could discern the cutting-edge methodology used in this large-scale atmospheric experiment and probably hoped his descriptions would be elucidating to Chinese meteorologists and the general public.

After arriving at the Etsin-gol River in late September 1927, Hedin decided to map the river and the two connected salt lakes—the Socho-nor and the Gachun-nor—from the water rather than from the land. Their Mongolian helpers built a few boats, and after a few test launches, Hedin and his team settled on a raft-like vessel built by joining two hollowed-out tree trunks together with wood planks.\textsuperscript{70} Hedin and Haslund—the Danish geologist in the group—took the raft to the river, while Xu and the rest of the team were divided into two columns to follow them on land. As Xu described in the travelogue, Hedin and Haslund undertook grave risks. The raft was crudely made, equipped only with some makeshift paddles and a small surface for Hedin’s mapping gear. While some parts of the water were so shallow that the boat often ran aground, other parts were dangerously deep. The weather was also turning wintry in October in the Gobi Desert, and the water was cold enough to be dangerous were the boat to become submerged far from the shore. Yet Hedin persisted. Xu noted that the sexagenarian Hedin was more athletic than he was himself, despite being only in his forties. Perhaps ashamed of his own lack of physical strength, Xu exclaimed that after witnessing Hedin’s herculean navigation, he was convinced that China needed a “Spartan-style” school to cultivate athleticism and perseverance among Chinese youth, as these qualities were crucial in the pursuit of science.\textsuperscript{71}

As the joint exploration’s field director for the Chinese contingent, Xu was keen to report the discoveries made by Chinese researchers. For example, after hearing about geologist Ding Daoheng’s discovery of a “massive iron ore deposit” at Bayan Obo (which means “mount of riches” in Mongolian), Xu excitedly predicted that the mine would surely become “one of China’s major sources of wealth.”\textsuperscript{72} At the northern foot of the Tianshan mountains in Xinjiang, Yuan Fuli found dinosaur fossils from the Jurassic period, which Xu emphasized as the first such discovery in Asia.\textsuperscript{73} Whereas Xu had little expertise in geology and paleoanthropology and made few comments on Ding and Yuan’s breakthroughs, he was invested in the archeological sites along the Silk Road and was particularly vocal about the looting and damage that had been done by Western explorers. At Khara-Khoto (“black city”; heicheng in Chinese), a ruined frontier town of the Tanguts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Xu noticed missing statues and the traces of earlier
excavations, which, he suggested, had probably been carried out by Western adventurers such as “Kozlov, Stein, or Warner.” Similarly, at the Bezeklik Caves, a Buddhist site near Turfan, Xu mentioned all the missing murals and sculptures in the grottoes, which he attributed to German explorer Albert von Le Coq, who had led several German expeditions in Xinjiang in the early twentieth century. In fact, even before entering Xinjiang, Xu had written about Le Coq in his travelogue. At Etsin-gol in Inner Mongolia, Xu borrowed a copy of Auf Hellas Shuren in Osttukistan (On the Trail of Hellas in Eastern Turkestan)—Le Coq’s account of German expeditions to Turfan—from Hedin to prepare for their exploration of Xinjiang. Learning about German activities in Turfan and the hundreds of cases of treasures they shipped back to Berlin had filled Xu with indignation. This is clear from his travel journal: “I am not a Nationalist (guojia zhuyi zhe) and have always advocated that science—knowledge—is the public property of mankind. But the fact that outsiders could grab any old thing from our own home at will was like an old tree with all its branches and leaves stripped away. Even if the old trunk is not dead, it is miserable and colorless. How could you not feel angry and heartbroken in the face of such wretchedness!” Hedin argued that the German seizure of the Silk Road artifacts near Turfan was actually “fortunate,” because shortly after the departure of the Germans, the region was hit by an earthquake, and these materials would have been destroyed if they had not been removed. Xu, however, was not convinced, pointing out that an earthquake was an accidental event, and did not ameliorate the foreigners’ original intent.

Agonized by these open wounds along the Silk Road and wary of foreigners’ insatiable appetite for “Chinese” treasures, Xu Xusheng felt protective of the archaeological findings in the Northwest. Huang Wenbi, an archaeologist from Beijing University, heard about the relics of an ancient city near Olon Sume from locals and set out to look for it. What he found was the ruins of a rectangular walled city. At the site, Huang saw the remains of the foundations of houses and temples, and also discovered a Chinese tablet and a Mongolian tablet, from which he made rubbings before leaving. Afterward, Xu discussed these findings with Huang enthusiastically. On the basis of their knowledge of the official dynastic histories from China’s imperial era, which Xu Xusheng had carried with him to the Northwest, both men suspected that this ruined city was the historical town of Jingzhou from the Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan dynasties (1271–1368). However, Xu objected to Huang’s idea of relocating the tablets from the ruins to the nearby Bat Khaalga monastery (known as Batlingmiao in Chinese) and entrusting them to the Mongol aristocrats there. Afraid that the Mongols would sell the tablets
to foreigners, Xu insisted on writing to their colleagues at Beijing University to request that they send a team to retrieve the tablets. What Huang and Xu did not know was that two months before Huang’s “discovery,” Henning Haslunl had already encountered this ghost town. The American scholar Owen Lattimore then reached the same place in 1932 under the guidance of a Mongol guide named Arash, who had worked for Huang and Haslund in 1927. Unlike Haslund and other Western explorers, Huang Wenbi did not pay attention to the Nestorian dimension of the site. Instead, like Xu Xusheng, Huang was preoccupied with locating lost frontier towns established by central regimes that were mentioned in Chinese dynastic histories. This reflected the academic trend of national studies, which emphasized the application of archaeology in corroborating Chinese historical texts, especially the official dynastic histories. It also met the political need to include the Northwest within the geohistorical realm of the Chinese nation-state.

This Chinese endeavor centering on how far the Middle Kingdom extended westward also mirrored the pursuits taken up by some Western explorers in Central Asia, which sought to discover how far east the influences of Western civilization—especially those of the Greco-Roman culture and Christianity—had traveled. Albeit with opposite orientations, both of these quests embodied the kind of worlding projects inspired by the Silk Road, in which the logic of world-making was determined by where the perceived center lay. As Tamara Chin has pointed out, “the Silk Road offers . . . a condition or strategy for geopolitical thought and action.” These worlding projects had implications beyond historical narratives. Just as articulating the West’s historical links to Central Asia reinforced the West’s modern-day imperialist ambitions in these distant lands, underlining China’s long-lasting influence in the Northwest provided much-needed legitimacy for a Chinese nation-state that encompassed the contested former Qing frontiers.

In the 1920s and 1930s, when Chinese intellectual travelers began to familiarize readers with the geography and history along the Silk Road, their travel writings also unveiled the present-day conditions of the region, especially the complex ethnic composition and the volatile political reality. At the time, anthropometrics had become the standard practice of Western explorations of non-Western societies. Within the joint mission, David Hummel, the physician of the group, for example, made 60 anthropometric measurements and blood tests in Inner Mongolia, while Henning Haslund conducted 170 anthropometric measurements of “East Turks, Lopliks, Dede Mongols, Torguts, and Tibetans” in Xinjiang in 1928. Seeking to correlate physical and biological traits with racial identity, Western members of the joint team often highlighted the non-Chinese features among the local pastoral
peoples in their more casual travel writings. Haslund, for example, described the native Uyghurs in Xinjiang as people “with Aryan facial traits” whose women were “very beautiful” and “could pass for southern Europeans.”

Hedin once depicted one of the Mongol camel handlers as “a magnificent type resembling an American Indian.” Rather than highlighting physical appearance, Xu Xusheng’s travel journal painted a subtle image of a linguistically, culturally, religiously, and politically diverse society in the Northwest. In Inner Mongolia, Xu recorded how their caravan encountered varied native peoples and other fellow travelers on daily basis. From Mongolian tax collectors sent by Mongol princes to Han Chinese farmers and shopkeepers relocated in the late Qing era, and from Tibetan lamas in local monasteries to multiethnic merchant caravans engaging in long-distance trade between Outer Mongolia and North China, the various groups he met in desert oases and yurt communities evinced a northwestern frontier that was far from empty.

