It seems only yesterday that scholars of Chinese literature and culture were all in an uproar about the “second renaissance” of modern Chinese literature and the new generations of Chinese filmmakers who burst onto the cultural scene of the 1980s. Since the early 1990s, however, this cultural landscape has evolved, and literature and film no longer occupy the central position they held during the 1980s. Among other things, they have had to contend with television and other forms of commercialized mass media and the Internet for public attention. One of the major storytelling forms in China today exists on television as dianshiju (television drama) or dianshi lianxuju (television serial). In the last three decades, especially since Kewang (Yearnings, 1990), television dramas have generated widespread public attention and serious debate on a range of issues.  

Television drama has come to constitute a major part of contemporary China’s cultural landscape, and critics are hard-pressed to disregard its presence and larger sociocultural implications. Yet many still do (despite burgeoning scholarly attention). The propagandistic and commercial dimensions of television culture and the mainstream and quotidian nature of television drama in particular have continued to ensure a minor status for Chinese television drama in the hierarchy of cultural forms studied by the humanities.

Many critics have casually used the term “soap opera” to identify Chinese television drama. Indeed, even though the term “soap opera” originated in the United States, making visible the connection between corporate sponsorship and the production of daytime television dramas, today its connotation mainly pertains to the representational characteristics of television drama in general, referring to the melodramatic “codes” of its narrative construction. I will return to the notion of “melodrama” later in this Introduction, but as a cultural form and practice, has Chinese television drama, dianshiju, always been American soap opera’s double? If we hesitate to answer “yes,” it is chiefly because a ready
application of the term to Chinese television drama collapses one set of cultural production with another without fully recognizing their very different social, cultural, and historical conditions and contexts of meaning production. The casual application of “soap opera” in the Chinese case is therefore more indicative of an ongoing low-level intellectual interest in the topic of (Chinese) television drama rather than a clearly delineated understanding of the phenomenon. More than that, it is also indicative of an ongoing intellectual uncertainty about how to engage this cultural phenomenon.

Along with some recent studies of Chinese television drama, mostly by media studies scholars, this book aims at changing these dynamics. Instead of merely lamenting and dismissing the rise of television culture and the impact of televisual dramas in China—a perspective largely informed by (Western) intellectual criticisms of “mass culture” and “mainstream popular culture”—I argue for a need to recognize that, along with the powerful rise of the television medium (which is now competing with the rise of yet another technology-aided medium, the Internet), Chinese “mainstream culture,” including both state and market forces, has become a site of ideological and discursive struggles. According to Wang Hui, if a “depoliticization” (which means “depoliticized politics”) process characterizes the postrevolution Chinese economic reforms, the politics and the tensions within this process, nevertheless, await fuller analysis and understanding. Contemporary Chinese mainstream culture is in flux, in part owing to structural changes spurred on by changes in the dominant ideology and in the state’s economic and cultural policies and also by a corresponding rise of market forces. Critics have rightly questioned the nature of these changes and the relationship between the state and the market within the larger context of the latest round of globalizing capitalism. But at the same time, the state-market-dichotomy perspective assumes a monolithic view of the two entities and ignores the fact that Chinese mainstream culture consists of multiple social, cultural, and historical forces whose coexistence, and the tensions and contradictions among them, constitute the seen and, to echo Haiping Yan, “unseen rhythms” that shape and inform cultural production. Mainstream culture thus produced inevitably manifests social changes, corresponding problems, and ideological struggles. In other words, although surely subject to the forces of the state and the market, cultural production within this context continues to be influenced by different and sometimes conflicting cultural and ideological legacies related to the complexity of one and a half centuries of modern Chinese history. Television drama as a quintessential mainstream cultural phenomenon, I argue, offers a diverse collection of televisual textual materials with which to study the implications of these influences.
In introducing this study, I first highlight the “fate” of mainstream culture and the debates about it in the West, with a brief observation about their own sociocultural particularities. In the Chinese context, I then argue for a need to move beyond the existing mode of state-market dichotomy in order to arrive at a historically informed understanding of the production of contemporary Chinese mainstream culture in general and television drama in particular. In China, mainstream (popular) culture continues to be unabashedly tied to social concerns, and this tie is rich with contradictions indicative of ideological tensions. Questions that interest me here include the following: What kind of social concerns are at issue? What gave rise to them? What informs their cultural representations? And, above all, how are we to understand televisual representational implications in the context of the rapidly changing social and economic conditions in the last three decades of economic reforms, with the inevitable corresponding ideological and discursive struggles, and the major cultural and historical legacies, from previous historical periods, that coexist in contemporary China? In conjunction with situating the production of television drama within the historical context of the last three decades, I believe there is a need to understand “melodrama,” the dominant mode of narrative representations in television drama, in historical terms. Indeed, while most dominant intellectual anxiety toward “mainstream culture” stems in part from a (continuing) discomfort with the latter’s “melodramatic” characteristics, little clearly delineated discussion exists regarding how to understand “melodrama” in relation to cultural production such as television drama and, by extension, in relation to the historical contexts and experiences of “Chinese modernity.” While the Introduction may seem somewhat abstract, the chapters in the rest of the book focus on some of the major subgenres of television drama, highlighting representative dramas in relation to the central questions raised above.

“Mainstream Culture” Refocused

In today’s (Western-influenced) academic discourses, “mainstream (popular) culture” is largely equivalent to “low” culture, unworthy of serious critical attention. Indeed, despite the Western Marxian critique of ideology in recent decades that argues for the importance of examining how the hegemony of the dominant class’ ideology works through mainstream popular culture, and despite the fact that there are different ideological persuasions and stances within criticisms of mainstream popular culture, part of the shared result is a critical distancing from and a general reluctance to acknowledge that “mainstream popular culture” also requires serious analysis and interpretation. And yet, to echo Zizek and Carla Freccero, such acknowledgment is important not
because mainstream culture is simplistic and ideologically manipulative and therefore deserves ready criticism, but because, ironically, it appears to be obviously the case and therefore easily dismissible. A ready dismissal of mainstream popular culture, I might add, is indicative of the tenacious elite-popular divide whose own social particularities, including critics’ own social positions, tend to remain invisible in existing critical discourses. The result of a ready dismissal, as Freccero maintains, is a weakened intellectual position from which to engage mainstream popular culture critically.

In arguing why it is important to take mainstream popular culture seriously, Freccero points out:

As long as popular culture remains a degraded cultural form in the minds of liberal educators and students themselves, it will be available for use without analysis, much the way religion and morality are invoked in U.S. public culture as givens without meanings that are subject to contestation. Liberal arts education will will itself into anachronism—as it is already being accused of doing—by focusing exclusively on forms of cultural production that are not widely shared in public culture. The domain of popular representation will pass as fact, unavailable for argument, debate, and analysis, or it will become an arena of technocratic competence where the focus will be on how to manipulate or manage it, but not analyze and interpret it.

