Television and film tend not to mesh in current established academic disciplines. The “disciplined” film-television divide in academia has effected more than just a disproportionate division of labor in the studies of these two cultural forms. It has also limited the role of the critic when it comes to analyzing, interpreting, and critiquing popular culture including television, which continues to be viewed as being too “extreme mainstream” to merit analysis and interpretation.¹ As indicated in the Introduction, recent publications on television culture in China in general and television drama in particular, by scholars mostly in media studies and some in film studies, are beginning to change these dynamics. However, there is more to explore with regard to the overlapping of the two cultural forms, including the phenomenon I explore in this chapter, namely, television as a meaningful motif found in recent Chinese films. By shedding light on this motif, I hope to further situate Chinese television culture and television drama in particular not in a hierarchically conditioned dumping ground but within a specific historical moment in China in which multiple cultural forms converge, contest, and negotiate. Indeed, while many Chinese (academic) critics in China have adapted themselves to Western disciplinary divisions, conceptual perspectives, and ideological positions, cultural production in China has nevertheless been attuned to a different set of demands, contextual specificities, and (albeit conflicting) cultural and historical legacies. To understand Chinese cultural production and its textual representations requires moving beyond the dominant negative views on television. In this way we will be able to refocus and gain additional perspectives that will contribute to a more complex understanding of Chinese television drama as today’s dominant form of storytelling.

In the world of film culture, which includes so-called mainstream and art-house cinema, filmmakers in the latter category are often recognized as having
made a conscious choice to comment and critique via an experimental style. Their style, in turn, has allowed the filmic form itself to be viewed as capable of performing the role of culture critic. For this reason I turn to films first, specifically a few Chinese films that use television as a motif. As my reading below will demonstrate, film-television dynamics (and intertextuality between the two) in these films helps bring television into the foreground as an important sociocultural phenomenon and a cultural text for direct analysis and interpretation. More important, the use of television as a motif in these films represents the extent to which television exists in a rapidly changing physical and social landscape either as an object of desire (to possess), as background noise that nevertheless reveals part of everyday life, or as a source of complex self-identification. In seemingly small ways, these representational characteristics help situate television in the context of social relations in contemporary China, while making visible the complex cultural and ideological implications within this context. In these filmic representations, television as a cultural phenomenon is made meaningful in a number of ways.

In the following pages, I discuss three films intentionally using television as a motif. They are *Ermo* (*Ermo*, dir. Zhou Xiaowen, 1994), *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiaoyao*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2002), and *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*, dir. Jia Zhangke, 2006). After discussing the filmic representations and their implications, I consider the extent to which the filmic-televisual intertextuality invites additional analysis and interpretation of the most dominant form of storytelling in contemporary China.

**Ermo’s Desire: Television Possessed but Not Quite Consumed**

When *Ermo* was released in 1994, critics took notice.² Not only was it the first “rural” film by Zhou Xiaowen, who had been known for his urban orientation, but it departed from the “fifth-generation” filmmakers’ pattern of representing the past allegorically and focused, instead, on issues of sociocultural transformation in the contemporary reform era in rural China.³ It did so by representing the peasant woman Ermo’s desire and efforts to own “the biggest television set in the county.” Ensuing studies have examined the gender dimensions of the film or questioned the elite filmmaker’s urban-oriented perspective on rural social mores, or hailed the film’s take on globalized consumer culture permeating rural China. My discussion here extends existing discussions on the “televisuality” of the film identified by Anne T. Ciecko and Sheldon H. Lu and by Ping Fu, and focuses more closely on the film’s use of television as a motif involving the main character and how the film portrays the social issues related to the cultural dialectics manifested in the rise of television culture.
Narratively, the film is about its title character, Ermo, a hard-working peasant woman from a small village in northern rural China, who is caught up in the rapid social and economic changes that have affected her, her family’s, and her fellow villagers’ lives. Looming in the background of the story is the “household responsibility” system—a system engineered in the early 1980s to replace the commune system—that had changed the social and economic relations within villages and rural families. In Ermo’s case, the system has changed her role in the family and her relationship with her husband. With her former-village-chief husband now physically frail, Ermo takes on many of the familial responsibilities to both earn income and take care of the household. In addition to trying to earn extra income by weaving large baskets for fruit packaging, she also makes dry noodles and sells them in the township. Ermo, in this respect, is represented as a strong woman in her own right. Specifically, the film focuses on one manifestation of her strong will, namely, competing with her neighbor’s wife to earn for her family a television set, the biggest in the county at that. Traveling to the county seat to sell her noodles, she discovers the biggest television set in a department store, which she is told even the county head cannot afford. Her desire to own such a television set drives her into situations that she has never experienced before. She takes a job making noodles in a restaurant in the county seat and, living away from home, realizes that she can also make money by selling her own blood. She has a short-lived affair with the neighbor’s husband, Xiazi (a nickname that literally means “blind man”), whose beat-up truck has made it possible for her to travel and to experience all of these new things. Toward the latter part of the film, Ermo stops the affair when she discovers that Xiazi has been subsidizing her income through her boss in the restaurant. She refuses to accept the setup and abruptly ends the relationship because, as she states, “I’m not in the business of selling myself” (wo bushi mai kang de, literally: she does not sell her bed). She goes back to selling noodles in the township until she accumulates enough money to buy the biggest television set in the county. After purchasing the set and bringing it home, however, she realizes that the biggest set in the county is actually too big for the family’s one-room house—it has to be moved inside the house through the window, and the only spot for it is on the brick bed. When villagers congregate in her house to watch television, Ermo is shown sitting next to, rather than in front of, the set, looking pale and weak.