Although Xu spent the majority of his time in Xinjiang communicating and negotiating with the Han Chinese governor, Yang Zengxin, and had very little free time left in the field, he was still constantly reminded of the complicated ethnic composition of the Xinjiang society. For example, Xu learned that Burhan (Bao’erhan), the interpreter and main liaison sent by Yang, was a Tatar expatriate originally from Russia. Aside from the Tatars (dada), Xu also recorded the “Turban heads” (chantou, a Chinese term of the day for Uyghurs), Kazaks (hasake), the Torgut Mongols (tu’erhute), the Hui (Chinese-speaking Muslims), and other non-Han groups in Xinjiang. These diverse peoples also molded their identities in the crucible of interethnic alliances, conquests, displacements, and migrations. Once Xu Xusheng met a fourteen-year-old coach driver who told him that he was also originally from abroad. Confused by the teenager’s muddled description of his origin, Xu later figured out that the boy was descended from the Hui Chinese who had fled to Russian Central Asia from Shaanxi and Gansu during the Muslim rebellion in the 1870s. Just like the Torgut Mongols who returned to Inner Mongolia during the High Qing after decades of exile in Russia, these Hui Chinese—also known as the Dungans among Russians and Uyghurs—resettled again in Xinjiang after the Russian revolution. These complicated histories prompted Xu to comment that the ethnic differences in Xinjiang were extremely hard to untangle.

As Xu’s travel journal demonstrated, across the steppes and deserts in the Northwest, multiethnic peoples formed communities and maintained cultural, ethnic, economic, and political norms that were strikingly different from those in the Han heartland. This anomaly was shaped by the
legacy of the Qing. One of the noticeable differences of the frontier society came from the unusual configurations of its ruling elites. Instead of being governed by civil servants appointed by the provincial and central governments, on the frontier, military strongmen, non-Han aristocrats who held hereditary titles, and religious leaders of Tibetan Buddhism and Islamic faiths exerted power. This tactical system of control on the non-Han periphery was not easy to grasp, even for highly educated Han Chinese travelers. Despite his matter-of-fact presentation, Xu Xusheng’s travel notes reflected a certain level of puzzlement over the nomenclature of the titles for frontier elites. When Huang Wenbi hoped to entrust the tablets he had found at Olon Sume to the beile wang presiding over the Etsin-gol area, Xu explained that this Mongolian nobleman, commonly known as the beile wang by locals, was in fact a zhasake who had been “demoted from the junwang rank to the beile rank.” For Han Chinese readers in the early Republican era, the terms junwang and beile might sound familiar, as they were top-ranking titles used largely within the Manchu imperial clan. The term zhasake, on the other hand, was not widely known. It is a Chinese transliteration of the Mongol term jasagh, which was used by the Manchus for the leaders of Inner Mongol banners.

Similarly, when the joint mission entered Hami in Xinjiang, Xu Xusheng went to pay his respects to the huiwang of Hami. Literally meaning the “King of Hui,” the term huiwang here referred to the Muslim prince Shah Maqsut, whose family was among the few native Muslim Khanates who had received hereditary fiefdoms granted by the Manchu court for their support of the initial Qing conquest in the 1750s. “The huiwang is seventy-one years old, grey-haired but in good health,” Xu wrote after their first meeting, continuing that “he dresses in Chinese style clothes and speaks fluent Chinese. If one didn’t know the truth, it would probably be hard to tell that he’s of another ethnicity.” Despite being impressed by his high level of Sinicization, Xu was not thrilled by Shah Maqsut’s praise of Yuan Shikai, the first president of the republic, who had been denounced by the New Culturalist intellectuals for his cultural conservatism, autocratic rule, and attempt to restore monarchy. As the Khanate prince reminisced about the good old “peaceful” days under Yuan and lamented the current chaos caused by the civil war between the northern warlords and Nationalists, Xu expressed his mild annoyance in his travel journal, reminding readers that these Muslim Khanates—along with other non-Han aristocrats with hereditary fiefdoms on the northwestern frontiers—were anachronistic relics from the Qing era. Out of their own self-interest, autocratic warlords such as Yuan Shikai had preserved this out-dated system even after the fall of the Qing.
If the antiquated hereditary fiefdoms clung to by non-Han elites signaled a challenge to China’s nation formation, competition among Han Chinese warlords further complicated the volatile political reality. In the late 1920s, Chinese intellectual travelers located the unrest in the Northwest against the backdrop of the political chaos in the rest of the republic. As the joint team traversed politically unstable regions in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang in the midst of the Nationalist military campaign against northern warlords, their caravans encountered suspicion and interrogation from various local authorities. As mentioned above, the caravan was a multinational team traveling with more than two hundred camels. The mission also carried some sizable meteorological equipment—some of which resembled cannons—as well as real weapons for self-defense. Perhaps because of the size of the group or the noticeable Chinese presence on the team, different warlords suspected that they had been dispatched by neighboring competing warlords on a hostile military mission. Nor did the suspiciously shaped pieces of research equipment and firearms help quell the speculations. The “Christian General” Feng Yuxiang in Gansu, for example, thought the team had been sent by warlord Zhang Zuolin, who had controlled the Beijing government in 1927 after ousting Feng from the capital. Feng jailed two Chinese members of the mission when they were sent to Lanzhou for supplies. It was not until Cai Yuanpei, who was informed by Xu Xusheng of the incident, intervened and asked the Nationalist government to explain the purpose of the joint mission to Feng that they were released. Similarly, when Yang Zengxin, the governor of Xinjiang, who had succeeded the last Qing governor in 1911, learned about the joint mission heading from Beijing to Xinjiang, he conjectured that Feng Yuxiang had sent the group to attack him.96 More speculation emerged in Xinjiang when a censor submitted to Yang a letter addressed to a Chinese student participating in the mission. The author of the letter, a friend of the student in Beijing, joked about the camels under their command, writing, “I congratulate you on having two hundred soldiers in your caravan.” A simple joke was misconstrued as indicating a suspicious troop of two hundred people, and caused Yang to send thousands of his soldiers to the border. Once the joint team had arrived at Hami, Yang’s subordinates closely examined their equipment and luggage before allowing them to move forward to Dihua (Urumqi).97

Compared with this vigilant attitude toward a scientific mission from Beijing, the frontier authorities seemed to be rather nonchalant about foreign explorers entering their jurisdiction. After arriving in Dihua, Xu Xusheng heard from Hedin that two German explorers were at Kucha, a Silk Road site along the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert, and planned
to go on to the Lop Nur. Enraged by the news, Xu blamed the “inconsistent government decrees” in the Northwest, which allowed foreign explorers to “sneak across the Chinese border at will” but obstructed “legitimate investigations of scientific materials” such as theirs. The phrase “inconsistent government decrees” here was perhaps Xu’s polite way to describe the many different layers of administrative and military units with which he and his fellow travelers had to negotiate during their journey. With varying degrees of independence from the national government, as Xu’s travel narrative suggested, these multilayered units underlined the patchwork nature of the frontier ethnopolitical reality, which resulted in a porous borderland vulnerable to foreign penetration and threatening to the integrity of the national space.

While Han Chinese travelers like Xu Xusheng largely identified with the Nationalists’ antiwarlord campaign, they were not blind to the value of upholding the Qing frontier legacy. For the warlords and Han officials in the Northwest, existing practices provided continuity, allowing them to rule through different native middlemen. Honoring the Qing promises regarding the privileges of indigenous rule also prevented the local non-Han elites from seeking outside support and from fomenting their own national independence movement. When Hedin relayed the rumor that a large number of the Torgut Mongols at Etsin-gol were “sympathetic towards the Mongolian Republic and might declare allegiance to it at any moment,” Xu Xusheng disputed the likelihood of that by pointing out that the local “Torgut prince”—whose tribe had gained their fiefdom since the Kangxi reign of the Qing dynasty—would lose his title and position if he were to let that happen. Inheriting the Qing frontier legacy also lent legitimacy to the Chinese republic’s territorial claim over the Northwest and other frontier regions. For Han Chinese travelers, the key was to rearticulate and ameliorate the relationship between the Han Chinese and their ethnocultural other. Differentiating themselves from the warlords who were, in their view, simply taking advantage of the indigenous peoples during the chaotic postimperial transition, Chinese intellectual travelers envisioned themselves to be scientific and nationalistic agents who could inform the central state, academia, and a broad learned public about the frontier society through their travels and travel writing. Exactly who got to depict the frontier society and how it should be represented, however, were not always clear in Sino-foreign joint missions.

