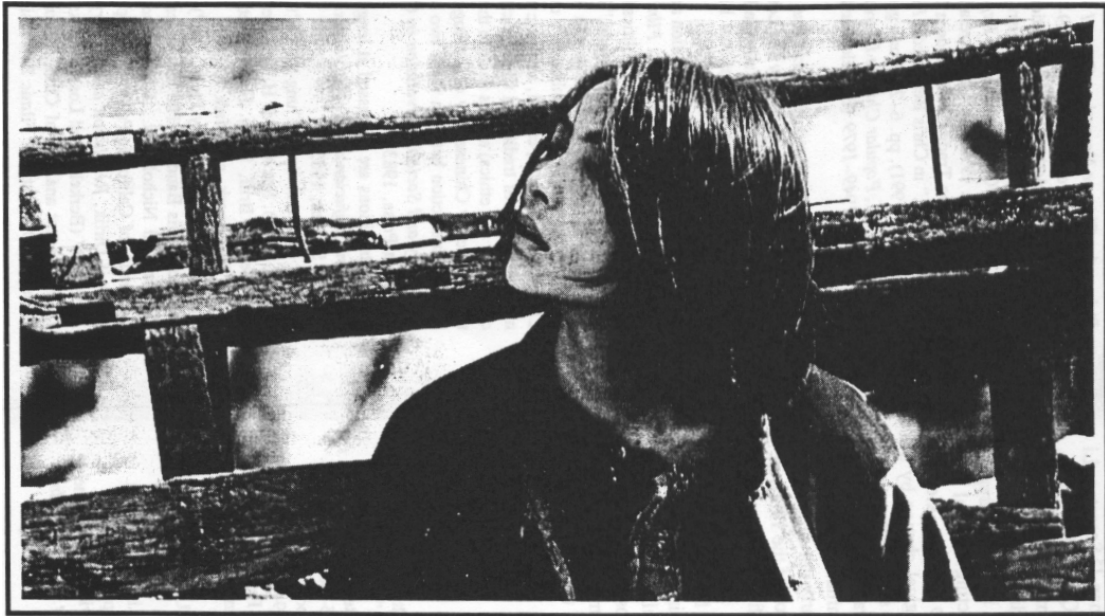


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## Ermo: Televisuality, capital and the global village



by Anne T. Ciecko and Sheldon H. Lu

Although set in a small village in northern China, Zhou Xiaowen's 1994 film ERMO provides a road map of the processes of globalization and capital accumulation in the Deng era's economic reform. Vis-ii-vis a deceptively simple narrative centered around a Chinese peasant woman, Ermo, and her struggle to acquire the biggest TV set in the county to outdo her neighbor, Zhou represents "televisuality" as the ultimate dream and paradox of China's collective national agenda of modernization and globalization. 1

In this essay, our analysis of the film will focus on several main levels. First, as typical of Fifth-Generation directors, it appears that ERMO still adopts a lingering, residual ethnographic approach to the subject of "China." The film's representation of the rural, primitive, and exotic partakes of the self-orientalizing strategy of the previous master texts of China's New Cinema. Second, at the core of the filmic narrative is a contemporary setting against the backdrop of economic reform and capital/capitalist accumulation, and the film uses this setting to offer a critique of the Deng era national agenda of modernization. Nevertheless, the self-reflexive critique of the Chinese nation is accomplished by way of gender politics and libidinal dynamics. Third, the story of the acquisition of a huge color TV set in a remote Chinese village can be read as an apt allegory of global televisuality in the postmodern era of electronic simulacra. ERMO dietetically foregrounds the interrelated issues of ownership and spectatorship. The film forcefully stages the contradictions, ironies, and uneven cultural formations between the local and the global, the native and the foreign. It is no coincidence that these layers of analysis correspond to the three basic levels of social, technological, and cultural formation in contemporary China: the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern. The co-existence of these non-synchronous, heterogeneous elements in the same space and time is a marker of the profound unevenness and hybridity of the (post)modernity of a "post-ThirdWorld," postsocialist country such as China.2