Here Freccero echoes Zizek’s questioning when the latter identifies a shift in Western Marxist criticism of ideology “from Critique of Political Economy to Critique of Instrumental Reason: from Lukacs’s History and Class consciousness to the early Frankfurt School, where ideological distortion is derived from the ‘commodity form,’ to the notion of Instrumental Reason which is no longer grounded in a concrete social reality but is, rather, conceived as a kind of anthropological, even quasi-transcendental, primordial constant that enables us to explain the social reality of domination and exploitation.” The problem, Zizek continues, is that “such an approach, although it is adequate at its own level, can easily ensnare us in historicist relativism that suspends the inherent cognitive value of the term ‘ideology’ and makes it into a mere expression of social circumstances.”

To expand on Zizek’s point, one can argue that the dismissive approach to mainstream popular culture in the West does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of—indeed it has shifted much-needed attention away from—the social and class characteristics of the cultural criticism itself that has evolved in the West since the counterculture movement—or, in the words of some Chinese critics, the bourgeois “cultural revolution”—of the 1960s. Indeed, the rise of the technology-aided mainstream popular culture in the
West is itself a social, economic, and ideological phenomenon historically closely related to the dominance of the bourgeois class whose values, beliefs, ideals, and aesthetics would be transmitted and normalized via mass media and later ensconced in the name of the euphemistically termed middle class. Intellectual criticisms in academia—developed into the form of cultural studies—are themselves part of this “cultural revolution” and have helped effect changes in cultural criticism vis-à-vis (the production of) mainstream popular culture. And yet today the condemnatory approach to mainstream popular culture, as a critical practice, persists in ways that blur the social characteristics of the last half century of cultural struggles in the West. As such, it also remains blind to the social particularities of the development of the critical discourse about mainstream popular culture in the West. Such blindness is at least partially responsible for taking “critical thinking” into what some critics refer to as “the dead end of paradoxes.” One can even suggest that, while Gramsci’s theory of “hegemony” effectively exposes the ideological dominance of mainstream culture in “democratic” Western societies, subsequent applications of his theory have virtually depleted an equally if not more important attention to modes of production, social relations, the political economy of structural problems, and their socioeconomic particularities. And the widespread and unreflective application of the theory has led to a dogmatic approach toward anything that is labeled “mainstream,” leaving the social specificities of such theorization itself largely out of sight and continuing to subject studies of mainstream culture to a critical practice that remains hierarchically oriented and is itself little questioned.

The point of moving beyond the elitist tendency of seeing mainstream popular culture as monolithic and unchanging, as always lowly, conservative, and hegemonic, is to understand that (mainstream) culture in any given society functions, to echo Zygmunt Bauman, as structure and praxis, and therefore always is subject to and can effect change. Production of culture is inevitably informed by and subject to, among other things, major social relations and contradictions within them, but culture as structure and praxis can also effect an unstable and dialectic relationship between cultural practices. One such dialectic may be between practices that are deemed either “apologetic” (mainstream) or “critical” (avant-garde). Within this dialectic, if I may stay on an abstract level, what is considered “apologetic” inevitably generates “critical” responses, and what is “critical” can be ideologically either “conservative,” “progressive,” or “avant-garde,” and can always be co-opted by and absorbed into the less critical part of the mainstream culture. The interaction between the two roles, in other words, can lead what is “critical” to being simultaneously absorbed into, while also effecting changes in, the “mainstream culture.” Depending on the social
specificities within a particular society and the power structure of its culture and discursive struggles for beliefs, ideals, and values, changes can either give rise to opposition and critical forces, or they can co-opt the critical component, which may in turn result in the weakening of the avant-garde nature of cultural criticism (which, incidentally, often takes the form of placing “avant-garde” on the pedestal of the elite culture). Such a process indicates not only that “mainstream culture” is constantly subject to challenge and change, but also, and more importantly, the dialectic relationship between the apologetic and critical dimensions of culture as praxis allows room for exploring and seeking cultural and social alternatives. The interaction between the two makes it possible to explore the role of mainstream (popular) culture in a society and the extent to which it manifests various social tensions while also effecting changes.

With regard to television culture, few influential Western cultural theorists or critics have paid as much specific attention to television culture in general and television drama in particular as Raymond Williams. Williams hoped to effect change via a new technology-aided popular cultural form, namely, television drama. Grounded in a specific sociocultural context, Williams’ discussion of television in 1974 stemmed in part from his expectations for developing a popular culture capable of questioning and resisting the hegemony of dominant culture—in the case of Britain, the blatantly class-oriented elite. The globalizing power of American culture dressed up as “popular culture” has subsequently dimmed such hopes and has also made Williams’ positive view of television appear too idealistic. Still, the structural implications of television drama he describes can help ground discussion of representational issues in relation to the political economy of technology-aided modern cultural practices.19

Williams sees in television drama “[a] new mobility in time and space, and a new flexibility in movement between kinds of dramatic speech—especially between the conventions of ‘spoken’ and ‘unspoken’ thought and feeling. . . . What could be seen from an orthodox theatrical position as the limitations of the broadcasting medium became opportunities for different kinds of dramatic creation.”20 He recognizes that “for more than half a century there had been an especially interesting complex relation between dramatic structures and the new technological means of production”21 and that “the comparatively low-cost original television play, which could quite quickly be shown to a very large audience, represented a new dimension of cultural possibility.”22 Williams relates such technology-aided possibilities to the notion of “structure of feeling” and finds that “it is not surprising that many television plays reproduced . . . [an] assumption of the nature of representative reality.”23 There is, in other words, a dialectic structural relationship between television as a technological system and television drama as a new cultural form. Williams fleshes out this relation-
ship by noting the social and cultural effects such a new development could bring when he remarks that both in Britain and the United States, “it is not uncommon for the majority of viewers to see, regularly, as much as two or three hours of drama, of various kinds, every day. The implications of this have scarcely begun to be considered.” It is clear, he states, that “one of the unique characteristics of advanced industrial societies is that drama as an experience is now an intrinsic part of everyday life, at a quantitative level which is so very much greater than any precedent as to seem a fundamental qualitative change. Whatever the social and cultural reasons may finally be, it is clear that watching dramatic simulation of a wide range of experiences is now an essential part of our modern cultural pattern” (emphasis mine).

Williams’ discussion recognizes the dialectic between culture as structure and as praxis and also the complex roles of “mainstream popular culture.” In terms of the quantitative and qualitative dialectic, one wonders in what ways the Internet and cyberculture have contributed to significant changes in meaning production in this post-Williams age both in the West and in other parts of the world, an issue I mention here in passing both to situate Williams’ remarks within their own time and also to indicate their continuing applicability in other historical contexts.

Today, almost four decades since his remarks, Williams’ expectations for an alternative television culture may indeed have proven too idealistic (although attempts at creating such a culture continue to exist), but the fact that his ideals appear too idealistic today may be one of the best examples of the social, or class, characteristic of the Western “cultural revolution” of the 1960s, which ensured the rise to power of a different kind of popular culture than he had imagined. As such, it also helps demonstrate the need to explore the political economy of (Western) mainstream popular culture and the need to treat it “seriously,” as argued by the critics quoted above. What, then, would “fundamental qualitative change” be in China (a postsocialist industrial capitalist society? or socialism with Chinese characteristics?) in relation to the quantitative surge in the production and broadcasting of Chinese television dramas? Given the specific historical context of contemporary China, where does a popular culture form such as television drama fall, socially and structurally, in relation to the official ideology and mainstream culture compared with the historical contexts of meaning production in popular culture either in Britain of the 1960s and 1970s or today’s United States? How do we identify and understand the “different kinds of dramatic speech” and “different kinds of dramatic creation” on television in the context of China’s last three decades of economic reforms?