Within the Sino-Swedish scientific mission, Paul Lieberenz, a German photographer and cinematographer, was enthusiastic about filming the expedition as well as the local peoples. For example, he went to the Festival
of Maidar at the Bat Khaalga monastery and shot “1,100 metres of film,” documenting local Mongolians carrying out a multiday celebration with rituals, music, and dances. The Chinese team members were not always pleased with Lieberenz’s filming. When Xu Xusheng learned that the film Lieberenz was making was his own personal production, he was disturbed. Aside from not being thrilled that 20 percent of the profit generated from the film screening would go to Lieberenz, Xu was also alarmed that the film would need to be sent to Berlin to be developed, which meant that it could be shown to foreign audiences without proper censorship from Beijing. After lengthy discussions with Hedin—who in turn talked to Lieberenz—Xu Xusheng managed to amend the joint mission’s agreement to ensure that Beijing had final say over the content and circulation of any photographs or film. Xu’s insistence on the Beijing committee’s right to censor visual content showed his strong belief that Chinese should have control over representations of the Northwest and, by extension, of China.

What should be represented was not always clear-cut, even among the Chinese members of the team. Early in the expedition, the international caravan was crossing a prairie near Baotou when an itinerant opera troupe showed up at their camp. The foreigners invited them to perform for Lieberenz’s camera, and the performance proved too vulgar for the Chinese intellectuals’ taste. According to Xu Xusheng’s travel journal, the stories were all about “flirting men and women,” and he found the performance offensive. Enraged by the off-color jokes, Huang Wenbi objected to the filming. Protesting to Xu, Huang argued that such “folk” performances were so indecent that the “Southern government” (by which he meant the Nationalist government) had already banned them in order to “reform social customs.” To Huang’s surprise, Xu had little objection to filming and argued that although this kind of performance should be banned in the future, because of its huge regional popularity folklorists would want to study it and therefore it should be filmed. For Huang, such footage would defame China and present the backward side of the country to the rest of the world. However, for Xu Xusheng, vulgar or not, the performance was an intrinsic part of local society. Collecting and studying every element of the social life and culture of the borderland was precisely the reason they had set out on the expedition in the first place.

Furthermore, Xu Xusheng did not think there was any difference between the vulgar and the refined in terms of their scientific value. He viewed the local opera the same way that Huang, an archaeologist, would think of an artifact excavated from underground: as an object of study. However, Xu’s proposal to ban this kind of local opera after letting folklorists study it also
exemplified an intriguing interrelation between the administrative apparatus and social scientific study in the Republican era. As Tong Lam has argued in his study of the social survey movement in the 1920s and 1930s, the discourses of science and reason permeating professional social surveys and amateur writings about China’s social world allowed such research to become a novel political technology that contributed to China’s nation formation. For Xu, the backwardness of the northwestern society did not lie in the vulgar performance itself but rather in its influence as indicated by its huge local following. Without proper research, Xu seemed to believe, the backward social mentality behind its popularity would not be eradicated even after the performance was banned. This logic of thorough scientific research leading to effective control illuminates the perceived link between culture making and nation building. Just like social surveyors, travel writers like Xu hoped to bring forth interventions to eliminate anomalies and impose sameness across the national space.

Besides being categorized as an anomaly, non-Han indigenous peoples were often consigned to the past in travel writings by Western explorers and Han Chinese travelers. This practice of the “denial of coevalness,” to use Johannes Fabian’s well-known term, was often exemplified in the depictions of “superstitious” religious practices. Once in Inner Mongolia, Xu Xusheng accompanied Huang Wenbi and a few Chinese students and Mongol helpers to excavate a few old tombs. Soon after their arrival, the local Mongol chief sent someone with his calling card to invite the Chinese to his nearby yurt. Sensing the possibility of an objection, Huang Wenbi went to the meeting with a Mongol assistant. The Mongol chief begged them to stop digging in his land. He told Huang Wenbi that just a few days prior, a few foreigners took away some rocks from their obo—the stone heaps piled on the top of mountains that serve as altars in local Buddhist practice—which had already caused the death of three sheep and made one person ill. Although feeling guilty about disturbing their peaceful lives, Xu Xusheng pitied how superstitious the Mongols were.

If Xu was only mildly disturbed by the Mongols’ plea based on their religious beliefs, he dished out harsh criticism of Islam in Xinjiang when they visited the Bezeklik Caves near Turfan. At this Silk Road site, Xu noticed many empty niches where statues of the Buddha once stood. On the basis of the damage he found, he concluded that it was the result of deliberate destruction. He blamed the great loss of historical artifacts on imperialist archaeologists for their theft, on the Chinese for failing to protect their objects of scientific interest, and on the Muslims for their anti-idol fanaticism. On the surface, Xu seemed to have identified three equal culprits.
and implied their simultaneity. However, there are subtle differences in these groups’ attitudes toward the Buddhist statues. Both the greedy foreign plun­derers and the failed Chinese protectionists probably shared a similar modern view that the Buddhist artifacts were valuable objects for scientific study. In contrast, with their view of the Buddhist statues as idols, Muslims were depicted as religious zealots whose aggressive actions seemed to emanate from a bygone era.

This deliberate denial of coevalness is even more obvious when we consider how much the joint mission had relied on the local Mongols, Uyghurs, and other indigenous peoples for service and information. It was evident that many “lost” sites were hardly lost to the native peoples, without whose guidance foreign explorers and Chinese scholars could not make their “discoveries.” However, even as Han Chinese travelers acknowledged that the inclusion of indigenous non-Han peoples within the Chinese nation-state was essential to the country’s postimperial transition, the agency of these non-Han peoples was either omitted or downplayed in travel narratives. When discussing the future of Xinjiang with Hedin, for example, Xu Xusheng agreed that education should play a crucial role. They both thought that it would be beneficial to the indigenous population to learn about local weather, geography, vegetation, fauna, and ethnic formation. Xu argued that learning these modern disciplines would help solve many practical problems in Xinjiang, such as road construction, forest cultivation, taming and utilizing rivers, and ore extraction. The greatest issue in the administration of Xinjiang, Xu emphasized, was “racial difference” (renzhong fenqi), which made it impossible for the Muslims to be assimilated by the Han.111

Xu criticized the existing approach to assimilating Muslims in Xinjiang, which forced them to give up Islam and to study Confucianism instead. He argued first of all that Confucianism was not a religion, so one could not expect it to replace the religious beliefs of the local population. Second, this approach was ignorant and disrespectful toward the history, religion, and culture of the Muslim people. Xu warned that simply using “old morals” (Confucianism) and state power to consolidate authority over the Muslims and other minorities was bound to fail. “The Russians could not succeed in Poland. Nor could the English succeed in Ireland,” Xu wrote. “China is even weaker than those two countries; how can we expect [a similar tactic] to be fruitful in Xinjiang?”112 He then concluded that Hedin’s suggestion to build a modern school in Xinjiang was a practical approach. Teaching Muslims the “precise science of modern times” and the “cultures of Arabia and other ancient nations,” Xu concluded that Han Chinese would be able to tell the local Muslim population,
You have your own religion and your own history. We recognize all that, and we do not want to interfere. However, your innate culture is an ancient relic, and not a precise form of knowledge in modern times. It is fine if you do not want to live in the present era. But if you do, you cannot ignore modern science. The school we set up is a place to provide you with modern science, which will give you methods to use in real life. It does not conflict with your religion. You can pursue your studies with ease. While it is good of you to maintain respect for and pride in the Arabian culture, do you really understand it? It is fine if you do not want to know. But if you do, there is no other way than to come to our school to study.