ERMO is centered around the quest of the title character, played by the Mongolian actress, Alia. Married to a sick, frail, and apparently impotent man who was once the village chief, Ermo is now the family breadwinner who supports her husband and young

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son, Tiger. By night, she kneads dough - into twisty noodles and hangs them up to dry; by day, she hawks her wares in the village. The first image of Ermo shows her as a noodle-seller crouching on the street with bunches of twisty noodles bound with red paper. Her cry of "mai mahua mian lou!" ("twisty noodles for sale!") is repeated like a refrain throughout the film and echoed by the music. Industrious, resourceful, and stubbornly determined, Ermo is fueled by jealous competition with her lazy neighbor (nicknamed "Fat Woman"), who owns a television set. The neighbor's husband, Xiazi (nicknamed "Blindman"), an energetic entrepreneur, is the richest man in the village. The perpetual rivalry between Ermo and Xiazi's wife intensifies, and they taunt each other about their husbands' virility and their abilities to produce sons (Xiazi and his wife have a daughter). Ermo secretly poisons her neighbor's pig in revenge. Frequently humiliated by the lack of a television set at home and by Tiger's mealtime excursions next door to watch his favorite shows, Ermo vows to buy an even bigger television set. She begins to accept rides from Xiazi into town, first to sell her hand-woven baskets and noodles at the street market. Later, she begins an affair with Xiazi, starts to work at the town restaurant, and temporarily moves away from her family. Motivated by the goal of earning enough money to buy the biggest television set in town, Ermo also sells her blood at a hospital, and works herself to exhaustion. Realizing that Xiazi has subsidized her restaurant wages, Ermo reacts defiantly by paying him back the extra money and breaking off the relation. Despite his wife's suspicions and rage, Xiazi sees to it that the wife does not learn of his fling with Ermo. After she finally has enough money to buy the television set, Ermo and her reunited family and neighbors bring it back to the village, but she is too fatigued to enjoy her triumph.

## **SIGNATURES OF "CHINA" IN GLOBAL ENTERTAINMENT**

From 1986 to the present, Zhou has directed some ten films, ranging from war film, thriller, detective, melodrama, to historical epic. However, *ERMO* is the only film released to the U.S. audience. Unique among the Fifth Generation, Zhou was first known as a highly successful director of urban films. His detective thrillers, *DESPERATION* (*Zuihou de fengkuang*, 1987) and *THE PRICE OF FRENZY* (*Fengkuang de daijia*, 1988), and melodrama, *THE IMPULSE OF YOUTH* (*Qingchun chongdong*, 1992), were box-office hits in China's domestic market. He was thought to have a knack for combining the skill of commercial success and the vision of art cinema. Yet, some of his more experimental films such as the war story *IN THEIR PRIME* (*Tameng zheng nianqing*, 1986) and the historical/allegorical work *THE BLACK MOUNTAIN ROAD* (*Heishan lu*, 1989) were never released to the Chinese public due to the vagaries of censorship. Despite his reputation within China, he was little known in the global film market.<sup>3</sup>

*ERMO* is Zhou's first work on a rural subject, as well as the film that brought him instant international recognition. The director was forced to change his style and subject to face the reality and politics of global entertainment. China has a long tradition of urban-based films dating back to at least the 1930s, yet the international art film market currently favors "primitive" rural films on the subject of mainland China.<sup>4</sup> Apart from being a masterfully made film, *ERMO* signifies what a Western audience understands and accepts as "China." *ERMO*'s cinematic gaze fixes on China's backward interior, and the director assumes in part a strategy of national allegory. Such a self-orientalizing, ethnographic approach has proven successful in the international film market.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Zhou joins other leaders of China's New Cinema such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang in the formation of what we call a "transnational Chinese cinema."<sup>6</sup> Their works partake of a transnational network of the manufacture, exhibition, marketing, distribution, and consumption of "Chinese" films. (As a matter of fact, *ERMO*

