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Comparative Literature, Vol. 53, No. 4. (Autumn, 2001), pp. 442-461.

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DAVID LEIWEI LI

“What Will Become of Us if We Don’t Stop?” *Ermo’s* China and the End of Globalization

IN HIS FAMOUS THESIS on “the end of history,” Francis Fukuyama noted the “ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture in such diverse contexts as the peasants’ markets and color television sets now omnipresent throughout China” (162). For Fukuyama the historical demise of communist utopias and the material signs of markets and commodities all over the world presage a global capitalist cornucopia that will resolve “all prior contradictions” and ensure the “universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (162). This Hegelian understanding of history is rejected by Samuel Huntington, who, though agreeing with him on the abatement of ideological and economic frictions at the end of the cold war, predicts “the clash of civilizations” and warns of a “Confucian-Islamic” threat to the West (21, 18). Huntington’s Weberian thinking reflects a tenacious Orientalist geocultural divide—uncannily resonant in the contemporaneous neo-Confucian triumphalism, however—that at once concedes the superiority of capitalism and challenges the Western symbolic monopoly regarding its origin and practice.¹ Likewise, Tu Weiming affirms a distinctive East Asian variety of state-sponsored capitalism while advocating a set of “Asian Values” as a “critical and timely reference for the American way of life” (“Multiple” 264). Resisting Huntington’s and Tu’s premise of civilizational difference, Aihwa Ong has recently proposed the notion of “flexible citizenship” wherein the elite nomadic Chinese subject turns into an emblematic figure of contemporary “capitalistic rationalities” and, to borrow from Arjun Appadurai, of “modernity at large.”²

¹ See Berger and Hsiao for an earlier probe into the neo-Confucian legitimization of East Asian development, Dirlík for a useful survey of its genealogy, and Pye’s recent revision of the thesis.

I wish to thank Wendy Larson, Tze-lan Sang, Sharon Carstens, Karen Ford, and Chuck Kleinhans for their reading of an earlier version, the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies at the University of Oregon for partial travel funding, and the multinational audience at the University of Singapore for their critical feedback.

² The notion of flexible citizenship as the cultural logic of transnationality is shared, according to Ong, by both individual subjects and nation-states (3-7 *passim*).

Within this diversity of recent pronouncements about forces of globalization that have both expanded and shrunk the world are two key questions. First, is capitalism becoming a universal form of culture that will override local practices historically circumscribed within the nation-state? An affirmative answer to this would imply a planetary cultural uniformity and a loss of local uniqueness. Second, is capitalism merely becoming a dominant mode of world economic production that only exacerbates national or regional cultural competitions? A nod to that would suggest the persistence of local distinctions impervious to the imperial presence of transnational capital. On the surface these seem to be concerns about universality and particularity, the destiny of the nation-state, and the predicament of individual and collective humanity. At their core, however, there appears to be a deeper preoccupation with the dialectic relationship between the economic and the cultural modes of production that our shared condition of globality has made especially urgent.

Ermo (1994), a Chinese film about the title character's quest for the biggest television set in her county, dramatizes with extraordinary cinematic power and precision the globalization theories, development trajectories, and modernity debates that I have laid out. This comedy is the work of Zhou Xiaowen, doubtless one of the least known directors of the Fifth Generation, whose trademark cinematography of untamed hinterlands has left an indelible mark on the Western mind.³ Unlike Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, who tend to divert their cinematic gaze from the madding pace of Chinese modernization through epic evocations of the archaic, the mythic, and the rural, Zhou adamantly refuses his generation's "primitive passions" by directing his lens to the immediate dynamism of a post-socialist China in a fervent embrace of the global market.⁴ It is true that in *Ermo* the village continues to figure an "earthbound" China, an ethnocentric continental mind-set and a land-locked way of life that have come to stand for the particularity of historical Chineseness (Wang). The project of a peasant woman purchasing her TV, however, already heralds a centrifugal outlook, inextricably infused with the work of globalization within and without Chinese boundaries, while inescapably burdened with the nation's underdevelopment. In this manner, *Ermo* broadly engages, on the one hand, the decentering of "Chineseness" in "peripheral," "greater," or "cultural" terms by suggesting an emergent global modern with its universal economic and political structures as well as what Raymond Williams felicitously calls "structures of feeling." On the other hand, *Ermo* treats with considerable rigor the protagonist's specific negotiations with this global modern as the irreducible idiosyncrasies of the local. If the global modern represents the culture of capitalism in its various stages and national manifestations, the film seems to want to persuade us that there are indeed "multiple

³ Ryans's critical biography and Ciecko and Lu's essay are helpful English sources on Zhou, while the special section devoted to him in the Chinese *Dangdai Dianying* (*Contemporary Film* 5 [1994]: 28-55) is highly informative. The video of the film is available in the U.S. through Arrow Releasing/Evergreen Entertainment. Citations of the film in this essay are based on that edition but with my translation. For explication of Chinese directorial generations, see X. Zhang (215-31).

⁴ For Rey Chow "the primitive" is a paradox of China's "backwardness" vis-à-vis "the West" (*Primitive* 22-23), while for Xudong Zhang the primitive turn is a Chinese directorial strategy to negotiate the global entertainment market (243, 386).

modernities” but perhaps no authentic “alternatives” to capital.⁵ In the enmeshed transnational movements of objects, ideas, currencies, and images that technologies of the market and media have made possible, differences persist only through uneven encounters. Ermo’s departure from the village and eventual return to her unsettled origin thereby enact an archetypal allegory of the contradictory human quest for mobility and stability, autonomy and community, whose achievement amid the brave new world disorder appears increasingly daunting.