Considering the weapon of “Confucianism” to be just as archaic as “Islam,” Xu Xusheng held “modern science” as an olive branch as well as a conquering device to captivate the indigenous non-Han population. It was clear to him that rather than assimilating to Han cultural values, the Muslims and other local non-Han peoples would be won over by preaching modern science, a line of reasoning inspired by the actions of foreign explorers. While pointing to unsuccessful cases in Poland and Ireland, Xu conceived an idea altogether not that different from the Western and Japanese colonizers’ approaches in their colonies: building authority in the name of science and modernity.

As Tani Barlow has asserted in her analysis of China’s colonial modernity, modernity is intrinsically colonial since one cannot possibly exist without the other in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To reimagine the Qing frontiers under the rubric of a Chinese nation-state, Xu and his fellow travelers portrayed the Northwest as a distant, empty land with savage indigenous peoples that should be better integrated through urban civil power (i.e., science and industrial capitalism). This settler-colonist-style argument resembled US tropes about “empty lands” and “Indian savages” in their western frontiers. Just as that trope had turned the colonization of indigenous land by white settlers into a benign westward movement and American exceptionalism, the push to use science to modernize the northwestern frontier in China helped repaint the history of Qing continental expansion as an inspirational narrative of strengthening the nation and resisting Western and Japanese imperialism. Yet simultaneously, Xu and his colleagues also presented the Northwest as a familiar and indispensable part of the national space, given its long history of affiliation with various Chinese imperial states. By presenting the Northwest as always a part of China throughout history, Han intellectuals reformulated Chinese national history to incorporate the
non-Han peoples. The travels of Han Chinese to the Northwest during the Republican era occupied a crucial position in China’s transition from empire to nation-state. This would inspire the mainstream narrative of the Northwest in journalistic and tourist narratives in the 1930s.

**Popularizing the Westward Movement**

Encapsulated by Chen Wanli, Xu Xusheng, and other Beijing academics’ participation in Sino-foreign joint explorations of the Northwest, this intellectual “westward movement” in the 1920s was embedded in China’s postimperial transition, the multilateral competition for influence and profits in Central Asia, and the transnational networks of knowledge production of Eurasia. It was also during the early Republican period that Chinese writings about “the Northwest” and “the frontier” (bianjiang) moved beyond the text-based evidential research valorized in Qing statecraft writings to a more scientific and journalistic style with an emphasis on fieldwork (shidi kaocha) and scientific facts. The Sino-Swedish joint mission played a significant role in this transition. After its initial negotiation, the mission captured public attention. Upon their departure, print media, especially those with significant visual components, reported on their journey with great enthusiasm. Later, Chinese members of the joint team gave public lectures about their travel experiences, popularizing the notion of scientific travel in the Northwest among urban audiences. Like Xu Xusheng, Chinese scientists who had participated in other Sino-foreign joint expeditions to the Northwest also published their travel journals about the Northwest in the early 1930s. At the epicenter of this movement, university faculty and students and other members of the learned public in and beyond Beijing became attuned to associating scientific travel with the Northwest.

Continuing as an intellectual endeavor throughout the 1920s, this westward movement exploded into a popular national campaign in the 1930s. After seizing power, the Nationalists soon faced the blunt aggression of Japanese imperialism and China suffered a string of military attacks from Japanese forces. Among them, the loss of Manchuria in 1931 not only dealt a bitter blow to the Nationalist government but also injected into the public consciousness an unprecedented sense of national crisis. Taking refuge in Luoyang in early 1932, the Nationalist central government looked further west for areas of possible retreat and selected Xi’an, a city in the northwestern province of Shaanxi, as an “alternate capital.” Soon a Planning Committee for the Western Capital (xijing choubei weiyuanhui) was formed to develop Xi’an and the surrounding region into a strategic base from which...
to resist Japan and assert firmer control over frontier provinces. Espoused by right-wing Nationalist Party politicians and thinkers as an opportunity to transform the “empty” frontier into what Jeremy Tai underscores as “a vital place in restructuring China’s political economy,” this broadening of the westward movement also coincided with the Chinese Communists’ retreat to northern Shaanxi, which thrust the movement to the top of the priority list for the Nationalist government.

Throughout the rest of the Nanjing Decade, the number of government initiatives, research societies, and publications dedicated to the Northwest mushroomed. “Head to the Northwest” (dao Xibei qu)—a slogan popularized by political speeches, popular print media, and even a movie—became a mantra reverberating in the zeitgeist of the 1930s. From top politicians to intellectuals to average urbanites, becoming an explorer-tourist to the Northwest became a key patriotic act. Shen Songqiao and Zhihong Chen have identified a broad spectrum of travel narratives of the Northwest that emerged in the 1930s and pinpointed their role in constructing the imagination of China’s national space and refashioning Chinese identity. According to their studies, the most active creators of travel narratives of the Northwest in the 1930s were Nationalist government officials and journalists from news agencies all across the political spectrum. Whereas the former group of travelers emphasized the pivotal place of the Northwest in China’s territorial integrity and its deep connection with China proper, the latter faction, like the Liangyou journalists in the previous chapter, brought more critical scrutiny to the local society. Dispatched by Dagong bao, Shibao, Shenbao, and other successful commercial newspapers, renowned journalists like Fan Changjiang, Chen Gengya, and Gu Zhizhong journeyed from coastal cities like Shanghai and Tianjin to Shaanxi, Qinghai, Gansu, and other northwestern provinces. Like the Liangyou travel columns about China’s interior, their travel reports about the Northwest called attention to harsh realities: an underdeveloped transportation infrastructure and rampant corruption among local politicians, as well as the persistent famine and other disasters that plagued the rural hinterland. Despite their different messages, both the political and the journalistic scrutiny boosted public interest in the Northwest. Government agencies in cities like Xi’an made efforts to improve transportation, beautify the urban environment, build tourism facilities, and publish guidebooks publicizing scenic spots and tourist sites in their cities and the surrounding areas. They also solicited assistance from tourism businesses like CTS, which not only opened new branches and built lodging facilities in the Northwest but also issued a guidebook to Shaanxi in 1935.
While the remote Buddhist cave temples in Dunhuang and the exotic scenes of non-Han peoples roaming the deserts in Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia fascinated urban readers, travel accounts by Nationalist officials, journalists, and intellectuals also highlighted historic relics and natural scenery in the Northwest that had become more accessible via modern transportation. A politically charged popular movement, the Head to the Northwest campaign also created commercial opportunities for transportation institutions and the tourism industry. Catering to this skyrocketing public attention to the Northwest, the Ping-Sui and Longhai Railways—the two major trunk lines connecting China’s eastern seaboard to western China—expanded their services and designed new tours to attract tourists.

Curating the Northwest

Connecting Beijing to Baotou in Inner Mongolia, the Ping-Sui Railway was a major achievement in China’s modern railway development. Its symbolic significance lies in the fact that the first section of the railway—between Beijing and Zhangjiakou (Kalgan)—was the first railway designed, built, and managed by Chinese. The only steam-powered transportation line linking China’s east coast to the Northwest until 1932, the Ping-Sui Railway played a crucial role in the economic development of the Northwest. However, because of the volatile political climate and the underdeveloped tourism infrastructure in the Northwest, unlike other major railway lines in coastal China, the Ping-Sui Railway did not attract many nonbusiness travelers in the 1920s. That changed dramatically in the 1930s, when academic travelers from Beijing began to explore the Northwest using the Ping-Sui line. Responding to the increasing demand, the Ping-Sui Railway started a weekly express service between Beijing and Baotou in 1932; by 1934, it was running every day.128 To promote sales in this new climate, the railway management also began to issue “tourism round-trip tickets” (laihui youlan piao).129 A common feature on major railways in coastal China, the tourism round-trip tickets gave passengers a discount and allowed them to travel within a certain period of time instead of in a fixed timeslot. This feature met tourists’ needs for a flexible schedule and lower cost.

