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Worlds in Fragments: Culture and the Market Under Postsocialist Modernity

China has seldom loomed so large in the Western imagination. During the early stages of the post–Cultural Revolution era of "reform and opening" (*gaige-kaifang*) the mainstream view of China in the West wavered between patronizing approval for Deng Xiaoping's introduction of limited market reforms and equally condescending disapprobation for the continuation of authoritarian political rule. And yet, by the turn of the century a scant two decades or so later, China suddenly appeared as an economic juggernaut destined to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy. Whether viewed with alarm or with excitement at the possibility of cashing in on China's success, what is now unquestioned is that China has transformed from a secondary player in the second (or third) world to a central force—perhaps eventually *the* central force—in the global capitalist system.

This book is about Chinese culture during the latter stage of the reform era, when cultural production itself went from being largely socialized to mostly marketized. My study makes no claim whatsoever to being comprehensive—no single book could possibly do that—nor even to being representative. Instead, through close readings of a relatively small number of critical essays, films, and works of fiction, I hope to examine how various cultural texts have reflected, and reflected *on*, the "going to market" of Chinese culture and society in general during the postsocialist period. In this introductory chapter, I argue that not only have the forces of marketization resulted in a new cultural logic in China, but this development is part of a global condition of postsocialist modernity and must be understood in the context of the history of the global capitalist system, which not only transforms China but also is thereby transformed. To comprehend the processes shaping Chinese culture in the market age, we do not necessarily have to make recourse to relatively recent academic and media discourses such as postmodernity and globalization so much as we need to reexamine the fundamental nature of capitalist modernity, the meaning of a market society, and the ways these articulate themselves to a previously socialist mode of production. In the realm of culture, we find that the postsocialist condition is fraught with experiences of fragmentation and anxiety in addition to the awakening of new desires and identities. In terms of material economic practices, as I will argue in my concluding chapter, global postsocialist modernity may represent a new era of globalized barbarism, or it may eventually prove not to be as "post" as it at first seemed.

The Culture Industry and Market Reforms

China's reform era—from late 1978 to the end of the century and beyond—has from the start been characterized by the ever-expanding reach of the market in society. The initial market reforms of Deng Xiaoping were limited to production in rural households and villages, where formerly collectivized farmers were allowed to sell their surplus produce privately on the local market and villages were encouraged to set up small industries and keep any profits for themselves. Throughout the Deng era and the Jiang Zemin era that followed, these market reforms expanded inexorably (if not steadily) to the point that the Chinese economy was formally integrated into the global capitalist system by its admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO) at the turn of the century.

Notwithstanding the apparent continuity signaled by the "reform era" appellation, however, it was not until the early 1990s that the fundamental *cultural* logic of the People's Republic of China underwent a basic market-driven rupture. The profound political and economic changes of post-Mao China had resulted in significant new cultural developments as early as the late 1970s; yet, despite major innovations in cultural expression during the 1980s, from the aesthetic accomplishments of the "Fifth Generation" in cinema to new directions such as the "root-seeking" (*xungen*) and avant-garde (*xianfeng*) movements in literature, the circumstances of cultural production through the 1980s remained shielded from the effects of the market. For example, even major Fifth Generation films such as *Huang tudi* (Yellow earth; dir. Chen Kaige, 1984) and *Hong gaoliang* (Red sorghum; dir. Zhang Yimou, 1987), regardless of their innovations in cinematic style and narrative approach, were nevertheless produced within the existing socialist studio system, the filmmakers being salaried employees of the state whose constraints did not include an overriding concern with box-office profitability. Similarly, writers of literature remained largely in the state sector of cultural production, occupying positions and drawing salaries according to the literary institutional system that had been established in 1950 based on the Soviet model. This socialist Chinese literary system met its demise not at the beginning of the reform era in the late 1970s, nor during the period of intense cultural innovation in the 1980s, but rather in the 1990s, when it became largely irrelevant.[1]

There are many reasons for viewing the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s—specifically, the period of 1989–92—as a turning point in the history of Chinese culture. Some observers take 1989 as a pivotal moment due to the student protests and the June 4 violence in Tiananmen Square. The resulting disillusionment and cynicism among intellectuals and artists, according to this line of thinking, led to an abandonment of high cultural ideals and an embrace of commercialism and the profit motive in the following decade. However, in terms of the underlying forces shaping cultural production, 1992 serves as an even more important turning point. In January of that year, Deng Xiaoping made his historic "southern tour" of the coastal special economic zones that had been on the cutting edge of free market economic reforms. With this tour Deng symbolically reaffirmed the course of the reforms and removed any lingering hesitation in the state bureaucracy after the turmoil of 1989. In the Fourteenth Party Congress later in 1992, the "socialist market economy" became the official label for the new organization of social resources, and various policies were instituted to extend market reforms to new areas of the economy. Most significantly, the culture industry was for the first time placed on the front lines of economic restructuring, and thus in the course of the next few years cultural production in general was subjected to the imperatives of market competition.