I. Discovery: The Market, the City, and the 29" TV

The movie opens with a scrupulously framed shot of the peasant woman Ermo, wrapped in her dull yellow babushka, hawking twisted noodles at the outskirts of an unnamed northern Chinese village. Her visage is intermittently blocked by the traffic in the foreground—passing pedestrians, bicyclists, donkey carts, and finally a rusty run-down truck—mixed signs of mobility in agrarian stagnancy. Xiazi, the proud owner-driver of the only motorized vehicle in the village, offers his neighbor a ride to town for better sales, but Ermo declines. The camera follows her heading home on a dirt road, exchanging greetings with an old man squatting on a haystack, and passing old women sunning at the village boundary stones. As the audio shifts from chirping birds to crowing ravens, one senses an ominous change in a Third-World *Gemeinschaft*: the hamlet of face-to-face contacts, homogeneous habits, and ascribed status is being dislodged from its particular attachment to place. Indeed, Ermo is greeted by her moping husband (the former village chief now permanently disabled) with the news that the commune has refused to buy the baskets it commissioned Ermo to weave because unexpected hail has destroyed all the fruit. While husband and wife eat dinner, still shocked that a caprice of nature could impact the centralized planning of the co-op, their son Huzi is summoned by the daughter of Xiazi because “the show is on.” As Huzi rushes next door, the camera pans to a courtyard of children all wishing to catch a glimpse of Xiazi’s TV. Behind the children, in the distance, the old women are still basking in the setting sun, abiding by the celestial clock and traditional codes of living, set in stone, as it were, by the boundaries of the village. The young, however, are irresistibly drawn to the programmable time of the tube and the space beyond their physical confines.⁶

With stylistic economy, Zhou deploys the automobile and the television set, ubiquitous signs of modernity and postmodernity, respectively, to mark the material changes occurring in Chinese modes of economic and cultural production, just as he purposefully pairs the two neighboring families to contrast the fading state-regulated economy with the burgeoning market practices of the Deng reform era. Ermo’s husband, as he repeatedly reminds the villagers, is “chief no longer.” Physically handicapped and sexually impotent, he stands for the defunct

⁵ For “Chineseness” see Shambaugh’s *The Living Tree; The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* and, most recently, Chow’s “On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem” and the edition in which it appears. See Gaonkar, et al. on “Alternative Modernities,” and the special issue on “Multiple Modernities,” *Dædalus* 129. 1 (2000). For China and the modern, see Lee, Tang, and Rofel.

⁶ For contemporary Chinese TV culture in general, see Barmé and Zhao.

socialist economy, while Xiazhi, in his black leather jacket and fume-pumping truck, exudes the masculine energy and entrepreneurial possibilities of a post-socialist order. Between the old state and the new capital, equal opportunity impoverishment and “getting rich is glorious,” Ermo decides on the latter.⁷ The next morning she stacks her baskets and ropes them onto Xiazhi’s jalopy truck before hurling herself on top with nothing to secure her but gravity. As the bandwagon of capitalist mobility rolls out of the village gate, nearly throwing her overboard, Ermo screams “Mama” and begs it to stop. But the vehicle of progress and prosperity has a momentum of its own: once she’s on, Ermo is compelled to stay straddled, as the truck snakes through the winding highways of the yellow earth that once inspired Mao’s utopian peasant revolution. The revolution Ermo experiences is of an entirely different kind, however, for its engine of desire and development will ultimately uproot the peasantry from the soil that has anchored the Chinese filial ethos. When the truck honks its way into the crowd-packed county seat, Ermo seems to have survived the trip—her face lit up, she can hardly contain her excitement at the sight of the provincial city, now open to her discovery.

Principally a site of business transaction, the city is also for Ermo the site of unimagined informational flow and commodity consumption. After selling her baskets for far more than she would have gotten from the co-op, she steps into the general store where a merry crowd is gathered around a shelf of TV sets (see figure 1). Ermo cranes her neck from behind the audience of various ages and



Figure 1.
Love at first sight: Ermo encounters the 29" TV

⁷ The punch line encouraging the pursuit of wealth comes from Den Xiaoping. For an informative account of China’s participation in global capitalism under this slogan, see Greider, “Facai zhifu shi guangrong de” (*One World* 146-70), and “Dynamic Economy, Declining Party State” (Goldman and MacFarquhar 3-29). Notably, however, the film’s figurative opposition of the state and the capital downplays the Chinese government’s top-down policy of economic change as well as the crucial role of the state—reminiscent of other East Asian “economic miracle(s)” of earlier decades—in the formation of capital.

attires to catch a dubbed episode of *Dynasty*: “What will become of us if we don’t stop? What will happen if we just go on like this?” a Caucasian woman mouths in perfect Mandarin as a man kisses her, the sticker of the 29" TV prominently pasted above their foreplay on the screen. If the truck signifies for Zhou the “disembedding” consequence of modernity in the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction (Giddens 21), the television set is for him the agency of the “deterritorialization” symptomatic of contemporary globalization (Appadurai 27-47 *passim*). By capturing the Chinese peasantry’s fascination with TV, Zhou has juxtaposed Chinese modernization’s industrializing and urbanizing impulses with media disseminated postmodern “time/space compression” (Harvey). In this, Zhou seems to concur with formulations of globalization as the continuation of the unfinished project of modernity on an international scale (Robertson 61-83 *passim*). But he is less interested in how “regions and civilizations [are] being squeezed together” than in how such squeezing occurs with mounting intensity “inside nationally constituted societies” (Robertson 104). That the truck is able to move inside China’s geopolitical proper and that the American TV show *Dynasty* is able to infiltrate the Chinese countryside do not diminish for Zhou the remarkable absence of mutual traffic between the hyper-reality of American TV and the everyday reality of rural China. In fact, the gap between border-crossing media and the insurmountable materiality of national boundaries generates the most productive artistic tension of the film, as we shall see later.

While Xiazi luxuriates in the mobility of his truck and Ermo is transfixed by the mediated liberty of the 29" TV, Zhou wants to probe not only the discovery of unprecedented freedom as enabled by the flow of capital but also “development as freedom” (Sen). It is not coincidental that he deploys footage from *Dynasty* to fast forward an insight to which Ermo, and, allegorically, both the majority of Chinese in a fever of capital accumulation and fully fledged American consumers seem equally blind: “What will become of us if we don’t stop?” Although an abrupt power shortage literally curtails the answer to this overwhelming question, the blackout reminds the TV audience at the store and the moviegoers at large of the material limitations of a Chinese underdevelopment, while prophesying perhaps a deregulated Californian overdevelopment. Pressing the question about the end of capitalistic development—that is, its objective and outcome—when it is merely beginning in China, Zhou at once engages the fundamental dialectic of liberty and limits that globalization engenders and questions globalization’s apparently unquestionable promise of progress and prosperity.

