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**Lin/Children of Marx and Coca-Cola**

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# Introduction

## Reading Chinese Avant-garde Art and Independent Cinema in Context

This book is a study of Chinese art and cinema in the context of postsocialist China and capitalist globalization. In this book, I draw on my experiences in Beijing and New York, the two “global cities,”<sup>1</sup> where a variety of art exhibitions, film festivals, academic conferences, and museum programs provide access to an emergent “transnational” Chinese visual culture essential to my study.<sup>2</sup> For this inquiry, I have selected Chinese artists and filmmakers from the mainland and overseas who represent avant-garde art and independent cinema in both national and global contexts.<sup>3</sup> The body of artworks and films examined in this book spans roughly from 1998 to 2008, a decade of China’s rapid integration into the world, as marked by the country’s admission to the World Trade Organization and Beijing’s sponsorship of the 2008 Olympics.<sup>4</sup> Today, China’s sustained economic growth seems a blessing to many but a threat to a few. At home, the continuous economic boom brings prosperity to a large segment of the population, yet it polarizes a society shaped for decades by Mao’s egalitarian socialism. On the one hand, China embraces capitalist globalization that boosts its foreign trade, domestic market, and living standard. On the other hand, China’s efforts to build a free market economy force countless state-owned enterprises into bankruptcy, resulting in mass unemployment and grave social problems unprecedented in the nation’s socialist history. Such is the paradox of China’s integration into globalization, a paradox that avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers in this study attempt to portray.

## Defining Chinese Avant-garde Art and Independent Cinema: A Critical Reflection

The works of artists and filmmakers included in this book are called “avant-garde art” (*qianwei yishu*) and “independent cinema” (*duli dianying*). In various contexts, critics use the two terms interchangeably with “experimental art,” “Sixth Generation cinema,” or “Urban Generation cinema.” In what follows, I will define these

critical terms by drawing on the writings of leading scholars in the fields, and I will offer my views on what I see as a dual identity avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers are compelled to maintain under the circumstances of a global and a national cultural industry.

Gao Minglu has explicated the use of “avant-garde” in the context of Chinese modernity. As he points out, some critics and curators have tended to use “experimental art” rather than “avant-garde” to redefine Chinese contemporary art. In his view, however, the term “experimental art” cannot describe Chinese contemporary art from the 1980s and 1990s, such as “Political Pop” and “Cynical realism.” For Gao, the word “experimental” sounds too passive and lacks direction, so he asserts, “To be avant-garde is to have choices, to have a specific critical direction. This critique integrates two inseparable tendencies: social critique and self-critique. Self-critique refers to the avant-garde’s disillusionment at its own conservatism and corruption, at the lifelessness of artistic language and methodology. Thus ‘avant-garde’ has a built-in sense of critique and protest.”<sup>5</sup> Gao concludes that the use of the term “avant-garde” has become “a fundamental, structuring part of the history of Chinese contemporary art.”<sup>6</sup> But Gao also points out that when Chinese artists and critics began using the term, its meaning was different from the earlier meaning derived from Western modernism because “the separation between aesthetics and politics implied by that earlier meaning was replaced in China by a unity of the aesthetic and the social.”<sup>7</sup>

Gao Minglu’s vigorous definition of Chinese “avant-garde,” which by nature possesses “a built-in sense of critique and protest,” is in consonance with a general notion of the avant-garde in the West. As Andreas Huyssen put it, the avant-garde is “a genuinely critical and adversary culture.”<sup>8</sup> Analyzing avant-garde in its political sense, Matei Calinescu cited Eugène Ionesco as saying, “I prefer to define the avant-garde in terms of opposition and rupture. . . . An avant-garde man is like an enemy inside a city he is bent on destroying, against which he rebels; for like any system of government, an established form of expression is also a form of oppression. The avant-garde man is the opponent of an existing system.”<sup>9</sup> Ionesco’s heroic concept of “the avant-garde man” has been translated into Chinese avant-garde art since the 1980s. When comparing the Western avant-garde movements with that of China, Gao noticed “many ideological similarities on the level of abstract spirituality and basic rebelliousness.”<sup>10</sup> Yet he suggested, “While the avant-garde movement in the West was fighting against middle-class commercial society and its kitsch tastes, one might say that the Chinese avant-garde was caught in a far more complicated relationship between localization and globalization, ideology and materialism.”<sup>11</sup>

This multifaceted cultural identity of the Chinese avant-garde needs to be further examined in comparison with the Western avant-garde. In the West, the

avant-garde is widely known to have fought against so-called official culture,<sup>12</sup> but Huyssen believes there is “the secret bond between avant-garde and official culture in advanced industrial societies.”<sup>13</sup> On this problem, Peter Bürger has given an in-depth analysis: “The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men.”<sup>14</sup> Like Huyssen, Bürger has nevertheless discerned a contradiction in what he calls “the avant-gardiste intent.” “During the time of the historical avant-garde movements, the attempt to do away with the distance between art and life still had all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side. But in the meantime, the culture industry has brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life, and this also allows one to recognize the contradictoriness of the avant-garde undertaking.”<sup>15</sup>

From the late 1970s through the 1980s, Chinese avant-garde fought hard against the dominant power of Mao’s socialist ideology and, in particular, Socialist Realism. As a style and aesthetic method, Socialist Realism perfectly exemplifies “art as an institution” in Bürger’s terms, and this “institution” had oppressed Chinese artists for decades. It is in this context that Gao Minglu defines the avant-garde ’85 Movement as an “anti-traditional and anti-authoritative” movement, in which the artwork was never considered for its commercial or artistic value but was a “spiritual vehicle” to engage the public and society.<sup>16</sup>

In early February 2009, Gao Minglu and his assistants organized a series of exhibits and events under the title of “20 Year Anniversary of China/Avant-Garde Exhibition” to commemorate the original “China/Avant-Garde Exhibition” held at the National Art Gallery in Beijing in 1989, but the police barred the exhibits and related events because, the organizers were told, they “had not properly registered with authorities.”<sup>17</sup> Gao read a protest letter to a small audience in public and later said, “It’s been 20 years, and it’s still the same.”<sup>18</sup>

Since the early 1990s, however, many avant-garde artists have devoted their critical attention to the contradictions of new Chinese capitalism and globalization, which seem to echo what Bürger described as “the contradictoriness of avant-garde undertaking” in the West of the 1960s. As he interpreted the pop art of Andy Warhol, “It must be remembered that where art does in fact submit to the coercion to bring what is new, it can hardly be distinguished from a fad. What Adorno calls ‘mimetic adaptation to the hardened and alienated’ has probably been realized by Warhol: the painting of 100 Campbell soup cans contains resistance to the commodity society only for the person who wants to see it there.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, American pop art blurred the line between a work of art as a commodity and any other commodity. Everyone was part of the same consumer society, and shopping became culture; Warhol was a shopping junkie himself.<sup>20</sup>

## Andy Warhol and China

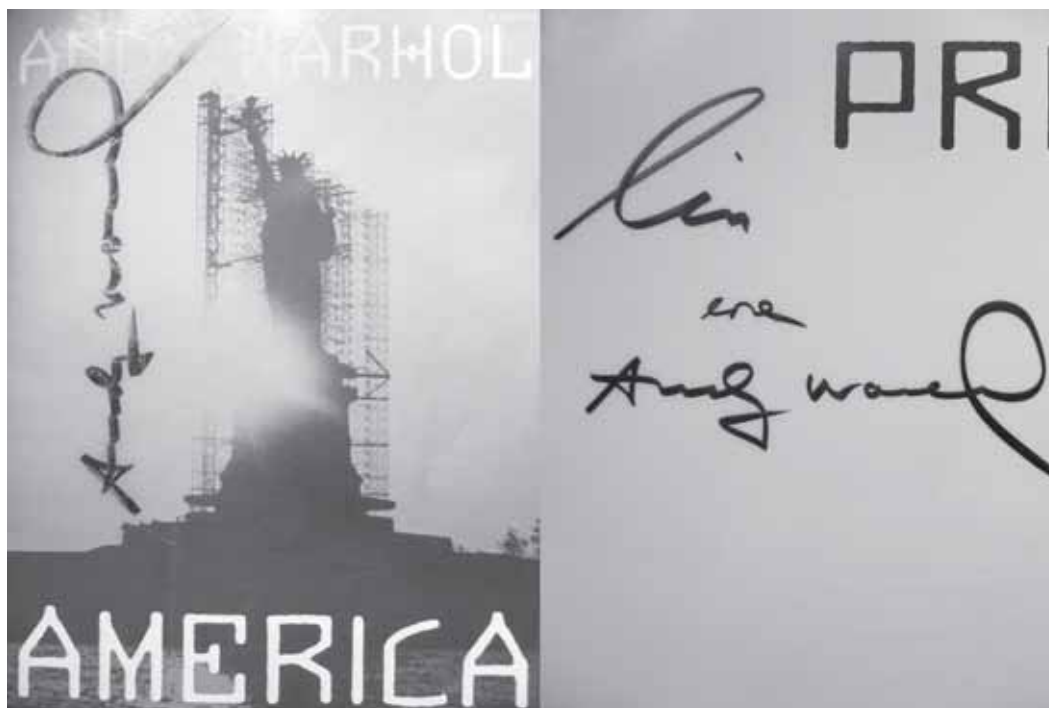
In the fall of 1982, Warhol and a film crew came to Beijing from Hong Kong on a mission to make a documentary titled “Andy Warhol in China” (which was printed on a crew member’s black T-shirt). I was then working at Chinese Artists’ Association<sup>21</sup> and was assigned to be a translator and tour guide to the Warhol group. During a three-day trip in Beijing, the crew first went to the Great Wall to film Warhol. Then they visited Tiananmen Square, where Warhol took a picture before Chairman Mao’s portrait hanging on the Gate of Heavenly Peace (before that visit Warhol had produced hundreds of “Mao portraits”).