The various texts of criticism, fiction, and cinema examined in the present study come almost exclusively from the period after Deng's southern tour in 1992, with the exception of a few earlier works that serve as context and contrast. A similar political endpoint in cultural history that frames most of the content of this book would be the enshrining of Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" in the amended constitution of the PRC in 2004.[2] The "theory" of the Three Represents states that the Party must represent the development of China's "advanced productive forces" (code for capital) and China's "advanced culture" in addition to the interests of the masses. In his address on the Three Represents to the Sixteenth Party Congress, on the matter of culture Jiang emphasized the importance of "encouraging diversity" and "letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend," thus endorsing the already well-established trend of cultural pluralization (more on that later). The dependence of this diversity on "the growing socialist market economy" was clear from Jiang's demand that the Party "deepen cultural restructuring," "improve the system of markets for cultural products," "deepen the internal reform of cultural enterprises and institutions and gradually establish a management system and operational mechanism favorable to arousing the initiative of cultural workers, encouraging innovation and bringing forth more top-notch works and more outstanding personnel."[3] The promulgation of the Three Represents did not signal any dramatic new direction but simply consolidated existing trends and stamped them with Jiang's own ideological authority. However, for the purposes of the present study, the incorporation of the Three Represents (and thus the legitimacy of capital and of the emerging private culture industry) into the PRC constitution in 2004 serves well as a bookend for the transitional period begun in 1992 and an indication that the new, marketized cultural conditions of the intervening years had grown entrenched enough to become the law of the land.

Many of the details of the institutional restructuring that began in the early 1990s are discussed in later chapters, but an important point to be made at the outset is that market reforms in China have not been dominated by the privatization of entire industries in the sense that happened, say, in Russia during the same period. Instead, many changes occurred as publicly owned enterprises were forced to earn profits and adapt to market demand, while others resulted from the emergence of new private cultural enterprises that often found ingenious ways to exist symbiotically with, and to find shelter in the legitimacy of, the state sector itself.

In the arena of literary production, for example, the existing publicly owned literature journals that published new authors and helped to extend the careers of established ones faced ever-fiercer competition with each other and with the explosion of new, lower-brow magazines and other forms of popular entertainment.[4] As for books, all publishing houses remained in the state sector, but the market demands for entertainment and variety were met partially through the manipulations of private book dealers (*shushang*), who worked with publishing houses to get around the ongoing restrictions imposed by state ownership in order to take advantage of profitable opportunities. For example, the practice of book number trading (*maimai shuhao*), by which publishing houses and private dealers bypassed restrictions imposed by the state system of distributing Chinese Standard Book Numbers (CSBN, the Chinese version of the International Standard Book Number [ISBN]), though technically illegal, spread through the publishing industry. In this way a book could be conceived, printed, and distributed entirely with private funds but have the nominal stamp of a licensed state-owned publisher, which would profit only from the sale of its name and its officially allotted book number. Through such transactions, as well as the related phenomenon of “cooperative publishing” (*banzuo chuban*), the literature industry as a whole reacted to the profit imperative imposed by market competition.[5]

The film industry offers a parallel case of complex new public-private arrangements rather than wholesale privatization. All the major studios in China remained under state ownership, and domestic film productions could be distributed only under one of the official studio labels. At the same time, the studios were now expected to be profitable, even as their environment became vastly more competitive after the introduction of imported Hollywood and Hong Kong blockbusters beginning in 1994. The studios were thus given the incentive to produce as entertaining a product as possible, and one way they met the demand was to work with private film production companies. As we will see in Chapter Six, by the end of the 1990s some of the most popular films in China were actually private productions that simply shared the label of an official studio in order to receive domestic distribution. As in the case of book number trading, the state-owned enterprise earns its profits not by creating a product but essentially by selling its own official legitimacy and then sharing in the product's success.

Postmodernity or Modernity?

In the face of all the changes sweeping the Chinese economy and cultural scene by the early 1990s, some Chinese critics began to distinguish the "new era" (*xin shiqi*) of 1978–89 from the "post–new era" (*hou xin shiqi*) that was dawning.[6] The "post" of this post–new era was also linked to the suggestion that China was entering a *postmodern* phase in its cultural life, as the essentially modern intellectual ideologies of the 1980s, and the modernist works of art that accompanied them, were felt to have been surpassed and discredited. Much English scholarship on Chinese culture since 1989 takes a similar view, with postmodernism as the guiding theoretical approach.[7] Indeed, the concept of postmodernism is often useful in the analysis of contemporary Chinese culture. As I will argue in the next chapter, there is a fundamental sense in which postsocialist China is intrinsically postmodern, insofar as it closes the door on the particular vision of modernity offered by the Maoist revolution. It is also true that an aesthetic of postmodernism has been evident in various art movements in China since the 1980s, and that postmodernism as an academic theoretical discourse became common in some quarters by the early 1990s.[8] Finally, it is obvious that by the turn of the century the sort of globalized society of superficial media spectacle that we often associate with postmodernity was very much in evidence in China, particularly in its largest and richest cities.