“The TV is so big,” the awe-struck Ermo comments to Xiazi as the disappointed crowd disperses. “Yeah, the only one in the county seat. Even the head of the county cannot afford it,” Xiazi adds. “How come the foreigners speak Chinese?” Ermo quizzes further, to which Xiazi replies without apparent irony, “The TV speaks whatever language it pleases.” As a subject, the 29" TV is Zhou’s empty signifier of endless desire, capable of containing and conveying a myriad of cultural contents and aspirations. As an object, it becomes an emblem of wealth and status, prestige and power, currently obtainable through the acquisition of money. The 29" TV is for Zhou a Pandora’s box of Chinese capitalism in the abstract and Ermo’s Faustian bargain in particular.

Counting her earnings in bed, Ermo invites her husband to smell the new bills while rhapsodizing about the large screen, the beautiful color and the high resolution that “make visible,” in her words, “the foreigners’ blond hair one by one.” This scene, which recurs throughout the movie, strategically weaves together the complementary roles of money and modernity, the media and the market. As “a means of bracketing time and so of lifting transactions out of particular milieu of exchange,” money is in its developed form, as Anthony Giddens has it, essential to the “disembedding mechanisms associated with modernity” (24-25). Although rural China has been an integral part of the nation’s monetary system, Ermo’s money counting could, given the recent opening of the Chinese market, suggest a gendered appropriation of the means of liberating individuals from the agrarian bounds of land, family, and community. The scene foreshadows money’s power to erode patriarchy as well as a transformation of emphasis from the localized use-value of a subsistence economy to the exchange value of commodity markets. Money also functions, in the immediate context, as Ermo’s mode of deferral, a depository of delayed gratification whose fulfillment is directly linked to what Fredric Jameson describes as “the libidinalization of the market” (“Notes” 69). If the innocent reference to blond hair is an indirect expression of Ermo’s thwarted sexuality, the direct achievement of desire, ironically, has to be mediated through vicarious image consumption. The media and the market thus converge in the sexy symbol of the 29" TV with scenes of seduction from *Dynasty*, propagating a “new transnational culture-ideology of consumption,” as Jameson puts it, that is “changing traditional psychic habits and practices and sweeping all before it into something resembling the American Way of Life” (“Notes” 69).

II. Development: Production, Consumption, and Self-Possession

Ermo’s departure from the village to acquire the TV set is a journey of individual cultural development as well as a microcosmic narrative of contemporary Chinese economic development. Grafted onto the story and condensed in the protagonist of the film are thus the pressures of a Chinese medley of modernity, with its mixed modes of production, ways of consumption, and codes of ethics. Zhou figures those pressures that accompany China’s contradictory turn to capitalism exclusively through Ermo’s body. First of all the body is conceived as the instrument of a disciplining mind for the pursuit of money. The camera work drives home Ermo’s direct channeling of her repressed sexuality into noodle making: her feet are the manual blender of the dough, her arms the practical muscle power that presses the noodles into shape. While her moaning at work expresses the transmutation of love into labor, her productive pain does not lead to investments in advanced apparatus in the typical trajectory with which Max Weber justifies the rise and renewable enterprise of early capitalism. Instead, the accumulation of Ermo’s capital is directed towards the immediate consumption of the very medium of consumption, the TV set. Deeply rooted in a pre-credit village economy, while helplessly seduced by the power and pleasure of a distant yet dominant consumption ethic, Ermo cannot but embody the disparities of globalization at the local level.

Zhou makes explicit that Ermo has no shortage of the asceticism or abstinence necessary for the development of primitive capitalism. Not only does she work while others sleep, thus increasing the duration of “industrial time” for self-profit, but she also refuses to eat in restaurants because of her inarticulate conception that to do so would be a squandering of resources (Hareven). The tug of war at the door of the “Grand International Restaurant” (a shabby establishment in the provincial city that nevertheless caters both “Western” and “Chinese” foods) best illustrates the paradox of Ermo’s innate bodily self-discipline and her inordinate consumerist desires. As Xiazi and the restaurant owner literally drag her feet into the door, Ermo stubbornly backs off, insisting “it’s a waste of money,” for a penny saved from the rudimentary maintenance of the body will be a penny applied towards the purchase of the TV, her fundamental if not fundamentalist developmental project.

Not at all objecting to his wife’s version of a sweating and saving capitalism, the parasitic ex-chief, however, plots the expansion of their clay house. After Ermo dismisses his building scheme and scares away the contractor, her husband flies into a futile fit of rage: “The TV is an egg while the house is a hen. Why would one want an egg instead of a hen? Why don’t you act like a woman?” With her head still buried in the pile of money, Ermo retorts, “Why don’t you do it like a man?” insinuating both his sexual malfunction and economic dependency. Ermo’s command of her own productive labor and its monetary rewards has made a mockery of ancient patriarchy and her husband’s impotence to enforce it. “I’ve found a job with better pay,” she announces flatly. “I’m leaving for the city tomorrow morning. And I am going to buy the biggest TV in the county.”

What appears to be a row over Chinese home economics—the chicken and egg problem of properly spending the yields of labor—turns out to be a thoughtful reflection on the transformation of gender relations as well as the abrupt intrusion of a global consumer economy into a fading socialist economy whose primary role was to ensure basic survival under conditions of scarcity. While the ex-chief’s renovation project still falls under the rubric of basic “needs” (food, clothing, and shelter), Ermo’s purchasing project belongs more appropriately to the satisfaction of “wants.”⁸ The conflict between needs and wants, which Daniel Bell pinpointed as one of the major “cultural contradictions of capitalism” in the U.S. when America moved from an industrial to a postindustrial or consumer society, seems to have already prematurely and convulsively seized China, a society that is yet fully to industrialize. If the dynamo of American late capitalism seeks to resolve this contradiction by ceaselessly converting “wants” into “needs,” Ermo’s submission to this logic of capital and her husband’s rejection come to embody not merely individual or familial conflict in the modes of consumption, but the impossibility, generally speaking, for developing nations to follow the West’s unilinear model of modernization. Global capital inevitably infringes on, if not determines, local conditions of development, occasioning rapid social change and radical psychological confusion.⁹

⁸ Zhou considers the choice of the 29" TV crucial in contrasting the consumption gap in the earlier 1990s between Chinese urban dwellers, for whom it was no longer an item of unattainable luxury, and rural folk, for whom it remained a symbol of coveted wealth and status (W. Zhang 32).