Once the object of her desire is obtained, Ermo appears to have no interest in what shows up on the screen of this thing called dianshi ji. Indeed, while she is motivated by her determination to mai tai dianshi ji (buy a television set), the film shows that throughout the entire process of obtaining and owning the set, Ermo is largely disassociated from what television brings, namely,
the content that is shown. In addition to the scene just mentioned, the very last scene in the film highlights this disconnect. At this point some time has passed after the purchase of the television, and arrangements have been made to make this “biggest set in the county” available to her fellow villagers. At the start of the scene, the frame is completely filled by a television screen, showing one episode of *Dynasty* (the well-known American prime-time soap opera that ran between 1981 and 1989). Two lovers, their conversations dubbed in Chinese, are in an intimate moment. Meanwhile, an off-screen space is indicated through the sound of breathing and snoring. With a reverse cut, we see the three members of Ermo’s family—husband, son, and Ermo—still sitting on stools against a wall, sound asleep. Their collective breathing is amplified while the camera lingers on their faces and then, zooming out, on the rows of stools in front of them (indicating that the whole village has been here, but they have now all left). The camera then cuts back to the television, which, having just finished the *Dynasty* episode, is now showing weather forecasts, about Moscow, Cairo, London, and so forth. Shortly after, the television screen goes blank, leaving behind a static pattern and noise that then fills the entire film screen accompanied, still, by the sound of the sleeping family. A few seconds later, with the static image still filling the entire frame, we hear Ermo’s noodle-selling chant *mai mahua lou*. With that, the film ends.

This last scene is clearly designed to symbolize the disconnect between television culture in terms of its content and the real issues and concerns in peasants’ everyday life. Whether or not the director runs the risk of being accused of urban elitism in suggesting that peasants are unable to “get” the content, this disconnect is part of the film’s central theme. And the film’s selective use of content on television closely related to the West and modernization—programs that use the English language, American television dramas, American football games, and weather forecasts for international cities, all of which are presented in scenes in which peasant viewers respond in ignorance—suggests where the disconnect lies. The comical effect is at the expense of the peasants. To put it in academic terms, the film helps make visible the incompatible temporalities and, as Ciecko and Lu put it, the “uneven and overlapping modes of production in Deng’s China” that, thanks to the spread and increasingly ubiquitous existence of television, nevertheless now coexist in the lives of Ermo and her fellow villagers.

This particular kind of disconnect is accentuated in other moments in the film in which Ermo is vicariously associated with (the idea of) television—through her son, who frequently goes to the next-door neighbor’s to watch television despite her objection to his going, through her burning the midnight oil counting money, and through her selling blood in order to quicken the
accumulation of money needed for the biggest television set in the county. It is also demonstrated through two moments when Ermo comes face to face with a number of television sets that are turned on, both times in the department store in the county seat. The first time she “discovers” the biggest television set, and the second time she returns to check on it. Her introduction to the biggest television set in the county is accidental—when she walks into a department store, it is among several rows of TV sets all turned on to the same program. But Ermo’s desire to possess a bigger TV set than her neighbor’s is generated when a shop assistant tells her that even the county head cannot afford the biggest one. Her relationship to television, in this sense, is mediated via changes that take place in her own life, changes whose meanings stem from a mixture of existing mores and newly generated desires. At the same time, these changes and their meanings are represented in a way that indicates the problematics within them. Even though the film’s emphasis during her face-to-face encounter with a television program is on her intention to own the set itself, the film nevertheless also zooms in on Ermo, whose gaze is one of wonder, incomprehension, curiosity, and determination, but not recognition. Looking at Ermo’s wide-eyed gaze, the viewer is also made aware of the “gaze” behind the camera and its intended interpretation and commentary.4