Even though the “state” plays a complex and powerful role in cultural production in Western societies—values, ideals, beliefs (including prejudices and
Western cultural studies critics tend not to draw attention to the role of the state in their studies. When it comes to China, no discussion of contemporary Chinese culture can get around noting the role of the state. Given the limited scope of this study, I will not elaborate on the implications of this difference. Suffice it to say that one should not conclude that the state does not also play a role in cultural production in the West. Recognizing the role of the “state” and the “market,” some discussions have correctly argued that, in order to better understand Chinese popular culture (including television culture), the relationship between the “official” and the “unofficial,” and between the “state” and the “market” must be fully recognized and critically examined.

Ruoyun Bai’s analysis is one example. Focusing on three major forces at work, the author suggests that “the ascendancy of television entertainment in China from the 1990s onward is mainly the result of media restructuring and the subsequent deepened media commercialization, to which the party-state’s proactive participation is central.” Media restructuring, she argues, includes three developments—reconsolidation of television stations, establishment of private companies for content production, and China’s entry into the World Trade Organization—all of which have been made possible by the changes in state policies. Such changes have one goal: changing the television medium from being mainly the outlet of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) directives and propaganda to becoming a means for commercial gain. The author points out a paradox underlying these changes, namely, “if television is the Communist Party’s property and mouthpiece, or at least the Party’s ‘Publicity Inc.,’ then what does the trivialization of Chinese television mean to the discursive monopoly desired by the Party? What is entertainment doing to the Chinese people?” She wonders, “How can we therefore characterize China’s media and political environment, an Orwellian one or a Huxleyean [sic] one, or a mixture of both?” These questions point to some of the complexities and paradoxes that exist in today’s China, but the Eurocentric—Orwellian versus Huxleyan—frame of reference here makes it impossible for the discussion to move beyond placing Chinese television culture at the dead end of trivialization and paradoxes.

Yin Hong, a scholar who works in China, offers his insights in a recent article (part of which has been translated and published in English, using television drama as his focus). “The development of Chinese television drama,” he states, “must be viewed within the context of the double-track movement (shuanggui yunxing) of marketization with Chinese characteristics (zhongguo tese de shichang hua) and [the media] being state-owned (guoyou xing). On the one hand, [the production of] television drama is subject to the control, intervention, and guidance of the state. On the other hand, it is also under the strong
impact of the market economy and consumer culture. Together, this phenomenon epitomizes the changes in the role played by the media in the various larger power struggles in contemporary China. The development of Chinese television drama not only reflects the realignment and conflicts within contemporary Chinese politics, economy, and culture, but has also exerted a complex and profound influence on the ethos, value formation, and cultural trends [of the society]. Here, Yin not only points out the complex dynamics that occur between the state and the market in the production of television drama, but he also recognizes the impact of television drama on other aspects of the society at large such as “the ethos, value formation, and cultural trends.” Whether one likes television drama as a cultural form or not, Yin’s discussion helps move issues regarding television drama beyond the narrow domain of (aesthetic) “taste,” recognizing the role of a popular cultural form as cultural practice and the need to explore its implications. Such a shift in focus also helps move the definition of television drama beyond the dichotomy of “high” or “low” culture. Still, the very notions of the state and the market need to be further fleshed out, and Yin’s discussion (here and in some of his other writings in Chinese) tend to assume but do not fully examine what the “realignment and conflicts” are, what sociocultural forces are involved, and in what ways and to what extent the latter function to affect “the ethos, value formation, and cultural trends.”

Jing Wang has questioned situating the study of Chinese popular culture within a framework of “official” or “unofficial” or, for that matter, “high culture” or “low culture.” Wang argues that “popular culture” in China does not easily fall into either category—official or unofficial—in the way they are generally assumed and presented—the general assumption being that, since “popular” implies “people,” popular culture must belong to the “unofficial” culture. She maintains that only by moving beyond the official-unofficial dichotomy and its problematic assumptions to the link between cultural polices of the state and the production of popular culture can one begin to recognize and attend to popular culture’s more complex relationship with, among other things, the state and the market. Wang’s discussion points out that a simple (and simplistic) designation of a cultural phenomenon as one thing or the other suffers from a limited and limiting conceptual model and understanding. In her more recent discussion of related issues, Wang further cautions “against treating all organized and planned spaces in contemporary China as devoid of transformative potentials” and points to possible blind spots in existing studies of Chinese popular culture with the Chinese saying *deng xia hei*, or “the most invisible place is the spot right underneath a light.” What remains to be illuminated, besides the state and the market, is what, if any, other forces with “transformative potentials”—possibly in “the most invisible place right underneath a light”—exist that mediate official
cultural policies and the production of popular culture, what role they play, and, for that matter, to what extent the seemingly “organized and planned spaces” are in fact more than just “organized” and “planned.”

The questions raised by these critics are important for investigating the relationships between policies and commercial interests in the development of communication industries nationally and internationally. Structural understanding is crucial in making visible the complex relationships between different interest groups and their power relations. Together, the aforementioned studies help delineate a historical trajectory in which the social, economic, and political logic of changes in television culture is touched upon. At the same time, however, the conceptual framework of these and other existing discussions tends to assume the “state” and the “market” to be two self-explanatory entities. Once these two terms are invoked, what they mean is assumed to be self-evident, leaving society, cultural practices, the complex history of the “state,” and many related issues (such as the role of various cultural legacies, historical memories, and cultural politics motivated by changing social relations) at the margins of their critical vision. Underneath the very “light” of the dichotomized state-market framework, much that informs contemporary Chinese mainstream popular culture remains invisible and unrecognized.

An important point of departure must therefore be made here: the specific historical context in which China witnessed the rise of television culture and television drama is neither akin to that of Williams’ Britain nor to that of the Adorno-critiqued mass culture in the United States. In contemporary China the quantitatively measurable process can be qualitatively characterized as one of commercialization at the behest of the “state,” in the postsocialist and postrevolution era in which several major cultural legacies coexist. The formation of contemporary Chinese “popular culture” has been accompanied by what can be identified as a state-sponsored postrevolution economic reform as China opened its doors and has actively tried to “join the international tracks” (yu guoji jiegui), and the last three decades of reform have been full of internal ideological tensions and struggles that are reflected in changes in policies and in social and everyday lived experiences. A corresponding (in Wang Hui’s words) depoliticization and also, I must add, a different kind of repoliticization have resulted in an “everyday life” whose imaginary has been increasingly governed by materialist desires and their discontent, defined and informed by the globalizing consumer capitalist logic. At the same time, “everyday life” manifested in contemporary Chinese popular culture such as television drama and in its “everyday” reception is filled with an array of socially, economically, and politically specific problems, tensions, and contradictions. How these specific issues are identified, discussed, debated, and represented is itself tension-filled and
not explainable by the existing monolithic view of a state-market dichotomy. If part of what characterizes the Chinese televisual representational characteristics is their “unabashed social concerns,” such concerns are informed by different but coexisting cultural and historical legacies, which formulate a strong tension-filled undercurrent that informs this “unabashed tie” in the production of contemporary mainstream culture.

