Introduction

Jenny Kwok Wah Lau

Western modernity has traveled to the East.[1] On the societal side, it has brought about colossal institutional changes, such as market economies, bureaucratic states, and modes of popular government. These transformations became especially noticeable on a global scale after the cold war. The rapid economic change in the East Asian countries has created a so-called new Asian generation – an affluent condition that is a source of both pride and anxiety for modern Asia. The pride of success in the restructuring of society, and in the resulting capacity to create material abundance compatible with that of the contemporary West, is accompanied by the anxiety of recognizing that such material advancement involves an unprecedented receptiveness toward Western ideas, manifested via financial and technological investments. This is particularly problematic in parts of Asia, such as China, that have struggled fiercely with Western colonization in the past and are trying to establish postcolonial status.[2]

The legacy of Western modernity is not restricted to the economic realm but inevitably has spilled over to Asia's cultural structures, symbols, and expressions. It is common knowledge that most of Asia's contemporary visual culture – television, films, magazines, fashions, and so forth – is, at least superficially speaking, either a direct imitation or a kind of "mutation" from Euro-America. As the renowned German film director Wim Wenders pointed out in his 1987 documentary *Tokyo-Ga:* "The Japanese continue to make televisions for the whole world to see America." This change in the arena of the symbolic is accompanied by a change in the concrete lifestyle of ordinary people. A seemingly minor but actually indicative example is the uniform nine-to-five work shift found everywhere in industrialized countries before the spread of computer technology. This apparently insignificant practice posed a challenge to China in the beginning of its post-Mao modernization. As a result China quickly canceled its national policy of afternoon siestas, just one indication of the transculture evolving in East Asia as it formulates responses to specifics of Westernization. A more general and crucial issue that

could be raised is how and where Asians spend their time and money after work during this process of change.

These examples, only the tip of the iceberg of the massive movements of technology, trade, and media persuasion, also demonstrate the power of modernity to standardize life practice. Based on this notion, universalists project a future convergence of all cultural activities into one global form, basically led by the Euro-American center.[3] Yet, such a belief tends to selectively focus on the "Westernized" elements of Asian life and to ignore the differences. Discourses thus created favor categories already popular in the West, such as self-identity, gender, nation, boundaries, genres, the postmodern, and so on. Usually ignored are categories such as human connectedness, cross-gender issues, transcendental existence, and so forth. A "new Asia," by this interpretation, is nothing more than an entity to be absorbed into the great tide of transnationalism built by global corporations and media productions.

Those who are more conscious of the complexity of human issues believe that although modernity may be Western in origin and global in reach, the transformation of a vast collection of people (the entire non-West) could hardly be uniform. A historical precedent in the West itself can demonstrate the point. Both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment benefited from the impact of Greek culture but were assimilated in different ways by northern and southern Europe. The Nordic, French, and English societies each responded differently to the impact of neoclassical studies and generated its own version of Renaissance and modernity. Similarly, contemporary modernization in East Asia, as a product of modern encounters with the West, has resulted in a variety of cultural manifestations. This points to the fact that a Weberian societal/institutional modernity epitomized by a market economy and democratic polity, when transplanted to the various cultures of East Asia, does not necessarily create an identical cultural modernity.

Asian societies entered modernity at different points in their histories. Some encountered the West during the height of their accomplishments; others encountered it at a time of relative weakness. Some exchanges took place through trade, others through intellectual interchange, politics, or even war. Thus, each society has had to negotiate its relationship with this new reality from the standpoint of its own sociohistorical context. In this sense, modernity was (and still is) full of divergent potential, and because of its ability to elicit responses was (and still is) an agent not only of homogenization but also of heterogenization.

In the arena of cinema and media, the contemporary power of technology in creating simulated cultures has no doubt valorized the impact of the West. However, the seemingly universal signs transmitted through media, such as images of love and luxury in the film *Titanic* or freedom and rebelliousness in rock and rap music, may work differently than in their places of origin. These symbols, potent as they may be, are always recast within the local context, which is constantly shaped by the "habitus" – the life patterns, the structures of response – of each community.[4] While *Titanic* may be a fantastic love story for many, rumor has it that the Chinese prime minister Jiang Zemin, after viewing the film, was moved by its message to "never overburden oneself with a wishful or oversized project," an interpretation quite different from that of most Amer-

icans. A more serious case in modern world affairs is the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest staged by the people of Hong Kong and Taiwan. In terms of information, both societies received similar news from CNN and other international news agencies. But in Hong Kong there was a massive demonstration by two million people (out of five million residents) against China's action, while in Taiwan the response was scanty or lukewarm, at best. Local conditions strongly shaped reactions toward the same "reality." This multiplicity of responses to shared images points to the diverse or even fragmented nature of cross-cultural, cross-boundaries communication.

If modernity is an attitude rather than an epoch, "a mode of relating to contemporary reality," as Foucault puts it, a major part of modernity in East Asian countries involves their different cultural/historical relationships to the presence of the contemporary West.[5] These relationships represent the many possibilities of the dialectics of the converging, homogenizing, transcultural impulses and the diverging, heterogenizing, multicultural effects that operate within modern societies. The new Asia that is currently in formation will consist of not one uniform modernity but multiple modernities that defy both the prescriptions of the globalists/universalists and the descriptions of the localists/indigenists. Consequently, it is important now to ask what these "multiple modernities" are and how they may continue to define Asian identities.

The goal of this book is to explore the cultural terrain of several major East Asian societies, namely mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, in regard to their response to Western modernization. It looks at modern/postmodern popular culture as both a generator and a product of different cultural forces. Through the examination of the very tools that organize and articulate modern lived experiences on a mass level – the media of film and other forms of popular culture – it delineates different artifacts and asks how they reflect and create the idea of different modernities.