However, despite all the evidence for the existence of postmodernism in China, to say that postmodernity is postsocialist society's fundamental condition would be misleading. In fact, when the discourse of postmodernism became prevalent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the term often seemed to be used interchangeably with *modernism* to simply point to some vaguely avant-garde quality. As Gao Minglu notes, in China "postmodernity has been just an alternative version of modernity. Postmodernity was perceived as a newer version of modernity proper, instead of as an essential critique of or a break with it."[9] While postmodernism as an aesthetic or critical pose may have been adopted by various Chinese artists and writers, its meaning in relation to modernism and modernity is very different than in the Western discourse on postmodernity. As a result, bearing in mind Fredric Jameson's insistence upon "the radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism," I maintain that the central cultural logic of China at the turn of the twenty-first century is not essentially postmodern, but rather is largely consistent with the fundamental dynamics of capitalist modernity itself.[10]

Postsocialist Modernity

For the above reasons, my exploration of the cultural logic of China from the early 1990s into the new century will occasionally engage Western theoretical models of modernity and modernism. But even more important, I consider it essential to start with some basic concepts that contemporary Chinese cultural critics have applied in their own observations of culture since the early 1990s. For me, the most central of these are *shichanghua* (marketization), *duoyuanhua* (pluralization), *gerenhua* (individualization), and *fenhua* (division, differentiation, disaggregation). As these terms indicate, there has been a basic sense that culture was not only transforming, but actually breaking apart, diversifying, and becoming ever more difficult to describe simply or to pin down. These abstract processes characterize the dynamics of transition from state socialism to a postsocialist market society, and it is through them that we can revisit some basic observations regarding the very nature of capitalist modernity.

Differentiation and associated concepts such as rationalization and secularization have of course long been key to sociologists of modernity from Durkheim to Weber to Habermas. In *The Differentiation of Society*, Habermas's sometime foe Niklas Luhmann outlined a theory of social modernity that takes as its defining dynamic a process of differentiation which "is not simply decomposition into smaller chunks but rather a process of growth by internal disjunction."[11] That is, an inherently expansionist capitalist modernity is marked by the separation of different spheres of life into relatively autonomous subsystems such as politics, education, religion, art, and so on, in contrast to the preceding historical state of a relatively unified premodern feudal system in which, for example, political, economic, religious, and cultural authority tended to coincide. Central to this process is the rise of economic markets, which drive the differentiation of society as a whole, and which make "impersonal" relations possible through the abstraction of exchange value. In this way the market "removes the mutually binding moral controls that evaluate persons and thus moral *engagement* as well."[12] People and commodities (and people as commodities) meet on the market as moral-neutral abstractions always reducible to exchange value.

In his epic wartime analysis of the history of modern liberal capitalism, Karl Polanyi also saw the false utopia of the "self-regulating market" as the driving force in the transformation of society under industrial modernity. According to Polanyi, what is entirely unique to modern capitalism is not the presence of markets, which of course had long existed, but rather the fact that they run society rather than the reverse; in all previous known forms of social organization, the economic system was a function of social organization as a whole, but under modern capitalism we have "the running of society as an adjunct to the market. Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system."[13] Among other things, the ideal of the self-regulating market requires "the institutional separation of society into an economic and political sphere," whereas in other forms of social organization the economic is ultimately subordinated by the political.[14] Here again we see how the market drives the differentiation or disaggregation of society, through which different spheres of social activity are separated *by* the logic of the market, which therefore becomes determinate for the society as a whole. In terms of people's social and cultural lives, capitalist modernity brings massive dislocation and the collapse of many previous social ties and cultural codes, as relations and values are increasingly reduced to abstract market functions. The paradigmatic description of this underlying dynamic of capitalist modernity rings as true as ever a century and a half later: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned."[15]

The distinctive and irony-laden twist that a postsocialist society puts on this formulation is that what was holy and is now profaned by capitalism is not just the premodern value system but also Marxism itself, insofar as a particular version of it was enshrined as a totalizing ideological system (Stalinism, Maoism) and then largely discarded. Nevertheless, despite the peculiarities of the postsocialist condition, the basic processes characterizing Chinese culture and society since the early 1990s—marketization, differentiation, individualization, pluralization—are consistent with a transformation from a unified social system, in which the political, the economic, and the cultural are all intimately intertwined, to a market society in which the economic differentiates itself and in turn drives the differentiation and pluralization of many other aspects of society and culture. A different way of putting all this would be in terms of the distinction Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari make between the *code* and the *axiomatic* (to be discussed in the next chapter), which in many ways simply reiterates Polanyi's insight into the distinguishing characteristics of modern capitalism. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the ethical and ideological "codes" that governed precapitalist societies give way to the primacy of the abstract "axiomatic" operations of the economy in capitalist modernity: "unlike previous social machines, the capitalist machine is incapable of providing a code that will apply to the whole of the social field. By substituting money for the very notion of a code, it has created an axiomatic of abstract quantities that keeps moving further and further in the direction of the deterritorialization of the socius."[16] In this light, *fenhua,* or differentiation, might also be glossed as a *deterritorialization* driven fundamentally by the logic of capitalist marketization.

Heteronomy and Autonomy

In view of the processes just outlined, in the following chapters the transformation of China's planned economy and ideologically unified culture into a market economy and pluralized culture will be described in part as a transition from (state) heteronomy to (relative) autonomy. By heteronomy—literally, subjection to the rule of another power—I mean that under the Maoist social organization all the various spheres of politics, society, economics, and culture were theoretically, and in most cases actually, subsumed under the total project of revolution; hence, for example, the oft-critiqued instrumentalization of art, through which films and novels became vehicles for political propaganda. By autonomy, on the other hand, I mean the various types of autonomy generated by the market-driven differentiation of society and culture, which will be discussed in more detail below and throughout later chapters. But by this brief discussion it should be clear that, somewhat paradoxically, the heteronomy of various spheres of society and culture implies an overall condition of homogeny, or totalization, in that some central ideological power unites the social field, while the autonomy of these spheres implies heterogeneity or pluralization. Yet, as I argue above, the apparently diverse and disconnected phenomena that appear in the new, pluralized cultural field are in fact all related in that they are manifestations of the logic of marketization; capitalism, as has often been noted, thrives on its own occultation by virtue of becoming naturalized and invisible as a total system. At the height of Mao's rule, nobody doubted that all spheres of society and culture were being united under the banner of the Communist revolution, but the driving power of the current revolution is dispersed in the flows of money, capital, and commodities.