For the moment, Ermo has emerged as the unambiguous victor of mass cultural consumption, though, unlike the perfect consumers of metropolitan centers, she is constitutionally unable to take "the waiting out of the wanting." While Zhou encourages here a reading of the husband's defeat as a triumph of the postmodern logic of fantasy and pleasure over the pre/modern logic of utility and subsistence, he also demonstrates that instant commodity satiation is not within Ermo's reach. The paucity of her resources and the time she needs to improve and develop herself entail an essential element of postponement. Such temporal delay is endemic to the geo-economic particularity of Ermo's place and complicates the preferability of a universal consumer culture. Zhou therefore embeds early in the film concerns as to whether Ermo will be able to catch up, whether she should stake an alternate course, and whether indeed she has a choice. The husband's defeat becomes at this juncture Zhou's tribute to the triumph of acquisitive spirit in post-socialist China over the hold of ascriptive status either secured by the communist party or the communitarian tradition. While seemingly sanguine about the transformative potential of capital, however, he refuses to portray a friction-free development or to overlook capital's drastic impact on the unique circumstance of China's motley modernity. Following Ermo's liberation from the village patriarchy and the symbolic masculinity she acquires through work in the city, the director focuses increasingly on the image of her body, because the body's multiple symbolic regimes of production, consumption, and subject formation constitute the locality where the effects of global capital are most evident.

Zhou juxtaposes two seemingly unrelated incidents, the injury of a donkey and the amputation of a worker's arm, to demonstrate the body's dual function as the manual engine of Chinese modernization as well as its tragic casualty. That Xiazhi's truck should sweep the donkey off the highway signifies more than just modernity's unstoppable march and the incompatibility of mule power and the age of mechanization. In fact, the fallen ass is not just a figure of disposability. Compensation for its death, paid through hard currency, ushers in a new ideology of money that will dominate all forms of exchange and seriously unsettle the valuation of the human body as well. In an analogy between an animal and human predicament reminiscent of Euro-American fin-de-siècle naturalism, Zhou evokes off camera the mangling of a noodle maker's arm in an electric blender at the shop where Ermo has been hired as the supervisor. Although this serves to highlight the peril of industrialization, casting doubt on the spell of technology (as does the failure of Xiazhi's truck to start at the time of this emergency), Zhou's primary purpose is not to show incidental damage caused by machines but the overarching effects of modernization. The maiming of the arm is accidental, but other volitionally inflicted wounds have consequences far more debilitating.

⁹ A related example very much in the news is the case of Falun Gong. Within a global-local nexus, we should be able to view the government crackdown not as an instance of internal or inherent Chinese repression (see "How China Beat Down FALUN GONG," *Time* 2 July 2001: 32-35). If the emergence of this religious and health movement and its mass appeal are due to an emptying of ontological meaning with the onset of global capital, the state violence against it only guarantees a free flow of transnational capital into China, which is anxious for membership in the "civilized" regimes of The World Trade Organization.

To save their co-worker, Ermo and her group volunteer to donate blood at the county hospital. In a prolonged facial close-up evocative of the one during her first visit to the city, we witness Ermo's helpless terror as her blood slowly fills the syringe. "Enough now. I am scared. Stop, please stop," a tearful Ermo entreats the nurse, who, like Xiazhi in the earlier scene, does not heed her plea, but hands her a receipt afterwards instructing Ermo to "collect her pay." Ermo is initially bewildered, for despite her hungry quest for money, she has not connected her act of helping a fellow human being survive with the idea of monetary compensation. But the scent of money and the no-fuss naturalness with which the nurse presents her the payment slip convinces her in no time that "a woman's blood will run away anyway" (as in menstruation) and "it would be a terrible waste" not to profit from it. Driven by instinct and interest, she has come to the recognition that the last frontier of her materialist conquest does not lie outside herself but within: the body as the reservoir of her entrepreneurial vitality is also an indispensable natural resource to be rationally developed.

It is unclear if the sequence of arm-amputation and blood-sale is Zhou's imagistic interpretation of Marx's theory of alienation or his cinematic dialogue on economic pillage and ecological insanity. What does seem evident is Ermo's intuitive subscription to a set of cultural assumptions undergirding American democracy. First among them, as C.B. Macpherson writes, is a conception of the subject as one who is the sole proprietor of his/her own person, owing nothing to society but capable of alienating his/her capacity for labor. Second, the subject is essentially independent from the will of others and free from any relations with people except those willingly entered into according to self-interest. Third, human society is seen as consisting of no more than a series of market relations (Macpherson 263-64). Clearly Ermo never precisely fits all aspects of what Macpherson calls "possessive individualism," and she remains unaware of her behavior's implications for the formation of polity. Her enthusiastic embrace of the market and her relentless pursuit of accumulation by all means necessary, however, adequately speak of the transformative impact of capitalist development on the individual body and psyche. Her assimilation of self-possessive values also makes us wonder how the mere fact of her being Chinese matters in cultural and national terms, and to what extent we can further entertain such articulations as civilizationally particular and geopolitically specific forms of capitalism and modernity. In Ermo's case at least, the varied modes of Chinese communalism—themselves products of historical rootedness in land, lineage, and loyalty, be it pre-modern Confucianism or modern state Communism—appear to be irreversibly undermined by the ascending logic of the global market and its companion gospel of individual mobility.