As I will discuss later in the Introduction, the proliferation of subgenres in television drama—one major characteristic of the quantitative and qualitative dialectic in the production of television drama—corresponds to structural changes and commercial interests, to be sure, but also to growing social and economic problems and tensions and to the different historical, cultural, and ideological legacies that inform and shape televisual representations of these issues. Along with that proliferation, the quantitative-qualitative relationship vis-à-vis the production (and reception) of Chinese television drama is also characterized by a corresponding shift of ideological and discursive struggles into the domains of mainstream popular culture, in this case specifically popular televisual representations that have become a dominant form of dramatic representation.

Although I do not suggest that cultural texts and social reality have a direct cause-effect correlation, I do want to emphasize the link between the two. I will explore its implications “symptomatically,” via the notion of melodrama within the Chinese context. The development of television drama as a cultural form is explosive, unruly, and full of contradictions that, despite having generated much discomfort on the part of critics, still defy simple conclusion and generalization. Indeed, as mainstream popular cultural products, Chinese televisual representations, along with their production and reception, are no less emblematic of the issues and contradictions within China’s latest round of social transformation than issues and contradictions represented in other forms of cultural and narrative representation. As in studies of other cultural forms, therefore, the relationship between social, economic, and political contexts, (televisual) texts, and historical subtexts constitutes the central concern of this study and motivates its approach. Above all, it is my insistence on recognizing the production of television drama as a sociocultural engagement—as cultural practice with complex ideological implications—that anchors the significance of this study.

In the sections that follow, I turn to the difficult task of fleshing out the complex aspects of television drama as a mainstream popular cultural production and cultural phenomenon. I focus on four “mainstream” aspects including the state and the market, the institutional and social characteristics of the practitioners in the production of this cultural form, the representational
characteristics—especially those of melodrama—of television drama, and social concerns (and what informs them) as they are manifested in the development of “subgenres.” I explore the ways in which the state, the market, Chinese intellectuals, and different social groups are all implicated in the rapid development of this mainstream cultural phenomenon, on the one hand, and how the tensions and contradictions within their interactions manifested televisually, help complicate our understanding of contemporary Chinese society, on the other. The emergence of and rapid growth in the production of television drama can be seen as having functioned as a cultural site where contemporary social-economic issues are addressed and different cultural legacies and ideological views transmitted and contested. By highlighting some of the major points of contention in recent debates and discussions of the notion of melodrama in literature and film studies in the West, I discuss how the continuing tensions within these discussions help both complicate the notion of melodrama and make it a useful point of entry into studies of Chinese television drama. In addition to recognizing its melodramatic mode, I argue for the need to approach television drama via its “subgenre manifestations.” While the development, including the rise and fall, of (certain) subgenres is in some ways “planned and organized” officially and commercially, that indicates precisely the fact that subgenres represent clusters of different ideas, values, and points of view, and the tensions and struggles within and the rise and fall in popularity of subgenres constitute active cultural engagement and manifest ideological renegotiations.

Between State and Society: Understanding the Political Economy in the Development of Chinese Television Culture and Televisual Drama

If the last three decades of reforms are characterized by a determined quest for “modernization”—as in the famous slogan “development is an unnegotiable principle” (fazhan shi ying daoli)—in postrevolution China, the promotion of the idea of fazhan (development) and policies oriented around this principle manifest a complex history of changes in the official ideology, in the role of the state and its various policies, and in social relations. The development of television as a technology-aided culture within this context consists of a complex mix of forces whose changes and interactions are both symbolic and symptomatic of the process of this quest. The slogan indicates the role of the state—in terms of initiating the idea of development, of qualifying it as a central and key concept, and of imagining what it entails with a slew of policies—in this recent round of economic reforms. Fazhan, or development, as an idea has since played a complex and problematic role ideologically and has been and will continue to be subject to different critical assessments and evaluations. Indeed, within the
last three decades in China, nothing has been more “mainstream” than the idea of “development,” but the fact that it has simultaneously been subject to various interpretations and (implicit and explicit) criticisms manifests the complex relationship between the role of the state—including various social, cultural, political forces and persuasions—and that of the various critical engagements in response.

There was positive response from the very beginning to the call for state-sponsored social and economic reforms. Socially and culturally, that is, the idea of “development” was a state-initiated idea that enjoyed widespread appeal and social support and, by extension, political legitimacy. At the same time, from the very beginning there were different views and positions within the “state,” indeed within the CCP itself, debating what it meant to “reform” and what kind of social, economic, and political structure should be envisioned. While in a vocabulary derived from Western mainstream culture, such struggles were termed (and have continued to be termed) struggles between “reformers” and “hardliners,” the real issue was and is far more complex than this simple binary characterization. The presence of the debates and differences also indicates that from the beginning of the postrevolution “economic reforms,” the Chinese “state” was itself to be subject to multiple lines of persuasion, or, in terms of political economy, subject to ideological struggles within. And the struggles within were not only real but would also lead to real social, economic, and political consequences that would generate further debates over different ideas, values, and points of views expressed by different interest groups including intellectuals. To study Chinese television drama as part of contemporary Chinese mainstream culture is to recognize fully the central contradictions within this “mainstream” phenomenon, namely, the state, the market, and their complex relationship with various cultural practitioners including intellectuals, the cultural industry, and viewers.

Recent examinations of modern Chinese social and historical changes vis-à-vis the notion of the Chinese state have posited that we should more fully recognize and understand China's revolutionary and socialist “temporalities,” that is, experiences, legacies, lessons, and even more important their historical legitimacies, in assessing contemporary Chinese social and economic conditions and their larger implications. Lin Chun’s recent study of the “transformation of Chinese socialism,” for example, reminds us of the larger complex and specifically modern challenges that have informed modern China’s historical choices and sociocultural and political practices—especially during the Chinese socialist period—and have also affected the last thirty years of reform. Indeed, Lin Chun’s provocative study calls for a basic historical understanding that many current studies of China’s post-Mao economic transformation
appear to find inconvenient to deal with or brush aside with simplistic labels. Wang Hui’s critical discussions of the “new Chinese order,” additionally, delineate the intellectual debates in China in a similarly provocative way. These discussions help make palpable the ideological tensions that exist in relation to the transformation of both the Chinese state and society as different groups of intellectuals debate with one another both in and outside of China.