Unlike the first three-quarters of the twentieth century when a single mass medium, such as film and, later, television, could dominate a society, in the last two decades Asia has been subjected to multiple media experiences. For example, cinema may be popular in one Asian society (South Korea) and less popular in another (Taiwan). The inquiry carried out here focuses on culturally reflexive media and does not hesitate to cross the boundary of the still very popular medium of cinema to broaden its scope of studies when necessary. In doing so, it avoids drawing broad cultural conclusions based on narrow studies of only one medium.

Furthermore, this anthology avoids the orientalist convention of seeing East Asia either as a single uniform block (except Japan) or as a set of discrete entities to be examined separately. East Asian societies largely share similar cultural and ideological roots, a recent history of colonization and decolonization (with the exception of Japan, to a certain extent), and an experience of Westernization. The area is now even more closely connected via technology, trade, and mass media. In this sense, East Asian societies do share important commonalities. At the same time, individual societies exhibit significant differences. Besides its linguistic and economic-political uniqueness, each society has its own history of modernization. For example, Westernization in Japan (since the Meiji period) pre-dated that of the rest of Asia.[6] China has a history of discontinuous or in-

consistent relations with Western modernization in the twentieth century. South Korean modernization was a forced process until the 1990s, governed by a military dictatorship and marked by violent protests. Hong Kong was a British colony with a policy of relative openness and a laissez-faire economy. Taiwan, which reemerged from the yoke of Japanese colonization after World War II, was brought under yet another military government, which was also instrumental in its modernization. Thus, East Asia is also a collection of separate societies whose intercultural connections do not eradicate their uniqueness. To put together an anthology of this kind is a way to allow this new paradigm to take hold, to allow each individual society to speak for itself so that the picture of uniqueness and multiplicity can emerge. To present each of their pictures side by side is to allow them to mirror, reflect, and dialogue with each other in terms of their interpretation and experience of modernity.

Because it takes a number of interdisciplinary scholars to build such a mosaic, this book had to be, almost by definition, an anthology. Many of the writers are leaders in their fields, and their articles reflect a cutting-edge quality in terms of both their subjects of investigation and their poignant conceptualizations. Most of these articles also share a critical-descriptive methodology that begins with a set of close readings and arrives at conclusions only when there is strong supporting evidence for them. This approach avoids imposing rigid or preconceived frameworks that tend to produce formulaic readings, as are found in some current writings on film or cultural interpretation. Rather, the writings emphasize reflexivity that is pragmatically and empirically verifiable. These richly documented observations are valuable both for understanding the cultural scene itself and for drawing conceptual conclusions. In addition to the traditional categories of class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality, many of the writers develop previously ignored social parameters, such as lifestyle, personal taste, age, and status. They thus extend beyond existing critical categories and even challenge established perspectives, such as the East/West, modernist/postmodernist, or globalist/regionalist dichotomies.

The study of East Asian media from a transnational critical perspective began to gain attention during the 1990s. Some of the major works include the two books *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* and *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema,* edited by Wimal Dissanayake, and part of *In Pursuit of Contemporary East Asian Culture,* edited by Xiaobing Tang and Steven Snyder. These studies address the issues of nationhood, gender, and identity in various national and transnational contexts. *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary,* edited by Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, offers stimulating discussion on the global/local interface of popular cultures as found in tourism, film, computers, and newspapers in different parts of the world, including Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. In addition, John Lent has supplied the field with useful information; his edited book *Asian Popular Culture* also includes brief critical surveys on East Asia. Other published works focus more on a single society, in the last few years especially on China. Sheldon Lu's *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* offers textual readings that consider Western and transnational impacts. Rey Chow's *Primitive Passions* consists of critiques of Chinese films from a

transnational feminist perspective. Both *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* by Xuodong Zhang and *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* by Xiaobing Tang include discussions of Chinese cinema and popular culture from a modernist perspective. Recently, a number of books on Hong Kong cinema have taken a transnational perspective in their discourses, such as *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*, edited by Esther C. M. Yau, and *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, edited by Poshek Fu and David Desser. David Bordwell's *Planet Hong Kong*, although Hollywood centered in its comparative references, is well aware of the global implication of its framework. While all of these quality works are conscious of globalism, many do not intend to question the notion of modernity itself. *Postmodernism and China*, edited by Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, provides an intriguing examination of the popular culture of China in an attempt to map and match the Chinese postmodern condition in relation to the West. (Both Dai Jinhua and Chuck Kleinhans discuss the strengths and limits of such an approach in this book.) Single-medium/single-society studies usually achieve a certain depth but cannot provide a broader view in the context of the connectedness or distinctiveness of each of these East Asian cultures. This book sees the necessity of a broader understanding of East Asia without losing sight of the specifics of its societies. It aims at providing a common ground for an inter/intracultural dialogue.

The book is divided into three parts. "States of Modernities" shows the role that various modernizing elements play in the cultural formation of modern China, Japan, and South Korea. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau's article on the Chinese sixth-generation filmmakers points to the inadequacy of the cold-war paradigm – the "free" world versus the "dictatorial/socialist" world, and "free" market versus state-controlled market. She argues for a contextualized global-local model and searches for detailed pictures of the cultural versus the political, and the local versus the international. Drawing upon Chinese contemporary art movements, Lau notes that many of the sixth-generation films replace socialist heroes with ordinary people, reflecting an interest in the "reality" of banal situations and a concern for "immediate presence."