Attention to scenic spots and historical sites along the Ping-Sui Railway also grew in the 1930s. In a 1932 article appearing in the China Weekly Review—an English newspaper in Shanghai—Dickson Tong, an author based at Yenching University, argued that tourism developers should stop neglecting the Northwest. Along the Ping-Sui Railway, Tong emphasized, one could find many places of scenic beauty and historical and cultural interest, including
“the outer part of the Great Wall, one of the four wonders of the world” and “the grave of Wang Chao-chun, a favorite concubine of Emperor Yuan Ti of the Han Dynasty.” Among all the tourist sites one could visit by train, Tong was most excited about the Yungang Grottoes, a Buddhist site near Datong in Shanxi Province. “The Stone Buddha Temple, with thousands of buddhas,” he wrote, was “some sixty or more feet high, carved on the rocks of a mountain stretching two li long and built in the Wei Dynasty.” Tong was not alone in recognizing the appeal of the Yungang Grottoes. Aside from the Beijing-Suiyuan and the Beijing-Baotou round-trip tickets, the Ping-Sui Railway designed a weekend- and holiday-only package tour to the Yungang Grottoes. Leaving Beijing on Saturday and returning on Monday on express trains, the tour participants would have an entire day to explore the famous cave temples and visit the historical capital of the Northern Wei dynasty (460–524).

On top of these discounts and offers, the railway also issued group tickets for school students on field trips to the Northwest. With a minimum of thirty people, a group could purchase discounted tickets to five different stops on the Ping-Sui route. These promotions were the railway’s response to the rapid growth in academic and adventure tourism to the Northwest. In an essay about his travel experience along the Ping-Sui Railway in 1934, the writer Xiao Qian—then a student at Yenching University—used the voice of an old local resident to describe the influx of students to the Northwest every summer:

Every year, droves of students clad in Western clothes come to investigate [the Northwest], inquiring about how many “worn-out shoes” [referring to prostitutes] or opium pipes we have, so you can use the figures to impress your teachers or readers. . . . Those who have good taste go to see historical sites. You visit the Zhaojun tomb, just a desolate mound, to ponder the past, or go kowtow at the Temple of Yu. Then, you take the same train back to Beiping and tell your fellow countrymen with your chest out: “I have been to the Northwest and have first-hand material!”

Xiao’s satirical depiction exposed the hypocrisy behind urban youths’ social surveys in the Northwest. Instead of effecting real change, many simply went to the Northwest to participate in a popular trend. However, Xiao’s travel essay, as well as other similar travel writings of the time, sheds light on one of the effects of this movement: an increasing familiarization with the Northwest among coastal populations. Curated by railway companies and the tourism industry, travels to the Northwest became increasingly standardized.
HEAD TO THE NORTHWEST

with common itineraries, which helped make the frontier region accessible to tourists from the core regions of China.

This kind of curation could take many different forms. The Ping-Sui Railway itself organized a group tour in 1934 to publicize its tourism appeal. Hoping to draw on the momentum of the Head to the Northwest movement, Shen Chang—the MIT- and Cornell-educated director of the railway—decided to invite a few prominent Beijing academics to travel to the Northwest. Even though the region still lacked basic tourism services, the railway administration had special connections with military authorities in the Northwest, which allowed them to provide all the necessary travel services for their guests, from lodging and meals to local transportation and guides. In return, the participants would publish their travel writings as promotional materials for the railway. Shen Chang knew exactly whom he should invite: Bing Xin (also known as Xie Bingxin), the renowned writer and professor, and, incidentally, his sister’s classmate at Wellesley College. After earning a master’s degree in English literature at Wellesley in 1926, Bing Xin returned to Beijing to teach at her alma mater, Yenching University, where her husband, Wu Wenzao, a Columbia-trained socioanthropologist, also held a position. Through Bing Xin and Wu Wenzao, seven other Yenching professors joined this Ping-Sui Railway Travel Group (Pingsui yanxian lüxingtuan) in the summer of 1934.

After the conclusion of the group tour, the Ping-Sui Railway produced ten different publications, including two bilingual pamphlets on the Great Wall and the Yungang Grottoes. Within these publications, the railway also singled out five titles as “reading materials for traveling along the Ping-Sui Railway” (Pingsui tielu yanxian lüxing duwu) for tourists and ordinary readers interested in the Northwest. To highlight the intellectual appeal to academic tourists, the Ping-Sui Railway’s travel reading materials included three short social-scientific studies, ranging from an anthropological description of Mongolian yurts to a historical account of a Han land merchant’s struggle in Inner Mongolia to a social survey of the Catholic missions along the Ping-Sui Railway. Different from guidebooks or travelogues, they offered social reportage and popular folk knowledge, and also conveyed the political implications of the Head to the Northwest campaign. For example, on the basis of what we might today call oral history, historian Gu Jiegang published a study on Wang Tongchun, a Han militiaman and land merchant who was successful in “reclaiming” agricultural lands in the region of the Great Bend of the Yellow River in the late Qing period. By recovering the story of a folk legend in Inner Mongolia, Gu’s account set Wang Tongchun as an exemplary figure—a “national hero”
(minzu yingxiong)—from an earlier episode of Han Chinese development of the Northwest and called for his compatriots to imitate Wang in the Head to the Northwest movement.\textsuperscript{138}

Indeed, travel to the Northwest, even in its most leisurely form, conveyed the excitement of scientific discovery and the urgency of nation-building—two sides closely intertwined as articulated by the Chinese members in the Sino-Swedish joint scientific mission. Echoing Gu Jiegang’s message, Bing Xin emphasized travel as a crucial way to incorporate the frontier region into the nation-state and stressed the link between resisting imperialism and going to the Northwest:

Since the fall of the Northeast, the whole country has suddenly become aware of the significance of frontier defense. There is a public clamor to develop the Northwest. But where on earth is the Northwest? What is the frontier condition of China’s Northwest? People feel completely in the dark on these questions. And with the loss of the Northeast, animal husbandry and land cultivation in the Northwest have become a source of wealth for the whole country. But we lack any understanding of the land, products, commerce, and other conditions of the Northwest. The Ping-Sui line is the gateway for people to go to the Northwest and for the products in the Northwest to get out. It is a route every compatriot should travel and investigate.\textsuperscript{139}

The purpose of their 1934 tour, Bing Xin emphasized, was “to pay attention to the scenery, historic sites, elegant architecture, customs, and religion as well as the local economy and products along the railway line.”\textsuperscript{140} Here, tourism became an organic part of the 1930s campaign to develop the Northwest. Just like the social studies, the popular travel writings penned by Bing Xin and other Beijing academics enticed intellectuals and average readers to partake in the broad political movement through travel.\textsuperscript{141}

The travel writings published by the Ping-Sui Railway Travel Group also successfully standardized the tourism itineraries along the railway line. The Yenching professors focused on three main towns during their tour: Datong, Suiyuan, and Bailingmiao, which became the main destinations for other coastal travelers to the Northwest in the 1930s. Datong was the ancient capital of the Northern Wei dynasty and the coal capital of modern China. The tourism appeal of the town lay in its historical sites and modern coal industry. Its most famous site, the Yungang Grottoes in Datong’s western suburb, were at the center of the Ping-Sui Railway’s tourism promotion campaign. First excavated in the fifth century when Buddhism was patronized by the Tuoba Xianbei—a non-Han people of nomadic origin.
who unified northern China and established the Northern Wei dynasty, the Yungang Grottoes consisted of thousands of Buddhist statues that had been carved into the cliffs and caves of the Wuzhou mountains over several centuries. The Beijing academics marveled at their historical and artistic value. In addition to bringing readers on a virtual tour of the site by detailing their three-day visit to the Yungang Grottoes, Bing Xin and Zheng Zhenduo, a fellow writer in the tour, stressed the profundity of the site by comparing it to other wonders of ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptian pyramids, the famous artworks at the Parthenon in Athens, and the Venus de Milo. By situating the Yungang Grottoes on par with the world’s greatest ancient ruins, the writers cast the Northwest not as a backwater of the republic but rather as a symbol of China’s early civilization, reinforcing its indispensable place within the nation.