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was funded by mainlanders-turned-Hong Kong businessmen in the final production stage. They also funded the production of his next film *THE EMPEROR'S SHADOW* [Qin song, 1995]). New Chinese Cinema as such orientalizes and exoticizes itself for the world market, and thus it follows a trend in transnational cinema all over the world.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of the politics and practices of representation, *ERMO*, based on a 1992 novella by Xu Baoqi, largely recognizes and participates in the marketing of consumable symbols of rural "Third World" China through the reworking of images of regionalism, primitivism, and exoticism which have become paradigmatic and symptomatic of the Fifth Generation-and intrinsic to global conceptions and receptions of Chinese art cinema. For example, consider one of the most striking and fetishistic examples of "Chinese" rituals-foot massage, employed by Zhang Yimou in *RAISE THE RED LANTERN*. In *ERMO*, there is a unique and knowing combination of appetites as the film showcases Ermo's distinctive and erotically-charged making of noodles with her feet. As in other Fifth Generation films, frequent long shots linger on the village and the surrounding landscape, particularly the dusty ridges of earth into which crude roads have been cut. In *ERMO*, the eccentric "local color" of everyday peasant life is shown; for example, Ermo's noodles are hung out to dry like the vibrantly dyed cloths of *JU DOU* or the bright, red chili peppers of *THE STORY OF QIU JU*. The film is also enlivened with the traditional Chinese festivities of the spring festival, fireworks, carnivalistic displays, folk arts (paper cuts, etc.). *ERMO* also shares with many films from the same period a focus on the screen image of Chinese women. More broadly, the film bears a striking similarity to a group of films produced in the 80s and 90s such as *IN THE: WILD MOUNTAINS* (Yeshan, 1985), *THREE WOMEN* (Nuren de gushi, 1986), and *WOMEN FROM THE LAKE OF SCENTED SOULS* (Xianghun nd, 1993). These films all deal with issues and images of gender, peasant women, rural life, and modernization in the Deng era.

The most notable connection between Zhang and Zhou's films is a parallel to *THE STORY OF QIU JU*, which was commented upon by many reviewers of *ERMO*. There is the obvious intertextuality in terms of casting: The character of Xiazhi (Blindman) in *ERMO* is portrayed by the same actor (Liu Peiqi) who plays Qiu Ju's husband; Ermo's husband is portrayed by the same actor (Ge Zhijun) who plays Officer Li in *THE STORY OF QIU JU*. In terms of tone-and genre, both films are melodramatic/comic hybrids, with absurdist contemporary social realism; each of their narratives centers significantly around the figure of a Chinese peasant woman and her single-minded mission. However, in the former film, Qiu Ju seeks retribution for the assault to her husband's masculinity, and ultimately, the restoration of the village community as extended family. *ERMO*, on the other hand, problematizes the title character's roles in the nexus of social relations- as wife, mother, and neighbor. Ermo's motives are not justice or loyalty, but naked greed, as she is willing to work herself nearly to death to achieve her goal. In both films, the women's ambitions lead them to make regular trips from the rural village into town, necessitating a clash with forces of modernization in the respective forms of government bureaucracy and free market economy.

Capital accumulation was euphemistically known in Deng's China as "socialism with Chinese characteristics," or "socialist market economy." Zhou uses the site of the rural community to provide a context for the inevitable cultural disruptions caused by modernization, as well as picturesque images which participate in cinematic "ethnographic" strategies. The title character of Ermo, forced to support her family, serves as an agency to reflect the these tensions. Indeed, the village *dramatis personae* seem rather ironically topological: Ermo's husband (the "Chief"), '**Blindman,**' his wife "Fat Woman," even Ermo's young son "Tiger" who will continue the family line. Their names point to key personality traits-powerlessness, capitalist myopia, endless consumption, and aggression.

In Deng's China, television became "a symbol of the success of the national modernization."<sup>8</sup> Fittingly, television becomes the object of Ermo's quest. Ermo's desire for

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the 29-inch television set is spurred by consumer one-upmanship, but it also humorously underscores the inadequacy of the available models of masculinity. The biggest TV set is intended to replace the dysfunctional phallus of her husband, the ex-village chief, in the symbolic order.