During the first face-to-face encounter with a television program, Ermo is looking at an English-speaking program in which a Chinese “expert” is speaking to a non-Chinese on how to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Even though Chinese New Year would have personal meaning to Ermo as a Chinese peasant, at that moment, ironically, it falls completely outside her purview of recognition. Instead, she wonders aloud why they do not speak Chinese and whether people on TV always speak foreign languages. On this TV program, the Chinese New Year is represented as a cultural symbol of “Chineseness” to the non-Chinese when in actuality there has never been one uniform way of celebrating the New Year in China. On television, the spatial and temporal complexities of “Chinese culture” along with rich regional diversities are reduced to a one-dimensional representation. On television, furthermore, the Chinese New Year becomes disconnected from the lives of ordinary people like Ermo, who have to make sense of what they watch and what they see by resorting to their own cultural resources. As viewers, they remain, one might say, actively misinformed. In Ermo’s second face-to-face encounter with what is on television, she walks in on a show of synchronized swimming. Staring at the camera (which assumes the position of the television sets), she marvels at the blond hair on the foreign athletes’ arms. As in the first encounter, the film cuts to a close-up shot of Ermo, showing a wonder-filled face that is staring at something intensely but without due recognition. The series of close-up shots are again reflective of the
gaze behind the camera, which invisibly zooms in and captures a seemingly spontaneous—therefore peasantlike?—gaze. This captured gaze, realized in a rather conventional method of editing is, once again, one of incomprehension, which underscores the disconnect between the content on television and peasants like Ermo.

By thus representing Ermo, the film offers a commentary on the disconnect between Chinese peasants and the globalizing consumer culture. On the one hand, there is a degree of urban elitist condescension toward peasants who are ignorant of “new” culture codes. The invisible gaze upon Ermo’s incomprehending stare at the television is a manifestation of such condescension. On the other hand, we also recognize sociocultural problematics symbolically represented through Ermo’s story. Whether or not these implications are intended by the filmmaker, the film reveals (1) a disconnect between what is seen on television and the everyday life of peasants and, (2) at the same time, a disjointed connection between the two, manifesting what Jason McGrath calls “the gap between the imaginary of popular culture and the intractable reality that the characters actually inhabit.” Both are symptomatic of a sociocultural impact informed, shaped, and contained by changes in social and economic relations. Ermo embodies this disjointed connection and its costly (to her health, for example, and to her sense of self), fragmented, and confusing nature—indeed, the object of her desire is at the same time something almost alien to her. Ermo, in other words, is represented as an unlikely “consumer” whose alienation from the object of her desire betrays a sociocultural alienation. By showing this disjointed connection, the film Ermo, with its urban elitist biases, motivates a critical representation of the permeation and “inconsumability” of television in rural lives.

Let me elaborate on this point with one last example from the film. In emphasizing the disjointed connection in relation to Ermo as a consumer, the film exploits another moment in the story to enhance the effect of such “connection.” It takes place in the scene in which Ermo and Xiazi find themselves in a cheap hotel room. The man comes with a jar of cream as a gift to Ermo. Not knowing what it is for exactly and how to use it, he asks Ermo to take off her clothes, ready to put it on her body. Ermo takes off her top except the bra, which she shows off to him as something new and attractive, asking him whether it makes her look like a city woman. What the viewer sees is a padded bra crudely put together and with too many colors. “City” people, the viewer is aware, would chuckle at her unself-conscious showing off, finding it rather childish or even embarrassing. The man in the film, however, discovers something else: her much bruised arms due to repeated blood drawing. He grabs her arms and demands an explanation. He is upset upon hearing how she got the bruises
and tells her that she is ignorant for trying to “cheat” by drinking large bowls of water before having blood drawn each time. At the same time that he scolds her for being ignorant, he himself scoops lotion (presumably for enlarging breasts) out of the jar with several fingers and splashes it onto her body.

The message here is simultaneously condescending and critical. While the two of them are seriously engaged in having an affair and trying to enhance their attractiveness or trying to help the other become more sophisticated based on what they have seen and understood, the film represents all of this as signs of ignorance on the part of these characters who are misinformed beginner consumers. The film does it in a way that betrays a degree of condescension on the part of the filmmaker, regardless of whether or not he intended it. Meanwhile, one cannot but make a connection between these two characters’ expressions of desire and that which is being beamed into their lives by television and by the culture that is increasingly informed and shaped by commercially oriented messages. At the same time, however, the representation of Ermo also shows her strong side, regardless of how ambivalently that strength is judged in the film. She is strong-willed, driven, prone to competition, and does not hesitate to stand her ground when, for example, she chooses to make money to buy a television set (as opposed to extending the house as her husband wants), she chooses to end the relationship with Xiaizi, or when she chooses to continue to sell noodles back in the township, knowing that what is out there in the larger world can be alluring. Even if unwittingly given, there is agency on the part of Ermo, an agency that is not entirely and readily consumed by the invasive spread of seemingly desirable imagery of the “modern” world.

In this discussion it is neither whether she is condescendingly represented nor whether she is actually a strong woman that is at issue; at issue is how all of these things combined point to the conflicted nature of the sociocultural changes in China and how the contradictions within them motivate, shape, and (mis)inform. It is the implications of the totality of social, economic, and cultural changes represented in these contradictory or conflicting ways that enable the television motif in this film to signify layered questions, some of which I have explored here. Television, therefore, is shown not just as a (bad) thing in and of itself (as most critics tend to assume) but as an embodiment of tensions and contradictions in the changing social and economic relations, in this case, in the parts of rural China where Ermo and her fellow peasants reside.