Jeroen de Kloet's discussion of Chinese rock music continues and expands the investigation of China's response to "modern" or "Western" culture. De Kloet challenges music critics who took Chinese rock either as mimicry of the West or as a tool for subversion. Like Lau, he refutes the clichéd cold-war dichotomies of commercial versus political (dissident) readings of Chinese rock music. Instead, he identifies a fragmentation after the mid-nineties when the medium can best be understood as a site of interaction between commerce, personal taste, and lifestyle. These two essays form a useful background for the later essay by Dai Jinhua, a poignant interrogation of the so-called Chinese postmodernist culture. She probes the arena of contemporary theater, poetry, postmodernist performance art, fiction, documentary films, popular sixth-generation films, and various discourses regarding these cultural practices in China, providing an overview of the cultural situation of Beijing. The three essays together present a rich and heterogeneous picture of the internal dynamics that shape China's cultural mutation and its response to the West.

Sharing a similar interest in the "present" and in the concrete reality of ordinary living, certain sectors of the media in Hong Kong surprisingly resemble their mainland Chinese counterparts, even though their expressions are vastly different. In "The Fragmented Commonplace," Hector Rodriguez emphasizes the inadequacy of the single-medium approach for understanding Hong Kong and proposes an analysis of various media that taken together provide a better picture of the multimedia, multicultural milieu of this cosmopolitan city. His study focuses on the formal construction and subject matter of avant-garde theater, experimental video, short novels, and short films. Given that the audience of mainstream media such as television and films is in rapid decline, this article proposes a new view of the undercurrents of a highly heterogeneous culture. The interest in ordinary living stands in sharp contrast to the earlier colonial (official) discourse, which tends to exoticize Hong Kong. From this perspective, the similarities between Hong Kong and mainland China become less surprising, for the latter's avant-garde movements also contrast with official (socialist) discourse that idealizes certain aspects of China. Yet while the "present" of both Hong Kong and China involves a heightened sense of the local culture, in the former this interest results from that culture's "disappearance" (due to its reannexation to China in 1997), while in the latter it comes from an influx of differences from the outside world.

Although the Japanese film industry resembled that of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China in that it suffered an almost irreversible collapse and subsequent fragmentation in the 1990s, its sporadic comebacks were quite different. The modernist realism of the Beijing and Hong Kong media projects a picture unlike the hypermodernist futuristic imagery of Japanese films. Yomota Inuhiko's analysis of a number of highly popular 1990s Japanese films presents a trans-/bi-gender, multiethnic, postnational, post-high-tech society that destroys Japan's illusion of itself as a "pure nation." His discussion reveals a cinema filled with surreal and sometimes nightmarish stories of the city of "Tokyo." These futuristic or even prophetic cityscapes of "Tokyo," which resemble none of the contemporary world cities such as Tokyo itself, Hong Kong, Amsterdam, or London, are at the same time representing all of them. This cinema reflects not the transnational picture found on the Chinese scene, but a sense of postnationalism, a product of globalization that erases the distinctive features of every culture. Unlike those who search for an alternative reality grounded in the "present," the futuristic Japanese films Yomota discusses are critical of the technological/transnational presence. While Hong Kong media assimilate world culture in terms of technique, language, and the modernist notion of self-identity, Japanese films postulate a world haunted by multiethnic conflicts and high-tech mishaps.

Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto's article on Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, a popular and controversial Japanese writer, reveals that an East-West dichotomized discourse is an orientalist construct that has skewed understanding of Japan's relationship to the rest of the world. The erroneous notion of dichotomy confuses ethnic or cultural variations with social variations such as age, education, experiences with the outside world, personal temperament, and so forth. What is labeled "Western" or "Japanese" could simply be a reflection of personal differences. Yoshimoto proposes that instead of the "Japanese" elements or their lack in Jun'ichiro's work, critical readings would do better to focus on a

combination of the self-reflective analysis of the writer himself and on general group differences not necessarily racial or national in origin. His essay demonstrates what is tacitly implied in others in this collection: The formation of contemporary East Asian culture is not a one-way response to the "West."

Yomota's description of a Japanese cinema concerned with the futuristic aftermath of modernism and postmodernism through images of destruction, gender transgression, and postnational racial segregation offers a gray picture of high postmodernity, an apocalyptic sense of history and critique of technology not commonly found in the media of Hong Kong or China. Yet, at the same time, as exemplified in Jun'ichiro's popular novels, there is the search for the "real as experienced," regardless of what was previously essentialized as "Japanese." In this sense, some Japanese media share a concern with the Chinese who are seeking "reality" from the concrete immediacy of presentness, despite the state's mythology.

In his discussion of the history of modernization in South Korea, Han Ju Kwak shows how such factors as the idealism of the student movements of the eighties, the nostalgia for the disappeared Korea, and a strong sense of entrapment by modernity have contributed to an evolving Korean cinema. Kwak analyzes four filmic responses: movement, tradition, present-tradition, and decontructionist films. Similar to Japan's, Korea's cinema of the eighties and nineties expresses dissatisfaction with modernization and industrialization. Scenes of environmental decline in mining towns, landscapes of cheap karaoke bars and motels, and the sound of sirens in Seoul are reminiscent of desolate images of Tokyo in the aftermath of (fictional) nuclear war.

Along similar lines, Frances Gateward focuses on the reaction of the young toward the results of the modernization imposed on the Korean people by their dictatorial leaders. Tracking the history of Korean cinema and its traditional prohibition of dealing directly with political issues, a prohibition similarly imposed on the cinema of Hong Kong, Gateward turns to melodramas to explore the gender and class problems faced by Korean youth in the nineties. Both Kwak and Gateward maintain that the new Korean cinema of the eighties and nineties represents, through various thematic strategies, a political critique of modernization. Among these strategies: the retold history of the democratization protest carried out by a decade-long student movement; the recovery of the "lost" Korea signified by traditional social ceremonies, folk arts, and folksongs; and the despair of postmodern city life. Thus, both Korean and Hong Kong media responded to the "loss" of the traditional or authentic past through nostalgic remembrance. But the Koreans are much more critical of the modernization and industrialization process, while Hong Kong retains its ultrametropolitan fragmentation. The Korean images of melodramatic realism also contrast with the futuristic, science fiction-like destruction of postnational Tokyo. While Korean cinema, especially the movement films as classified by Kwak, is engaged in political issues, the Chinese sixth-generation films actively seek alternative stories and disengage themselves from politicized discourse.