## **THE LIBIDINAL ECONOMY, GENDER POLITICS, AND CAPITAL ACCUMULATION**

ERMO unsettles gender politics by recognizing the relation between money and power, satirizing conventional notions of masculinity and femininity, and revealing the corrupting influence of western popular culture. Gender roles are switched. This is demonstrated through the dialogue, as well as visual representation. Ermo's husband, at one point, asks her, "Why can't you act like a woman?" She retorts, "Why can't you act like a man?" (Although her husband repeatedly advises her that a house is a chicken, and a television set is an egg, the emerging modern Ermo rejects his folk wisdom.) Ermo fulfills her roles as wife and mother in a perfunctory manner. Instead, her central motivation and values come from a spirit of competition which is at odds with traditional notions of femininity. In ERMO, capitalist entrepreneurship is inextricably linked with catalytic, paradoxical effects on the dynamics of male/female relations and sexual exchange.

The film employs ironic juxtapositions to illustrate this relation between entrepreneurship and sexual politics. Initially, Ermo's manner of capital accumulation is ostensibly rather primitive and premodern, as she prepares twisty noodles in her home to sell at the street market of the county town. Without her steely determination and high energy, her husband is unable to do any heavy manual work. Their neighbor, Xiazhi, his wife, and their daughter, appear to offer the exact asymmetry in libidinal, physical, and economic conditions. As the richest man in the village, Xiazhi owns a truck, and thrives on his trade between the village and the town-although he tells Ermo, "Money's no use without a son." His wife stays at home and plays the role of the domestic housekeeper, albeit one who is most often seen munching pickled eggs and other snacks. (In fact, she is rather unkindly linked with her pig which Ermo secretly poisons.)

In contrast to the bedridden, emasculated former village head, the sexually active Xiazhi gets Ermo a job in town and eventually succeeds in seducing her. Thus, capital equals libido. Ermo begins to respond sexually to Xiazhi when she has had a "taste" of the world outside her village and the things money can buy if the consumer can afford them-an extravagantly bountiful meal at a restaurant; a 500 yuan pay-off for a new donkey for a hapless peasant who is side-swiped by Xiazhi's truck; and most important, the prized model in the town department store's captivating display of television sets.

The exposure to television and Ermo's increasing sense of self-identity as a consumer seems to have an effect on her sexuality, turning her "on." When her neighbor makes his first brusque physical advances toward her in the cabin of his truck, she resists, but then she begins to peel off her many layers of clothing and seems to reciprocate his desire. Later, she becomes a kind of parody of a kept woman as she moves to town to take the restaurant job to earn more money toward the television set. At first, Ermo appears to participate fully (if somewhat unwittingly) in her crude sexual awakening which is inextricably linked with her life as a consumer. After the consummation of her relation with Xiazhi in the cabin of his battered truck, Ermo is roused in fear and wonderment to the spectacle of a sleek, shiny white Ford parked in front. (China awakens to Fordism!) Soon, Ermo becomes a kind of parody of a kept woman. When Xiazhi meets her in a seedy hotel for a sexual liaison, he presents her with a gift of wrinkle cream to keep her from getting as "slack-assed" as his wife. He slathers it generously all over her face and back as Ermo reveals a gaudy "city girl" brassiere she has

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bought. However, Xiazhi's discovery of the bruises on Ermo's arms from selling her blood forces a confrontation. Xiazhi wants to support Ermo and worries that she will ruin her health, but he is unable to summon the courage to leave his wife.

Realizing that Xiazhi has subsidized her restaurant wages, Ermo asserts that she is not a whore. However, she has definitely changed. Xiazhi's wife notices that her skin smells nice and is "whiter," and the ironic implications of this observation in light of her development as a capitalist (not to mention adulterous woman) are obvious. Ermo has literally become whiter because of her consumption of consumer products.