In the realm of the arts, one thing we see as new in contemporary Chinese culture is the sort of relative autonomy of the aesthetic that was part of the process of modernization in the West. Thus the various modernist, postmodernist, or otherwise avant-garde movements in Chinese culture in the reform era follow much the same logic of increasing artistic autonomy as that of the various Western modernisms—an autonomy which takes its place under the more global logic of the differentiation of society in general, through which the arts stake out their autonomous spheres just as do politics, religion, and so on. In Chapter Three, we will examine such an avant-garde movement in literature, in which the "Rupture" writers, in manifesto-like fashion, declared their independence from all external forces and influences. The early films of director Jia Zhangke, examined in detail in Chapter Five, also represent an attempt to make art that is independent of both political power and market forces, in that it neither seeks the support of the state studio system nor tries to entertain a mass audience.

Equally important—in fact even more so in China at the turn of the century—aside from the aesthetic autonomy sought by relatively elite art, there is the much more visible phenomenon whereby the market engenders new autonomies of *popular* culture, allowing new genres of entertainment cinema and literature to appear, for example, to occupy an increasingly large space in the public imaginary distinct from officially sanctioned discourse. Thus in Chapter Three we will see that not only did the growing market for popular fiction alter the aesthetic and career choices of a major writer such as Chi Li, but even the "Rupture" writers themselves, in flamboyantly proclaiming their artistic autonomy, were in part engaged in a publicity stunt to gain attention in the ever more market-driven mass media. Even "independent" filmmaker Jia Zhangke, though he did not make films in a popular genre, nonetheless soon became dependent upon the transnational market for art films, insofar as his producers expected his films to gain success through screenings at film festivals and subsequently in art-house theaters around the world. As for the increasingly competitive domestic market for filmmaking, in Chapter Six the early "new year's celebration films" of Feng Xiaogang will serve as examples of a new popular genre that appeared in the late 1990s to contend with Hollywood and Hong Kong imports for the Chinese mass audience.

As already noted, the new autonomies of Chinese culture must be viewed as contingent, relative, and apparent autonomies, and I by no means intend the term to be taken at face value or regarded as intrinsically positive. The growing relative autonomy of culture in the reform era is generated by, and ultimately must adjust itself to, various market conditions, from the demands of domestic consumers to those of a global cultural market. Culture since the early 1990s must therefore be explored in terms of two countervailing movements—a deterritorializing trend from heteronomy to autonomy in the relationship between cultural production and state institutions and ideology, and a simultaneous reterritorialization as culture is commodified and subjected to the market mechanism and the profit imperative. In fact, following Theodor Adorno, we should understand the new autonomies of culture under marketized conditions as not just being the negation of the previous heteronomous condition, but as in fact containing ultimately their own heteronomous negation. The autonomous modernist artwork—whether in the form of Zhu Wen's individualized, existentialist novels or Jia Zhangke's aestheticized art films—in fact is yet heteronomous to the society that necessitates its very autonomous form;

even the most apparently "autonomous" work of modernist art is a product of social labor that cannot help but reveal its own historicity. More concretely, it too becomes a commodity on a market (however elite that market may be), leading to a different sort of heteronomy in Adorno's sense—that works of art are ultimately determined by the culture industry itself under capitalist conditions.[17] Thus the autonomy of culture as either high art or entertainment in postsocialist China, insofar as it is only a relative autonomy, can be simultaneously read as but an aspect of or appearance within an underlying transition from a *state* heteronomy to a *market* heteronomy,[18] the latter of which presents itself as autonomy and pluralization in part by reference to the previous totalized condition of state Communism.

Moreover, what may be provisionally called the autonomy of culture in postsocialist China is not simply a condition but rather a trend or tendency, generated by the market yet always in tension not just with the deeper market heteronomy as just described, but also with the political power that first unleashed it but nonetheless periodically attempts to contain it and reassert state heteronomy in various ways—banning certain novels or filmmakers, patrolling the Internet, and so on. In other words, culture and the arts in contemporary China must both respond to the dominant trend of marketization *and* cope with the remnants of state heteronomy. Without question, however, the pressures of the former are generally now felt much more broadly and deeply than those of the latter (no matter the lengths to which the Western media continue to hype any instances of the latter they can find), and the censorship of the market now functions at least as effectively as that of the state.

Although political control of culture has now been vastly reduced in most cases, works resulting from the relative autonomies of culture in the market age often still reflect their prehistory in the earlier revolutionary age. Indeed, it is only in contrast to the previous collectivized society and totalizing ideology of Maoism that so many observers feel compelled to remark on the "pluralized" state of contemporary Chinese culture at all. (In contrast, nobody bothers to point out that American cultural production is "pluralized," since that is a given.) Even as economic transformation accelerates, both popular and elite postsocialist culture continue to be marked by the memory of socialism, which can often serve as a source of nostalgia under contemporary conditions. More significantly, the preceding state of socialism means that the trends generated by the arrival in China of capitalism (though the preferred euphemism for the new formation is "socialism with Chinese characteristics") run up against a capacity for critique that is, among some intellectuals at least, somewhat different than in the West, insofar as a generation of Chinese have experienced a market-dominated society as a new—and often disturbing—phenomenon, rather than as a given condition of socioeconomic life.