To broadly summarize, East Asia's response to technology and transnationality may differ from one society to another, yet all share an almost Baudelairean aesthetic of daily life.

The second section of the collection, "Postmodernism and Its Discontents," comprises essays that directly critique three of the most popular views on the relation of modern Asian culture with the West. David Desser, in "Consuming Asia," argues that the established assumption about cultural flow – that "the East always learns from the West" – is erroneous. In fact, Hollywood for decades has been borrowing significantly from both Japan and Hong Kong. The Japanese influence was not limited to the art film master best known in the West, Akira Kurosawa, but affected American popular media as early as 1954 with the Japanese creation of Gojira (Godzilla), which generated waves of science fiction monster films in the United States. An ongoing impact was evident in Japanese-made toys, animation films, and electronic games, and in karaoke bars. Similarly, Hong Kong martial-arts films have attracted attention since the 1970s. The action hybrids Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers exemplify the way Hong Kong expertise has molded the U.S. imagination. Through detailed documentation Desser establishes his thesis and repudiates the one-way myth of colonial discourse.

Chuck Kleinhans, in "Terms of Transition," begins with observations on popular Hong Kong-Hollywood action-packed movies and questions the Jamesonian correlation frequently cited by cultural analysts between these Asian cultural products and postmodernity. He objects that such analyses mainly track and identify the differences between the so-called premodern, modern, and postmodern phases and ignore the overlap and constant fluctuation among them. For instance, aesthetically speaking, the realist narrative of these action movies falls well within the tradition of the romantic rather than the modern. Thus, using a postmodernism framework alone neglects important contradictions generated by other traditions and practices that coexist within the same culture, such as the old capitalist economy, whereby Asia is usually the exploited.

Dai Jinhua's essay continues the argument against the simple use of the postmodernist framework to interpret the culture of modern China. She points to the political use of the "postmodern" itself, which ignores contradictions that accumulated and erupted in China at the end of the eighties, a time that some may prefer to forget. Dai elaborates extensively on the cultural scene in the 1990s, covering modernist performance arts, popular theater, personal/documentary films, popular literature, commercial films, and so forth. To interpret this new phenomenon she proposes an alternative framework that intertwines history, state politics, creative ideas, commerce, and world politics. These discussions in the second part of the book substantiate both the content and the methods proposed in the first part and further describe the multiplicity and the complexity of the pictures of modernity revealed in critical close readings.

The two essays in the third section of the book, "Women in Modern Asia," challenge myths concerning contemporary Asian women. Augusta Palmer, Jenny Lau, and Lin Szu-Ping all suggest that one of the biggest contradictions of modernity lies in its treatment of women, an issue that remains largely unresolved despite its centrality for human progress. Palmer and Lau analyze the contradiction between the popular belief that women in Hong Kong enjoy unusually high status and its insubstantial images in Hong Kong cinema. Under the triple binds of capitalism, patriarchy, and paternalism, cine-

matic characters of women, especially in the "art" films directed by the first and second new-wave directors, are mostly unidirectional, elusive, and sometimes even misogynistic. This, surprisingly, contrasts with the more traditional or popular action films, which may seem less sophisticated but portray women in more progressive terms.

Lin Szu-Ping's almost anthropological analysis of a Taiwan television series reveals how the modernist sensitivities of its female audience can significantly reframe a traditional local soap opera. This unusual media-related story involves a community that, in reflecting on its own culture, creatively formulates an alternative that fits its own experience of modernity. The incident repudiates the picture of passivity on the part of the "modernized," who in reality rise to meet and negotiate both tradition and modernity on their own terms. While both essays focus on the gender inequality that remains intact in modern Asia, each describes a unique response to it.

One recent commentator has pointed out that modernity is signified by "a mood of distance, a habit of questioning and an intimation of what Baudelaire calls the 'marvelous' in the midst of the ruins of our tradition."[7] The self-reflexive critical engagement to one's "hybrid" culture is 'detectable in post-Tiananmen China, postnational Japan, and the post-martial law, new democratic culture of South Korea and Taiwan. This book investigates and presents a scenario of multiple modernities in which each society mobilizes its own cultural resources, less for "coping" with Westernization, as the West may view it, than for a double negotiation between social and cultural modernity.

These studies taken together form a mosaic of Asian modernities. However, it would be pretentious to think that one book can map out the entire East Asian picture. Omissions are inevitable due to space limitations. For example, the media culture of Taiwan and women's issues warrant more detailed attention. Nevertheless, this anthology draws out some of the complexities of the configuration as reflected in the many facets of Asian popular cultures. Through a deeper understanding of Asia's many responses to the challenge of different ideas and technologies, one may begin to appreciate the ingenuity of communities who continue to create their own versions of civilization.

Notes

1. I specify "Western modernity" versus simply "modernity" in recognition of recent debates in sociology that suggest the West should not monopolize the term "modernity." Even within the Western tradition, definitions of modernity differ. I use the word in its broad sense to describe the general mode of rational thinking and living since the Enlightenment in Western Europe. This definition does not negate the existence of other forms of modernity generated by non-European cultures.

2. Although China was never fully colonized by any European country, its history in the past two hundred years was still one of massive economic, military, and territorial concessions.