In this sense, television as a motif has the potential to be evoked in other ways that can help lead to additional understanding of both the cultural phenomenon itself and the social context in which it is produced and received. In the next two films, we will see television employed in different ways as a motif.
Unknown Pleasures: Television as Background and Its Layered Implications

Unknown Pleasures (Ren xiaoyao) is the third film of Jia Zhangke’s so-called trilogy (the first two are Xiao Wu of 1997 and Platform, or Zhantai, of 2000). Set in Datong, Shanxi province, Unknown Pleasures is about two young men, Bing Bing and Xiao Ji, who are unemployed, roaming parts of the city (which used to house state-owned factories and their workers and which are now being torn down), restless and directionless. Unlike Ermo but like all of Jia’s films, Unknown Pleasures does not have a clear plot line and is structured, in a pseudo-documentary manner, by the camera that follows the two young men, sometimes together and sometimes separately, in moments of their everyday lives when they find themselves either at home (Bing Bing with a mother who practices Falun Gong and Xiao Ji with an uncle who appears to work at odd jobs), or at a night club, or at a show that advertises a brand of liquor, or at one of the many places where scores of young men hang around (one such place is a former factory turned into a crude entertainment place where young men play pool). While Bing Bing has a girlfriend who is a high school senior getting ready for college entrance exams, Xiao Ji chases after a dancer with a jealous “boyfriend,” a former physical education teacher of hers, who prevents him from approaching her. After Bing Bing is laid off from work, he tries to enlist in the army, only to discover that he has hepatitis. Xiao Ji, meanwhile, insists on pursuing the woman who is “taken,” only to be beaten up at a nightclub by a group of thugs working for her boyfriend. The “boyfriend,” shortly after, is struck by a truck and dies. The seemingly random happenings culminate when, at the end of the film, the two young men try to rob a bank with a fake bomb. The debacle ends with Bing Bing being arrested and Xiao Ji on the run on his motorbike, which dies on him on the newly built highway. He then hitchhikes and is picked up by a vehicle that disappears from the screen leaving behind the open-ended question of what will happen to him. Open-ended question number two is what will happen to Bing Bing. At the police station after his arrest, Bing Bing is ordered by a policeman to sing a song. Startled and uncertain at first, Bing Bing sings a popular song titled “Unknown Pleasures.” As he comes to the end of the song, the screen abruptly goes blank and the film ends.

While the film’s representation of these aimless youths is reminiscent of the French New Wave cinema (1950s–1960s) or Italian Neorealism (1943–1950), Jia’s early-twenty-first-century Chinese version captures a postrevolution ennui embodied by jobless young men, women working in beauty parlors (many as underground prostitutes), unemployed workers of an older generation, and various people who try to eke out a living in one way or another. Stylistically,
Chapter one

the film structures seemingly random and mundane happenings among these different groups of people mostly by following the two young men wherever they find themselves. Spatiotemporally, it does so against the backdrop of a city in the middle of physical transformation. With the coal hills looming in the near distance, many long shots, shot on location, capture the city of Datong both in ruins or dilapidation and in the process of being (or waiting to be) rebuilt. Ordinary people are caught in the middle of this transition and do not seem to know where they belong, either at the present or in the future. Their uncertainty lingers, made visible and palpable with the help of a camera, constituting a particular filmic sentiment that captures the sociocultural milieu with uncertainty lingering in the air. Critics have celebrated Jia’s concerted efforts in letting his camera show and tell by unrelentingly focusing, through long shots (both in the temporal and the spatial sense, i.e., long in duration and distance of shot), on individuals whose lives are captured in a reversed gaze that both invites and defies interpretation.

The film further complicates the already layered spatial and temporal relationships by consistently noting the presence of television in relation to its protagonists’ mundane activities. Indeed, television is employed to allude to less tangible but nevertheless real spatial and temporal dimensions connecting this filmed locale’s (uncertain) social and economic transition with the national spread of globalization that helps further define the nature of the transition in question. On the surface, the television motif in this film functions also to show people’s lack of interest in what is broadcast on television. While owning a television set no longer has the same meaning it held for Ermo, watching television appears to be of even less interest for many people. The film shows most people ignoring what is being shown and does so by either positioning characters and extras with their sides or backs turned away from the “box” or by not directly showing the television screen. Either way demonstrates another kind of disconnect. Three scenes are particularly poignant.

First is a scene in the little apartment that Bing Bing shares with his unemployed mother, who used to work in the same textile plant that Bing Bing worked at before, as he claims, he “fired his boss.” Incidentally, anyone familiar with the history of the People’s Republic of China would infer that the apartment must have been assigned by the factory to his mother: it is located in an old residential compound that bears the marks of an earlier era. The buildings, like the characters old and young in the film, though for now still standing, nevertheless look run down and depressingly grey in the midst of a dilapidated landscape that is in yet another moment of transition. Unlike that bygone Maoist era, however, the remaining living spaces built during that era, though visibly run-down, continue to stand, bearing with them overlapping temporali-
ties in the present. The overlapping temporalities include the socialist era still within living memory and embodied in these not-yet demolished residential buildings, which is juxtaposed with the postsocialist era in which numerous state-owned factories have gone bankrupt, creating a large number of unemployed workers, the youths who have been set loose and try to find their way in the midst of the changes, unfulfilled and with a lack of promise.