Despite the Confucian code of ethics which presumably guides the lives of the peasants in Ermo's village, she does not seem burdened by guilt over her malicious poisoning of the neighbor's pig or her adulterous relationship; nor is she especially loving or maternal in her interactions with her son and family. Rather than imply that Ermo has sold her soul for the smell of new money, the film suggests from the start that she is motivated by working for material gain, constantly lingering on her lack of affect (and the effect of lack) when it comes to family matters. The 29-inch TV vindicates her lack of "phallus." Ermo, like China, is ripe for capitalism. During one visit home, Ermo brings her husband and son matching, Western-style, crisp white cotton, button-down shirts. When she purchased them at the clothing market, the display featured cardboard heads of Caucasian models. As she opens the packages, her husband and son stand before her, both shirtless. Her husband's skinny torso, his sunken chest, make him seem even more helpless. As a silent and expressionless Ermo dresses her family, she demonstrates a knowledge and power gained from the purchase of and exposure to consumer goods. Her husband is further, and rather pathetically, emasculated as she assists him in buttoning up his collar, and he pulls out a piece of cardboard, wondering if it's a joke.

There are also indications throughout the film that the traditional Chinese medicines Ermo administers to her husband are supposed to restore potency, but that the process is ultimately futile. When Ermo massages her husband's back with a large heated stick, and when the "Chief" sits wrapped in a floral blanket while his wife is outside working, his masculinity is continually undermined.

Ermo's nocturnal ritual of foot-kneading her noodle dough is therefore represented as a displaced expression of female sexuality, and Zhou deliberately films these sequences as a kind of fragmented and elliptically masturbatory experience. Close-ups of perspiring Ermo's face and her preternaturally expert feet highlight Ermo's intense engagement with the work activity and the unseen movements of the rest of her body, accentuated by jump-cuts. Frustrated by her husband whom she must constantly nurse by cooking his medicines, massaging his back, etc., Ermo recognizes her position as "bread winner" in an earthly eroticized fashion. (After she starts bringing home substantial amounts of cash, she also enjoys counting her money in bed.) She regularly rises from her place in the bed between husband and son to experience some measure of liberation and pleasure through manual work. In Zhou's representations of the woman at work and the repeated images of the dough being squeezed and shaped into long, thin twisty noodles, Zhou foregrounds the notion of the doubled eroticization/exoticization of the "primitive"- in terms of the peasant woman's sexuality and the traditional mode of noodle production.

Ermo's "premodern peasant" status is complicated by her incredible industriousness and creative corporeality which is sometimes at odds with modernization. For example, when a mixing machine in the town restaurant (ironically called International Grand Restaurant) severs a male coworker's hand, Ermo improvises a more domesticated version of her foot-kneading in the restaurant's kitchen. When she discovers that she can make "blood money" (Ermo's logic is that women lose their blood anyway), she devises a subversive and ultimately self-destructive scheme whereby she can make repeated visits in

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the same day after drinking bowls of salt-water. Her entrepreneurship has vampiric consequences on her body, as Ermo becomes quite literally drained by her obsessive efforts to make more money. She increasingly runs down to the point of final collapse and loss of consciousness after she has finally achieved her goal of acquiring the television set, the fruit of her labor. Ermo's absence of pleasure provides the viewer with the most explicit critique of the effects of modernization and capitalism. Thus the film asks, as Tony Rayns has suggested, "What ... is the true nature of *satisfaction* in present-day China?"<sup>9</sup>

The film's narrative structure foregrounds the conflict between Chinese premodern rural life and the forces of modernization. And a natural extension of the conflated libidinal/economic dynamic leads Ermo to begin taking rides to town with Xiazi-to avoid the "waste" of her labor. She initially wanted to find a wider market for the hand-woven baskets she has made all winter. Ermo's repeated cry, "Mai mahua mian lou!" ("Twisty noodles for sale!"), frames the film. This is the sound counterpart to the film's final image: static on a television screen. The "snow" represents the absence of televisual image and also the emptying out of meaning-a vacuity enhanced by Ermo's blank, waking gaze, absorbed into the television frame.