Later, as Warhol requested, I took the group to the home of Mr. Wu, an old artist who specialized in traditional Chinese ink painting and calligraphy. Warhol showed no interest in Mr. Wu’s work but was attracted to an oil painting hanging on the wall. He asked about the picture, which was a still life of Chinese folk toys done by Mr. Wu’s daughter. Warhol offered to buy the artwork, but Mr. Wu said he would give it to him (as the old man was afraid to accept money from a foreigner). Warhol was clearly displeased by this “free” gift. He insisted on buying it, and after my mediation, an assistant to Warhol handed over several hundred yuan to the old painter and Warhol happily took away the “commodity” he had purchased.

In the evening, the association hosted a banquet for the Warhol people, at which Warhol and his entourage asked why there was no “night life” in Beijing (in the early 1980s, the Chinese capital city was dark after seven o’clock), since they truly enjoyed it while in Hong Kong.

Three years later, in the winter of 1985, under the sponsorship of Asian Cultural Council, I made a trip to New York and met with Andy Warhol at his “Factory” located at East Thirty-third Street between Madison and Fifth Avenues. At our meeting Warhol presented me with a copy of his new book *America* (which turned out to be his last book) and a December issue of his *Interview* magazine. He kindly autographed the two publications and I have kept them to this day.

In 2008, I was back in Beijing working on the revision of this book. By chance I read in the June issue of *TimeOut Beijing* that Christopher Makos, an American photographer who accompanied Andy Warhol on his 1982 trip to China, had returned to Beijing in late May to promote his new book *Andy Warhol China 1982: The Photographs of Christopher Makos*.<sup>22</sup> In Beijing, Makos stayed at the same place as he had with Warhol twenty-six years before—the prestigious Beijing Hotel<sup>23</sup>—where he gave an interview with an editor of *Sheying zhi you* (Photographer’s companion).<sup>24</sup> Makos told the editor that he had seen a new model of the prestige car Hongqi (“Red Flag” in Chinese) in the hotel parking lot and wanted to take a picture of it, as he had in 1982 because he and Warhol were attracted to the grandeur



**Figure 1.** Andy Warhol, *America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), book cover and title page. Author photo.

of a Hongqi they saw in the street.<sup>25</sup> Makos then asked the editor, “Is Hongqi for sale in the United States? If it is, I must buy one.”<sup>26</sup> Hongqi was a Soviet-style limousine made in Mao’s socialist era,<sup>27</sup> and Mao himself often rode in one, as did other Chinese Communist Party leaders. But these days we see Hongqi taxicabs roaming the city’s streets, and one of them had caught the eye of Makos at his hotel.

During his trip Makos held a press conference at Timezone 8 Books & Café, located in Beijing’s trendy 798 Art District. Although I had missed Makos’ book promotion event, I went to the bookstore and bought the conference’s poster. Another press conference took place at Timezone 8’s branch in Shanghai. Just days before I came back to New York in late August, I heard from a friend that Makos was now represented by the New Beijing Gallery in the Chinese capital. To me, Makos’ 2008 “return” to China seemed like Warhol’s own—all through the interview with *Sheying zhi you*, Makos talked about “his friend Andy” on that 1982 trip. And a Chinese version of *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* was published in May 2008<sup>28</sup> as a belated tribute to Warhol, who told Makos, “I love Chinese culture more than our own. It’s simpler.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet Warhol’s 1982 trip was unknown to avant-garde artists in China because his Chinese host, the Chinese Artists’ Association, represented a socialist “official culture” that repressed the avant-garde. Warhol, in turn, was unaware of the existence of the Chinese avant-garde, which had turned to the West, including to the

famed pop artist himself, for inspiration. In any event, Warhol's impact on China's avant-garde has increased considerably in the intervening decades. In an interview with Ellen Pearlman in September 2007, Xu Bing spoke of Warhol's fascination with Mao: "Mao is actually a big contemporary avant-garde artist. . . . Andy Warhol learned a lot from Mao. . . . Compare Mao's pop culture to Andy Warhol's pop culture. If you had the experience of the Cultural Revolution in China you can understand authentic pop culture. Everybody had to read the same book and do the same thing. If you look at the Andy Warhol photo where he is standing in front of the big portrait of Mao in Tiananmen Square, then you can understand how Andy Warhol's art works with Mao's ideas about the masses, the people, and pop culture. . . . Andy Warhol is the greatest artist. He is a real thinker."<sup>30</sup>

Zhang Huan is a Chinese artist who, in Bürger's view, works within the best tradition of Warhol as a "neo-avant-garde." In September 2007, the exhibition "Zhang Huan: Altered States" opened at the Asia Society in New York. On display were many large-scale sculptures that, according to Lance Esplund of the *New York Sun*, were produced in the artist's "large Warholian studio-factory" in Shanghai.<sup>31</sup> As early as 1993, Zhang Huan established himself as a performance artist in the legendary "Beijing East Village," named for New York's East Village.<sup>32</sup> In 1998 he came to New York as a participating artist in Gao Minglu's exhibition "Inside Out: New Chinese Art" held at the Asia Society and P.S.1, affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art. There seems to be a mythical and spiritual link between Warhol and Zhang Huan, even though the two artists never met in person. Warhol was an ardent supporter of "underground" pop art, rock music, film, and multimedia performance. Zhang Huan was a member of Beijing's art underground in the 1990s,<sup>33</sup> when most avant-garde art was banned in China and the police frequently raided East Village, often forcing Zhang Huan to flee after a performance.<sup>34</sup> Warhol had a similar fear of the police; when he first met Valerie Solanas, he thought she was a cop.<sup>35</sup> An initial success in the art world led Warhol to go into business for himself. In 1968 he opened the Factory, which became an efficient production line for American pop art. In 2006 Zhang Huan launched his "studio-factory" in Shanghai, which employs about a hundred craftsmen and is indeed a Warholian "business art"<sup>36</sup> enterprise built in China. The vital link between Warhol and Zhang Huan helped establish a new cultural identity for China's avant-garde. On the one hand, Chinese avant-garde artists maintain what Gao Minglu defines as an "anti-traditional and anti-authoritative" stance; their best works still vigorously critique the country's economic and social problems. On the other hand, avant-garde artists such as Zhang Huan, who has a "reputation for aggressively peddling his images" to collectors and art galleries,<sup>37</sup> have become the true successors to Warhol as "neo-avant-garde" pop artists. As Calinescu put it, "To be popular in our age is to create for the market, to respond to its demands—including the eager and quite

recognizable demand for ‘subversion.’ Popularity is equivalent to accepting if not the ‘System,’ then its most direct manifestation, the Market.”<sup>38</sup> Hal Foster’s analysis of pop art is most relevant here: “In the case of pop, then, the fabled integration of high art and low culture is attained, but mostly in the interests of the cultural industry, to which, with Warhol and others, the avant-garde becomes as much a subcontractor as an antagonist.”<sup>39</sup> This “dualistic” cultural identity of the avant-garde in the West, I think, has entered Chinese contemporary art. Today a Chinese avant-garde artist is in a similar paradoxical situation: become either a “subcontractor” struggling in the highly competitive global art market or an antagonist fighting an existing “System”—be it old socialist ideology or new capitalist globalization. Just as the “avant-gardist” Warhol was eventually, in Foster’s opinion,<sup>40</sup> turned “into an institution,” many Chinese avant-gardists who were once rebels now, in Holland Cotter’s judgment, “form the new Chinese art establishment.”<sup>41</sup>

## The Avant-garde Traditions and the “Sixth Generation” Filmmakers

As a “neo-avant-gardist,” Warhol had also produced films that had no plot but rather simply recorded “man’s daily activities, the things he sees around him.”<sup>42</sup> “The world” filmed by Warhol is “transposed, intensified, electrified” so “we see it sharper than before.”<sup>43</sup> The strong documentary and improvisational elements we see in Warhol’s films are characteristic of his paintings that depict everyday objects such as Coca-Cola bottles or Campbell’s soup cans. In this sense, Warhol’s filmmaking revived the great tradition of the European avant-garde movements of the 1920s. As Siegfried Kracauer put it, the European avant-garde artists broke away from the commercialized cinema because of their conviction that the narrative as the main factor of feature films is alien to the medium.<sup>44</sup> Kracauer considered the avant-garde cinema “an extension of contemporary art”<sup>45</sup> because it “took much of its inspiration from contemporary art.”<sup>46</sup>

Kracauer’s view is perfectly illuminated by Warhol’s creative work, and I will turn in this direction to define Chinese independent cinema with respect to avant-garde art.