3. See the vigorous discussion in Featherstone, Lash, and Robertson, *Global Modernities.*

4. For a gloss on the term "habitus," see Bourdieu, *In Other Words.*

5. See Michel Foucault, "Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth," in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. I, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 303-320.

6. Notice that modernization is not the same as Westernization, although Westernization has functioned as a catalyst for some quantum changes in Asia. This, in a sense, is similar to what happened in Europe, where "modernization" would not be viewed as "Grecianization."

7. Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities,* 23.

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CHAPTER 1

Globalization and Youthful Subculture: The Chinese Sixth-Generation Films at the Dawn of the New Century

Jenny Kwok Wah Lau

A new generation of filmmakers from China has taken the world by surprise. Their work differs radically from that of their immediate predecessors, the world-renowned fifth-generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige.[1] Contrary to the fifth-generation directors, who employed an elegant craft to narrate subversive folklore and enjoyed the last moment of the state-supported studio system, these sixth-generation directors are unfortunate (or fortunate?) enough to be caught in a transitional period when significant changes are happening both in the cultural world and in the filmmaking industry. The sixth-generation filmmakers are the first group to grow up when China's open-door policy was full-fledged. In addition, while they were students at the Film Academy, the film industry of China was already changing from a socialist industry to a semi-market-driven business. This colossal structural transformation resulted in directors losing their stable production environment and working within a system that is still forming, a twilight zone of film production where no channels are proper or improper, clearly legal or illegal. The young sixth-generation directors are challenged to carve out unique ways of production simply to ensure their survival. Sometimes even the most elemental practice, such as location shooting in the city of Beijing, which involves city rules that no one really is clear about, can raise many bureaucratic eyebrows. At this confused stage the Chinese system has no clear way of funding or distributing and exhibiting these films; money from outside China finances many.

To complicate this political problem, the filmmakers of this new generation, with no nostalgia for the recent Chinese past, are modernist or even postmodernist in their view. Their films are literally products of the streets, steeped in realism and offering a raw and unprecedented look at attitudes and lifestyles in post-Tiananmen China. Such content does not encourage officials (the cultural police) to favor their works either. Some of their films are not shown in China. Without a large local audience the only hope of public recognition is through winning international prizes, and many have done so.

China's move toward a market economy has meant a substantial cutback of government support for the film industry, and the sixth-generation directors have had to garner financial and technical resources from outside the country. But the larger cultural-industrial question is: What does it mean to have a great number of the most energetic and creative filmmakers producing films that will not be shown to the Chinese?

This essay explores the cultural landscape that has shaped the life, art, and production practices of this group of filmmakers to discover the reasons behind and the effects of the incongruence between China's cultural system and its political system.[2]

Critics who tend to retain the cold-war paradigm champion the sixth-generation films as "dissident" by focusing on China's "oppressive" practice toward these cultural workers. While some of the films may have controversial content, categorizing them as dissident privileges a narrow political reading and neglects the multifaceted elements at work in them. Such pigeonholing reduces a complex real-life situation to a simplistic political narrative of the socialist world versus the "free" world.[3] Consequently, I prefer not to classify these works under the highly politicized category "dissident film" and take a more wholistic approach, attending to the details of their context and inquiring into other sources that contribute to the disharmony between the filmmakers and their cultural supervisors.

These films are best seen as a reflection of the cultural metamorphoses that China is experiencing at this juncture of centuries; an "uneven globalization" that has created sets of unsynchronized movements between its local cultural world, the economic world, and the political world, is among the most important factors that defines the dilemma of the sixth-generation filmmakers. Considering other major cultural movements in China, such as the arts and literature, helps demonstrate how the transnational factor shapes the formation of China's contemporary culture, and how modern lifestyles are reflected in the films and the filmmaking of this young generation.

Zhang Yuan and Legal Films in China

Among the sixth-generation filmmakers Zhang Yuan could be considered the first and leading director. His filmmaking career epitomizes the experience of the group, and an exploration of his filmmaking sheds light on the contemporary film world in the post-socialist economy and culture of China. Since Zhang graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1989, he has made about one film per year. The West has recognized him

partly because his films consistently garner awards at international film festivals.[4] In particular, his film *East Palace, West Palace* caused an international dispute between the Cannes Film Festival and China. From the Chinese officials' point of view, the production procedure of this film was considered illegitimate (as was that of most of his films and many other sixth-generation films), and therefore neither his film nor he could participate at Cannes; the Chinese officials confiscated his passport. However, since the content of the film, which portrays gay life in China, was intolerably out of line with the Chinese official stand, one cannot but suspect that the real reason for China's rejection of the film was its content rather than its production process. The Cannes Film Festival committee insisted that it was a Chinese film and on the night of its screening staged a protest.

The issue of legality in filmmaking in China has been fluid, especially at the beginning of the 1990s. In the socialist past, the central government not only initiated and controlled film production but also owned the production, distribution, and exhibition networks. The Culture Ministry set annual production goals for the number and themes of films and their budgets. Creative personnel, mostly each studio's directors and writers, would plan films that adhered to these goals. A final script went first to the head of the studio, then to the China Film Bureau, which operated under the Culture Ministry and supervised all operations related to the filmmaking industry. Once it approved a script, the bureau would grant a permit for production; with the permit came the funds assigned to the film. The (government-owned) studio directly supervised and lent technical support to the production. The completed film then went to the bureau's Censorship Department for approval, a prerequisite for permission to show the film publicly. The film's next destination was the Distribution Department, another branch of the Film Bureau. A flat rate (about 1,000 rmb per copy before the Cultural Revolution, 30,000 rmb per copy during the early nineties) would be paid to the studio. Once permission for exhibition was granted, the entire distribution and profit-making end of the business was of little concern to the director, since his or her rewards were not related to the box office. Sometime before the film even went into distribution, the major creative personnel such as the director, scriptwriters, and actors received a "prize," not a bonus, whose amount depended on their rank. Whether or not the filmmaker would make another film and receive funding for his or her next film, depended not so much on the film's commercial success as on the production goals set by the central government, the director's political relationship with the studio head, the China Film Bureau officials, and the political climate.