In the next several sections I bring forward four seemingly straightforward terms—television set (dianshi ji), television industry (dianshi chanye), television culture (dianshi wenhua), and television drama (dianshiju)—in order to both focus and expand the discussion regarding the relationship between state and market forces and cultural production. These four terms are indicative of television’s role among “global” and globalizing technology-aided cultural phenomena, but they are also socially and historically particular to modern and contemporary Chinese history, rich with specific implications. They help illuminate the complex relationship between the state and the collective imaginary of “modernization” shared by different social groups and between the state and different players who have participated in the development of television culture as mainstream popular culture in ways specific to the social characteristics in contemporary China. Manifested and implied in these terms are the changing state policies that have aided the marketization of the television medium and culture, which, in turn, has shaped and effected changes in the roles of intellectuals whose participation as writers and critics (or whose disdain toward television) further manifests the shift of ideological/discursive struggles into such popular storytelling forms as television drama. Each of the four terms, additionally, bears with it numerical figures that reveal a complex interplay between the state, the market, and various sociocultural forces that participate in the production and reception of television drama and, by extension, in the production of meaning and ideological tensions.

**Dianshi ji, or Television Set: The First Collectively Desired Commodity in the “Modernization” Imaginary of Postrevolutionary China**

Even though the People’s Republic of China began to experiment with television technology and established a few television stations in the 1950s and the 1960s, television remained a highly exclusive and limited medium until the late 1970s. It was not until the beginning of the open-door and reform era in the late 1970s and early 1980s that television, both in the material and cultural sense, quickly became one of the early commodity symbols of “modernization” and functioned essentially to inaugurate the arrival of postrevolution, technology-aided mass culture in the reform process. Coming to China later than to many other parts of the world as a modern technology product and as a modern com-
modity, the television set nevertheless quickly captured the imagination of a society that was ready to devour anything bearing the sign of “modernization.” Owning a television set became one of the earliest collective obsessions on the part of urban Chinese. Indeed, if ownership of a television set symbolized an initial collective modernization imaginary of the post-Mao era, as it turns out, it also signified the beginning of the postrevolutionary age of commodity worship in contemporary China. That eventuality is indicative of the early ideological shift in the Chinese dominant official discourse.

The actual participation in the purchasing and widespread ownership of television sets, by people from all walks of life, helped set the stage for a further collective embrace of a “modernization” imaginary oriented around material ownership and, by extension, for the emergence of a cultural industry and its related cultural products celebrating such an imaginary. At the beginning of 1976, there were altogether only 463,000 television sets nationwide in China, with only 4,000 color sets among them (most of which were owned by “work units”).\(^1\) A little over ten years later, in 1987, there were 1.2 hundred million television sets nationwide with 47.8 percent of households owning a television set (in 1978, it was 2 percent).\(^2\) By the end of 2002, there was more than 91 percent television coverage, or more than 1.1 billion television viewers in China,\(^3\) along with (at least by 2000) 374 provincial-level television stations, 1,273 county-level television stations, 234 cable television stations, and other related facilities set in place nationwide.\(^4\) By the turn of the twenty-first century, watching television became so routine and so everyday, and the television industry and television culture became so ubiquitous a mainstream popular culture force and social reality that the collective obsession over owning a television set seems to belong to a distant memory.\(^5\)

In brief, both materially and symbolically, the rapid growth and spread of television-set ownership ushered China into an age of development-worship-cum-commodity-worship, quickly linking an industrial modernization imaginary with a commercial one, with the state authorities anxious to find a way both to utilize and to control the television industry and television culture. The exponential growth of television-set ownership can be seen as symptomatic of the following: the relationship between the open-door and reform policies, the subsequent rise to dominance of a commodity-worshiping-and-materialism-oriented modernization imaginary and discourse, a collective embrace of the ideological turn by the elite and the populace alike, consequent social tensions and problems, and the more recent intellectual debates on how to understand the past three decades of economic reforms in relation to sociocultural development and the direction of China’s ongoing social transformations. Put differently, although a ubiquitous and mundane object today, the history of
television-set ownership in China is symptomatic of the complex relationship between the state, society, the elite, and the populace in relation to China's post-socialist transformation and related discursive and ideological struggles.

In less than three decades, China managed to complete the journey to establish a structural network for television broadcasting, setting the stage for the economic and ideological interests of such players as the “state” and the “market,” but also for the contradictions between and within them and for other related social problems and concerns to play out. Today, with hundreds of millions of television sets beaming with the ever-increasing lure of a materialistic “modernization” imaginary in people’s everyday life, televisural stories thus transmitted also manifest complex changes in social relations, contradictory social conditions, ideological tensions, all of which affect cultural and meaning production. Television culture in general and television drama in particular are not only related to the current state of affairs in China, but are also related to the contested views of historical experiences, political choices, and promises throughout modern Chinese history.

**DIANSHI CHANYE, OR TELEVISION INDUSTRY, AND THE STATE**

With the exponential growth in television ownership came the rapid expansion in television networks and coverage, which generated the need for programming and content production (including commercials). The state—by issuing various guidelines and policies—would play a major role in the structural formation of a Chinese-style television industry as well as in its evolution from four levels of government-owned television stations to a mixture of corporate-like media entities that play a dual role in directly conveying the official line in ideas, perspectives, and points of view and in creating programs to fill hundreds of channels while being responsible for their own financial interests. It is this dual role that characterizes the Chinese television industry, and it has been the major focus of criticism of Chinese television culture (including that by some of the critics mentioned earlier).

These changes indicate, as mentioned by Ruoyun Bai and Yin Hong, the structurally guaranteed dual role of the state and the market in the formation and control of the television industry, television culture, and, by extension, the production of television drama. In terms of commercial interests, their post-revolutionary return can be traced to January of 1979, when viewers saw the first advertisement on television in Shanghai. By the mid-1990s, commercials cost staggering amounts of money for a five-second slot during the prime-time news on Chinese Central Television (hereafter CCTV). The year 1994 witnessed the creation of the first “private” television company (even though its appearance was at first met with official disapproval).
Structurally speaking, the quantitative and qualitative dialectic in China has been a direct result of policy changes in the (aforementioned) reorganization of the television industry, which further led to something called *zhibo fenli*, or the separation of broadcasting and content production. *Zhibo fenli* means that, other than most of the news items, television stations were no longer the sole program-making entities as they had been. Content production was thus poised to become a new (technology-aided) cultural industry for “creative possibilities.” One of the quantitatively measurable effects has been the exponential increase in the output of television dramas since the early 1990s. In 2003, for example, after about ten years (1994–2003) of little official support, private “culture” companies were officially allowed to compete with other entities for content production. Providing “opportunities for different kinds of dramatic creation,” the specific modern-Chinese-history-related quantitative and qualitative dialectic within the development of this mainstream cultural phenomenon tells socially and historically messy and specific “stories” from reform-era China. The rise and fall of many private television drama production companies and the expansion in subgenres in Chinese television drama all testify to the complexity of this history.

**DIANSHI WENHUA, OR TELEVISION CULTURE, AND THE STATE**

While the state has always played a controlling role in the development of television as a cultural industry and in its content production, it was not until the 1990s that new official cultural policies made it possible for television drama to be “stretched” and expanded into a dominant storytelling form and cultural phenomenon. These new official cultural policies not only enabled the structural changes mentioned above, but also encouraged content production in the direction of so-called *zhuxuan lü* (main melody) plus *duoyang hua* (multiplicity). This official guideline is indicative of the coexistence of arbitrary censorship control and fluidity in what a “guideline” can be made to mean. Narratively, *zhuxuan lü* and *duoyang hua* can simultaneously evoke “social realism,” “critical realism,” “socialist realism,” “revolutionary romanticism,” or melodrama, all of which also evoke different historical references, ideological implications, and cultural/political meanings. Additionally, while “realism” may be combined with melodrama, this may or may not be based on a clear ideological perspective, owing, in part, to the “depoliticization” politics of postrevolutionary China and to the fact that the reform era’s “reality” itself has been tension-filled and interpreted differently by different sociocultural forces.