Capital mobility has unleashed Ermo's energy towards the achievement of economic autonomy, detaching her from the sterility of the village time/space and freeing her from the shackles of its gender stratification. It promises an openness for individual realization that begins to contradict the ethos of a collective cosmos used to contain as well as sustain the self. As "possessive individualism" is instrumental in Ermo's economic development, so does "affective individualism" of the kind that prizes romantic love become pivotal in her emotional fulfill-

ment.¹⁰ Zhou's exposition of capital as both an impersonal engine for remaking the world and the personal engine for remaking the self culminates in Ermo's and Xiazhi's love-making. Not surprisingly, the fulfillment of individual desire and the satiation of the body takes place in the truck on the winding highways of barren hills, suggesting not reproductive fecundity but a rejuvenation of the yellow earth through pure sexuality.¹¹ As night falls, Xiazhi stops his truck on the pretense of an unreparable mechanical failure and pounces on Ermo without any preliminary gestures of intimacy. A violent struggle ensues as Ermo disentangles herself from Xiazhi's passionate grip and plunges her hand right below his belt, instantly stopping him in his tracks. Still panting, Ermo slowly removes her babushka and the many layers of her winter clothing, as a perplexed Xiazhi looks on passively. The camera cuts to a long shot of the truck in a no man's land as a swirl of silvery dirt gently lifts against the dark blue of the night. The rhythmic ecstasy of Ermo follows as a haunting flute in the familiar tune of her hawking slowly takes over, recalling the now unspoken words that once accompanied that tune: "buying my twisty noodles."

For Zhou, this consummation represents the pinnacle of Ermo's self-actualization and her exercise of sexual agency free from male intimidation. The subtle and poetic affirmation of the adulterous affair significantly transcends the imperatives of traditional morality, powerful in the dynasties and still residual in rural China, where the value of women depends on the perception of their virtue if not their virginity.¹² It is not that Zhou approaches his characters in an amoral frame of reference. Rather, he is presenting an emerging ethical alternative that favors individual preference over goods conceived in concrete social networks and immutable teleologies of life. Since the Chinese are not renowned for their anxiety regarding salvation, neither Ermo nor Xiazhi seem concerned, at least in that Edenic moment, with the consequences of their coupling. Indeed, such coupling is, as the narrative buildup adequately illustrates, the consequence of capital mobility, social disembedding, and the privileging of the virtue of the sovereign self at the heart of a globalizing consumer culture. Changes in economic modes of production are accompanied by similar changes in popular ethos. If the feudal codes of agrarian China bind women to the whipping post of chastity, it is the notions of chastity and monogamy themselves and not the gender exclusivity with which they are historically conceived that have become suspiciously outdated. Perhaps the Chinese modernist proposal of gender equality based on reciprocal ethical restraint at the turn of the last century has become inescapably anachronistic at the turn of the new millennium, for China, however belatedly, has reached the end of history "after virtue" where the absolute individual rules (MacIntyre).¹³

¹⁰ The term is from Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*, quoted in and elaborated by Berman (59-60) and Giddens (121-22).

¹¹ Here Zhou could be alluding to the association of automobiles and adolescent sexuality in American popular culture, given his demonstrated knowledge of it in the film. The truck clearly symbolizes the space of mobility beyond the village confines.

¹² The premodern conception of virtue was tied to a chaste female body—virginity prior to marriage, sexual exclusivity in marriage, and asexuality upon widowhood (Larson 74-75).

The love-making is in many respects the climax of Ermo's romance with modernization and globalization, a Chinese infatuation with capitalism after puritanical communist repression, and the liberation of an unregistered civilizational pubescence from its historical encumbrances. However, having captured this rapture of capital mobility, Zhou ruthlessly returns his audience to the rueful existence his heroine has to face. In the seedy hotel room that Xiazhi has reserved, Ermo looks at her face in the broken looking glass, the cubist image mirroring either a tormented realization of a hitherto suppressed individual or the schizophrenia of capitalism itself (see figure 2). Zhou has created an uncanny intertextual resonance between this secret rendezvous and the previous clip from *Dynasty* to hint at a temporary convergence of media and life narratives. Ermo has indeed gone from a bewildered fascination with television romance to an enactment of her own version of that romance. Similarly, she seems to have become accustomed to seeing herself through the eyes of televisual media and the products it promotes. With great pride, she shows Xiazhi her newly purchased bra, muttering with glistening eyes, "Don't I look like a city girl?" In response, Xiazhi unpacks his gift of anti-wrinkle cream and smears it in generous blobs onto her semi-naked body, chanting all along its youth-enhancing magic like a salesman for Revlon. Zhou's deadpan delivery of the scene conjures up the shrill image of "a truncated and warped modernization," or "the modernism of underdevelopment," as Marshall Berman writes, that is "forced to build on fantasies and dreams of modernity, to nourish itself on an intimacy and a struggle with mirages and ghosts" (232). In their anxious assimilation of the culture of late



Figure 2.
Sighting the split self

¹³ Both Lu Xun (1881-1936) and Hu Shi (1891-1962) have advocated the applicability of virtue to both men and women (Larson 79), thus revising a gender-exclusive personal morality in traditional China. However, they did not share and could not anticipate Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of modernity and the ethical "emotivism" at its core.

modernity and “the global city” (Sassen *Global City*), both Ermo and Xiazi have submitted themselves to the imperializing eye/I of a transnational consumerism, whose regime of spectacle, surface, and sexuality constitutes their simultaneous “subjection and subjectivation” (Balibar). For some, Ermo’s emergence as a sexualized subject of desire may be progress from gender erasure under “state feminism,” but one cannot but question if the rampant commodification of desire in present-day China can really be construed as a space for women’s liberation.¹⁴

Zhou does not engage the question of commodification in gender-specific terms; rather he couches it in the language of universal humanism. Stunned by Ermo’s bruised veins, apparently caused by her repetitive blood drawing, Xiazi shouts, “You sell blood again? Don’t you want to live anymore?” The seducer of Ermo’s self-possessive and affective individualist yearnings has emerged unexpectedly as the voice of sobriety against the frenzy of her pursuit and the extent of her dehumanization. Shocked and stuttering, he calls her blood sale an act of “barbarism” and volunteers his “loads” to buy her the 29" TV and to redeem her humanity. What he could not have imagined is Ermo’s resolute rejection.