### **SPECTATORSHIP AND FRAMES OF VISION**

Throughout the film, Zhou represents the view from within and out the windows of Ermo and her husband's humble home as a kind of proto-television; the shape of the television screen, the fetish-object, largely frames the field of vision of the viewers. One shot early in the film captures both Ermo and her husband looking out from their window onto their neighbor's home as masses of villagers vie for a place in line to have a look at Blindman's television set. Images of Ermo and her husband are framed as if on a television screen, a commentary on the "materialization" of Ermo's desire. "Let's buy a TV for the boy," she tells her husband. Ermo looks out upon the masses of villagers who have gathered outside her neighbors' home hoping to watch their color television set. Meanwhile, her own son Tiger is one of the lucky spectators.

Television is signaled early on as a symbol both for Ermo's restlessness and for the effects of modernization; in several shots of the village at night, the town's silence is broken by the sounds of her neighbor's television set. Yet television also provides an ironic mode of community-building and perpetuating the extended family (socialism with Chinese characteristics?). Children crowd around, attracted by its lure. When Ermo's family finally purchases and brings home its own monumental color set, their home is filled with curious peasants. Ermo's ex-chief husband even suggests they fill their small house with children's benches to accommodate schoolchildren (although this gesture provides even more discomfort for the family). Acquiring the television set somehow seems to bond the family with feuding neighbors, as Ermo and her rival ride together into town with their husbands to purchase the television set and Ermo's neighbor suggests that their children marry some day, officially fusing their families.

However, the film continually spoofs the inevitable impact of television on Chinese culture. At the end of the film, the television set in Ermo's home takes the literal place of the shared family bed; and as Ermo's noodle-strainer becomes a makeshift television antenna, it appears that she has lost her livelihood as well.

As the villagers and Ermo's family watch indiscriminately whatever appears on the set, the rather ludicrous pervasiveness and irrelevance/decontextualization of U.S. popular culture is illustrated. For example, the first broadcast witnessed when the new set is turned on is of an American-style football game. One of the peasant spectators perceives the televised scene as some sort of battle until a more worldly neighbor chides him,

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explaining that it's a sport: basketball. In fact, throughout the film, the images transmitted on television are never purely "Chinese." The medium is indeed a vehicle for capitalist ideology as well as a source of entertainment. Television influences the reshaping of the community, the family, and individual lives through the spread of western popular culture; and it also marks the elision or erosion of indigenous folk traditions.

ERMO repeats images of spectatorship throughout and connects them with consumer desire and ownership within the context of the town store and the family home. When Ermo first sets her sights on the "biggest" television set as her desired object and stakes her claim, she needs evidence that the TV set works. She is told by the sales clerk that she needs to pay first. Ermo worries that continual usage (and, in turn, constant spectatorship) will drain the set of power. (Indeed, Ermo's first glimpse of a softcore love scene dubbed in Chinese is followed by a power failure which shuts the televisions off.)

As Ermo enters the store after finally accumulating sufficient capital to make her purchase, the camera assumes her point of view, zeroing in on the desired television set in the multi-set display. With her bundle of bills and flanked by her husband and Blindman, Ermo can finally lay claim to the power to turn the set on and off. Fittingly, after purchasing the set, Ermo insists that the consumer label be left on, fearing that the television may not work without it. Her logic reflects the way she has participated in the nexus of production and consumption.

At first shocked by the presence of what she can only identify as "foreign language" on television in China, Ermo increasingly marvels at the precision of the televisual illusion since she can see every strand of the foreigner's hair. The programs we see glimpses of range from aqua-exercise demonstrations to English-language lessons, but it hardly matters exactly what is on the screen. Television teaches Ermo how to be a good capitalist.