Indeed, ideologically, the new guideline differed from both early-twentieth-century left-wing intellectuals’ attempts at constructing a “proletariat literature” (*puluo wenxue*) and Mao’s idea that “art” must serve the workers, peasants, and
soldiers (wenyi wei gongnongbing fuwu). It manifests the postrevolutionary depoliticized populist nature of the mainstream and official ideology that has moved in the direction of decoupling culture from what is deemed “politics.” This official populist maneuver, I might add, is ironically (or not soironically) reminiscent of post–Cultural Revolution intellectuals’ declaration of gaobie gening, or farewell to revolution, widely expressed throughout the 1990s. Indeed, if contemporary Chinese academic critics sneer at this official “catch-all” set of zhuxuan lü plus duoyang hua slogans, the irony is that they seem to have overlooked their own role in imagining and constructing a depoliticized society in which the “modernization” imaginary rules. Incidentally, the notion of duoyang hua, or multiplicity, is not that dissimilar from the notion of “multiculturalism,” a catchword in recent U.S. cultural politics in which class-oriented social and power relations and contradictions are deemphasized and even concealed in favor of celebrating ethnic and gender diversities (in an everyday sense). It is precisely in this sense that serious analysis and interpretation of mainstream popular culture is necessary.

Despite the stated official guideline on making television drama, given the “depoliticization” and “repoliticization” in everyday life in contemporary China, what constitutes “reality” is no longer defined by a single force, be it the state, the market, or even a combination of the two. In this sense “realism” itself has become less definable. I will not elaborate on the notion of realism; suffice it to suggest here that, today, in the name of “modernization,” “development,” “joining the international tracks” (yu guoji jiegui), “moving with the times” (yu shi jujin), and establishing a “harmonious society” (hexie shehui), attempts to normalize a seemingly depoliticized culture in a socially troubled society are precisely what is questioned in the subtext of many “realist” television dramas. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the next section and the rest of the book, more often than not television drama has proven to be not that “harmonious” a cultural site after all, but, to reiterate an earlier point, a site where a range of “mainstream” problems and issues are constantly politicized under the guise of entertainment and where different ideological positions and cultural legacies coexist and are contested. Thus, as a cultural phenomenon, television drama has also become, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s words, more “polyphonic.”

Furthermore, there is a wide spectrum of practitioners in the production of television drama, including well-known and not-so-well-known writers, filmmakers, actors, and other “culture workers.” Their active participation inevitably turns television drama into a contested cultural site where different social, political, and ideological persuasions contest and negotiate. The importance of script writers compared with directors in the production of television drama is
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often viewed as a shortcoming of this narrative form, but putting aside the hierarchical reflex may enable us to better explore the implications of such specificities of this visual narrative form. Indeed, the crossover between literature, theater, film, and television drama has always been a unique characteristic in the development of Chinese television drama as a narrative and cultural form, and from time to time certain subgenres have become (temporary) bastions of creative energy, the result of which is an expansion of the bulk of television dramas. While the market plays an important role in making such a crossover attractive, the creative energy thus released cannot be explained by market interests alone. The seemingly most clichéd places may well be where unexpected maneuvers are attempted, controversies generated, and “unseen rhythms” exist, all because there are real political implications at stake.

The widespread success of the first large-scale (fifty-episode) Chinese-made serial, Yearnings, in 1990 signaled and in effect inaugurated the beginning of the crossover of literature writers into creating and writing for television drama. The script writers of Yearnings included such then well-known writers as Wang Shuo and Zheng Wanlong (both of whom had been known for having produced “oppositional” literature). Their active participation in the production of what to many critics was a problematic melodrama gave writers a new role in the production of television drama. Today, debates continue regarding the role of well-known writers in the production of television drama, manifesting an ongoing intellectual anxiety over the (changed and changing) role of “intellectuals” in contemporary China. The success of Yearnings brought about the practice in television drama of dealing with issues believed to relate to ordinary people's lives, thereby reintroducing “everydayness” as a legitimate subject of representation in storytelling and creating a critical anxiety regarding “realism” and melodrama.

It is worth noting that some Chinese critics in the humanities and communication studies, during the 1980s and parts of the 1990s, saw television drama as a new art form with potential artistic possibilities for both elite and popular taste (yasu gongshang). Like Williams, most of these critics did not immediately associate the medium of television with commercial interests but as yet another addition to the existing narrative forms in literature, film, and theater, only more promising in terms of transmission and reception. I identify this as another layer in the quantitative and qualitative dialectic regarding the evolution of television drama in China. Like Williams, before the onset of the television industry in China, Chinese critics did not realize the degree to which commercial interests could impact television culture as a whole. As a result, ironically, there existed, also from the start, a fluidity between the views toward television drama and those toward other forms of storytelling. The
fact that early television dramas in China, especially those made in the 1980s, were mostly based on literary classics attests to this early orientation.65

There are dozens of television-related magazines, newspapers, and journals, funded and published by television guilds, television stations, and universities, and many are circulated nationwide. In the last decade, additionally, the Internet has proven to be an active and influential space for the public to engage with various contemporary cultural productions including television dramas. There people read and share (often heated) comments and reviews, on the one hand, and stories about the making of television drama, about their favorite actors, and thinly disguised gossipy pieces, on the other.66 Many of the debates on the Internet find their way into the mainstream print media, thereby further foregrounding both the dominant influence of television dramas and public reactions to some of the issues (or nonissues) generated by their televisual dramatic representations. The electronic media, the print media, and the Internet are inseparable components that have helped turn television drama into a dominant cultural form with a double-edged function—“mainstream” and therefore seemingly apologetic, but also often explicitly and implicitly provocative and therefore manifesting tensions within this dominant mainstream cultural form. The significance of these different dimensions of Chinese television culture in general and the production and consumption of television drama in particular signify what Raymond Williams identifies as “the quantitative and qualitative connection” within.

Understanding “Melodrama” as a Mode of Representation in Television Drama

Television storytelling as a form first emerged in 1958 in China, but television drama was not popularly available until 1978, when television was poised on the verge of entering every household and everyday life. Like the early development of film, television drama in China went through a stage in which different formats coexisted, starting mainly with domestic-made single plays and short serials and longer imported dramas.67 Today, a Chinese television drama serial usually runs for twenty to fifty episodes.68 Once a serial is on the air, it will run daily until completed. Generally, there are both new shows and reruns showing daily.69 Most shows last less than a month and are immediately followed by new ones.70 While only eight episodic televisual dramas were made in 1978, in the year 2000 alone, 1,271 titles with 22,231 episodes were approved by the State Administration of Radio and Television (Guojia Guangbo Dianshi Ju), and 458 titles with 7,535 episodes were actually produced.71 An unofficial count puts television drama production companies nationwide at more than
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one thousand, with Beijing having almost half of them.\textsuperscript{72} In the 1990s alone, the total number of television drama titles produced easily reached the thousands, although fewer were actually shown.\textsuperscript{73} In short, during the last three decades, China has witnessed an exponential expansion in the production of television drama.