At Datong, another recommended attraction was the coal mine in the nearby Kouquan county. Just as tourists from the Japanese main islands were encouraged to visit sites of production in Japan’s overseas colonies and semicolonies, coastal Chinese travelers viewed sites like modern coal mines as examples of achievements in modernization and state-building in the Northwest. Both Bing Xin and the aforementioned Xiao Qian described the unique sensory experience of descending underground to the coal pits of the Kouquan mine: the darkness, the stuffy air, the narrow space crammed with blackened workers, and the eerie sounds made by shaky lifts and coal cars. The palpably hellish conditions they captured in their travelogues also demonstrated the creeping advance of capitalist modernization.

Known as Hohhot in Mongolian, Suiyuan was the second main destination on the Ping-Sui line that coastal travelers frequented in the 1930s. Located in western Inner Mongolia, it was the capital of Suiyuan Province, which was established as a full-fledged province by the Nationalist government only in 1929. Divided between old and new towns, Suiyuan was famous for a number of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries inside the city and the Zhaojun tomb on its outskirts. Bing Xin’s travel journal recorded visiting four different monasteries. The history of these monasteries, she pointed out, could be traced back to the High Qing period when the Manchu’s western conquest reached the region. For example, the monastery called Xiao zhao in the old town of Guisui was rebuilt in 1698, and renamed Yanshou temple by the Kangxi emperor himself. Whereas the structure of the monastery was of both Chinese and Tibetan styles, a stele erected at the site bore texts in four languages: Chinese, Manchu, Mongolian, and Tibetan. From the stele, Bing Xin learned that the Kangxi emperor resided there after he
suppressed the Dzungar Mongols. In his travel essay, Xiao Qian ranked the Shiretu Juu (shelitu zhao) as his favorite monastery in Suiyuan. Charmed by its “hybrid Eurasian style,” Xiao and his travel companions even convinced the lama there to show them the armor that was believed to have been left there by the Kangxi emperor. While the mixtures of architectural styles and the juxtaposition of multiple linguistic markings demonstrated this frontier town’s complicated religious and cultural history, the stories of the Kangxi emperor’s sojourn cast light on Suiyuan’s unique position in a central regime’s westward expansion.

Situated outside Suiyuan, the Zhaojun tomb, which was also referred to as the “green tumulus” (qingzhong) in many tourism promotion materials about Suiyuan, was believed to be the grave of Wang Zhaojun. Wang was a Han Chinese court lady who was sent to marry the Xiongnu Khan by a Chinese emperor in the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE) in exchange for peace. In an essay about his visit to the tomb, Zheng Zhenduo pointed out that although it might not be the real location of the famous beauty’s final resting place, this “poetic ancient site” was still worth visiting to ponder on the past. Although these historical sites turned tourist attractions came from different time periods, they collectively represented Suiyuan as a frontier town bearing witness to the interactions between China’s central regime and its northwestern frontier. These interactions, from military conquests to religious patronage to marriage alliances, not only formed the unique cultural and religious institutions in Inner Mongolia but also shaped contemporary narratives of the connections and ruptures between the center and the periphery.

Located north of Suiyuan on the other side of the Daqing mountains, Bailingmiao (Bat Khaalga sume in Mongolian) was not technically on the Ping-Sui Railway route. Nor was it as accessible as other tourist destinations in the Northwest. However, as the home of an important Tibetan Buddhist monastery complex and the center of the Mongolian autonomous movement in the early 1930s, it attracted many Han Chinese travelers who were intellectually curious and politically minded. Accompanied by an interpreter and an associate of the Ninth Panchen Lama, who had been visiting the monastery at Bailingmiao since 1932, Bing Xin and her Yenching colleagues headed to Bailingmiao from Suiyuan in several all-terrain vehicles. Even with modern means of transportation, it took them two days to reach Bailingmiao, where they were received by the Mongol Prince Demchugdondrub (known in Chinese as De wang), the prince of the Sunid Right Banner in the Shilin-gol League and the leader of the Mongolian autonomous movement. In perhaps the most exciting and exotic part of their journey,
the group stayed in Mongolian yurts and were treated to performances of horsemanship and wrestling by Mongolian elites.  

Aside from a guided tour of the Bailingmiao monastery complex, Bing Xin was also fascinated by the nomadic lifestyle of the Mongols, taking pictures of their dwellings, clothes, and other scenes of their daily life. In her travel journal, Bing Xin called the Mongols “our brothers of the same mother,” who were also under threat from “powerful neighbors.” She appealed to her readers, presumably Han Chinese in coastal regions, to support the Mongols so they would know that they were not alone in their fight. Here, “powerful neighbors” referred to Japan and Soviet Russia, which had successfully instigated the separation of Manchuria and Outer Mongolia from the Chinese republic. Nevertheless, Bing Xin’s own wishful thinking on behalf of the local Mongols belied the reality of the tricky situation unfolding at Bailingmiao. Gaining new momentum in the aftermath of the Manchurian incident, the call from Mongol elites for a higher level of Inner Mongol autonomy was particularly worrisome for the Chinese nation, considering the growing Japanese encroachment in Inner Mongolia and North China.

In another travel essay about Bailingmiao published in *China Traveler*, author Huang Yubin, while praising the hospitality of Prince Demchugdondrub, directly acknowledged the existing tensions between the Chinese and the Mongols. Huang attributed such tensions to the Mongols’ deep-rooted superstitions, a comment that resonates with the opinions voiced by Xu Xusheng in the late 1920s. Echoing Gu Jiegang’s praise of Wang Tongchun’s endeavor to expand Han settlements in Inner Mongolia, Huang Yubin argued for Han migration and land reclamation as an ultimate solution to ethnic tensions in the region. Unlike Datong and Suiyuan, which attracted travelers with their easy accessibility and iconic tourist attractions, the hard-to-reach Bailingmiao lured visitors with its authentic Mongolian flare. Its astonishing rise to become the power center of the Inner Mongol autonomy movement also attracted high-profile visitors from the Nanjing government and intellectual explorers like university faculty and students. Although Han travel writers depicted the Mongol elites as friendly hosts and urged their readers to work harder to shore up ties with them, their travel writings nonetheless evoked an underlying anxiety about the political loyalties of ethnic non-Han peoples to the Chinese republic.

Traveling to Inner Mongolia in 1935, Huang Fensheng, one of the chief editors of *Weekly on Mongolia and Tibet*, spent more than two weeks at Bailingmiao observing the council meeting of the local Mongol autonomous political committee. Aside from his official capacity, Huang was also a
tourist. Like Bing Xin, Huang was eager to act like a “local.” Treated to a feast of roasted whole lamb (a Mongolian custom to welcome special guests), Huang learned to use his left hand to hold down the meat on the platter and cut with his right hand using a Mongolian knife. According to him, the local Mongol lamb tasted less gamey than that in China proper. Local Mongolians used cow dung as fuel to roast the lamb, which was rumored to reduce the muttony flavor. While recording this tidbit in his travelogue, Huang argued that instead of the cow dung, it was probably the local environment that gave the lamb its unique flavor. Although only an outsider, Huang presented himself as an authority on the Northwest for his coastal readers. In another piece, Huang pointed out that the Bat Khaalga monastery—from which Bailingmiao got its name—was considered sacred by the Mongolian believers in Tibetan Buddhism, and the town was not to be entered by women. “Modern girls” were nowhere to be found here, Huang noted. However, he also pointed out that “the precepts of Buddhist lands are often broken by our modern times.” Since Bing Xin’s and Lei Jieqiong’s visit in the previous summer, at least two other groups of women travelers had also penetrated the sacred ground of Bailingmiao. Even as he acted as a conveyer of the local authenticity in Bailingmiao, Huang admitted that the power of modernity—the fast marching of tourism in this case—would inevitably change this remote religious site in the Northwest.