Postsocialism as a Global Condition

This brings us to the phrase "postsocialist modernity" itself. It is with some reservation that I use the term *postsocialist*. "Socialism" can take a wide variety of forms, some of which in the course of the twentieth century's upheavals became obscured by a particular strand of Marxist-Leninist communism, others of which have quietly existed and continue to be practiced elsewhere (as in the social democracies of Northern Europe), and still others of which may well remain to be realized in the future. Obviously in the Chinese context it is the specific form of state socialism pursued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the last century that has been largely abandoned in the post-Mao period. In many ways, this postsocialist condition is shared with the societies formerly subsumed under the Soviet Union and its allies and satellite states, in that, despite their differences, all these states were under the rule of Communist parties with origins in the 1919 Comintern and the Bolshevik model of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." In fact, some scholarship on Eastern and Central Europe, Russia, and other former Soviet republics prefers the term *postcommunism* to *postsocialism,* which would indeed seem to be more specific.[19] Yet to use the term *postcommunism* in the case of China would be confusing, since single-party Communist political rule has remained constant throughout all the social and economic transformations of the post-Mao era. Another difference between contemporary China and other postsocialist states is that the state-owned portion of the economy, though shrinking, is nonetheless still substantial. As a result, as Kevin Latham has argued, "The 'post' of 'postsocialism' in the Chinese context does not signify a straightforward 'after' in either logical or chronological terms."[20]

Despite the important distinctions between Chinese postsocialism and that of societies which have gone further in terms of economic privatization and rule by new political parties, many crucial commonalities remain. In China as elsewhere, the ideology of global communist revolution has been replaced by that of capitalist economic growth (i.e., endless accumulation) and individual consumerism, and the complexity and contradictions of this transition are reflected in the media and the arts. As Slovenian aesthetics scholar Aleš Erjavec has pointed out, "Today, these [postsocialist] countries share very similar problems, such as rising unemployment, a crisis of values, a loss of identity, commercialization, nationalistic ideas, and a resurgence of sympathy for the former political system, but they also share something else. At the historical turning point that marks the beginning of their transition to capitalism, these countries also possessed a similar cultural and ideological legacy. From this legacy there emerged similar kinds of artistic endeavors."[21] Thus postsocialism is a cross-cultural phenomenon that reveals striking parallels—the films of Jia Zhangke and Hungarian director Bela Tarr, for example (Chapter Five), or those of Feng Xiaogang and Russian filmmaker Aleksei Balabanov (Chapter Six).

In a broader sense, I would go further to say that postsocialism is not just a condition that characterizes nearly all of the formerly communist "second world" but is rather a global, universally shared condition. The international communist movement represented the only really serious threat and alternative to the spread of capitalism—as synonymous with modernity—around the world. The failure of the global communist movement and the apparently overwhelming triumph of capitalism are therefore conditions affecting the entire planet. In fact, from the perspective of postsocialist states, the term *globalization* often appears to be simply a label for the rapid, technologically enabled spread of capitalism into areas it had not previously penetrated—or had previously been kicked out of.

Postsocialist modernity is thus a global condition, and a condition that, with the collapse of the "alternative modernity" of communism, inexorably returns us to the "singular modernity" that is, in the final analysis, synonymous with capitalism.[22] Chinese postsocialist modernity is an integral part of global postsocialist (capitalist) modernity, and it is a fantasy to celebrate it as primarily an example of diversity or difference, as an "alternative modernity" or one of "multiple modernities" that is fundamentally separable from global capitalist modernity (which is not to say that a genuine "alternative modernity" of this sort could never arise in China, or elsewhere, in the future).

At the same time, we must be careful not to jump from this to the mistake of hypostatizing capitalist modernity itself, as if it has some abstract, constant form that simply reappears to reiterate itself in various societies, postsocialist ones being merely the latest manifestation. Global capitalism is always in flux, and postsocialist modernity represents a fundamentally new stage of capitalist development, not just for China but for the world. Indeed, as a volume on contemporary Eastern Europe has argued, the postsocialist condition provides us with an opportunity to rethink classical sociologies of capitalism, especially since "the most unlikely agents [former communists], starting from the most inconceivable point of departure [communism], are the ones who are building capitalism."[23] If there are universals of capitalist modernity (as I have argued above in the case of market-driven differentiation and the generation of relative autonomies of culture, for example), postsocialist societies would seem to offer a telling test case for finding them. Yet even any universal characteristics of capitalism always appear in new social and cultural environments with which they must cope. Even more important, the global conditions of capitalist accumulation have periodically undergone radical shifts since the beginning of capitalism a half millennium in the past, and these shifts mark fundamental changes in the structure of global capitalist modernity itself.