How are we best to understand the television dramas thus produced? Indeed, given the numerous subgenres that deal with seemingly very different (but also overlapping) subject matter, what narrative characteristics do they share? And how do these characteristics relate to the various socioeconomic, cultural, ideological, and historical forces that inform the production of contemporary Chinese mainstream popular culture in general and television drama in particular?

Regardless of the exponential growth in the number of television dramas and the proliferation and mutation of different subgenres, the one characteristic they all share is, simply, that these dramas are unfailingly represented melodramatically. At the same time, a habitual negative reflex toward “mainstream popular culture” and its melodramatic mode of representation, on the part of many critics, has maintained a deng xia hei situation, indeed a blind spot right underneath the light, when it comes to how to understand melodrama as a shared narrative mode of television drama.\textsuperscript{74}

The debates on melodrama over the last several decades, mainly in the field of film studies in the United States, shed light on this issue. In these debates, scholars have argued for understanding melodrama as more than a genre and considering the historical linkage between “melodrama” and “modernity.”\textsuperscript{75} Such a linkage is illuminating in the Chinese case because much of modern Chinese history has comprised a series of struggles as China has attempted to come to terms with its “modern” encounters with the West and with the “modern” experiences conditioned by such encounters.\textsuperscript{76} If, as I have argued, television drama as China’s dominant form of storytelling is informed by various social and cultural forces, legacies, and tensions within them, how can a better understanding of the notion of “melodrama” help illuminate this seemingly familiar but little explored cultural mode within the Chinese context?

Although debates on melodrama emerged in American academia in the mid-twentieth century, Peter Brooks, a scholar of literature, is generally credited with arguing for taking melodrama seriously.\textsuperscript{77} He contends that, given that melodrama continues to enjoy a strong presence in both popular and elite cultures, only by taking it seriously can we begin to explore why this is the case and how to understand such cultural tenacity. His discussions were picked up by film studies scholars, mainly in the United States, whose studies of Hollywood cinema have taken the debates much further. Today, although the term “melodrama” still tends to be used pejoratively, scholars have taken the term
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seriously and defined it variously as “a mode of conception and expressions . . . a certain fictional system for making sense of experience,”78 “a product of modernity,” or a “code” that is permeated in various (other) forms.79 While some question the conservative bent and ideological manipulation of melodrama as a cultural form, others argue that melodrama, being a product of “modernity,” can be subversive in either gender or class terms. Some argue that these mixed possibilities are inherent in such characteristics of melodrama as “excessive,” “situational,” “overly emotional,” “morally polarizing,” and “sentimental,” all of which can elicit “strong pathos.”80 These and other attempts at defining melodrama make the point that melodrama should be understood historically as opposed to generically.

These theoretical debates on melodrama help illuminate why Raymond Williams saw in television drama “[a] new mobility in time and space, and a new flexibility in movement between kinds of dramatic speech—especially between the conventions of ‘spoken’ and ‘unspoken’ thought and feeling . . . What could be seen from an orthodox theatrical position as the limitations of the broadcasting medium became opportunities for different kinds of dramatic creation.” Along the same lines, in the context of contemporary China, these debates can help illuminate the need to recognize the connection, via the notion of melodrama, between different kinds of televisual dramatic speech and creation and the legacies of the different historical experiences, cultural resources, and ideological persuasions that inform them. In what ways, we can ask, for example, does melodrama, as a “fictional system for making sense of experience,” function in “different kinds of dramatic creation” on television? How, via strong pathos, emotions, sentimentalism, and other narrative codes, are melodramatic representations both informed by and able to manifest social changes and different cultural, historical, and ideological legacies in modern Chinese history? And how do we identify and understand such manifestations?

Subgenres in television drama, as “different kinds of dramatic creation” with slippery narrative boundaries, are indicative of the “inherently” context-contingent nature of the specific meanings of “melodrama.” The proliferation of televsual subgenres is not only conditioned by the “accomplices of the state and the market” but is also informed by different social, cultural, and ideological tensions and contradictions.

To complete this brief consideration of melodrama as a shared narrative mode in television drama, I must also point out the “word-centered” (as opposed to visual-centered) characteristic of television drama. Indeed, I consider “word centrism” to be part of the melodramatic mode of Chinese television drama. In the existing scholarly discourse, visual texts and their verbal components tend to be critically scrutinized with the assumption that the latter
work to limit the meaning of the visual texts. In his discussion of the “rhetoric of the image,” for example, Barthes explores the relationship between word and image (despite poststructuralist critical interventions, the combination of word and image continues to play an essential role in the technology-aided globalized late-capitalist economy and has become so invasively ubiquitous that it is both widely visible and conspicuously unnoticed, not to mention far from being understood). Barthes observes that “knowing that a system which takes over the signs of another system in order to make them its signifiers is a system of connotation, we may say immediately that the literal image is denoted and the symbolic image connoted” (emphasis original). He goes on to explore the relationship between the “denoted” and the “connoted,” and observes that “today, at the level of mass communications, it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image. . . . In every society various techniques are developed intended to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of these techniques” (emphasis original). Differentiating photography from other types of visual expression, including paintings, drawings, advertisements, and films, which tend to be aided linguistically, Barthes concludes that “it can thus be seen that in the total system of the image the structural functions are polarized: on the one hand there is a sort of paradigmatic condensation at the level of connotators (that is, broadly speaking, of the symbols), which are strong signs, scattered, ‘reified’; on the other a syntagmatic ‘flow’ at the level of the denotation—it will not be forgotten that the syntagm is always very close to speech, and it is indeed the iconic ‘discourse’ which naturalizes its symbols.”

Although Barthes goes on to articulate a desire to resist the aforementioned structural tendency (by insisting on the need to “read” symbols in the image without being controlled by the word), we must pay attention to the dialectics of the relationship between word and image in various forms of narratives told visually.

One of the characteristics of Chinese television drama is a heavy linguistic presence that “connotes” but also “denotes” and “naturalizes” symbols or images. Given this characteristic, television drama’s narrative structure is more dominated by dialogue than film is. The serial nature of most Chinese television dramas also means that their storyline is arranged with the intention of organizing people’s daily routine so that the viewers want to (and can) follow the events in the story. To study such narratives, one must pay attention to the ways in which words function to direct the meanings of the imagery, characters, plot, storyline, and overall narrative structure. “Word” in television narratives, in this sense, means more than just what is spoken. It is also the plots, events, storyline, narrative structure, characters and their relationships
with one another, diegetic implications, and the spoken and unspoken thoughts and feelings conveyed within. The visual, which often tends to be passive and formulaic on television, in essence becomes part of the dialogic/polyphonic components adding meaning to the more determining narrative elements. And yet the presence of all of these elements constitutes the unstable nature of the relationship between the visual and the verbal and, by extension, the “kinds of dramatic speech” conditioned by the “dialogue”-cum-“dialogic”-cum-“polyphonic” specificities of this particular narrative form.