Film scholar Zhang Zhen’s anthology *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*<sup>47</sup> is a fine collection of articles on the subject of contemporary independent cinema. According to Zhang Zhen, the Fifth Generation directors, despite their reputation for avant-garde art cinema as well as the political controversy that surrounds some of their films, have worked mostly within the state-sponsored studio systems. The Sixth Generation or Urban Generation filmmakers, however, have from the beginning identified themselves as institutionally and financially independent. They have resigned from assigned

jobs in state-owned studios, worked on low-budget underground productions, and participated in international film festivals without official sanction.<sup>48</sup> To Zhang, this new cinema of the Urban Generation is driven by a “documentary impulse.”<sup>49</sup> She writes, “For a filmmaker like Jia Zhangke, the documentary method is not only necessary when the film is set in his hometown, which supplied all the ‘locations’ for *Xiao Wu*, but also critical for the particular kind of story he wanted to tell about people *in* their social milieu. It is an aesthetic grounded in social space and experience—contingent, immanent, improvisational and open-ended.”<sup>50</sup> The strong documentary and improvisational elements in Warhol’s films are echoed in the “documentary impulse” of the Urban Generation cinema, and Chinese filmmakers of this new generation may see themselves as true heirs of a great tradition of the European avant-garde movements.

The cultural critic Dai Jinhua also points to the avant-garde stance the Sixth Generation has adopted since its emergence in the early 1990s.

The appearance of Sixth Generation films suggested a break away from commercial culture’s ambush of art film. Their avant-garde style also constituted a subversion of the official system of film production. More precisely, the Sixth Generation feature directors’ cultural pose and creative style they selected were more or less an enforced choice. Documentarists working in video did not experience this productive pressure. In a sense, the new documentaries that appeared under the labels “Sixth Generation” or “China’s underground film” were actually the works of those who had been eclipsed by eighties mainstream culture. In other words, marginal cultural forces banished during the social turmoil of the eighties and nineties now gathered strength along with other exiles and began the march toward the center.<sup>51</sup>

Here I want to elaborate on two main points raised by Dai Jinhua: (1) the Sixth Generation’s “subversion of the official system” and (2) “the march toward the center” by so-called marginal cultural forces, which, according to Dai, comprise Political Pop painters, rock stars, avant-garde poets and writers, photographers, and experimental theater directors.<sup>52</sup>

The Sixth Generation’s “subversion” is not only anti-institutional, but, more important, it is anti-ideological. That is to say, the Sixth Generation filmmakers subverted the official artistic ideology of Socialist Realism, as did avant-garde artists. Yet this “subversion” is a complex issue in both contemporary art and cinema. As Gao Minglu put it,

The Political Pop artists had complex and contradictory feelings about the Cultural Revolution and the Mao era. Although Political Pop allegorizes and

criticizes Mao's mythic utopia and the political realities it brought about, the artists by no means simply criticize the power of Maoist discourse itself. Rather, the artists still worship and desire to gain this power as the major source for the construction of a new Chinese identity in the face of growing globalization and international influence. Mao's Socialist Realism becomes a symbol of recent Chinese heritage.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, in Gao's view, Political Pop "has already exhausted itself because it simultaneously relies on Socialist Realism in order to exist, even as it seeks to critique and deconstruct it."<sup>54</sup> This paradox of Political Pop in regard to Socialist Realism is what I see as a dual identity of China's avant-garde art and independent cinema.

In the eyes of a Chinese cultural critic, filmmakers of the Fifth Generation have already "visually dismantled" Socialist Realism "in the name of a higher realism."<sup>55</sup> But this critic regards "the Fifth Generation as a failed project" because it attempts to establish a Chinese modernism "by locating its institution under the protection of the state whose representational officialdom it found suffocating and set out to challenge."<sup>56</sup> This dual identity of Fifth Generation cinema is similar to that of Chinese avant-garde art such as Political Pop as characterized by Gao Minglu. Thus, a question should be raised here: Is the Sixth Generation cinema seeking "the protection of the state" that it supposedly challenges? As Dai Jinhua observed, the Sixth Generation filmmakers had begun to march toward the center, which is "the state whose representational officialdom" both the Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers found "suffocating and set out to challenge." Accordingly, Zhang Zhen addressed this same problem by saying that "just how 'independent' the Sixth Generation cinema was in its formative years, or remains today, has been the focus of critical debates both inside and outside of China."<sup>57</sup> It is necessary to examine the current status of Sixth Generation cinema and determine its identity in a context of changed political and cultural circumstances.

On November 13, 2003, China's Film Administration Bureau held a conference at the Beijing Film Academy. Two Sixth Generation directors, Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai, whose films had been banned years before, attended the conference and met with the director of the bureau and other officials. The conference was said to mark "a change of attitude towards so-called 'underground' directors as it advocated their being regarded as the new blood of the Chinese film industry to be guided and nurtured, rather than renegades whose creativity is choked at source."<sup>58</sup> As a result, Jia Zhangke's two recent films, *The World* (*Shijie*, 2004) and *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*, 2006), were partially sponsored by the Shanghai Film Studio, a major state-owned studio. On January 18, 2007, *Shanghai Daily* published a report titled "Film Regulator to Aid New Generation of Directors," which reads like a tragicomic "official story" about all current Chinese filmmakers:

Sixteen young Chinese film directors will receive funds from the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television to develop more sophisticated movies. The administration will offer 500,000 yuan (US\$64,267) for each good script and help them publish their films more easily. The 16 directors include Lu Chuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, Xu Jinglei, Jia Zhangke and Ning Hao, who have won awards from international film galas [sic] or won high reputation from audiences. Ning, the director of *Crazy Stone*, may be the first to be given the funds for his new film, the English name of which is translated as “Crazy Racing Car.” The administration plans to lower the maximum age limit to 40 years next year from the current 45. An official of the administration said crowd-pleasing entertainment productions filled Chinese theaters, especially those directed by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Feng Xiaogang, the Fifth Generation of directors in China. These big-budget movies earned a lot of money rather than a good reputation because of their lack of creativity, culture and philosophy, the official said.<sup>59</sup>

From this report we learn that the Fifth Generation is out of favor with the state, yet its best director, Zhang Yimou, was put in charge of the Beijing 2008 Olympic opening ceremony, which is definitely the “crowd-pleasing entertainment” the Chinese government cannot afford not to stage before the eyes of the entire world. The Sixth Generation directors are indeed being “guided and nurtured” by the state, both politically and financially, although their sophisticated, international-award-winning films have had almost no audiences at home. In this regard, I think, the Chinese state is actually caving in to the power of global cultural institutions that have also been guiding and nurturing the two generations of Chinese filmmakers over the past decades (most of the funds for the Sixth Generation’s films, for example, come from outside China). And the state’s policy change is merely a reflection of China’s submission to global capitalism in the cultural sphere.

Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*, 1987) won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 1988 to become the first Chinese-language film ever to bring home a major international award.<sup>60</sup> At home, however, the film’s reception, especially among intellectuals, was “a mix of celebration and bitter accusation of sellout.”<sup>61</sup> Dai Jinhua wrote that through this film, Zhang “showcased himself as a sign of the oriental/Chinese subject,”<sup>62</sup> and that Chinese directors like Zhang “had to turn their native history and experience into a reified object, an exotic and sensational Other, which was still accessible to the Euro-American cultural decoding machine. Thus the process of cultural subordination and the self-exile of indigenous culture unfolded.”<sup>63</sup> Twenty years later, this “process of cultural subordination” seems to have continued, as exemplified by Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life*,

which won the Golden Lion at the 63rd Venice Film Festival. Derek Elley of *Variety* first expressed critical doubt about this award-winning film: “The surprise film at this year’s Venice fest offered no surprises: Aptly titled ‘Still Life’ it is another slow, contemplative look at spiritual/emotional malaise in modern China by thirtysomething auteur Jia Zhangke. . . . Virtually docu-like look at a town about to be submerged by the Yangtze River Three Gorges Dam project has almost zero plot but molto mood. It will appeal to the most faithful of the director’s camp-followers and no one else.”<sup>64</sup> Agreeing with Elley, Bernard Perusse wrote in *The Montreal Gazette*, “Plot and narrative seem almost incidental. . . . There is . . . very little to engage the viewer on the level of the heart.”<sup>65</sup> In his review of the film, Kevin Laforest was keen to point out, “While *Still Life* remains a heavy film that offers spectators little by way of human connection, its formal mastery and value as a documentary are undeniable.”<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, an anonymous online Chinese commentator also pointed out that there was no connection whatever between the two protagonists in *Still Life* and the imposing landscape of the Three Gorges Dam that has fascinated many Western viewers.<sup>67</sup> On that account, Jia Zhangke, like Zhang Yimou before him, used the Three Gorges Dam as “a reified object, an exotic and sensational Other” to appeal to “the Euro-American cultural decoding machine”—this time the Venice Film Festival. Zhang Weiping, a long-time producer for Zhang Yimou, accused the festival’s director, Marco Muller, of manipulating “the award of the top prize to *Still Life*,” and Jia Zhangke considered suing the producer.<sup>68</sup>

This bitter feud between the two generations of Chinese filmmakers reveals what Calinescu termed “a culture of crisis.” For Calinescu, the avant-garde was “furthering the ‘natural’ decay of traditional forms in our world of change, and [doing] its best to intensify and dramatize all existing symptoms of decadence and exhaustion.”<sup>69</sup> He believed that “the ‘decadentism’ of the avant-garde is not only self-conscious but also openly ironical and self-ironical—and joyfully self-destructive.”<sup>70</sup> In this light, Zhang Yimou’s latest film, *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Man cheng jin dai huangjin jia*, 2006) is blatantly “self-ironical” and “self-destructive” because it radically reverses the main theme of his *Red Sorghum* and *Ju Dou* (*Ju Dou*, 1990), in which the mother, in complicity with her lover or son, violently and successfully revolts against the father. As Sheldon Lu put it, “The oedipal complex in the triangulation of the relationship between fathers, mothers and sons is not only a fundamental element of the melodrama of most of Zhang’s films but also the basic condition of the historic appearance of the Fifth Generation in relation to its predecessors.”<sup>71</sup> From Dai Jinhua’s point of view, Zhang’s *Red Sorghum* “locates the act of patricide within the narrative environment” so that the film “becomes an acclaimed, triumphant legend and an exquisite myth about Chinese men and Chinese history.”<sup>72</sup> In *Curse of the Golden Flower*, however, the father/emperor

triumphs while the mother/empress is poisoned and her two elder sons commit suicide. Moreover, the youngest son is slain by the father/emperor, which, to borrow Dai Jinhua's words, is "a theme that forms the backbone of the narrative of 'oriental infanticide' (*shazi wenhua*)."<sup>73</sup> The movie concludes with a glorious scene in which the paternal authority of the father/emperor is restored. With *Curse of the Golden Flower*, Zhang Yimou destroyed the "myth about Chinese men and history" he had created two decades before.

Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* manifests this same "self-ironical" and "self-destructive" pattern of the avant-garde. As noted, *Still Life* is a film that in the eyes of many Western and Chinese viewers, if not the jury of the 63rd Venice Film Festival, severs any "human connection," in Laforest's words. More recently, the British film critic Neil Young has questioned the legitimacy of Jia's prize-winning film: "*Still Life* was the surprise winner of the Golden Lion at last year's Venice Film Festival and, while by no means a bad movie, is the kind of middling affair that makes you keen to find out what else was in competition. In fact, *Children of Men*, *The Queen* and *Black Book* were all in the running—and any of these would have been a worthier winner than Jia's topical but torpid tale of discontents in back-of-beyond China."<sup>74</sup> Clearly Young's doubt is raised by the movie itself, in which the two protagonists set off to search for their long-lost spouses, yet roam around the hills and plains of the Three Gorges as if they were somnambulists who feel nothing in real life.

At a film conference in Jiangsu, China, in March 2007, Zhang Hongsen, a deputy director of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, strongly criticized the film, suggesting that "Jia cuts himself off from the people he films" and pointing to "the dismal box-office for *Still Life* as evidence of artistic failure."<sup>75</sup> This view seems to parallel that of Gao Minglu, who is critical of films both by Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke. Gao considers *Curse of the Golden Flower* a commercial production, like "rubbish coated in gold and jade" (*jinyu qi wai, baixu qi zhong*). By comparison, Gao says, *Still Life* is a documentary feature (*jishi dianying*) that at least tries to portray the sufferings of people who are displaced by the Three Gorges Dam project. Yet, as he points out, Jia's filmic language is too "crude" (*cucuo*), because the director has no patience or desire to refine his narrative structure.<sup>76</sup> (Jia claimed that he wrote the script in a week, and he regarded *Still Life* an "improvisational work" [*jixing de zuopin*].<sup>77</sup>) Gao then asks: Are all Chinese people as "straight (*zhibai*), inarticulate (*mune*), indifferent (*mamu*) and impassive (*wudongyuzhong*) as the protagonists in *Still Life*?" He continues: like many Chinese avant-garde artists who paint "signs" (*fuhao*), Westerners see the Three Gorges as a "sign" or "subject" typical of China's crudeness, which is primordial but good, and they appreciate the crude Chinese life portrayed in Jia's film, an appreciation which is itself discriminatory.<sup>78</sup>

Gao Minglu's criticism of Zhang Yimou's and Jia Zhangke's latest work illustrates a dilemma that confronts Chinese avant-garde art and independent cinema today.

In my opinion, Chinese avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers are caught in a conflict between global institutions and Chinese authorities that fund projects to promote their different agendas. The French actress Catherine Deneuve, who headed the jury of the 63rd Venice Film Festival, praised *Still Life*, saying that "the story was moving without being political."<sup>79</sup> Yet her acclaim was at odds with other Western critics such as Neil Young, who dismissed Jia's tale as "topical but torpid." Clifford Coonan of *The Independent* (London) also noted that *Still Life* "may not be explicitly political, but it is hard to avoid the political aspect of the Three Gorges Dam project."<sup>80</sup> The Chinese media reported in 2006 that Marco Muller came to China and asked Jia Zhangke for "a feature film" about the Three Gorges. Earlier that year, Jia was filming Liu Xiaodong, a well-known avant-garde painter and Jia's close friend, at the Three Gorges at the request of a collector of Liu's paintings.<sup>81</sup> Since Jia was not sure he could finish his feature picture in time for the competition, he instead recommended his documentary to Muller.<sup>82</sup> *Still Life* was a late entry at the Venice Film Festival but won the top prize anyway. Many concluded that Jia was "commissioned" by Muller to make the film and was "guaranteed" to win. In Dai Jinhua's view, Muller is an excellent example of "the Euro-American cultural decoding machine." He is an Italian, university-trained "Orientalist" who studied Chinese language and culture in China from 1975 to 1977. Since the early 1980s, Muller has been known as a "festival maker." He was director of prestigious international film festivals such as the ones in Rotterdam and Locarno (Switzerland), and eventually became a film producer himself.<sup>83</sup> In this context, Muller should be seen as a shrewd "contractor" of a global culture industry, and Jia Zhangke indeed "becomes as much a subcontractor as an antagonist," to quote Foster's words about the "Warholian" avant-garde. But Warhol's documentary films merely record daily activities, so they are by their nature improvisational. In contrast, Jia's recent work seems to have exhausted the "documentary impulse" extolled by Zhang Zhen; Jia had to defend the use of staged scenes in his *Useless*, a documentary about a Chinese woman fashion designer, which won the Orizzonti documentary prize at the 2007 Venice Film Festival, run by Muller.<sup>84</sup>

Nowadays too few successful Chinese avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers can elude this dual identity of "subcontractor" and "antagonist." At the 48th Venice Biennale in 1999, Cai Guoqiang's *Rent Collection Courtyard* won the Golden Lion Prize, which aroused a great deal of controversy about the copyright issue in mainland China's art circle.<sup>85</sup> Cai's award-winning installation appropriated a canonical work of Socialist Realism—*Rent Collection Courtyard*—which

had been commissioned by the provincial government of Sichuan from professors and students at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in 1965. Harold Szeemann, head curator of the 48th Venice Biennale, had been trying since 1972 to invite the original *Rent Collection Courtyard* to the Documenta 5 exhibition, while Cai was fully aware of Szeemann's intense interest in this masterwork of Socialist Realism at the time.<sup>86</sup> In the context of the Venice Biennale, however, Cai "co-opted the socialist realist style for the entertainment of the very bourgeoisie the original denigrated."<sup>87</sup> So the saga of Muller and Jia Zhangke is a replay of that of Szeemann and Cai Guoqiang. In both cases, there was a "contractual" relationship between Western Orientalists representing global institutions and Chinese avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers aspiring to international success, a contractual relationship most likely to blossom among avant-garde artists. As noted by Esplund, in Shanghai Zhang Huan manages "a large Warholian studio-factory" supplying his works to Western museums and galleries. In that context, Esplund says, Zhang Huan's art is "a global product of our 'inter-connectedness,'" and he calls it "Western art made in China."<sup>88</sup> Although Esplund's opinion may seem overstated, it is true that capitalist globalization allows many Chinese avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers to thrive.

Under these circumstances, I believe, Chinese avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers are obliged to assume a dual identity of "subcontractor" and "antagonist," especially in their relationship with global institutions and Chinese authorities. Thus a key question must be raised: Can they still perform the essential role of antagonist? For Bürger, this is a fundamental question about the avant-garde and political engagement.<sup>89</sup> As he points out, in avant-garde artwork, "the individual sign" or "the individual political motif" "does not refer primarily to the work as a whole, but to reality," and "the recipient" of the avant-garde art "is free to respond to" such sign or motif "as an important statement concerning the praxis of life."<sup>90</sup> In a discussion that follows, I will demonstrate how Chinese avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers employ their signs and motifs to portray Chinese realities as true "antagonists" in the best tradition of the historical avant-garde movements.

## **The Paradox of Perceptions: Globalization, Nationalism, Postsocialist Trauma**

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin writes that film unfolds "all the forms of perception" so "all problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in the context of film."<sup>91</sup> This thesis sets a conceptual framework for my approach. In this study, Chinese avant-garde art and independent cinema are

treated as two related “forms of perception” in Benjamin’s terms. In art and cinema, I think, these “forms of perception” can only be expressed through “individual sign” or “political motif,” which, as Bürger says, can exert a direct effect on the spectator who “can confront it with life as he experiences it.”<sup>92</sup> In my observations, Chinese avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers use such “sign” and “motif” to convey their paradoxical views of a China caught between its socialist past and capitalist present. In other words, Chinese artists and filmmakers examined in this book perceive China as a hybrid of two conflicting yet coexisting systems, ideologies, cultures—Mao’s socialism and global capitalism.