Back at the “Grand International,” it is Ermo’s turn to treat. As a reluctant Xiazi begins picking at the tableful of dishes, Ermo starts settling their scores:

Ermo: “I’m paying back feelings and favors.”

Xiazi: “What on earth do you mean?”

Ermo: “Let me tell you, I don’t sell my body. I’ll earn the money I need. I don’t want your secret subsidy. Everyone at the noodle shop says you are my provider. I am the only one in the dark.”

Xiazi: “What if I indeed am?”

Ermo: “Fine. Get a divorce, and let me marry a real man.”

Xiazi: “This is certainly a good idea . . . but it is such a big thing . . . a good idea for sure . . .”

Ermo: “Why don’t you piss off? I’ve figured it out. You gave the shop owner ten yuan additional for fifty days. The total is five hundred yuan. Here you are. You count it . . . I’m not that cheap. That amount’s only good for a donkey. Waiter, check please.”

Although she is willing to alienate her labor and blood, Ermo is not ready to violate the integrity of her sexuality, the validity of her libidinal fulfillment, and the romantic projection of her marriage with Xiazi in order ultimately to sanctify her affections and aspirations. With one foot still mired in the traditional structures of feeling that value and valorize reciprocity, memory, legitimacy, and stability, Ermo refuses the final leap towards total reification.

Her defiance of Xiazi appears almost flamboyant, especially if viewed in relation to another *Dynasty* clip near the movie’s end in which a woman in a compromising position is begging her boss for a raise. Perhaps Ermo’s resistance to the system of absolute exchange is exceptional, reflecting an incomplete Chinese modernization in matters of rationality and affectivity. Perhaps her gesture is merely Zhou’s nostalgic idealization of the local “non-exchangist practices” in late capitalist globalization (Lowe 173). The implicit contrast between women in

¹⁴ In her intriguing proposal for “women’s public sphere in China,” Mayfair Yang seems optimistic that the market, while returning “some women to the domestic sphere,” will enable through its “desiring production” “women’s culture, psychology, sexuality and discourse” (63-64). However, the Chinese state, which once had the most progressive laws on women’s equal rights and had eliminated polygamy, prostitution, and other forms of violence against women (Yang 37), is witnessing the comeback of such violence and the weakened enforcement of women’s rights with the surge of the market.

fledging and advanced capitalist societies seems to illuminate the different degrees to which their individual consciousnesses have been saturated by the market. There is beauty to Ermo's defiance, a beauty consistent with her recalcitrant will and dignity, a beauty derived from the material and ethical solidity of disappearing China. However, such a gendered beauty of transcendent virtue and blind dedication, as the film later makes obvious, is neither individually desirable nor socially sustainable in a globalizing economy.¹⁵

III. Denouement: Alternative Readings of *Ermo's End*

Just as Ermo breaks up with Xiazi where the dusty highway and the narrow mountain path part, so Zhou shifts his film from an exuberant departure from the village to a determined return of the native, thus shunning the Hollywood narrative of romantic sunsets and the development narrative of a global village where the sun never sets. Such a narrative resolution helps tease out the complex issues of contemporary globalization and its equally contradictory consequences.

One is tempted, first of all, to situate Ermo's repatriation to the village within contemporaneous populist outcries, such as *China Can Say No* (1996), against what Bourdieu terms "the tyranny of the [world] market."¹⁶ But Zhou is far from reviving a nationalist fantasy of *Gemeinschaft* after China's historical opening. He is more interested in exploring if social alternatives are available for such a "no" to be materially viable. In suspending Ermo and Xiazi from further migration to the coast, where their intimate consummation is likely, the director could be commenting on the institutional and individual readiness for globalization. Because globalization occasions a significant decline of formal citizenship, Holston and Appadurai have argued, struggles for rights to the city have become seminal in developing nations and democracies in that they empower the poor to "mobilize around the redistributive rights-claims of citizenship" (196-97). Ermo's return suggests, by contrast, the foreclosed struggle of rural migrants to attain benefits reserved for urbanites. The coming of the markets to China cannot readily con-

¹⁵ When asked to comment on Ermo and the representation of women in Chinese films, Zhou remarked, "What attracts me is the self-consciousness of peasant women that Ermo stands for. Ermo is self-reliant and does not live for others. Her doggedness, independence, and active pursuit, though unable to radically alter her living environment and social status or help her acquire a full sense of the self, make Ermo simultaneously admirable and pitiful . . . The image of obedient women is more a supposition of traditional ethics. It creates a misperception, an aesthetic one at that, which has convinced the audience, the directors, and the critics that obedience and endurance are indeed the essence of Chinese women. If we look beyond the colored lens, we shall find that women of such virtue no longer live in our society" (qtd. W. Zhang 30, 31). While clearly beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that *Ermo* is just one among many mainland films that center the radical social transformation brought about by global capital on the figure of women. *Liangjia funü* (*Good Women* 1985), *Nüren de gushi* (*Women's Story* 1987), *Nüren, Taxi, Nüren* (*Woman, Taxi Woman* 1991), *Dushen Nüren* (*A Single Woman* 1991), *Xianghun nü* (*The Woman from the Lake of Scented Soul* 1992), and *Qiuju da guansi* (*The Story of Qiuju* 1992) come immediately to mind. Gender, sexuality, and family are equally central for directors from Taiwan (Yang Dechang/Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang), Hong Kong (Ann Hui, Wong Kar-wai), and Chinese America (Ang Lee) in what seems a transnational Sinic cinematic dialogue on modernity and morés.