### **TELEVISUALITY AND GLOBAL POSTMODERN CULTURE**

The popularization of television is one of the greatest fruits and most visible symbols of the social and economic reforms of the Deng era (1978-1996). "In 1978, there were 1 million TV sets in China. [In 1996,] there were 232 million."<sup>10</sup> The film uses Ermo's struggle to acquire the biggest TV set in her county as an allegory of the pursuit of wealth in the entire country. The steady diet of foreign soap operas in Chinese TV programming also indicates the opening of China to global culture. U.S. TV series aired in China since 1979 include *MAN FROM ATLANTIC*, *HUNTER*, *FALCON CREST*, *REMINGTON STEEL*, *MATT HOUSTON*, and *DYNASTY*. (It is reported that *DYNASTY* was Deng Xiaoping's favorite.)<sup>11</sup>

As Ermo's family lies sleeping at the end of the film, the television set continues to play on, broadcasting images of a titillating "romantic" scene from a U.S. nighttime soap opera—appropriately enough, a frothy shower scene. In fact, this is a love scene from *DYNASTY*, a genre of U.S. television series known for its "excessive style."<sup>12</sup> The episode ends as the female protagonist urges her adulterous male lover to "have more fun." However, the irony of U.S. television's discourse of pleasure is lost on Ermo and her dozing, oblivious family. At the end of the film, CCTV concludes a . day's broadcast by reporting the weather of the major cities of the world: London, New York, Tokyo, Cairo, Bangkok, etc. The whole family has fallen asleep, unresponsive to the TV images. **The relation between the global and the local is questioned. Contrary to the promise of instantaneous communication through electronic media in McLuhan's "global village,"<sup>13</sup> what happens here is a break-down of communication in the postmodern age.**

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The film embodies uneven and overlapping modes of production in Deng's China: the premodern (primitive manual labor), the modern (motorized vehicles, the truck, mechanized production of twisty noodles, electricity, "Fordism" as revealed in a glimpse of the shiny white Ford), and the postmodern (electronic simulacra, antenna, television). That these various technological and social forces coexist and are highlighted in the film's narrative propels the protagonists' desires and brings out the contradictions of the Deng era. Ermo's family's final entrance into the world of global televisuality at the end reveals the ironies and paradoxes embedded in the process of globalization. On the one hand, televisual images of foreign lifestyles (especially in soap opera and soft-porn dubbed in Chinese) draw the attention of Chinese peasants and townspeople, seem to offer an alternative way out of the daily routine of their drab Chinese existence, and invite them to join "a brave new world" of fun and fulfillment. On the other hand, the CCTV's daily weather report from world capitals does not relate to local villagers' life in a meaningful way but rather induces sleep. At this point, at the local level of a post-Third World nation-state such as China, the global homogenization of cultural production and consumption meets serious, stubborn resistance. 14 The ultimate question to be raised, after all, is what happens if the ethnic subject in a (self-) ethnographic film does not return her gaze at global televisuality?

The 29-inch TV set is both the material and symbolic embodiment of Deng's slogan, "To get rich is glorious." Yet, the "snow," the blank screen at the end suggests a problematic, pervasive, existential, and ideological emptiness which has resulted from the kind of economism and pragmatism of the Deng era, a policy which is the opposite of the extreme "culturalism" of Mao Zedong that shaped such movements as the "Cultural Revolution." Tired, dispirited Ermo and her television's static annul the meaning and joy she found in her blind capitalistic pursuit of material objects. The film begins with Ermo's cry of noodle-selling and ends with the cry's musical refrain so the narrative comes round full cycle. On the one hand, ERMO questions the goals, processes, and results of one-sided modernization and capitalism. And on the other hand, the film also indicates that an instantaneous introduction and airing of foreign television programs in China, in this postmodern age of communication, appears to fill a domestic void, a cultural and ideological lack. Thus, a remote post-Third-World Chinese village becomes a global village. . Its televisual culture vividly stages the disjunctions and contradictions of global postmodern culture.

#### NOTES

1. We would like to thank Gina Marchetti and *Jump Cut* editors for offering helpful comments for revision. Although Zhou is one of the most well known directors of the so called "Fifth Generation," existing studies of his films in English are few. For a study of one of his early films, see Tonglin Lu, "How Do You Tell a Girl from a Boy? Uncertain Sexual Boundaries in THE PRICE OF FRENZY," in *Significant Others: Gender and Culture in Film and Literature East and West*, ed. William Burgwinkle, Glenn Man, and Valerie Wayne (Honolulu: East West Center, University of Hawaii, 1993), pp. 63-74. Fredric Jameson briefly touched upon DESPERATION (1987/1988) in his essay "Remapping Taipei," in *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, ed., Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, Esther Yau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 121. For an informative account of Zhou's career and a review of ERMO, see Tony Rayns, "The Ups and Downs of Zhou Xiaowen," *Sight and Sound* 5:7 (July 1995): 22-24; "ERMO" (movie review), *Sight and Sound* 5:7 (July 1995): 47-48.