Subgenres as a Useful Analytical Category

The official production guideline that encourages dramas that “promote the main melody” and those that address a range of different topics is not based on an interest in encouraging television drama to deal with difficult social issues, but it is vague enough for a range of subject matter to be tackled. The result is a relatively rich array of “subgenres.” Even though “subgenres” in Chinese television drama are often only casually noted and most critics do not seem to be particular about how to identify them, the emergence and development of these subgenres is the site at which the relationship between representations and changing state policies, market interests, and cultural and ideological logic in contemporary China that informs “dramatic creation” can be located and examined. Why, how, and which subgenres appeared on the cultural scene are emblematic of changes and tensions in various “mainstream” preoccupations, problems, and problematics. While the production of numerous dramas has been motivated by the potentiality (i.e., marketability) of a particular subgenre, it is those that either try to push boundaries in both a visual and a verbal sense, or happen to respond to a public mood or generate controversy that manage to attract public attention and generate debate. Even though “boundary breaking” may not function in an avant-garde fashion, it can still function to offer different ways of representing and therefore thinking about seemingly familiar social and cultural issues, ideas, values, and problems.

Related to this particular kind of “boundary breaking” is the previously mentioned crossover on the part of many well-known writers who play a role in television drama production either as sources for materials to be adapted, as direct participants in script writing, or both. Although literary works had been adapted into television dramas in the 1980s, the direct participation of two well-known writers from the 1980s, Wang Shuo and Zheng Wanlong, in the conception and script writing of Yearnings changed the dynamics between televisual and literary production. There are writers, filmmakers, and actors who pride themselves on not participating in televisual production, but that does not pre-
vent others from crossing over and producing interesting, provocative, controversial, and thought-provoking television dramas. The participation of these writers in television drama production has contributed to the formation of certain subgenres as well as to the lack of clear-cut boundaries between subgenres. Zhou Meisen’s novels, for example, have been adapted into popular dramas that tend to be identified as “anticorruption” dramas. At the same time, however, his novels as well as their adaptations can be identified, as Jeffery Kinkley does, as political novels or political dramas.88 Writings by women writers such as Chi Li and Wang Hailing have been adapted into television dramas and identified as *jiating hunyin ju* (family-marriage drama), *nüxing jiating hunyin ju* (women family-marriage drama), or *jiating lunli ju* (family ethics drama). Regardless of whether they choose to participate in adaptations of their works and whether critics find such crossover problematic, these writers nevertheless leave strong marks on popular culture.

In this sense, through the prism of (the rise and fall of) “subgenres,” television drama can be seen as having functioned as a “contested cultural site” where a range of “mainstream” problems and problematics have been implicitly and explicitly considered and represented melodramatically.89 The rise and fall of specific subgenres in television drama is related to state and market interests, to be sure, but it is also emblematic of sociocultural politics closely related to the rapid (and in many ways troubled) changes and transformations in social relations and to the larger context of globalizing capitalism and the impact of its cultural logic and imaginary in China. The relatively wide array of subgenres that have emerged in the last thirty years of television drama production has left us with more questions than answers regarding, among other things, China’s latest round of rapid social transformation.

In the two decades since *Yearnings* (1990), a slew of subgenres have come into existence rapidly, signifying both the rise in dominance of popular culture, in which television drama exists as a major form of storytelling, and a corresponding rise in the number of sociocultural issues being addressed publicly via television drama. The subgenres include, on the one hand, crime, corruption, rising social injustice, and changing social positions of individuals and social groups due to access (or the lack thereof) to money and power, and, on the other hand, historical topics ranging from the Chinese revolution and its participants, politics in various ancient courts, (imagined) life stories of (in)famous historical figures, and legends from “classical” stories and modern martial arts novels. Mixed within these issues and topics are related ideological ones regarding changes in social relations, values, notions of sexuality, gender identity, and romantic love; cultural ones such as loyalty, filial piety, and familial relationships; and psychoanalytical issues such as desire, fantasy, despair,
and hope. The result is an expansion in subgenres, with an unstable nature, that cluster around different sets of issues and tensions.

Some of the commonly known subgenres that have appeared on the television screen are identified as fanfu ju (anticorruption drama), jingfei ju/pian (police-crime drama), jiating hunyin ju (marriage-family drama), jiating lunli ju (family ethics drama), diwang ju or huangdi ju (emperor drama), wuxia ju (martial arts drama), guzhuang ju (costume drama), fenghua xueyue ju ([Republican era] petty-bourgeois love drama), geming lishi ju (revolutionary history drama), qingchun ouxiang ju (youth-idol drama), plus imported dramas such as Ri ju (Japanese drama), and Han ju (Korean drama) (the importation of foreign dramas has exerted a constant impact on the development of subgenres and has also generated the reaction from Chinese creators and producers of developing Chinese equivalents, the result of which is more subgenres). As there is no standard for “naming” subgenres, many of them continue to be called by different names, reflecting a lack of clear boundaries between the different subgenres. The lack of boundaries is indicative of the presence of multiple meanings that can generate different angles and different questions when critics engage with the same dramas.

The development and expansion of subgenres is not simply a matter of popular culture running amok. Jing Wang’s point about questioning the notion of “popular culture” as “unofficial” comes to mind once again. However, when the coexistence of the “main melody” (zhuxuanlü) and the Republican era romance (fenghua xueyue) subgenres indicates a collective postrevolution depoliticized historical consciousness, it does not follow that new social problems and social tensions will not become part of the storytelling content. Indeed, the development and expansion of subgenres are inevitably motivated by viewers’ interest in contemporary issues and problems. Whether or not such interests are profit-driven or cater to an escapist tendency, they do not prevent real and serious social issues from being addressed and various related issues from being evoked—indeed as the most visible place in the spot right underneath the light. It is for this reason that I suggest that television drama has functioned, and therefore needs to be understood, as a mainstream but contested cultural site.

In the end, we come back, full circle but on a different level, to my point regarding studying Chinese television drama as a mainstream-culture form represented in a melodramatic mode. In subgenres we recognize the relationship between the making of television dramas and some of the driving ideas, values, and tensions within contemporary Chinese society. Oriented around specific subject matter in a subgenre, different ideas, values, and contradictions contest, manifested melodramatically via specific types of characters often with overwrought but also conflicting emotions; a strong sense of (in)justice; the
desire for power, material gain, vengeance; and more. Focusing on and exploring the implications of these narrative characteristics by way of subgenres helps make visible coexisting but different cultural resources and historical and ideological legacies that conflict and negotiate with one another in a society going through rapid social transformation.

Because of the limited scope of one book, this study does not examine all of the major subgenres. I am regrettably unable to include the so-called red classics (hongse jingdian), zhuxuanlü dramas (in this case those specifically about Communist revolutionary leaders), rushang ju (Confucian merchants drama), fenghua xueyue ju (love drama set in the Republican era), jingfei ju/pian (police-crime drama), and several others. These subgenres, along with those studied in this book, constitute rich sources for future studies.