Liu Kang has defined this paradox of China’s process of globalization under Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and openness” policy:

Deng Xiaoping’s *gaige kaifang* is a strategy of modernization and globalization without a real alternative vision. It retains only the discursive forms of Mao’s revolutionary hegemony, but not his revolutionary globalism, as its ideological core. Capitalist globalization, by contrast, has both a vision (in a variety of ideological guises) and enormous material and institutional power. Yet the neoliberal vision of the free market, the dominant ideology of globalization, cannot rationalize and camouflage the ever-increasing rifts between the wealthy and the dispossessed, between the powerful and the disempowered, which are, in the final analysis, the fundamental and irreconcilable contradictions of globalization. The global/local, universal/particular, or homogenizing/diversifying dichotomies or paradoxes are different manifestations of this fundamental contradiction.<sup>93</sup>

Liu Kang’s insight into a sharply divided Chinese society—“the ever-increasing rift between the wealthy and the dispossessed”—is well illuminated by a 2004 “BMW incident.” On a busy road in the city of Harbin, a farmer’s truck scratched the side mirror of a new BMW X5 driven by a woman, who became angry and ran over the farmer’s wife, killing her and injuring several other bystanders. The female driver was the wife of a wealthy property developer who was connected with the local authority, and she was later cleared of manslaughter and given a suspended sentence. This “BMW incident,” wrote Jonathan Watts of the *Guardian*, has strengthened “a growing public belief that wealth equals corruption in a country that once prided itself on communist equality but is now racked by suspicions that officials are exploiting their control of land, the courts and the media to grow rich and escape justice. The feeling is particularly strong in Harbin, the heart of the rust-belt in northeastern China, where millions of workers have been laid off from state-owned enterprises since the switch to a market economy.”<sup>94</sup> Watts cited a Chinese sociologist at Heilongjiang University as saying, “People believe the rich

can influence the law behind the scenes with money. More cases like the BMW furor are likely to happen in the future.”<sup>95</sup>

BMW, the world’s largest premium car maker, entered the Chinese market in 1994, and since then the German-made luxury car has been seen as a symbol of wealth and power. In Chinese, the name of BMW is dubbed as *Baoma*, meaning “precious horse.” In July 2007, BMW reported that it had sold 38 percent more cars in China during the first half of the year than in the first half of the previous year, as the country’s *nouveau riche* “snapped up the latest models.”<sup>96</sup> Earlier in that year, an exhibition titled “Art in Motion” was held in Long Match Space, an art gallery in the 798 Art District in eastern Beijing. The exhibition showcased four of fifteen “BMW Art Cars” designed by prominent artists such as Alexander Calder, David Hockney, and Andy Warhol.<sup>97</sup> Also on display was a group of Chinese avant-garde artists’ new work. In fact, the 798 “Art in Motion” show was part of the BMW Art Car Collection’s world tour, which kicked off at the Petronas Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in September 2006 and traveled to Singapore, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, India, China, Russia, Turkey, and the United States.<sup>98</sup> In this respect, the BMW Beijing exhibition was an exemplar of global capitalism’s “enormous material and institutional power” on the one side and China’s assimilation into a global car industry and culture on the other.<sup>99</sup>

Four BMW art cars included in the “Art in Motion” show were conceived by Alexander Calder, David Hockney, Mafonso Kayama, and Jenny Holzer, who admired the modern science, technology, and aesthetics of the capitalist car culture and whose cars, except for Kayama’s, were used in auto races.<sup>100</sup> By contrast, five participating Chinese avant-garde artists presented their work as “a multilayered dialogue regarding the conflict between contemporary culture and the logic of capitalism in our globalized world,” and their “creative endeavor” was characterized by “contradictions and confrontations.”<sup>101</sup> One example is Wang Gongxin’s video installation *Myth of Capitalism (Zibenzhuyi de chunqi, 2007)*, which consists of nightmarish scenes of an auto junkyard as a source of pollution and a murky Forbidden City in Beijing as a casualty of car exhaust. Wang’s work “overlaps today’s familiar landscapes to summarize the ghoulish results of humankind’s pursuit of capital and the hegemony of industrialism.”<sup>102</sup> The avant-garde artist’s grim perception of global capitalism, as reflected in the BMW art car collection, also “overlaps” with that of independent filmmakers such as Ning Hao, Wang Chao, and Wang Quan’an. In their recent films, these directors use BMW, Audi, and Mercedes cars as central motifs to convey a clashing vision of China’s modernization and globalization.

Ning Hao’s *Crazy Stone (Fengkuang de shitou, 2006)* is a black comedy about property developers and thieves chasing a gem discovered in a bankrupt state-

owned factory in Chongqing, a “mountain city” in southwestern China where one in five employees of state-owned enterprises is laid off because of the government’s policy of “reducing workforce and increasing productivity.”<sup>103</sup> As Ning put it, “It’s about the reality of this crazy developing China and Chongqing being a microcosm of the country. In this crazy city, there must be a lot of crazy stories. . . . Lots of contradictions and conflicts, class differences and wealth gaps. . . . I have known some thieves. They’re not necessarily bad guys. I’ve known some governmental officials and property developers. They are not necessarily good.”<sup>104</sup> In the opening sequence of *Crazy Stone*, a collision between two parked vehicles is staged like a surrealist “happening.” While parked on a steep empty street, a van driven by a worker from the bankrupt factory suddenly rolls downhill and crashes into a stationary BMW owned by a property developer in a symbolic clash between a waning socialism and an omnipresent global capitalism. During a quarrel over the collision, the developer points to the BMW logo on the hood and yells at the factory worker, “See this is a *Bie mowo!*” *Bie mowo* is another Chinese dubbing of BMW that means “Don’t touch me!”—a popular name that seems to mock the brash arrogance of BMW owners. In the movie’s heist sequence, a professional thief from Hong Kong drives the same BMW provided by the developer. In Ning’s view, a BMW is not an object of admiration but one of “class differences and wealth gap” and even criminal adventure.

In *Luxury Car (Jiangcheng xiari, 2006)*,<sup>105</sup> director Wang Chao also employs a flashy Audi as an object of desire that induces greed, crime, and death. The car is driven by a businessman, who, like the woman in the BMW incident, has a reckless disregard for human life and knocks down a rustic youth in the city of Wuhan, and the Audi is then stolen by a street gang. From the country, the youth’s father sends his daughter to look for her “missing” brother, but the girl too is lost in an underworld of crime and prostitution in the city. A retired policeman solves the crime but is killed in the car driven by the gang leader, who has profited from the robbery. An American reviewer remarks, “The story plays out to a satisfactory close but the real tension in the film is between the two Chinas that father and daughter represent.”<sup>106</sup> The father is a residual figure from Mao’s socialist China who was denounced in the Anti-rightist Campaign in 1957 and sent to the countryside for forty years. The daughter and her brother belong to a young generation that escapes an impoverished countryside to seek a better life in the big city. In the film, father and daughter (or the “two Chinas”) ride together in the Audi driven by her gangster “boyfriend.” In the eyes of a French critic, “This Audi has turned into a hearse. This black vehicle has a color of tragedy and is an omen of catastrophe. The car illustrates greed, corruption, larceny, and exploitation. In a word, it is a certain Evil that destroys Chinese civilization.”<sup>107</sup> The critic calls the

Audi a “seductive MacGuffin” through which Wang Chao presents “a society in transformation, a people perplexed and lost... a China whose metamorphosis is unjust, unequal, and painful.”<sup>108</sup>

Wang Quan’an’s *Tuya’s Marriage* (*Tuya de hunshi*, 2007) is a tale about a woman’s search for a reliable man who can support her children and her disabled husband.<sup>109</sup> The story takes place in the barren land of Inner Mongolia, where Tuya, the protagonist, agrees to marry a prosperous businessman who drives a Mercedes on the rugged country road. The man makes a fortune in the oil industry and, unlike the owners of the BMW and the Audi in two previous films, he is clean. There is no greed, no corruption, no crime, and no exploitation that may be attached to the Mercedes. With Tuya’s consent, the businessman drives her family to a city and puts her husband under the care of the city’s best welfare facility, at his own expense. In this case, his pristine Mercedes is an iconic image of triumphant Chinese capitalism that is generous to the needy. Later, the depressed husband attempts suicide by slitting his wrist, which leaves him in a hospital emergency room bleeding because he has no money to pay for treatment. When the businessman is called for help, his generosity dries up after Tuya refuses his sexual advance in a hotel room. In the end, Tuya marries a young man who drives a truck and digs a well for water, which Tuya’s village needs most. In a long shot, we see the Mercedes confront a huge truck on the road, with the businessman and the Tuya family standing in silence on opposite sides of the frame. This memorable image of two vehicles is yet again an image of a conflict between an old socialist China and a new capitalist China.<sup>110</sup> Tuya’s husband was disabled in an accident while digging a well for her village. The young man continues his “socialist” cause for water, in sharp contrast to the businessman’s “capitalist” enterprise for oil. Against this backdrop, Tuya’s marriage is a choice of old socialism over new capitalism.