¹⁶ Song Qiang, et al., *Zhongguo Keyi Shou Bu* (*China Can Say No*), Beijing: Zhonghua Gongshang Lianhe Books, 1996. Also of interest is Berry's "If China Can Say No, Can China Make Movies?"

vert country denizens into citizens by making them dwellers of new urban centers and helping them achieve national membership through access to the state's allocation of socio-economic resources. Known as the problem of "floating population" (Li), this failed conversion, as Dorothy Solinger makes cogent, stands parallel to the sharp decline of the welfare state in the West. Where "the [American] welfare state" or "[Chinese] state socialism" fails to "allay the influence of the market . . . capitalism, rather than promoting citizenship, may be antagonistic and detrimental to it" (Solinger 278). Ermo's agrarian retreat thus challenges the assumption that capitalism and democracy are twin engines of development and that capitalism necessarily fosters laissez-faire economic competition, egalitarian governance, and the guarantee of human rights. As a failed exemplar of "flexible citizenship" (Ong), Ermo's very "inflexibility" heightens the contradiction between the instantaneous mobility of finance capital, on the one hand, and the overall immobility of the human body, on the other, that the forces of globalization have only intensified; the regulation of rural influx to the cities within China, it is worth noting, bears striking similarity to the control of immigrants at U.S. borders.

Aside from viewing it as symptomatic of an institutional failure, we can parallel Ermo's return with the resurgence of neo-Confucianism. This would allow us to inject individual agency into our protagonist while reaffirming a notion of "Chineseness." Zhou seems to accomplish this with a determined contextualization of culture as a place-particular practice. Therefore, when Ermo unloads her bundle of thick quilt on the family bed, the camera appears to suggest that she has literally re-embedded herself in the grounding order of the Chinese local after her disembedding foray into global modernity. Perhaps she has now reconciled with human finitude and the limits of capital. Perhaps she has recognized that ascriptive circumstances can only be transcended to a certain degree, nature can only be exploited to a certain degree, and her rapacious acquisition in the context of the market, instead of being a vehicle of her personal choice and freedom, has turned her into a vassal of possession.¹⁷ She has perhaps grasped ever so intuitively Amartya Sen's argument that economic freedom alone may not necessarily prolong life spans or proffer more fruitful existences.¹⁸ Consequently, she has decided to say "no" to the unfettered market rationality and "no" to the unencumbered individual affectivity by embracing once more the ideal of a Confucian mean in the spatial and temporal scheme of the village, with its routinized domestic chores, demands of making a living, not to mention its mandatory codes of ethics. To simulate documentary and narrative authenticity,

¹⁷ The market "rarely has anything to do with choice or freedom," as Fredric Jameson reasons, "since those are all determined for us in advance." We select among new model cars or television programs, but "we can scarcely be said to have a say in actually choosing any of them" (*Postmodernism* 266).

¹⁸ For Sen, the exercise of development should transcend its exclusively economic, technological, and industrial objectives. It should be geared towards overcoming deprivations and enhancing "substantive freedoms in judging individual advantage and in evaluating social achievements and failures" (285). Deeply committed to the complementarity of individual agency and social arrangements, Sen is concerned "with our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reasons to value" and with widening "the range of human choice" beyond the tyranny of the market (290; 295-96).

Zhou has to subject his characters to a Chinese agrarian system of discipline of which their earlier affective abandon makes a mockery. After Xiazi deliberately has himself caught patronizing prostitutes in the city, thus exonerating Ermo of the potential stigma of the scarlet letter, the two neighboring families apparently reclaim their tranquility. They enjoy the Spring Festival fanfare together, bring the 29" TV back home together, and the ex-chief invites the whole village over for the biggest TV show ever.

Harmony and happiness seem to smile again on the descendants of the yellow emperor, but this picture of Ermo's China is a far cry from the Singaporean model of East Asian modernity that energizes much argument in favor of "Asian Values." Although the seeming closeness of the village might resemble such a neo-Confucian construct as the "concentric circles" of "self, family, society, nation, world, and cosmos," its cloistral closure defies at every level the promise of Tu's circular ideal ("Human Rights" 302). The self looks unfulfilled: Ermo passes out before the show and sleeps through most of the program. The family seems dysfunctional: the bedding has to be removed to make room for the TV. The society becomes more competitive: Xiazi's wife now inquires after an even bigger TV. The Singaporean model of the strong and caring state that supposedly secures for its citizenry a high material standard of living and mandates in return its moral discipline is nowhere in sight. And finally, the world beyond comes through the entertaining and infomercial tube, which draws in the peasants under Ermo's roof only to dissipate them with private dreams of glossy commodities and a gaming universe that they cannot adequately comprehend, respectfully disavow, or realistically claim. The concentric circles of a Confucian universe obviously lack a center that holds, while the earthbound solidity of historical Chineseness is melting into air. The desirability and applicability of the Singaporean model aside, Ermo's China seems to have made dubious the claim for the endurance of a transnational and transhistorical Sinic consciousness and its materialization in distinctive capitalisms and alternative modernities.¹⁹

As many have reasoned, theses of geocultural uniqueness and civilizational conflicts, of which the neo-Confucian revival and Huntingtonian hallucination are representative, simply ignore the theoretical overlap of ideas that originate from different parts of the world.²⁰ In this vein, both the so-called "Asian Values" of familialism and communalism and the "Euro-American Values" of equality, liberty, and democracy suffer egregiously from a reduction of historical complexity that only helps perpetuate authoritarian rules and cultural exclusivity. A more enabling conception would approach cultural values as products of their own geopolitical and historical circumstances as much as ideals whose power of appeal, paradoxically perhaps, resides in their imperfect realization in practice. In this way, the accentuated "Asianism" or "Americanism" of cultural discourses would become a usable resource to encourage a committed exercise of their purported potentials regardless of the sites of practice.

¹⁹ Since the success of Singapore hinges on its unique formation as a small city-state, this model is hardly "reproducible" in larger nation-states such as China (Ong 208).

²⁰ Both Sen (227-28) and de Barry (1-16) emphasize, for example, the universal origins of democratic ideals and the need for a comparative model of cultural convergence.