Indeed, the success of the tourism promotion campaign by the railway and other institutions was manifested in the popularity of Northwest travel photography in the mass print media. *Kodak Magazine* featured popular destinations in the Northwest in its column *Kodak Travelogue* (keda youji). A travel column for amateur photographers to showcase their adventures, it was designed to broadcast the easy-to-use Kodak hand cameras and roll films and to demonstrate their great performance in outdoor environments. The appearance of the Yungang Grottoes and Suiyuan in the column in 1934 and 1936 indicated their increasing accessibility and appeal, attracting not only student and academic travelers from Beijing but also tourists from Shanghai and other cities. Connecting two urban middle-class recreational hobbies—leisure travel and photography—the Kodak Travelogue also presented the Northwest as a playground for their targeted consumers. Just as using the latest model of Kodak camera would indicate a consumer’s purchasing power and status as a more advanced amateur photographer, touring the Northwest and taking snapshots of magnificent Buddhist statues and remote ancient tombs could showcase one’s adventurous spirit and free-spending modern lifestyle. In tourism to the Northwest, it is impossible to
separate middle-class citizens’ sense of civic pride and responsibility from their desire to consume new tourism destinations.

**Hardship and Adventure**

Just as the Ping-Sui Railway took full advantage of the Head to the Northwest movement to promote its tourism appeal, the Longhai line also helped advocate for travel to the Northwest, especially in Shaanxi Province. Shortly after the central government extended the Longhai line to Tongguan, railway administrators invited experts from government agencies, the business and banking sectors, and universities to participate in exploratory trips to Shaanxi. Once the railway reached Xi’an in December 1934, tourists could purchase tourism round-trip tickets to multiple destinations in the province to visit the famous Huaqingchi hot springs and to hike Mount Huashan. From Shaanxi, more adventurous travelers could also venture further into Gansu via newly constructed motorways, or even go on as far as Ningxia and Qinghai. Intersecting with two main north-south trunk lines at Xuzhou and Zhengzhou, the Longhai Railway also allowed more access to the Northwest. In short, the extension of the Longhai line to Shaanxi helped broaden the geographical scale of this westward travel and shifted the center of movement beyond the intellectual hub of Beijing to include political and economic centers such as Nanjing and Shanghai.

Focusing on Xi’an and Shaanxi Province, the CTS guidebook to the Northwest argued that Xi’an should be a must-visit city for tourists from major cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin. Not only did it become more accessible via train, but Xi’an was also worth spending time in because “as an ancient capital . . . for roughly nine hundred years, it is filled with historic relics, artifacts, and scenic spots.” Indeed, the guidebook’s suggested itinerary contains twelve days of activities, including touring sites within the city limits and those in the surrounding areas. Leading a tour of thirty people from Shanghai to Shaanxi in 1934, Shen Xingchu, a core figure in the Unison Travel Club, designed a classic itinerary for tourists originating from the lower Yangzi region. While Shaanxi’s Mount Huashan, one of China’s five sacred mountains, was the main destination, Shen’s tour itinerary also included twelve hours in Kaifeng, the historic capital of Northern Song (960–1127), and twelve hours in Luoyang, another ancient capital in Henan Province. Since both Kaifeng and Luoyang were also on the Longhai line, a tour to the Northwest via the Longhai Railway also meant a cultural tour of multiple historic capitals in China.
While the Longhai line allowed many coastal urbanites to sample Chinese history through tourism, the harsh conditions travelers underwent became a trope in commercial travel writing, mirroring journalists’ travel accounts of the Northwest. In the mid-1930s, *China Traveler* published a string of travelogues on long-distance journeys to the Northwest. Joining a 1932 exploratory trip in Shaanxi organized by the Longhai Railway, Bian Wenjian, a manager at the Shanghai Commercial and Savings Bank, detailed his journey in a lengthy travelogue.\(^\text{164}\) Even though the group traveled with a large staff and were offered the best amenities available in the Northwest, the journey turned dreadful once they left Xi’an. The lack of modern roads, subpar food, and appalling rural poverty quickly diminished the travelers’ optimism for the future of the Northwest.\(^\text{165}\) Shortly after publishing Bian’s article, *China Traveler* serialized Shu Yongkang’s travel journal about his journey from Shanghai to Qinghai, in which he painted an image of the Northwest that was even more jarring.\(^\text{166}\) On their way from Xi’an to Lanzhou, for example, Shu and his travel companions, including Shanghai journalists Gu Zhizhong and Lu Yi, were stranded for a week when their long-distance bus broke down in rural Shaanxi. Terrorized by bandits, the authorities could barely protect local communities and travelers who were passing through. Local militias were prone to abuses of power. Shu also noted that in rural Shaanxi “9.5 people out of 10 smoke opium.”\(^\text{167}\) The poor hygiene also turned the most mundane acts of daily life, such as washing one’s face and relieving oneself, into stressful tasks. Published at a time when coastal urbanites were growing more interested in the Northwest, these anecdotes preached caution when setting out to visit less developed regions of the country.\(^\text{168}\)

Less flattering depictions of travel destinations were not always intended to deter potential travelers. Modern guidebooks and popular travel writings often included information about inadequate facilities or mentioned the lack of cleanliness at certain destinations, so readers could be fully prepared for their journeys.\(^\text{169}\) Descriptions of hardship were also found in popular travel writings about the Northwest, adding a sense of adventure and uncertainty into otherwise curated and safe tourism experiences. In 1934, Zhang Henshui, a best-selling fiction writer in the Republican era and a regular contributor to *China Traveler*, embarked on a three-month journey to the Northwest. In a piece serialized in eleven parts in *China Traveler* in 1934–35, Zhang seldom mentioned the significance of developing the Northwest.\(^\text{170}\) To him, the various sites he visited in Luoyang, Xi’an, and Lanzhou were representations of a Chinese tradition not that different from those former imperial spaces turned tourist sites in Republican Beijing.\(^\text{171}\)
Zheng Henshui’s 1934 tour disembarked from Beijing, and his first stop was Zhengzhou via the Beijing-Hankou Railway. Sightseeing aside, the main task in Zhengzhou was shopping. Zhang reminded readers that Zhengzhou was the last city where one could purchase, at reasonable prices, all the necessary items for a northwestward journey. For example, Zhang emphasized that one should prepare canned food and crackers if planning to climb Mount Huashan in Shaanxi. Other required items included a camp bed, gas stove, salt, water filters, and so on. “When you get to Gansu Province, the water there is muddy,” Zhang warned readers, “and you will want to filter the water and boil it on your stove.” From Zhengzhou, Zhang transferred to the Longhai Railway to continue on to Luoyang, where he visited two famous Buddhist sites: White Horse Temple (Baima si), the first Buddhist temple in China, and the Longmen Grottoes, a Buddhist site dating from the Northern Wei dynasty like the Yungang Grottoes. The Longmen Grottoes, Zhang noted, were disappointing. Many of the small statues were either headless or completely missing as a result of theft, while the bigger statues were intact but hard to view without hiking up the cliff. In Shaanxi, one of the main items on Zhang’s itinerary was hiking up Mount Huashan. Although he enjoyed the natural scenery, he complained that some of the paths up Huashan were so narrow that the sedan-chair bearers needed to dismantle the chairs at certain points and reassemble them further on in order to carry travelers and their luggage up the mountain.