In 1982 a new system joined the existing system, similar except for the method of funding some films. Each year the central government's Culture Ministry still set modest goals for themes and production quotas. However, the government would fund only some of these envisioned films and encouraged studios to raise money from outside investors. The permit-seeking process for production and distribution remained similar, although the shooting permit now went not to the individual filmmaker but to a government studio under which the film could be produced. The filmmaker could either

seek full technical support from the studio through which the permit was granted or shoot the film with outside equipment and personnel, a freedom made possible by high-tech facilities newly available on the open market.

It is clear then that since the early eighties, China has been gradually abandoning the socialist system of production. Capitalistic economic practices were introduced in the form of encouraging private investment and allowing production activities outside of the government studios, but the China Film Bureau remained the sole distributor of all the films produced in China until 1989, when distribution was opened up to private companies. The significance of the new system of filmmaking lay in the greater production freedom it allowed.

What remains intact from the old system is state control over the content of films shown to the public. Even when money is available, the filmmaker still has to secure a permit from the China Film and Television Bureau (the former Film Bureau) through one of the government-owned film studios, whose producer has to submit the script for approval. With prior censorship by the China Film and Television Bureau, the film may be shown both inside and outside of China. Without it, a film may still be produced, but its public screening is banned.

Such were the complex conditions under which Zhang Yuan worked after he graduated from the Beijing Film Academy. When he was planning his first film, *MaMa* (Mother, 1990), a story about disabled people in China, his major financial support came from the China Association of the Handicapped. This film was made with the permission of the bureau and then lost its distributor, who presumed that it would not appeal to a general audience. Its sole screening occurred at the Beijing Film Academy until it was sent outside China, where it immediately drew attention from international critics. The film won the Jury Award and a Special Mention at France's Festival des Trois Continents in Nantes. Later, when the film was shown on China's television, it was well received.

While *MaMa* was a "legal" film, Zhang's next film, *Beijing Bastards* (1992) was not. *Beijing Bastards,* written by Tang Danian, starred China's most popular rock singer, Cui Jian, who was allowed to perform but banned from broadcasting in China. A collage of the lives of a number of Beijing underground artists, the film was largely funded by Zhang and Cui himself. Knowing that this theme would not be easily accepted by the bureau, Zhang decided not to pursue a production permit but shot the film on location throughout Beijing with no studio involvement. Postproduction was done in France, with help from the French Cultural Council. Yet the film was considered illegal by China and was never shown there.[5] Distributed in France and other Western countries, it won prizes at various festivals. Its international distribution offended China, which prohibited Zhang from shooting films nationwide. But it is hard to suppress the artistic impulse.

After *Beijing Bastards,* Zhang shot *The Square* (1994), a feature documentary about Tiananmen Square, which won a Jury Award at the Hawaii Film Festival. Production money came from Hong Kong and France. *Sons,* in 1995, won the Tiger Award at Rot-

terdam. Then came the clash with Chinese officialdom over the showing of *East Palace, West Palace* (1996) at Cannes.

Zhang Yuan is one of a group of some thirty young filmmakers suppressed by the authorities that includes scriptwriters, photographers, sound engineers, actors, and so forth. Most graduated from the Beijing Film Academy and have been actively pursuing every possible avenue to make films that, based on my conversations with them, express their views, even when they contradict the official line.

Filmmakers often disagree with their governments, and in China this disagreement is not unique even to the sixth-generation filmmakers. Films with content unacceptable to the government began with the fifth-generation directors, among them *Judou* by Zhang Yimou, *Blue Kite* by Tian Zhangzhang, and *Farewell My Concubine* by Chen Kaige. Nor was foreign investment in production new with the sixth-generation filmmakers. A number of fifth-generation directors, especially Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, attracted money from outside China after their international success, most notably from Japan, Taiwan, and France. However, with the exception of *Blue Kite,* all of the fifth-generation films were "legally" made with Film Bureau permits through an official film studio; they were nevertheless banned in China for awhile because of their content. Yet many of the sixth-generation film directors cannot even secure a permit to start "proper" production. What is it about these films that prevents the Chinese government from issuing them permits?

What Sets the Sixth-Generation Films Apart

While both the fifth- and sixth-generation filmmakers question a worldview overdetermined by political discourses and attempt to reinvestigate the reality of life, striking differences separate them.

No Epics

The classical form of larger-than-life heroes that characterized many fifth-generation films made before the mid-nineties (perhaps with the exception of Huang Jianxin) – tragic or otherwise (albeit much reduced in scale compared to the heroes of the Cultural Revolution formulaic films) – disappeared in the sixth-generation films.[6] Gone are not only the traditional heroes, but also the idea of heroism itself, the traditional form of storytelling, and the fifth-generation international trademark epic that conveys an almost prophetic insight through the use of spectacle. In my conversation with some sixth-generation filmmakers, it became clear that they did not appreciate this kind of formalism but had turned their interest to the truly ordinary. Visually, they strive for utter realism. Narratively, they make no attempt to create extraordinary characters. (Fifth-generation films, even in stories of ordinary folk, such as farmers, regular citizens, or villagers, made them unusual or heroic characters.) But by rejecting the "grand themes"

Beijing Bastards, directed by Zhang Yuan, 1992.

approach, the sixth generation rejects a major premise of traditional socialist art; they are sometimes labeled nihilists.[7]

An example of these nonepic films is *Beijing Bastards*, freely structured around the daily life of a few young men. With the exception of the rock singer Cui himself, who can be considered the main character in a loose narrative centered around his music career and his problems with his girlfriends, none of the other men participate in any dramatic plot. The film depicts some minor encounters between them as they spend leisurely time together drinking, playing chess, chatting, skirmishing over money, and so forth. There is no traditional protagonist or antagonist, neither the high drama of a hero trope nor the journey trope of an ordinary man. As one of the young men, Tang, mutters: "I just want to live in an ordinary way. I do not want to be in the mainstream [of trying to be idealistic or extraordinary]." This scene, shot in a documentary interview style, conveys a preference for the naked reality of living, however unstructured, over the mythologized grand narrative of a heroic/villainous life.