In this scene, Bing Bing and his mother are in their little apartment. The camera is largely stationary, and its position captures several small but separate areas within the apartment: the little dining room in the middle with doors that lead to a tiny kitchen, his mother’s bedroom, and perhaps another bedroom and bathroom. Bing Bing is having breakfast. His mother, a lackluster woman, walks in and out of the kitchen, the dining room, and her own room. While the two of them are talking without actually looking at each other, we can see that the television in the mother’s room is turned on. A news program is running showing, among other things, Colin Powell. He is speaking about the 2001 spy plane incident. For an uninitiated viewer, the showing of Colin Powell may just be another one of those things going on in remote places, but this piece of news is clearly employed in the film to mark the year—2001—in which the film is set. On a symbolic level, the film uses this real historical event, presumably being shown in real time as the event is unfolding, to mark the disconnect between “international” time, “national” time, and “local” time—and, I might add, the individual’s time. By way of this disconnect, social problems in the present are critically represented.

Bing Bing’s mother, for example, remarks that she has been “bought off” (mai duan) by the factory with 40,000 RMB, pointing out this is the final compensation for her decades of work at the factory. Bing Bing does not appear to take much notice of this piece of news—he does not seem to understand the meaning of her being laid off. Nor does he appear to connect with “international,” “national,” or “local” time. Indeed, his unemployment, his rejection by the army due to hepatitis, and his girlfriend’s upcoming departure for school all symbolize his lack of opportunity to “connect” even locally. The presence of television in this scene further demonstrates both his and his mother’s generational disconnect with one another as well as with the “international” and “national” times represented on television.

The second scene is in a room in a karaoke complex that Bing Bing and his girlfriend often frequent when they date. The room has at least one couch and a set of karaoke equipment. There they sing karaoke, and the song they sing is, not so coincidentally, the same one that Bing Bing sings at the end of the film at the police station. Besides singing, they also try to have a conversation. As they talk, the camera, at times, cuts to the television set opposite them, showing that
they are watching a cartoon show about Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, from the novel *Journey to the West*. It might seem strange at first for the two young grownups to be watching a cartoon show clearly made for children. The film also indicates, however, that the two of them are not really watching it; television, once again, exists in the background and serves largely as background noise. Given that this cartoon was an early one made after the founding of the People’s Republic, however, I wonder whether this particular reverse shot, between the two young people and the cartoon show, indicates yet another temporal dimension involving the changed meaning of the Monkey King in relation to youths like this couple. That is, even though the Monkey King was not specifically associated with being young, in modern times, especially during the Mao era, the production of cartoon versions of this cultural icon made the Monkey King a mischievous rebel more suitable for consumption and entertainment by young people. What complicates this seemingly simple change of meaning, however, is that Mao was interested in this character and is reportedly to have half jokingly identified himself with Sun Wukong in his celebration of the need to rebel. But when the cartoon is shown in the karaoke room, Sun Wukong is devoid of this historically specific meaning and is simply a mischievous trickster. While the scene shows a remarkably awkward young couple who are having a conversation facing the television set, as opposed to facing each other, the presence of television effects yet another overlapping temporality that complicates this rather awkward and seemingly uninteresting scene.

In the last of the three scenes, Bing Bing and Xiao Ji are idly standing outside in a neighborhood where a group of old men and young children are watching television. Quickly the viewer realizes that this is supposed to be the moment when the international Olympic games committee is about to announce which city has been chosen to host the 2008 Olympics. The scene is shot from a medium distance with the two young men somewhat centered in the shot. The television screen, however, faces sideways, away from the film’s viewer, with only sound indicating what is being shown. The crowd goes quiet, with the two young men being the only ones looking on without emotion, when the former chair of the committee starts announcing the decision. Everyone, again except the two young men, cheers upon hearing “Beijing,” and small fireworks go off in the background. With the positioning of the young men and with their nonchalance, the scene once again accentuates the disconnect between them and the overlapping meanings of the time and space they are in, namely, the overlapping of the “international” and “national” temporalities conveyed to them via television. By showing the main characters’ eyes turned away from the television set and their disinterested body language, the film manages to convey yet another disconnect between television and its viewers.
Unlike the disconnect seen in *Ermo*, the disconnect in *Unknown Pleasures* indicates that the television set has lost its lure as a meaningful material possession and has become ubiquitous, mundane, and quotidian, with people either paying no attention to it or “performing” disengaged acts of watching. If we recall the point made earlier regarding the filmic form of experimental cinema as cultural critic, *Unknown Pleasures* performs the role of cultural critic, with its visual interpretation and commentary on the disconnect, or the disjointed connect, between youths like Bing Bing and Xiao Ji and the “modernization” temporalities transmitted via televised news. The visualized disconnect manifests a critique of the ideology, practices, and consequences of China’s rapid economic reforms aimed at “joining the intentional tracks” (*yu guoji jiegui*) and “moving with the times” (*yu shi ju jin*). By depicting television as an official mouthpiece and simultaneously showing disconnected and tuned-out youth in relation to it, the film’s political message cannot be mistaken.