Mao’s socialist legacy is also an integral part of new Chinese nationalism, a discourse that finds a distinct echo in contemporary Chinese art and cinema. First of all, the discourse of this new Chinese nationalism is a mixed reaction to or paradoxical perception of capitalist globalization. In this sense it is a fight for national symbols and icons against globalization. In July 2007, *China Daily* reported, “The most controversial symbol of globalization in Beijing has closed its door. The Starbucks outlet in the Forbidden City downed its shutters on Friday after months of online protests by millions of people, saying its presence undermined the solemnity of the former imperial palace and trampled over Chinese culture.”<sup>111</sup> The online protest campaign was led by Rui Chenggang, an anchorman with CCTV’s English language Channel 9, in January. A year before, Rui had met with Jim Donald, Starbucks’ chief executive, at a summit at Yale University and had asked Donald to shut down the coffee shop in the Forbidden City,<sup>112</sup> formally known as the Palace Museum (Gugong Bowuyuan), a symbol of Chinese civilization for Rui and

his supporters. Yet Rui denied that he was “nationalistic” and said, “Sure I hope Starbucks will consider the dignity and sensitivity of Chinese people. But I’m not accusing anyone, or globalization. Nobody can stop globalization.”<sup>113</sup> Starbucks left the Forbidden City only after millions of China’s Internet users “react[ed] strongly to any perceived slight to national pride.”<sup>114</sup> In fact, the Starbucks coffee shop had opened in 2000 at the invitation of the museum authorities, who needed to raise money to maintain the 178-acre complex of palaces and gardens. Since 1999, Starbucks has opened 250 outlets in the mainland, and its chairman Howard Schultz describes China as the company’s “No. 1 growth market.”<sup>115</sup> But even some Western visitors to the Forbidden City noticed “the paradox that an American cultural icon should spring up . . . inside a crowning glory of Chinese civilization.”<sup>116</sup> In any case, the removal of Starbucks is a triumph of so-called cultural nationalism or liberal nationalism that has engaged Chinese intellectuals since the 1990s.<sup>117</sup> As Suisheng Zhao points out, after a century of turbulence and thirty years of Mao’s socialist experiments, Chinese intellectuals have “found the real possibility of rejuvenating the nation because post-Mao reforms not only brought about rapid economic growth but also fed national pride. They were determined to eradicate all obstacles in their pursuit of national prosperity.”<sup>118</sup> Liu Kang also remarks that nationalism is keenly felt in China’s modernization and globalization, and it has increasingly influenced the country’s political and social life.<sup>119</sup> For Liu, Chinese nationalism is a paradox that cannot be simply attributed to a change from Mao’s revolutionary globalism to Deng’s nationalist agenda or an emergent “China threat.” In his judgment, Chinese nationalism should be seen as a result of China’s integration into globalization, which is actually “a symptom of the fundamental contradictions of globalization.”<sup>120</sup>

In art and life, I think, Chinese nationalism as “a symptom” is curiously referenced by a certain foreign object that invades a Chinese society still burdened by Mao’s socialist legacy. A prominent referent for this Chinese nationalism is Coca-Cola, an American soft drink brand and cultural icon. In February 2004, the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce conducted a study, titled “PRD Patriot’s Paradox: China Youth Nationalism not Reflected in Brand Choices, Recent Survey Finds,” on youth preference for brands in the Pearl River Delta (PRD). In this survey we read, “Despite growing feelings of nationalism, fuelled, among many other things, by China’s recent success in space exploration and the upcoming Beijing Olympics, Chinese youths are not discerning when it comes to choosing local brands over foreign ones.”<sup>121</sup> Yet the study also states that China’s national brands are competing with international ones such as Coca-Cola for “the hearts and wallets of China’s dynamic youth” and that many brands like Jianlibao are appealing to national pride as part of their offering to the market. And the study concludes that these national brands, especially Jianlibao, have exploited patriotism to achieve

their success.<sup>122</sup> Once called “China’s magic water,” Jianlibao was established as a state-owned sports beverage maker in the 1980s. It dominated the soft drink market in the early 1990s but could not compete with Coca-Cola, which re-entered China in 1979. Recent mismanagement and corruption scandals have thwarted the company’s growth.<sup>123</sup>

The avant-garde artist Wang Guangyi takes Coca-Cola and other famous Western brands as subjects in his “Political Pop” paintings. But Wang’s oeuvre, which contrasts Western brands with symbols and icons of Mao’s socialist revolution, is a critique of capitalist consumer culture. Sheldon Lu has analyzed Wang’s art in depth:

In Wang Guangyi’s *Great Criticism* series, one notices a pastiche of symbols and icons: revolutionary workers, peasants, and soldiers—all engaged in criticism of the past—as can be commonly seen in posters during the Cultural Revolution and commercials for Nikon, Kodak, Coca-Cola, Benetton, Philips, and other commodities in the age of global capitalism. The symbolic and real juxtaposition of a residual revolutionary enthusiasm with emergent transnational commodification actually makes up contemporary China. The union of disjoined, contradictory elements of social life marks the unfolding of a post-modern culture in China.<sup>124</sup>

In Wang’s work, the “contradictory elements” in contemporary China nonetheless appear more as a clash than a “union.” A picture in his *Great Criticism: Coca-Cola* series depicts Mao’s socialist revolutionary heroes—the big, robust figures of worker, peasant, and soldier (*gong nong bing*)—passionately stabbing at a Coca-Cola logo, since “the artist sees the Coca-Cola logo as an invasion of Western brands into China.”<sup>125</sup> Although this “violence” is imaginary, it is a parodic discourse of Chinese nationalism. Wahaha, a Chinese soda maker and a domestic competitor of Coca-Cola, has ardently claimed that “Coke and Pepsi have long dominated the China market; their empire should be dismantled and more domestic players should enter the fray. Chinese people should have their own Cola.”<sup>126</sup>

Coca-Cola as an invading alien object is a common theme in recent Chinese films. In Zhang Yimou’s *Not One Less* (*Yige ye buneng shao*, 1999), there is a satirical depiction of the domestic competition between Jianlibao and Coca-Cola. In the town’s grocery store, a group of twenty-six children from a poor village want Coca-Cola instead of Jianlibao, but they do not have enough money to get one for everybody, so they decide to take a sip from the two cans of Coke they are able to purchase—only two cokes for twenty-six thirsty kids! Coca-Cola controls 70 percent of the Chinese market, mostly in the big cities, but the U.S. soft drink giant

has not won over the country's vast rural area, where "domestic players, even in a small capacity, can thwart the monopoly of Coke or Pepsi."<sup>127</sup> This assessment proves credible in Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* (*Xiao Wu*, 1997). After seeing a play about a village girl's tragic suicide, Xiao Wu and his sister walk down a dark street. The sister steps on a metal object and finds a discarded can of Coke in the ground. In resentment she kicks it miles away. In the sister's symbolic gesture, we recognize a similar nationalistic suspicion—global capitalism is to blame for all that the impoverished rural population has to suffer. In *Crazy Stone*, Ning Hao uses a can of Coca-Cola to construct a subplot: San Bao, a young worker from a bankrupt factory, is obsessed with the lottery. He has been laid off from a state-owned enterprise and desperately needs fast cash to survive. By accident, San Bao enters a hotel room in his home town of Chongqing, where he finds a mountain of Coke cans. He picks up a can, lifts the lid, and finds the winning number in a Coca-Cola lottery. San Bao travels to Beijing to claim the prize, but the lottery turns out to be a scam. The hotel room is occupied by local thieves who have conceived the sting. In this diegetic context, Coke is a motif for sham capitalism that thrives on fraudulent business practice. The film opens with a Coke can being thrown from a cable car. The can falls onto the city of Chongqing like a bomb, which crashes into the windshield of a white van driven by San Bao and his supervisor, which is parked on a steep hill. A moment later the driverless van rolls down the street and collides with a parked BMW. Through this chain of absurd events we witness how two alien objects, a Coke can and a BMW, together wreak havoc on a Chinese society unprepared for the brutal invasion of global capitalism.

In a long shot in *Crazy Stone* we see San Bao standing alone in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, a symbol of China's socialist revolution. After being conned in the Coke lottery, San Bao looks forlorn and disenchanted. Yet, as a good citizen, he is duly paying his tribute to the revolution led by Mao, whose portrait is hung over Tiananmen Gate behind him. On the soundtrack, a hit children's song from the early 1970s sings, "I Love Beijing's Tiananmen where the sun is rising. Great Leader Chairman Mao is leading us to march on."<sup>128</sup> For San Bao, however, even the Great Leader can no longer prevent a postsocialist China from the near anarchy that victimizes him and his family. Both the *mise-en-scène* and the childish musical score define San Bao as a traumatized youth who has little knowledge of today's Chinese society plagued by massive fraud and crime. Apparently, the young man comes from the so-called disadvantaged community (*ruoshi qunti*)<sup>129</sup> largely ignored by China's new leadership, which advocates "socialism with Chinese characteristics" or, in essence, new Chinese capitalism. This "disadvantaged" segment of Chinese society has not fared well since the country's economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979. It is, in Ning Hao's view, vulnerable to a violent foray of global

capitalism, as rendered by the vicious Coke “bomb” in the opening of the film.<sup>130</sup> Though young in age, San Bao, too, is a residual figure from a socialist past like the father in Wang Chao’s *Luxury Car*.