Cinematically, the film is full of apparently unrelated documentary footage of the streets of Beijing: crowds surging, bicycles rolling by, children running around. But it is exactly because of these "unrelated" shots and scenes that the film requires a reading distinct from that of the fiction film typical of China's traditional socialist cinema. The film as a whole tells no story but creates an impression of "simply living." In some parts, it resembles a diary, a collage of not necessarily related events in the lives of its characters. In other parts, the film resembles music video, where much of the meaning must be deduced from the lyrics.

Films such as *The Postman* (a postman who secretly reads die letters that he delivers), *The Beads* (the lives of asylum patients), and *The Days* (the lives of some artists) share a common theme: people living in ways that are a combination of what is imposed on them, what they desire, and what they can afford. No individual necessarily has any preconceived, unified, or consistent high ideal or goal (freedom/propriety, capitalism/socialism, traditional/anti-traditional). For example, in *The Postman,* while the main character's mundane job of sorting and delivering mail allows him to sneak into other peoples' lives, nothing dramatic happens. His indecorous practice is interrupted only by a few unexciting sexual encounters, and the sound track echoes with the mechanical thumps of a postal clerk stamping an endless pile of letters, an apt accompaniment for the postman's monotonous life.

As in *The Postman,* so in *Beijing Bastards,* which neither champions the rock singer's sexual life as free love (positive or Westernized?) nor criticizes it as irresponsible (negative) – few of these films pass judgment on their characters. Again, not only is the didactic model of the socialist hero versus the selfish villain absent, but also the score's lyrics (a major part of the film) repeatedly reject the heroism of the revolution. In place of the sacred socialist mission and the grand ideal of good overcoming evil is a return to the reality of one's experience, what one can truly know. The film ends with the lyrics from Cui's song: "Year upon year the wind blows, changing in form but never going away. How much pain to how many people, revolution after revolution. . . . Suddenly there is a mass movement in front of my eyes. Changing my life like a revolution. A girl gives her love to me. And it's like wind and rain in my face." This is the apparent point of the film.

Stream of Life and Disengagement

Some scholars label this new form of film "stream of life" cinema, a term attributed to the new trend in art and literature that began in the mid-eighties in China. As described by Maria Galikowski, author of *Art and Politics in China,* "stream of life" art offered "intimate and personal portrayals of 'low-key' non-political subjects" and was a reaction against the overt politicization of the traditional socialist art/media.[8] Even though the fifth-generation films are untraditional and critical, their themes – heroic patriotism (*One and Eight*), transcendental faith or loss of faith in communism (*Yellow Earth*), transgression of the thousands of years of Confucian social rules (*Judou*), and so on – remain associated with the grand theme of reflecting on cultural roots or socialist tradition. The sixth-generation films, on the other hand, have developed a variety of alternative narratives.

A subplot in *Beijing Bastards* raises the issue of creative freedom. In the beginning of the film a landlord is asking a rock band in the middle of a practice session to move out. Their apparent financial problem is later aggravated by city officials' unwillingness to provide a performance site for their concert. The scaffolding that the musicians themselves put up for the show is torn down by police during a rehearsal. But the plot, full of conflict potential, does not develop in the direction of epic drama. Nor is there a

moralistic delving into whether the police or the artists are right or wrong. The camera continues to capture the ordinariness of life; the artists continue to sing whenever and wherever they can, sometimes on a stage, sometimes along the streets. This theme of creative freedom is new in Chinese cinema. *The Postman* is another film that addresses unusual themes – privacy, a double life led in a supposedly moral society, and the boredom of ordinary living – in a nondramatic and intimate way.

The sixth-generation films, by leaving the socialist discourse behind, also affirm their belief in its irrelevance for the daily life of contemporary China. Unlike the fifth-generation films made before the early nineties, which criticized the mythologies created by the central political discourse, the sixth-generation films are outright oblivious to these mythologies. If the Film Bureau appears open-minded in allowing the critical fifth-generation films to be shown, it faces a different challenge with the sixth-generation filmmakers – not criticism but disengagement from the official political discourse. It is this disengagement, accompanied by a "disorganized" (or fragmented) variation of narratives, that has befuddled the officials.

Free Market or Globalization

The Chinese film theorist and critic Wu Kat was partly correct in pointing out that the sixth-generation films are more "personal" because "a free market economy has enabled the filmmakers to use their personal experience to interpret reality rather than following a party interpretation."[9] But by collapsing the controversial issues of the sixth-generation films into a matter of "personal" versus "party" expression, Wu does not go far enough. The sixth-generation films are personal in that they usually represent the filmmakers' own vision and do not pretend to convey grand universal truths, as some of the traditional socialist films did. But these films also stand out in their wide variety of subject matter, perspectives, and style. Most significantly, they represent an important cultural product resulting from the most central social change in China in the past twenty years, the process of globalization. The sixth-generation films not only reflect China's modernization but also participate actively in its production. Unfortunately, the slower pace of change in the state's political world has created tremendous tension with its new cultural world. Perhaps by sorting out the social conditions that produced filmmakers with a significantly new interpretation of reality, one can begin to understand the crux of the dispute between the artists and the state.