The film, in this sense, dismisses television on the same grounds that most popular culture critics do, that it is too mainstream. The problematics of this film become explicit in the ways in which the youths are shown to have tuned out. Similar motifs—rebellious youths turned off by mainstream culture, which could be rich parents and their lifestyle or radio or television—are employed in films from different countries made at different times including *Rebel without a Cause* (dir. Nicholas Ray, 1955), *The Four Hundred Blows* (dir. Francois Truffaut, 1959), *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* (dir. Hou Hsiao-Hsien, 1985), to name

![Figure 1.1. Bing Bing and Xiao Ji in front of a television set. In this scene the others are excited at the announcement of Beijing being selected as the site for the 2008 Olympic Games. *Unknown Pleasures* (Ren xiaoyao)](image-url)
just a few. At the same time, it is conceptually problematic to lump these films together without also realizing the temporal differences and historical particularities that are differently signified.

*Unknown Pleasures*’ use of television leaves the relationship between television and everyday life as an open issue for further commentary and interpretation. In subtle ways, the film’s representation of the youths’ disconnect with television is contrasted with and complemented by its desire-generating and fantasy-forming influence on them. Their imitative acts of night-club hopping, *Pulp Fiction*–like spontaneous robbery, and the Zhao Tao character’s Mia Wallace–like hairpiece and crude celebrity status in the local area all demonstrate a disjointed connection between these youths and television, namely, that the latter is also a major source of their daily fantasies and desires. Whether or not intentionally rendered, these details reveal a crucial blind spot in the cynicism of these youths (and, by extension, in many critics’ understanding of their cynicism): what informs and shapes their fantasies is not so dissimilar from that which informs the official slogan to join the international track and move along with the times. The same globalizing capitalist ideology, dressed up as personal desires with the right to pursue them, is mediated via the simplistic “join the international track” official ideology and the unmediated flood of consumer-culture-oriented global popular culture on television.

The simultaneous disconnect and connect manifested in this film is realized in a subtle but meaningful (filmic-televisional) intertextual manner, making it clear that the seemingly disembodied stories, be they news, commercials, or imported films, on television have become part of the stories of everyday life. The political and ideological implications, by extension, indicate that the seemingly depoliticized Chinese cultural landscape is far from being so.

**Haoren yisheng ping’an** and **Still Life**

*Haoren yisheng ping’an* means “bless good-hearted people,” or, literally, “good people, entire life, peace and safety.” *Sanxia haoren*, the Chinese title of the film **Still Life**, which literally means “good people of/at/from the Three Gorges area,” evokes, more than its English title, implicitly complex contextual and intertextual references and issues televisually. *Sanxia haoren* echoes the title of one of the two theme songs composed for the television drama **Yearnings**, which is one of the most famous and well-remembered Chinese television dramas and is seen as a cultural text that marked the turning point in the era of economic reform from the 1980s to the 1990s. The connection between the title of the film and **Yearnings** is further symbolized by the ring tone on the cell phone used by one of the main protagonists, Han Sanming’s character. The film’s double
reference to *Yearnings* is subtle but nevertheless echoes the pathos conveyed via the latter’s melodramatic representations of the life experiences of the main protagonist, Liu Huifang, and via the song that expresses the wish that a “good” person like her will have a good life.

In his usual fashion, Jia Zhangke places his characters in yet another dilapidated locale, this time along the Yangtze River near where the Three Gorges Dam is being built and where extensive (and permanent) demolition is taking place to make way for the reservoir’s ongoing construction. This about-to-be-submerged locale is in between visible demolition and its own eventual disappearance, which is constantly indicated in the film when the camera captures, in a few repeated shots, workers writing on buildings where the eventual water level will be. It is also a place that embodies the not so “still life” lived by small communities of natives, migrant workers, and individuals like Han Sanming’s character and Zhao Tao’s character, Shen Hong, who are there each in search of their “spouses” but in essence are also in a moment of transition. The two characters coexist (although in the film their paths are not to cross), historically, in a shared time and space mixed with both a shared and different past, and an unknown future.

Han’s character is a middle-aged man from Shanxi who comes to Fengjie, a county much of which will be under water once the dam is built, in search of his “wife,” who is originally from this area. He purchased her about two decades earlier, but she decided to leave him when the local police found out about this transaction. She took their daughter with her, and the man, inexplicably, comes to the region to search for her years later, insisting that he has the right to see his daughter. As it turns out, his “wife” now lives with a much older man who works and lives on a transport boat. Because at first the woman’s family—her brothers—refuse to let him know where she and their daughter are, he decides to stick around until he sees her again. In order to make a living while waiting, he takes a job with a demolition team tearing down old and uninhabited apartment buildings from which former residents have presumably departed and relocated to other parts of the province or country. The migrant workers are friendly to him, and he shares lodging with them in a small hostel, which, as it turns out, also will be demolished soon.