Studies of Zhou's film art are more in Mainland Chinese film journals. See the special section devoted to him in *Dangdai dianying* (Contemporary Film) no. 5 (1994): 28-55.

2. Terms such as postsocialism, postcoloniality, and postmodernity have been used to describe the uneven, hybrid quality of the social, economic, and cultural developments of the West as well as what was called the Third World. For questions of postsocialism in regard to Chinese cinema, see Paul G. Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism," in *New Chinese Cinemas*, pp. 57-87; for a discussion of postcoloniality and China's possible relation to it, see Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20.2 (1994): 328-356; for inquiries into the question of Chinese postmodernity, see Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, "Postmodernity, Popular Culture, and the Intellectual: A Report on Post-Tiananmen China," *New Literary Boundary* 2 23.2 (summer 1996): 139-169; "Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China," *New Liter-*



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*ary History* 28.1 (Winter 1997): 111-133; "Global POSTmodernIZATION: The Intellectual, the Artist, and China's Condition," *boundary 2* 24.3 (fall 1997): 65-97.

3. In fact, the omission of the countryside and the replacement with cityscape in an urban thriller such as *DESPERATION* by Zhou, or what amounts to the very erasure of "China," was underscored by Fredric Jameson in his comment on this film. It is a "peculiar process whereby the identifying marks of all specific, named cities have been systematically removed, in order to foreground the generally urban." "The high-tech espresso bars and bullet trains of *DESPERATION*. thus dutifully block out a world of contemporary industrial production and consumption beyond all ideological struggle" ("Remapping Taipei," p. 121.)

4. In another telling instance, Zhang Yimou's film *KEEP COOL* (Youhua haohao shuo), a film about life in contemporary Beijing, was poorly received in the 1997 Venice Film Festival and captured no awards. Obviously, international film festivals prefer and award Zhang's films about rural, primitive China such as *THE STORY OF QIU JU*

5. See Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

6. See Sheldon H. Lu, ed., *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

7. As we write this essay, Zhou has turned away from filmmaking for the moment and is directing a TV series, *THE LEGEND OF EMPRESS LO* (Lihou chuanqi), a story based on early Chinese history (200 BC). Primetime TV drama is the most popular form of entertainment in contemporary China due the high rate of TV penetration in the average house-' hold. In cashing in on this lucrative entertainment business, Zhou's career move seems to bear certain similarities to the heroine's predicament in his own film *ERMO*.

8. James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 1.

9. Tony Rayns, "Ermo" (movie review), p. 48.

10. Bill Powell, "A Fast Drive to Riches," in the special issue "China after Deng," *Newsweek* (March 3, 1997), p. 32.

11. See Judith Marlene, "The World of Chinese Television," in *China at the Crossroads*, ed. Donald Altschiller (New York, The H. W. Wilson Company, 1994) p. 217. For discussions of China's TV programming, see James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); James Lull, "China's New Star. The Reformation on Prime-Time Television," in James Lull, *Inside Family Viewing: Ethnographic Research on Television Audiences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 96-145; James Lull and Se-Wen Sun, "Agent of Modernization: Television and Urban Chinese Families," in *World Families Watch Television*, ed. James Lull (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1988), pp. 193-236.

12. For a discussion of this aspect of American TV series, see Jane Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form, and Television Today," in *The Media Reader*, ed. Manuel Alvarado and John O. Thompson (London: BFI Press, 1990), pp. 253-264. For a recent study of televisuality, see John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

13. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

14. For essays on the interrelations of the global and the local in the post-Cold War era, see Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, ed., *GlobaULocal: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996).

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