While it is no doubt hazardous to identify the precise nature and ultimate direction of these shifts while they are under way, it is still possible to discern some basic trends guiding the transformation of global capitalism under postsocialist modernity. First, the fall of communism as an international alternative to capitalism has, somewhat ironically, coincided with the gradual decline of American hegemony in the world. Although the destructive power of the American military is still many times greater than that of any actual or potential rival, American control of the global capitalist economy has slipped in many respects (the decline of American manufacturing, the rise of alternative currencies to the dollar, the vulnerability created by massive public and private debt, and so on) even if it remains strong in others (control of key institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, for example). Moreover, when one considers hegemony in Antonio Gramsci's sense of not simply *domination*, but also *leadership* that gains the consent of others by claiming a universality in which other states share in a system that benefits all, the decline of American hegemony in fact appears to be tied to the end of the Cold War. As David Harvey has argued, the Cold War provided a rationale for all capitalist states to rely upon American leadership for protection against the threat posed by communism.[24] Now that the threat has been removed, one of the most important bases for consent to American hegemony has been lost as well. Of course, to the extent that the United States' position of world leadership relied upon a moral claim to represent justice, democracy, and so on, the dominance of neoconservatism in American foreign policy during the Bush presidency—with the subsequent horrors of "preemptive" war, torture, demagoguery, extreme unilateralism, and so on—accelerated the decline of American hegemony, but the process already had been well under way.

Concomitant with the gradual decline of American hegemony has been the rise of other regional concentrations of capitalist economic power: the formation of the European Union, the remarkable ascent of the Japanese economy during the 1960s through the 1980s, the economic growth of the "Four Tigers" (also known as "Little Dragons": Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea) in East and Southeast Asia, and finally the explosive expansion of the Chinese economy since around 1990. Particularly if we accept Giovanni Arrighi's narrative of the history of capitalism as a succession of "long centuries," each dominated by a particular center of capitalist power driving the world economy, it is tempting to speculate whether China will prove to be the economic hegemon of the twenty-first century and beyond, replacing the United States as the center of the global capitalist economy.[25] Indeed, it is a testament to the suddenness of the Chinese rise within the global capitalist economy that—after barely mentioning China when writing *The Long Twentieth Century* in the early 1990s, focusing instead on Japan as the main Eastern threat to American hegemony—Arrighi himself more recently suggested that we may well be in the early stages of a "re-centring of the global political economy on East Asia and, within East Asia, on China."[26] In this view, China will present what David Harvey dubs a new "spatio-temporal fix" for global capitalism. Here *fix* is intended to have a double meaning, in that the international economic system becomes "fixed" in a new place as a means of "fixing" a cyclical problem of overaccumulation, in which its previous configuration had played itself out and led to unused surpluses of capital, labor, and commodities that had no outlet in a saturated market.[27] As the previous center of capitalist accumulation then goes into decline, with rising debt and unemployment and a decaying infrastructure, global capital seeks new spaces ripe for profitable development. Countless mainstream media reports have trumpeted popular versions of essentially the same argument—that we are beginning an "Asian Century" dominated by China—on the basis of China's economic growth as well as its rapidly expanding importance as a trading partner—not just to other states in the region, nor to other key northern economies such as those of the United States and Germany, but even to a growing number of southern economies in Latin America and Africa.

The sort of overarching narrative of the history of capitalism offered by Arrighi and Harvey allows us to conceptualize postsocialist China as neither presenting an "alternative modernity" to global capitalism, nor simply being assimilated into some unchanging, essentialized abstraction called *modernity* (or *capitalism*), but rather as becoming an integral part—and perhaps eventually the center—of a global capitalist system in the midst of epochal transformation. In other words, postsocialist China does not simply partake of global postsocialist modernity but may well prove to define it more than any other state, and the capitalist modernity to come may be as different (and as similar) as those under America's long twentieth century and the United Kingdom's long nineteenth century were in comparison to each other.

At the same time, however, several problems with this account must be acknowledged. As critics of Arrighi and Harvey have pointed out, it is by no means certain that American hegemony will decline smoothly or quickly, or even that it will necessarily decline definitively at all, and in any case unforeseen economic crises or wars could change the global outlook—and that of China—quite suddenly.[28] Even more important, this narrative of the "rise of China" reifies "China" itself and relies too heavily upon the idea that global political economy is a drama in which the main actors are internally homogenized nation-states. The real situation is much more complex, and this complexity is reflected in much of the cultural production examined in the following chapters. Rather than describing China as gradually becoming the new center of a postsocialist global political economy, it may be more accurate to say that a new potential "center" is dispersed among East Asian hubs of capital including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore, Seoul, and Tokyo, while within mainland China there remains a vast underdeveloped periphery that provides the raw resources of materials and labor to be exploited by the emerging East Asian concentration of capital.[29] The dominant images of the "new China," whether promulgated in China or abroad, come largely from its urban hubs, while the comparatively impoverished rest of the country is often ignored. Indeed, the largely neglected areas of China, outside the major urban hubs of commerce and culture, amount to a constitutive absence in most representations of contemporary China. As soon as one considers them, what had appeared to be a commendable economic success story often turns out instead to be an instance of the worst abuses of "primitive accumulation" in capitalist development (see Chapter Seven). Thus, while "China" may indeed rise to a position of unparalleled prominence in the coming century, the real question will be whether economic growth and capital accumulation will benefit a large enough portion of the population in the medium to long term to maintain the legitimacy of the new concentration of capital and the political system that upholds it. While observers on the right no doubt overestimate the extent to which market reforms have helped the poor in China, critiques from the left must not underestimate the appeal of the new imaginary of consumer capitalism even to those in China who so far have benefited from it only modestly or not at all.