The San Bao character might be called the “Child of Marx and Coca-Cola” to appropriate Jean-Luc Godard’s famous phrase that characterizes 1960s European youth engaged in socialist leftist politics and capitalist pop culture in his film *Masculin/Feminin*.<sup>131</sup> In San Bao’s case, however, this Chinese “Child of Marx and Coca-Cola” may represent a fusion of and a paradox between Mao’s socialism and global capitalism. As such, San Bao is a schizophrenic and a traumatic child undergoing personal psychosomatic chaos. In his study titled “Walker Evan’s Depression and the Trauma of Photography,” Eric Rosenberg says, “Freud’s image of trauma is that of a wound to the psyche. This configuration would seem to lend itself to the totality and expectation of documentary photography.”<sup>132</sup> Indeed San Bao inflicts such wounds, both psychologically and physically. The youth’s psyche is first damaged by the Coke lottery scam, so in revenge he beats a thief unconscious. Later San Bao himself is almost strangled to death by his superior, who assumes he has stolen a gem. Most male characters in the film are prone to such mindless violence (e.g., father beats son, boss beats employees, thieves beat each other, stranger beats stranger), which is surely a warning sign of social inadequacy, mental illness, and trauma. As Rosenberg puts it, “We can never truly know what trauma looks *like*. Nevertheless, trauma can *have* outward appearances, can hide behind manifestations, perhaps symptoms. But it can reveal its own image only to that or in that body or subject it inhabits.”<sup>133</sup> Thus San Bao’s bruised face or wounded psyche reveal nothing but “symptoms” of what I would call a postsocialist trauma, a social illness that prevails in a Chinese society subject to change and anarchy.

What, then, is postsocialist trauma? To answer this question, we first need to clarify “postsocialism,” a term that has been defined by scholars from in and outside China. In his book *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture*, Sheldon Lu probed the origin and meaning of the term by drawing on a range of scholarly writings, such as the following: Arif Dirlik writes that postsocialism is a historical condition in which socialism has lost its coherence as a dominant theory of politics and existing socialist states must adjust to the demand of a capitalist world order. Postsocialism is thus the historical condition of Deng’s China, where the people have lost their faith in socialist ideology and the government has to instill capitalist elements into the Chinese economic and social systems in order to modernize the country. Paul Pickowicz asserts that in arts and culture, postsocialism refers to a negative, dystopian cultural condition that prevails in China and other existing socialist states. Postsocialism deals with the domain of perception; it is the perception of a dehumanizing and dystopian reality. According to Zhang Yiwu, postsocialism is a period of new culture directed

toward consumption, supported by mass communication, and guided by pragmatism. Lu summarizes by saying that postsocialism is a socioeconomic condition in which capitalist modes of production have been implemented in a “socialist” China that has joined the global capitalist regime of the World Trade Organization. Thus postsocialism is a contradictory overlapping of capitalist economy and communist politics, and it embodies the fundamental internal contradictions of Chinese society.<sup>134</sup>

On that account, I propose that postsocialist trauma is the trauma of China’s transition from socialism to capitalism, an agonizing experience for people in China as well as Russia and Eastern Europe. Citing Ralf Dahrendorf’s use of “vale of tears,” Slavoj Žižek described this transition as a “necessarily painful” process. After the collapse of socialism, one cannot pass directly to a market economy; socialist welfare and social security systems must be dismantled first, which means less social security and less guaranteed social care.<sup>135</sup> In Žižek’s judgment, however, people in former socialist countries never had a chance to choose this transition; they were just thrown into “a new situation in which they were presented with a new set of given choices.”<sup>136</sup> To follow Žižek’s psychoanalyst view, this transition is a trauma that designates a person’s “shocking encounter” with his or her new environment, especially “a violent intrusion of something which doesn’t fit in” a person’s “life-world.”<sup>137</sup>

Zhang Zhen considers new Chinese cinema since the 1990s to be “the witness” to the traumas of China’s economic and social transformation (*zhuanxing*).<sup>138</sup> According to Zhang, Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 “southern trip” is the mantra of *zhuanxing*, or transformation, and that, in Deng’s words, “socialism can also practice market economy.” This transformation is no longer about the market reforms but about “a kind of structural overhaul in mentality and ideology as well as infrastructure.”<sup>139</sup> In Zhang’s view, many contemporary filmmakers depart from Chinese cinema’s tradition of critical realism or Socialist Realism by taking up a new position of “the witness who produces testimonials rather than epistles. Yet this form of witness is one mediated through the visual technologies used for making the films or embedded in the films as metacommentaries, which are deployed as resources for social critique, collective recovery, memory production, and reflections on the nature of cinematic representation.”<sup>140</sup> And she stresses that “the concept of the witness derives in part from the growing field of trauma studies.”<sup>141</sup> In this regard, I think, new Chinese cinema stands “witness” to the nation’s traumatic encounter with what Zhang Zhen has called “a blatant form of capitalism that voraciously mixes the rawness of industrial capitalism and the slickness of the computer-age postindustrialism thriving alongside the residues of socialism.”<sup>142</sup>

Much of recent work by independent filmmakers is expressive of this postsocialist trauma. Earlier in 2005, three Chinese films won top prizes at various

international film festivals. Gu Changwei's *Peacock* (*Kongque*) (2005), Wang Xiaoshuai's *Shanghai Dreams* (*Qinghong*, 2005), and Li Shaohong's *Stolen Life* (*Shengsi jie*, 2005), all look into the subject of China's rapid yet painful transition from socialism to capitalism. Central to the three filmmakers' work is a traumatic encounter between father and daughter; the working-class father from a bygone socialist era is incapable of understanding the daughter who has grown up in Deng's "reform and openness" era. The bitter conflict between the two generations takes a tragic turn. In *Peacock*, the daughter hastily marries a man she does not love in order to leave the family, and the marriage ends in divorce. In *Shanghai Dreams*, the daughter attempts suicide in protest of her father's disapproval of her boyfriend, who is later sentenced to death for raping the girl. In *Stolen Life*, against her parents' will, the daughter chooses to live with a man she falls in love with. Yet she soon finds out that their romance is a scam; with different women, the man has already fathered a string of babies and sold them to childless couples. So in the eyes of the three filmmakers, the disintegration of the traditional Chinese family arises from the breakup of socialism, as the unfit father exerts no authority or lends no help to his children traumatized by loss, death, and crime in this crude era of transformation.

Li Yang's *Blind Shaft* (*Mangjing*, 2004) is another prize-winning film that bears witness to China's transformation or, to borrow Pickowicz's words, "a dehumanizing and dystopian reality" that defines postsocialism. The film not only depicts horrid working conditions in which Chinese coal miners struggle to survive, but also a demoralizing criminal mentality tied to China's market reforms. Deep down in the pit, two rural miners murder their co-workers so they can get compensation for the dead victims, whom they claim to be their relatives, while the mine owners are willing to pay to cover up any coal accidents that subject them to safety inspection by the government. Yet, as an American critic comments, the film "puts faith in neither communism nor capitalism—it's a savage swipe at China as the filmmaker finds it. Communist slogans are emptied of meaning and capitalist progress is emptied of hope. The new China is a place where everyone is for sale, and the lives of the once-exalted working class are the cheapest."<sup>143</sup>

In China, "the once-exalted working class," such as coal miners or steel workers, has its glorious socialist past, but it is now a painful reminder of new Chinese capitalism that takes a human toll. The dehumanized miners like those in *Blind Shaft* represent a haunting image of postsocialist trauma, the image that also dominates the work of the avant-garde artist Zhou Hai. In the best tradition of documentary realism, Zhou's photographic series *The Unbearable Heaviness of Industry* portrays miners working under brutal conditions and exposes a lesser-known underworld of China's economic boom. As Erick Eckholm of the *New*

*York Times* remarked, “You cannot just glimpse at Zhou Hai’s photographs; the grimy factory workers and miners in them catch your eye and peer into your soul as you are drawn to look into theirs. The weary faces do not show bitterness, but they do seem to say: ‘This is the underworld of China’s miracle, and I exist.’”<sup>144</sup> This “underworld of China’s miracle” has also attracted the attention of Zhang Jianhua, who produced a series of sculptures of the dehumanized coal miners. Howard French of the *New York Times*, in an essay titled “Carving Plight of Coal Miners, He Churns China,” wrote of Zhang Jianhua: “Many of the life-size works depict miners sitting on the ground in their black rubber boots wearing looks of sheer fatigue. Some stare blankly into the distance or prop up their heads with both hands, their faces fixed in nameless agony.”<sup>145</sup> And what was most shocking to French was Zhang’s portrayal of the miners killed by coal accidents: “Yet, easily overlooked at first are the most haunting sculptures of all. At the edge of the out-of-the-way Beijing lot in a newly created art zone that is frequented by foreigners—but few Chinese—lie six figures shrouded in green blankets. Silently, they symbolize the largely anonymous victims of China’s rolling mine-worker catastrophe.”<sup>146</sup>

It is widely known that coal mining is “the most deadly job” in the country<sup>147</sup> and that China’s mines are “the world’s deadliest.”<sup>148</sup> The miners powerfully rendered in Zhou Hai’s and Zhang Jianhua’s work come to light as the “human sacrifice” to the country’s economic growth. In March 2007, China’s Supreme People’s Court issued “a legal interpretation on penalties for coal mine safety accidents,” and an SPC spokesman said that this legal interpretation “provides a yardstick for fixing penalties for those who make a fortune out of blood-tainted coal production.”<sup>149</sup> Obviously, he is referring to the private owners of illegal mines in China, but Chinese miners are not the only victims of this “blatant form of capitalism,” to use Zhang Zhen’s terms. In June 2007, the *Sunday Times* published a report titled “Miners Face ‘Suicide Mission’ Working for Mittal’s Empire,” which reads:

The exact sequence of events that led to the explosion in September 2006 at Lenina—which occurred during routine maintenance work on the ventilation system—is now the subject of a criminal investigation and a trial of eight middle-ranking managers on charges of negligence. It is one of a series of incidents at the Kazakh mines owned by Arcelor Mittal, the company owned by Lakshmi Mittal, Britain’s richest man with a fortune of £19 billion. They have cost the lives of 91 miners since 2004, raising concerns over safety standards.<sup>150</sup>

This British newspaper coverage sounds like a media trope of China’s deadly mining industry. Yet the tragic events happened in Kazakhstan, one of the republics

of the former Soviet Union, where a similar crude global capitalism has caused a profound trauma to society.<sup>151</sup>

In this context, postsocialist trauma is a global *perception*. The image of coal miners serves as a consistent metaphor for all the postsocialist countries prone to global capitalism's exploitation. The reputed American economist Joseph Stiglitz has observed, "For the majority of those living in the former Soviet Union, economic life under capitalism has been even worse than the old Communist leaders had said it would be. Prospects for the future are bleak."<sup>152</sup> That Kazakh miners were killed at Lenina, a mine named after Vladimir Lenin, conveys a bitter historical irony. On April 25th, 2005, President Putin lamented "the breakup of the Soviet Union, a trauma he said Russia was still struggling to recover from,"<sup>153</sup> and called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."<sup>154</sup> Putin's critics dismissed his speech as that of "post-traumatic politics." Richard Lourie wrote in the *St. Petersburg Times*, "President Putin and his generation were shaped by the traumatic collapse of the Soviet Union, just as previous generations were shaped by revolution, terror or war. Their own relationship to the Soviet Union and its demise—their sense of loss, regret and acrimony—is dwarfed by the sheer magnitude of the event itself. Their shock resulted from seeing that something as mighty and gigantic as the Soviet Socialist Republics could vanish so suddenly and so easily."<sup>155</sup>

But such a "shocked" response by Putin and his generation opens a political and psychological discourse on "postsocialist trauma," a discourse that has found its artistic expression after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The acclaimed Ukrainian filmmaker Kira Muratova seems to have shared Putin's response to the breakup of the Soviet Union when she said, "My country had reached bankruptcy and there was nowhere else for it to go. Everything had to burst!"<sup>156</sup> Muratova's *The Asthenic Syndrome* (1989) is a masterpiece of post-Soviet cinema in which "the psychological paralysis afflicting both female and male characters is inseparable from the dissolution of the Soviet Union on the eve of *perestroika*."<sup>157</sup> The film begins with a scene of a funeral; a woman is burying her dead husband who happens to resemble Joseph Stalin. After hearing someone laugh at the funeral, the woman stalks away, and we follow her wandering through a bleak landscape of the fallen Soviet empire. Muratova's recent picture *The Tuner* (2004), depicts "the clash of two worlds: The old world of Soviet Odessa, where official immorality was compensated for with close-knit ties between private individuals, and the new world of Kuchma's oligarchic capitalism with its degradation of human values and disappearing distinction between good and evil."<sup>158</sup> Muratova's grim social and moral postsocialist landscape has found a distinct echo in China's "New Urban Cinema" of the 1990s, when most Chinese cities were going through an enormous process

of demolition and reconstruction. As Yomi Braester put it, the films of New Urban Cinema, such as Zhou Xiaowen's *No Regret about Youth* (*Qingchun wuhui*, 1992), used "demolition as a symbol for the need to chronicle the city's transformation."<sup>159</sup> And Braester described China's new cityscape as "a map of trauma": "Demolition sites are also the scars in spatial form left by traumatic events, from the forceful evacuation of tenants to political oppression. . . . Like other forms of visual art, cinema traces the city's scars and translates history into spatial representation; the photographic and cinematic documentation turns the city into an exhibition space for personal and collective traumas."<sup>160</sup> He also noted that the avant-garde artist Wang Jinsong's photographic series *One Hundred Signs of Demolition* (*Bai chai tu*, 1999), juxtaposes one hundred photos of the Chinese character *chai* (demolition) painted on old houses or walls waiting to be demolished.<sup>161</sup> In this sociocultural context, the character *chai* has become a universal sign for a national trauma, the trauma of China's gradual yet painful switch to a market economy, which according to Žižek must make its way by first "dismantling" old socialist welfare and social security systems.

In Zhou Xiaowen's *No Regret about Youth*, there is a cinematic reference to this "dismantling" of old socialist systems. The film's male protagonist, under an order from higher authorities, drives a bulldozer to demolish an old courtyard house (*siheyuan*) and its enclosing walls, where his female lover still lives. According to Braester, the film "portrays Beijing in the late 1980s as a doomed space, waiting to be rebuilt into impersonal high-rises, shopping centers, and other shrines to new capital."<sup>162</sup> However, the scene is staged as if it were a rape of the woman by the bulldozer operator,<sup>163</sup> who, I think, adequately embodies an aggressive and violent form of "new capital." (The bulldozer operator suffers from amnesia and dies of a head injury he had suffered during his service in the army.) Zhou Xiaowen depicts the clash between two worlds of capitalism and socialism as man's savage sexual assault against woman. It should be noted that the Chinese character *an* (peace/security) was originally constructed as a pictograph: a woman sitting under the roof of a house. If a house is razed, there is no peace or security. Such is how Zhou Xiaowen perceived old Beijing being destroyed by "new capital" in the late 1980s and early 1990s. More than a decade later, in the mind of the avant-garde artist Liu Jin, that "new capital" (read global capitalism) is still threatening the divine tranquility of the traditional Chinese home. Liu Jin's newest work is a performative photographic series titled *Wounded Angel* (*Shoushang de tianshi*, 2006). In one picture, we see a "wounded angel," white wings covered with blood, clinging to the roof of a courtyard house that is being torn down. Towering above the "wounded angel" and his dilapidated house is a modern high-rise condo, which surely signifies global capitalism's triumph over Chinese socialism.

## About This Book

In this book I offer a close reading of the most representative works of avant-garde art and independent cinema, which are related by common themes and motifs of globalization, nationalism, and postsocialist trauma. The book is divided into three parts. In part 1, “Re-creating Urban Space in Avant-garde Art,” I explore urban space as perceived by Chinese avant-garde artists who live and work in two global cities—Beijing and New York. Chapter 1 reviews the photographic and video installations of a group of Beijing artists that represent the capital city’s public and private spaces affected by globalization. It then gives insight into Beijing as an “Olympic city,” where new architecture evokes a strong response in avant-garde artists such as Hong Hao and Wang Guofeng. Chapter 2 continues to look at Beijing as a domestic space for the female artist Yin Xiuzhen, whose installation *The Ruined City* depicts a tranquil Chinese family life threatened by fast urban developments. Chapter 3 turns its full attention to Cai Guoqiang, Zhang Huan, and Xu Bing, three Chinese artists relocated to New York City, where they express their critical views of global capitalism and the anxiety and turmoil it causes around the world. In part 2, “China’s Lost Youth through the Lens of Independent Cinema,” I examine the theme of “lost youth,” which is central to Chinese independent cinema, against a background of China’s economic and social transformation. Chapter 4 analyzes five landmark films by Sixth Generation directors, which portray the alienated urban youth victimized by injustice and violence (Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastard* [*Beijing zazhong*, 1993] and Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Beijing Bicycle* [*Shiqisui de danche*, 2001]), the schizophrenic young female characters torn between true feelings and pragmatic compromises (Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River* [*Suzhou he*, 2000] and Wang Quan’an’s *Lunar Eclipse* [*Yueshi*, 2000]), and the repressed sexuality of a young worker isolated from society (Zhang Ming’s *Rain Clouds over Wushan* [*Wushan yunyu*, 1995]). Chapter 5 focuses on Wang Chao’s *Anyang Orphan* [*Anyang yinger*, 2001], a film that reveals the growing power of Chinese patriarchy (as represented by the young mother/prostitute) in a capitalist market economy and its social and moral consequences. Chapter 6 discusses three recent films made by independent directors: Gu Changwei’s *Peacock*, Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Shanghai Dreams*, and Li Shaohong’s *Stolen Life*, in which the adolescent female protagonists are traumatized by conflict with their working-class fathers who cannot cope with rapid economic and social changes. In part 3, “In Quest of Meaning in a Spiritual Void,” I investigate both independent films and avant-garde videos that seek a flight from a spiritual void left by Mao’s socialism. Chapter 7 is a close examination of Jia Zhangke’s “home” trilogy: *Xiao Shan Going Home* [*Xiao Shan huijia*, 1995], *Xiao Wu* [1997], and *Platform* [*Zhantai*, 2000], which take

a symbolic man's journey across a ruined post-Mao China. Chapter 8 centers on Yang Fudong, an avant-garde video artist based in Shanghai, whose unique black-and-white filmic style not only harks back to Chinese silent cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, but also serves as an aesthetic escape from today's nightmarish global realities. Chapter 9 is a case study of Ning Hao's debut film *Incense* [*Xianghuo*, 2003], which relates a curious tale about a young Buddhist monk who forsakes his religious faith for economic survival. In the postlude, "Chinese Artists and Filmmakers at the Beginning of a New Century," I take a critical look at Chinese avant-garde artists and independent filmmakers active in the first decade of the twenty-first century, concentrating on Huang Yongping, Xu Bing, Paul Chan, and Qin Yufen, whose latest works challenge a Western "master discourse" on politics, religion, and culture.