About halfway into this character’s story, the film switches to the female character, Shen Hong, played by Zhao Tao. Since this character’s story does not have much reference to television, I will just briefly point out that the juxtaposition of her story with that of Han Sanming’s character adds an additional gendered dimension to Jia Zhangke’s exploration of lives in transition and individuals’ agency in trying to capture the meaning of their transience as best they can.

Critics have heaped praise on this film, recognizing layered meanings in seemingly simple stories laden with visual cues. Indeed, Jia’s camera focuses
on the lives of displaced and dislocated individuals whose journeys across various parts of the country, often on the edges of development, tell sobering stories that symbolize social problems, tensions, and contradictions related to the rapid economic changes and their aftermath. Even though on the surface television is not as pronounced a motif as in the previous two films, this film’s use of television indicates a subtle and effective take on this prevailing cultural form. In addition to the title of the film, which echoes the strong pathos of the drama *Yearnings*, the television motif is evoked through a seemingly minor character and through his chance, short-lived friendship with the main character played by Han Sanming. Represented as a single thread that is nevertheless a significant component of the main character’s experience in the Three Gorges area, this part of the story, like the rest of the film, appears to be random and without a clear and systematic explanation. However the television motif not only adds emotional layers to the film but, more important, helps signify the aforementioned disconnect with overlapping but also conflicting temporalities and their social implications.

The Han Sanming character and the young man come across each other accidentally because they live in the same run-down hostel. The young man is significantly younger than the other men and yet takes a fancy to an old Hong Kong television drama called *Shanghai tan* (Old Shanghai, 1980), which was a great success when it first aired on the mainland in the early 1980s, when the young man would not have been born. He becomes a fan of Chow Yun-fat, who played the main character in the drama, whom he likes to imitate. He likes the drama so much that he sets its theme song as the ring tone on his cell phone. Han Sanming’s character sets his cell phone ring tone to the music of one of the theme songs of *Yearnings*, called “Haoren yisheng ping’an.” In one scene in the film, the two of them are having a meal in a small restaurant. When he hears Han’s character’s ring tone, the young man does not recognize its origin. When told that the title is “Bless Good-Hearted People” (“Haoren yisheng ping’an”), he laughs, saying there are no such people anymore. He jokingly calls Han a nostalgic type, to which the latter replies that one should always have something good to remember. The young man then asks Han to ring his mobile, whose ring tone Han does not recognize either. Imitating a signature gesture of Chow Yun-fat in the drama *Old Shanghai*, he points at Han as if with a gun, wondering aloud how it can be that Han has never heard of “Fa Ge” (Brother Fa, Chow’s nickname). The film does not stop here with its references to television drama but pushes the multiple temporal references implied in this little exchange much further.

After the exchange in the restaurant and after telling Shen Hong’s story, the film again picks up the thread regarding the young man. In a quiet and seem-
ingly random way, the film cuts to a moment when Han Sanming’s character runs into the young man on the street. The latter is in a hurry but cheerfully tells the former that he is going to do something and that he will be paid 50 RMB for it. He asks Han to wait for him that evening in the same restaurant. Without further explanation, the young man gets into a pickup truck and quickly disappears from the scene as the truck takes a left turn and speeds off. That evening the young man fails to show up. The next day at his worksite in the midst of piles of demolished bricks, Han Sanming tries to call him. After he dials the number, he hears the theme song of *Old Shanghai* coming from somewhere nearby. He turns around and notices the sound coming out of a pile of bricks. He pushes the button on his phone to hang up, and the music stops. He calls out, pointing at the pile of bricks, while other workers rush to surround it. In the next scene Han is sitting in a partially demolished space in which the young man’s body lies underneath a quilt beneath a makeshift shrine. Han sits next to the covered body. As the camera zooms in, we see next to Han a picture of the nameless young man (who has told Han that everyone calls him “Xiao Ma Ge,” a nickname taken from Chow Yun-fat’s character) posing in a Chow Yun-fat–like gesture. Subtly and not so subtly, the film pushes the television motif further: despite his fantasy that he is Chow Yun-fat’s character in a popular televisual story of old Shanghai gangsters, in real life, this Xiao Ma Ge’s participation in what appears to be a gang fight brings his life to a premature end.

This entire thread about the young man and his accidental, short-lived friendship with the protagonist are represented with little exploitation of emotion. However, by using camera angles, lingering shots, moments of verbal

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**Figure 1.2.** Han Sanming and Xiao Ma Ge having dinner. *Still Life* (Xihe Xinghui)
exchange, and seemingly naturalistic acting, the film manages to tell a heart-wrenching story about a young man whose life is lost in a senseless way. From visual clues one can infer how he meets his end—he is recruited (seemingly by Shen Hong’s estranged husband, Guo Bin), with 50 RMB as his payment, to take part in a gang fight. He must have been killed during the fight and is subsequently buried under the pile of bricks where Han Sanming’s character finds him. Seemingly quietly—with the violence symbolized by the pile of bricks in the midst of a demolished and about-to-disappear “past”—and almost without a trace, the young man with a fancy for the television drama Old Shanghai and its main character has come and gone. He is young, but his short life seems to have included a mixture of hardships, innocence, small hopes, fanciful moments, and eventual destruction. What do his youth and his life stand for when associated with a place in ruins, about to disappear, and yet nevertheless layered with history? To complicate this question further, let me return to Han Sanming’s character, his ring tone, along with other snippets shown in the film about his past, his present, and his uncertain future.