At Lintong, another popular tourist destination in Shaanxi, Zhang bathed in the hot springs at Huaqingchi, a site believed to be the place where the famous beauty Yang Yuhuan, a consort of the Tang dynasty, had enjoyed the water. In Xi’an, Zhang used a guidebook to direct himself through a long list of must-see attractions, such as the Forest of Steles (Beilin) and the Great Goose Pagodas (Dayan ta). Zhang paid attention to local customs as well. As he pointed out, it would be prudent to learn about the local customs and habits to avoid offending local residents. Compared with travelers from the eastern seaboard, Zhang noted, the locals in the Northwest were used to simpler clothing. Strict distinctions between men and women were still deeply ingrained in the Northwest, so Zhang warned his Shanghai readers not to simply ask any woman on the street for directions. Above all, Zhang emphasized that “people from the Southeast”—the lower Yangzi region and other urban centers on the east coast—needed to respect the strong patriotism and native pride in the Northwest. He even instructed visitors about what to say to locals: “[You] should say that ‘we have come back to our ancestral home’ . . . or ‘people in the Northwest are so hardworking that
we from the Southeast cannot compare.”¹⁷⁷ Like Ni Xiying’s travel writings about inland cities discussed in chapter 2, Zhang’s depiction of local customs alerted his readers to regional differences but also indicated his concern that tourists might appear arrogant to locals.

With help from local officials, Zhang journeyed from Xi’an to Lanzhou via the Xi’an-Lanzhou motorway, which was still under construction. Traveling with two engineers inspecting the motorway project, Zhang spent nine days on the road, during which he encountered abject poverty, rampant banditry, and faint traces of progress. Having received a classical education, Zhang found himself recognizing the names of counties outside Xi’an from the classics he had once memorized. This was not entirely a surprise, as he knew that the Guanzhong plain was the cradle of early Chinese civilization. Although struck by the surreal feeling of visiting places where venerable saints and legendary kings once resided millennia ago, Zhang’s meditations on the past were often interrupted by disbelief at how unimpressive many famous locales looked in person. When the group was forced to spend a night in a small county because of heavy rain, Zhang and his traveling companions were offered lodging at the local elementary school. Recently built, the building’s windows had no glass or paper to block the wind and rain. One of the engineers had stayed there before, and told everyone that there was no need to worry about bandits, because the county was so poor that even the bandits had long abandoned it. But he also added that during the night he had spent there, two wolves had tried to get in. Zhang was so shocked by this anecdote that he barely slept that night.¹⁷⁸

Further on at Lanzhou, Zhang deemed the Yellow River and the iron bridge over the river the sights worth seeing, especially for travelers from the Southeast. Before the iron bridge was built by the Germans in the late nineteenth century, people in Lanzhou had maintained a floating bridge at the same location. That floating bridge and subsequent iron bridge were for years the only bridge spanning the Yellow River. While that was no longer the case, the bridge was nonetheless a rare place where travelers could see the huge waterwheels propelled by the rapid currents and ox-skin rafts floating downstream with passengers and cargo.¹⁷⁹ Although Lanzhou was harder to reach than Xi’an, with the upcoming completion of the Xi’an-Lanzhou motorway, Zhang saw the city’s potential to become a popular destination in the Northwest, and he added information about transportation, lodging, and special local products to his travelogue.¹⁸⁰

“Compared to traveling in the southeastern provinces, traveling in the Northwest is arduous,” Zhang wrote in his conclusion to the series. Despite the hardship, Zhang emphasized that it was worth the trip.¹⁸¹ Unlike Bian
Wenjian, who had traveled to the Northwest on an official tour organized by the Longhai Railway administration and the Shaanxi government, or Shu Yongkang and his journalist colleagues, who had set out from Shanghai to Qinghai to conduct sociological investigations, Zhang Henshui was a successful commercial writer without any official, professional, or academic titles who had acted on his own as a leisure traveler. His essays in *China Traveler* normalized leisure travel to the Northwest. Cities like Luoyang and Lanzhou indeed showed up more often as tourist destinations in popular print media in the mid-1930s.  

Zhang Henshui’s tourist perspective does not mean that he was ignorant of the national crusade to fully incorporate the northwestern frontier. Ending his long journey at Lanzhou, Zhang could not help but examine the unique location of this Yellow River city. A town “incorporated into the map of China as early as the Han dynasty,” Lanzhou had long been a city of military importance.  He asked his readers to draw a cross over a map of China, and they would find Lanzhou located exactly at the center of the cross. By pointing this out, Zhang underlined the city’s position as the center of China’s geobody and the entryway to the far Northwest.  

Although Zhang Henshui never cited any slogans from the Head to the Northwest campaign in his travel essays, he was clearly aware of the moment of national crisis that had inspired similar travels. Just as Bing Xin told her readers that she had witnessed “the solemnity of the motherland” in her Northwest travels, Zhang urged readers to connect the dots of cosmopolitan coastal cities, ancient capitals in central and western China, and frontier military towns like Lanzhou in their tourism adventures.  

From publications with national followings such as *Eastern Miscellany* and *Liangyou* to lowbrow weekly magazines like *Saturday*, or from political publications issued by the Nationalist Party organs to professional photography magazines, texts about and images of the Yungang Grottoes, the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Suiyuan, scenery on Mount Huashan, and the iron bridge over the Yellow River in Lanzhou abounded. And many of them bore a similar title—“Head to the Northwest!”—indicating that the familiar saying was not only a political catch-phrase but also actual advice to travelers.  

Xiao Qian’s 1934 essay about his travels along the Ping-Sui Railway included an unexpected detail. Upon leaving Suiyuan for Baotou, Xiao learned from the local newspaper that the Beijing University professor Liu Bannong—the same Liu Bannong who had orchestrated the renegotiation with Hedin in 1926–27—was also in town conducting field research into regional dialects
in Inner Mongolia. Xiao went to Liu’s hotel to greet him, and Liu mentioned that he was heading to Bailingmiao.188 This brief encounter between teacher and student on their respective field trips demonstrated that travels in the Northwest had become so common for Beijing academics and university students that their paths could cross even deep in western Inner Mongolia. But Xiao’s inclusion of this detail in his travelogue was not random. Liu Bannong passed away suddenly in Beijing in July 1934, a month after the chance encounter. He died from a relapsing fever because he had not received timely treatment after being bitten by lice in Bailingmiao, a cruel reminder of the travel conditions in the Northwest.189 Well-known for his early literary accomplishments in Shanghai, his fierce advocacy for vernacular language during the New Culture movement, and his achievements in spearheading linguistics and phonetics in China, Liu Bannong was not particularly remembered or celebrated for his crucial role in China’s westward movement. Nevertheless, as this chapter has demonstrated, Liu could be viewed as a common thread in different stages of the Head to the Northwest movement, stitching together the early intellectual impulses undergirding the joint explorations and the later popular idea of saving the Northwest through travel. His personal tragedy aside, Liu Bannong was not an outlier. He was one of many Republican intellectuals and writers—like Xu Xusheng, Bing Xin, Zhang Henshui, and others across the ideological spectrum—who had participated in the knowledge production of the Northwest through travel.

Through the travel and travel writing of such figures, this chapter delineates China’s westward movement in the 1920s and 1930s—a movement in which eastern urbanites sought to engage more closely with the country’s vast northwestern frontiers. From an intellectual undertaking to modernize national studies via scientific travels to a popular campaign to regenerate the republic by encouraging average urbanites to travel to the Northwest, this broad westward movement helped transform the Qing western frontiers into a defining part of the national space of modern China. Prominent China scholars, both in China and the West, have acknowledged that the Republic of China had inherited its territorial definition from its Qing predecessor.190 Yet neither the warlord regimes nor the Nationalist government could maintain a multiethnic rule over these lands. This contradiction between claim and reality provides the core question underpinning this chapter. If the Republican state’s real political reach was often vaguely defined and subject to challenge, how could the popular consciousness of China’s national space—one largely shared by the Han majority—unwaveringly adhere to the image projected by the Qing imperial domain?
As demonstrated in this chapter, the narrative that the Chinese republic inherited its national territory from the Qing, or that the Manchu imperial domain was simply carried over to the Republican era, was carefully manufactured. Indeed, we can see that Republican-era Han Chinese travelers and tourists to the Northwest actively evoked notions of science and modernity, colonial civilizing missions, Chinese historical discourses of frontiers, and the industrial capitalist goal of constant expansion. Clearly, the national space of modern China was envisioned and produced not only by political leaders and state apparatchiks but also by university professors, railway bureaucrats, freelance writers, magazine publishers and readers, and adventurous tourists.