The Role of Culture

If, with the above caveats in mind, we nonetheless accept the stunning rise of the Chinese economy as one of the central, defining phenomena of global postsocialist modernity, the question that arises in the present context is what role culture plays in all this. In fact, a notable trait of contemporary Chinese culture evident in many examples in the following pages is its still often hesitant and anxious nature in contrast to the relentlessly forward march of the Chinese economy. In intellectual and cultural life we find much second-guessing, auto-critique, and even a persistent inferiority complex in relation to the more "advanced" capitalist cultures of the West. Deserved or not, the perceived inferiority of Chinese intellectual and cultural life betrays ambivalence over the "going to market" of culture itself. At the same time, it shows that economic hegemony, however incipient, by no means corresponds directly to cultural hegemony. Pascale Casanova, following Fernand Braudel, points out that in the history of capitalist modernity, the center of world artistic space at any given time often has not necessarily coincided with the contemporaneous center of political or economic power.[30] To cite just one example, while Great Britain was at the height of its global power in the nineteenth century, the center of "world literary space" was nonetheless Paris, not London.

Even in economic terms, for the moment China remains mainly a regional hegemon with the possibility of global dominance still perhaps decades away. However, even within the East Asian region, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong appear to be much more culturally dominant than mainland China, at least in terms of their measurable impact in commercial culture. Korean gangster films and melodramas, Japanese anime, Taiwanese popular music, and Hong Kong entertainment cinema all have been embraced much more widely in China than similar mainland Chinese cultural phenomena have elsewhere in East Asia. Thus Chinese officials are reportedly "fretting" over China's "cultural deficit"; in the realm of literature, for example, "Officials are looking for a success story that would firmly reestablish China on the literary map of the world and make foreign publishers engage in bidding wars for the translation rights."[31] Even domestically, as markets open up to foreign competition, the issue is not simply whether domestic culture can compete economically, but whether it can continue to even seem relevant in people's minds. Susan Larsen has made this point about the "crisis" in postsocialist Russian cinema—which has parallels with the situation in China since the mid-1990s—noting that what concerns filmmakers and critics is not simply the economic difficulties of the domestic film industry, but also "a catastrophic drop in the audience's perception of the social relevance and cultural significance of contemporary [Russian] cinema," which led to a drop in the domestically produced share of the box office market to only 10 percent in 1996.[32] As postsocialist societies not only marketize their cultural industries but also expose those markets to the global cultural economy, they face competition from culture producers that often have much greater resources, more experience at appealing to mass consumers, or long-standing high status in what Casanova calls the "world structure" or "world space" of culture. In China, this phenomenon combines with the vulgarizing effects of the market in general (see Chapter Two)—and the sheer upheaval that goes with the shift from cultural heteronomy to cultural autonomies—to provoke a deep ambivalence among many artists and intellectuals about the role of domestic culture even as the economic marvel continues.

Fragmented Worlds, Worlds Within Fragments

The processes of deterritorialization and differentiation associated with the spread of capitalist modernity are frequently experienced as profoundly disorienting and destructive, and postsocialist China is no exception. Thus—aside from the buzzwords mentioned earlier such as *shichanghua* (marketization), *duoyuanhua* (pluralization), *gerenhua* (individualization), and *fenhua* (differentiation)—other terms that often appeared in cultural criticism in the 1990s conveyed a sense that the differentiation of culture and society was in many cases experienced as a disturbing disintegration. For instance, terms containing the character *beng* (collapse, split) were used to describe the breakdown (*bengkui*) of values in contemporary society[33] or the collapse (*bengta*) of a sense of social totality[34] or of a frame of reference for authors of literature.[35] Other terms employ the character *sui* (break, fragment) to convey a similar perception, as in the shattering (*posui*) of spiritual convictions[36] or of all past beliefs.[37] In these instances, the objective differentiation of society is experienced subjectively as the crumbling of value systems or ideological reference points that previously served to orient thought and behavior.

Many of these examples are drawn from the "humanist spirit" debate among intellectuals to be discussed in the next chapter, and one thing they reveal is an ideological void that inevitably appears when the heteronomous organization of communist culture ceases. This seems to be a generic feature of postsocialist societies, as Erjavec argues: "An essential part of the 'postsocialist condition' was the ideological, political, and social vacuity of the ruling utopian political doctrine, a doctrine that exceeded plain political ideology, for it held in its grasp the whole of the social field and hence spontaneously affected all social realms."[38] When such a totalizing doctrine is voided, it leaves an immense ideological vacuum, which is of course partially filled by commodity culture. Indeed, Erjavec argues, the role of the commodity in capitalist cultures is in some ways equivalent to the role of political ideology in communist cultures, in that "each permeates all pores of the respective society. In the former, the billboards promote consumer products, while in the latter, they display ideological slogans and promote political ideology."[39] Both even have similar "languages of banality" that fill the social space.[40]

Here we also run into a peculiarity of the postsocialist condition that only reinforces the loss of "ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions" that occurs generally under capitalist modernity. In China, the Maoist revolution itself, as an alternative utopian vision of modernity, advocated the systematic and sometimes violent replacement of the old with the new, of "feudal" culture with revolutionary culture. Thus, when postsocialist capitalist culture arrived, with its own need to continually revolutionize both production and consumption, it confronted a population that already had been cut off from much traditional culture while being immersed in the totalizing culture of revolution. Consequently, the loss of both traditional *and* revolutionary ideological reference points contributes to a persistent feeling of disintegration that accompanies the breakneck building of a new economy.