While Ermo's return to the village might suggest the specific holding power of Confucian values, in fact it can be read as an argument for cross-cultural and transnational values that preceded the full entrenchment of the global market. We may celebrate the recovery of familial integrity with Ermo's return as a triumph of worthwhile values, but we may also note its resonance with the well-known Victorian narrative recuperation of wayward women into patriarchy. In other words, Ermo's individual agency is achieved within predetermined gender hierarchies; the re-masculation of the ex-chief, his confident address to the villagers assembled under his roof in front the 29" TV Ermo has paid for, betrays just that inequity. If this conjunction shows the gap between the universality of positive residual values and the particularity of its practice, Zhou wants to complicate it further by inquiring after the precise status of the "habitus" (Bourdieu *Outline*). That is, he intends to find out if the kinds of cultural capital that we inherit from a prior historical mode of production are capable of regenerating forms of individual agency appropriate to our globalizing planet.²¹

Recall Ermo's question the first time she sees the 29" TV. She asks why the foreigners speak Chinese, to which Xiazi responds, "the TV speaks whatever language it pleases." By the time she has saved enough to buy the set at the store, Ermo is again puzzled, this time asking "why they [the Chinese TV hosts] speak the foreign language [English]." When Xiazi explains that "they'll have to speak a bit of foreign language every day," Ermo wonders if "they are going back to speaking Chinese afterwards." The question Zhou is pursuing by the film's conclusion is no longer "what will become of us if we do not stop?" The question is whether we can speak the lingua franca of global consumption just "a bit every day," whether we can realistically "go back to speaking [a native pre-capitalist] Chinese," and whether stopping is indeed a desirable option or a reluctant sign of imposed deprivation.

In the deepest cultural sense, globalization is probably nothing but the planetary domination of the values of market divinity and individual mobility based on an uneven capacity of subject nations and peoples to consume natural resources, material goods, and human services. Ermo may have reasons to value the ontological security the village once provided, but Zhou makes palpable that such psycho-social stability is not at all viable in a world of constant change. Now that her noodle-making strainer is turned into a makeshift TV antenna, even the basic means of her production seems to have been emptied of its meaning. Despite her preference, Ermo cannot truly return to the site of an original producer society to observe its material limits and social regulation of desire (Bauman, *Life* 153-54). Global capital, as the process of "creative destruction" and the "reproduction of social life through commodity production," has forced her strainer's obsolescence (Harvey 343), signifying not only the near impossibility of small-scale local economy but also a way of life dependent on it. As the Ford-ferrying

²¹ See in general Sung-Joo Han's edition on changing values in Asia. It is my view that there are strong limitations to the fulfillment of values that are stripped of their material and institutional conditions of reproduction. For this reason, I tend to sympathize with Jameson's pessimistic assessment, when he remarks that "critiques of consumption and commodification can only be truly radical when they specifically include reflection, not merely on the problem of the market itself but, above all, on the nature of socialism as an alternative system" (*Postmodernism* 207).

land surveyors and joint-venturers loom upon Ermo's yellow earth, Zhou seems to say that Nabisco and Monsanto are not far behind.

As an arrested producer without prospects to sustain a valid mode of economic life, Ermo is also an abortive consumer without the command of its essential cultural grammar, for arrival and gratification are death in another name. No wonder she looks lethargic and lost, her image now imperceptibly blended with that of the old women squatting at the village boundary slabs. Having gone global with all the sound and fury she could muster, Ermo is eventually condemned to the role of the local in a world where, as Zygmunt Bauman has it, "the 'globals' set the tone and compose the rules of the life-game," while the locals are fixed in their place, "losing their meaning-generating and meaning-negotiating capacity" (*Globalization* 2-3). Such infiltration of cosmopolitan consciousness at the individual level and such incongruities of its materialization on the international scale are for the director of *Ermo* the crux of a contemporary universal contradiction whether in inner cities or reservations in the U.S., or in the Chinese hinterlands. Rather than seeking a neat narrative resolution, Zhou deploys a series of intercutting visual frames and audio tracks in the film's closing to enhance his picture of a seriously divided "one world, ready or not" (Greider).

An aerial shot of the snow-covered village in sleepy darkness fades to the chill of Ermo's uninsulated house where the entire family is huddled together in heavily padded cotton jackets, snoring (see figure 3). A steamy shower scene from *Dynasty* fills up the 29" TV as the lovers finish their bargain of money and sex and embark on the journey of "having more fun." Like the bubbly fluidity of the shower that seems to smirk at Ermo's muddy flat without running water, the misty heat of sexual excitement on the screen seems to jeer at her state of exhaustion—the laughter of the TV lovers lingering over Ermo's sleeping family. As they sleep the central Chinese TV station winds up its programming with "weather forecasts



Figure 3.

The world speeds by them: Ermo and family sleep through the TV show

of world cities." On the map of the world in the background, Beijing, Tokyo, Bangkok, Sydney, Karachi, Cairo, Moscow, Frankfurt, Paris, London, and New York all zoom out of their respective locations, performing a cartography of mobile capital connections, or an "interurban geography" that calls our attention to their distinctive landmarks and disparate locations.²² After the metropolitan cities exit their planetary televisual stage, and the huge Chinese characters, "Zai Jian" or "See you again" fill the 29" screen, we see what Ermo has not quite seen: the world is speeding by her while she remains trapped in her body and stranded in her locality. Ermo's predicament of impossible venture and impossible return turns out to be Zhou's apt allegory not only for China but also for all the locals of the world, East and West, North and South, who are thrown into the giddy whirlpool of global capital over which they have little control. Only the cacophonous buzz of the sign-off rouses Ermo from her Rip Van Winkle like slumber, and alerts us to the gaping economic, social, and spatial polarization in a paradoxically interlinked "post-revolutionary" globe.²³ Face expressionless and eyes wide open, Ermo stares at the TV, which has nothing on but static snow, an image of flickering uncertainty and chaotic velocity that bespeaks the human condition in globalization.

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²² As part of an emerging global grid, "interurban geography" joins major international financial and business centers (Sassen, "Spatialities" 225), but omits zones of the rural and the inner city.

²³ By "post-revolutionary" I refer both to American independence, with the Jeffersonian articulation of the Enlightenment concept of equality, and to the Chinese revolution, with Mao's vision of a Marxist communist utopia. Both social ideals, divergent as they are, hinge on the same rational orderings of collective human harmony and happiness which, it seems to me, have been turned into some form of the "post," functionally defunct under global capital.

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