Social Environment

Most of the sixth-generation filmmakers graduated from the Beijing Film Academy around 1989, young people born at the end of the Great Cultural Revolution who never experienced the direct impact of its idealism and heroism. By the time they hit their teenage years, China in 1979 had already opened its doors to the "free" world. Their adolescence and early adulthood were filled first with popular songs and TV (and later

movies) from Hong Kong, and later with the Western media that brought in Hollywood movies, CNN News, BBC News, and other North American and European cultural expressions. As a result of transnational communications the young filmmakers shared significant global experiences and memories with the rest of the world, such as the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the economic boom and later downturn of East Asia. As the authors of *Global Modernities* predicted, the globalization of the media has created a heightened sense not only of the "outside world" but also of "the world as one community." Obviously, this has had tremendous impact on how these young people interpret their immediate surroundings. For example, *Beijing Bastards,* a film filled with songs that question traditional interpretations of history, also affirms the relation between Chinese and Western culture. *The Days* is framed within the larger context of interlocational economics, namely art sales between Hong Kong and mainland China.

During their university years, most of the sixth-generation filmmakers spent their time in the by then metropolitan capital, Beijing, and visited nightclubs and bars frequented by Westerners. The Film Academy began to screen many foreign films. For example, between 1985 and 1989, when these filmmakers were trained, the Film Academy staged a Japanese Film Festival of more than forty films, a Latin American Film Festival, an East European Film Festival, and so forth.[10] These events not only introduced students to foreign films but helped them establish personal friendships with foreign artists, administrators, film scholars, and critics who followed or represented these festivals in China. One result of such intercultural interaction is, as described by Jan Pieterse, an "intensification of world wide social relationships (which will influence even the most local or even personal matters)."[11] Rock star Cui Jian, who broke away from traditional orchestral music, or Zhang Yuan, who would not have been able to finish the postproduction of his film *Beijing Bastards* without the help of the French Cultural Ministry, are evidence of the concrete impact of this global momentum in China. The translocational (or transnational) factor is important in the sixth-generation films, for many were made or screened with the help of international connections.

The central story of *Beijing Bastards* epitomizes the transnational condition of the city. Obviously, rock music itself is a quintessential symbol of the West. Other references – the ubiquitous international television news in the house, the mention of business contracts with pop-song producers in Taiwan, and so forth – point to the connections between life in Beijing and the rest of the world. This sensitivity to and integration with the world community did not begin with the sixth-generation filmmakers but with their predecessor artists and writers. During the eighties, when these filmmakers were growing up, a number of significant cultural movements resulted from the extensive exchanges between China and the outside world, mostly the West – large-scale museum or gallery exhibitions of foreign arts and scholarly visits that introduced foreign philosophies, critical thinking, literature, and so on – that flooded China with untraditional ideas.[12] At the same time, within China's own art and literary world, daring political commentary began to appear as early as 1979. The sensation created by the first unofficial artists' group, Stars, which held its first (scar art) exhibition in Beijing in 1979, is

an indication of the Chinese public's interest and their anticipation (under the promise of Deng Xiaoping) of a new cultural era. The political commentaries on the scar art of 1979 quickly spawned a spectrum of interests, including an interest in ordinary life and the life of minorities, as well as powerful avant-garde movements in the eighties. The first was the '85 Movement, also known as the New Wave, which reflected a patriotic desire to evaluate the Chinese traditional cultural ethos and the reality of the immediate, ordinary environment as opposed to that described by the government. In 1989, the China/Avant-garde Exhibition, held in the China Art Gallery in Beijing, continued to question Chinese tradition while creating new concepts and new arts. Both art movements were heavily influenced by Western techniques, ideas, and philosophies.[13]

The spirit of experimentation and radical thinking in the arts continued despite official interference, and by the early 1990s the new avant-garde movement included experimental theater, behavioral (or performance) art, and installation art, creating unprecedented variety on the Chinese art scene. Historians of Chinese art, such as Chris Driessen and Heidi van Mierlo, consider the eighties to be the period when Chinese art made a decisive break with centuries-long tradition; by the early nineties, contemporary Chinese art was born.

Yet the avant-garde art of the nineties departed from that of the eighties: The collective memory of history, especially of the Cultural Revolution, and the examination of national cultural tradition disappeared. Instead, art was characterized by individualism and irreverence for classical heroism.[14]

China's reconnection with the rest of the world and its promise for more intellectual and economic freedom in the early eighties created a utopian mood in the post-Cultural Revolution era. Scar literature or wounded literature began simultaneously with scar art, a reassertion of humanistic thinking that recanted and condemned the heresy of the Cultural Revolution. This movement quickly metamorphosed into the much acclaimed reflective literature and later the root-searching literature of the mid- and late eighties. Again, as in the art world, the literature of this time differed from traditional socialist literature in both techniques and themes, searching for cultural origins and tradition and focusing on reality as experienced by ordinary people. Nevertheless, as the economic plan suffered setbacks time and again, and as intellectual freedom was cut back throughout the decade, the idealism of the artists and writers began to wane. Even before the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, it was obvious that awareness of the "progress" of the outside world, both materially and "culturally," and the fading hope of similar progress in China had brought a widespread disillusionment. The nineties turned out to be an era of obliviousness toward both history and culture.

Although the sixth-generation filmmakers, at that early point of their careers, may not have been aware of the first experimentation, the continuous influx of arts and ideas from the outside and the vehement response of the Chinese artists and writers toward new thinking fueled the entire creative world. The indigenous movements in the arts and literature had a profound effect on the younger filmmakers, partly because of their personal relationships with some of the contemporary artists, and partly because of the tra-