In fact, in today's China the most iconic character of all is arguably *chai* (demolish), which seems omnipresent in contemporary Chinese cities, painted on buildings slated for destruction to make way for the runaway construction boom, causing entire neighborhoods to disappear seemingly overnight. Considering the sociopsychological implications of the crumbling of ideological anchoring points in addition to physical infrastructures, it is tempting to psychoanalyze the cultural trends of contemporary China in one way or another. For example, given Jacques Lacan's definition of psychosis as the loss of such ideological *points de capiton*, one might follow Deleuze and Guattari and diagnose contemporary (postsocialist) capitalist culture as schizophrenic. Alternatively, beginning from the view of totalitarianism as pathologically collectivizing precisely that which should remain private—individual desire itself—one might characterize the postsocialist period as, at least in this sense, a *return* to sanity after the madness of the Cultural Revolution.[41]

But here I will only recall the classic C. T. Hsia essay "Obsession with China:

The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature," which ends with a critique of Chinese communist literature, the writer of which "equates a bright socialist future with whatever little dreams of personal happiness still lurk in his heart," thereby losing even "a minimal personal life" or the possibility of simple "domestic and individual happiness."[42] A quarter century into the reform era, we might often note that the loss of a "bright socialist future" was no small sacrifice, given the anomie, hedonism, and nihilism apparent in much postsocialist Chinese culture, just as in Western capitalist culture. Yet it is also clear that the domestic and individual pleasures of personal life have at long last returned to mainland Chinese cultural representation with a vengeance. The autonomies of various industries, markets, artworks, and artists are accompanied by a new psychology of autonomy in which visions of desire and fulfillment have become highly individualized.[43] After the merging of the public and private spheres under the totalizing ideology of communism, in which even the individual psyche is explicitly expected to be heteronomously determined by revolutionary politics, the transformation to postsocialist modernity requires the excavation of a new psychological interiority that had been previously repressed.[44] I have argued elsewhere that one result of this is the rise of romantic love to, in a sense, replace the political in popular cultural representations.[45] In Chapter Four we will see how, in the "cinema of infidelity," adultery and divorce became tropes for representing not just the new interior desires and anxieties awakened in the market age, but implicitly the very social and economic processes generating these desires and anxieties.

In the final analysis, of course, no matter how highly individualized people's aspirations become, they are nonetheless rooted in a wider social imaginary and tied ultimately to the material processes transforming China in the reform era. One challenge in any attempt to describe postsocialist Chinese culture is how to give an overall account of something so pluralized, fragmented, and riddled with contradictions. The title to this introduction, "Worlds in Fragments," is intended to convey something of the sense of disintegration implied by the Chinese characters *beng*, *sui*, and *chai* mentioned above. However, this title also echoes more specifically two sources to which the present study is indebted, one Western and the other Chinese.

First, it recalls a favorite phrase of Cornelius Castoriadis, "world in fragments," which was used as a title for a collection of his writings in English translation.[46] Although I was not familiar with Castoriadis' work until the present book was well under way, it provides a precedent to my emphasis on modernity as a transformation from social and cultural heteronomy to autonomy. The notion of heteronomy as developed by Castoriadis, in particular, is related (though not identical) to mine. For him, heteronomy meant a certain "'closure' of meaning and interpretation" characteristic of both premodern and "totalitarian" modern societies, in which meanings and values are posited as given absolutely by a seemingly outside force in which the subject is cathected—a role which the Communist Party or Chairman Mao himself played during much of the earlier history of the People's Republic.[47] *Autonomy*, on the other hand, is for Castoriadis an "emancipatory project" that began in ancient Greece, is taken up again with modernity, and is meant to represent a society's full consciousness of its own self-constituting nature, and therefore its ultimate freedom. As a socialist, Castoriadis felt that modernity-as-autonomy was merely "contaminated" by its association with capitalism.[48] In contrast, the *relative* autonomies of culture that I explore are intimately connected to the trend of capitalist marketization, and I am more apt to follow Adorno's conception of autonomy and intend to imply no relation to a wider "emancipatory project."

The second, and for me earlier, inspiration for this chapter title comes from Chen Sihe's *Zhongguo dangdai wenxue shi* (History of contemporary Chinese literature), in which he describes the state of literature after 1990 as *yige suipianzhong de shijie*, or literally "a world in fragments," in which some authors uphold literary elitism, others embrace the commodification and vulgarization of literature, and still others capture entirely singular private lives.[49] The image of a world in fragments captures well the differentiated, pluralized state of Chinese culture since the early 1990s, and thus the impossibility of representing or narrating it in any way that can approach a tidy whole. However, the phrase *suipianzhong de shijie* can also be used to mean "a world *within* a fragment." In other words, each of the fragments of contemporary culture in the following pages presents us with a semiautonomous world, and the hope is that by critically reconstructing this world, we gain insight not just into the fragment but also into the unrepresentable totality, if only in some fractal form.

If a common thread links these fragments together in the present study, it is the logic of the market, and my suggestion is thus that while China in the advanced reform era no longer has any master ideological signifier or overarching cultural "fever," it does have the central cultural *logic* of the market, which, for the first time in the history of the People's Republic, leaves its traces virtually everywhere. Thus, through the exploration of some key moments in postsocialist cinema, literature, and criticism—various "worlds within fragments"—the marketization of culture emerges not just as a condition of production but as a historical horizon that is imagined and negotiated in diverse ways through individual works of art, from new genres of entertainment cinema and popular literature to renewed strategies of modernist negation and cultural critique.