In addition to Old Shanghai, the television drama Yearnings is quietly but strongly referenced in this film. Each drama in its own way refers to moments—in the early 1980s and early 1990s—when the slogan gaige kaifang, or reform and open door, signified an optimistically imagined future for China that is both economically developed and socioculturally enhanced. When these relatively old dramas turn up again in this film, however, the time and space they occupy has become further layered with demolished space and individuals in transition with uncertain futures. On one narrative level, the television dramas each tells a
story set in a different historical moment in the twentieth century: *Old Shanghai* in the 1920s and 1930s, and *Yearnings* in the 1960s to the early 1980s. The former was made in 1980 and became widely popular both in Hong Kong and on the mainland throughout the subsequent decade. The latter, shown in 1990, was also an instant success but within a different historical moment and with references to different historical issues. Each in its own way is about a not-so-distant past, and each tells a rather linear story with—especially in *Yearnings*—by now rather familiar political implications in relation to the time when it was released: it is time to move away from politics. In *Still Life*, when these dramas turn up again and are symbolized by the ring tones, the lives of the characters in the film signify the sociocultural and economic changes that have taken place during the years since the airing of these dramas and since the hopes, the imagination, and the struggles manifested in these dramas have been crushed, transformed, and rewritten, or are waiting to be rewritten and reimagined. Quietly, but surely, the film manages to revisit those earlier historical moments and question the dominant “modernization” imaginaries by placing them in a time and space where their meanings have to be reexamined.

As old television dramas, their “reappearance” is realized, in this film, via cell-phone ring tones and via the short-lived connection between two characters of different generations. Of different social status than the characters in these television dramas—rich old Shanghai families (of the 1920s and 1930s) and urban Beijing intellectuals (of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s)—the young man and the middle-aged man in the film identify with the dramas in relation to their own sense of where they are and what they hope to hold onto. In addition to showing the downside of the “economic miracle” in China, *Still Life*’s use of the television motif recognizes and provides indirect commentary on the impact of television on storytelling via seemingly insignificant individuals’ lives.

The notion of *haoren*, or good-hearted person, in *Yearnings*’ theme song takes on new meaning in a socially different setting in *Still Life*. *Haoren* today conjures up all kinds of meanings except, perhaps, for someone like Liu Hui-fang, who is the “good-hearted” character in *Yearnings*. Today, a “good-hearted person” is someone who is poor, so poor that years ago he had to resort to buying a woman to be his wife but who quietly goes about his life in the face of ruins and an uncertain future. Ideologically, then, such a “good person” can provoke controversy. What does “good” mean in today’s Chinese context? What does Han Sanming’s character mean exactly? What is his agency and what motivates him? If *haoren* here also extends to the young man who cheerfully identifies himself with Chow Yun-fat’s character in *Old Shanghai*, what is his “good-heartedness”? With these questions, we realize that *haoren* is not a moral term here but one that hinges upon these individuals’ “will to live,” their
willingness to leave home to make a living selling their labor while continuing to have hopes for themselves. Politically, however, is this not a rather depoliticized sense of being “good,” one not oriented toward questioning and challenging social inequality and injustice? The film Still Life answers these questions in subtle and often conflicting ways.

While the unclear definition of haoren is indicative of cultural, ideological, and discursive changes and uncertainties in postrevolutionary Chinese mainstream culture—indeed symptomatic of its particular kind of depoliticized politics, its unspecific meaning can nevertheless become specific contingent upon historical specificities of social context. The visual particularities employed in this film manifest the interactive dynamics between different individuals and their appropriations of the cultural narratives that are available to them.

The evocation of the two television dramas helps bring to the foreground the fact that, as a dominant form of storytelling, not all television dramas are equal. Some may indeed be ephemeral, while others, at least in China, can be invoked in different historical contexts and can continue to exert an impact, often in different ways due to changing sococultural conditions. It is interesting, therefore, that while Han Sanming’s character gravitates toward the sentiment expressed in the theme song of Yearnings, the much younger man prefers a drama that was made one decade earlier than Yearnings and is about an earlier historical period. The two characters’ relationships to the two television dramas as symbolized in Still Life, in other words, essentially reorient our sense of the original dramas and help us recognize the complex temporalities that inform the film’s representations of these characters. The film not only sheds light on the cultural impact of television drama on individuals, but also, and more importantly, complicates such a cultural relationship via stories about individuals who find themselves in specific social and economic conditions and whose interactions with these cultural texts offer sometimes heart-wrenching glimpses into the layered social and historical temporalities in contemporary China. In short, the multilayered implications and overlapping temporalities, manifested in filmic-televisual intertextuality indicate the extent to which television culture and television drama have participated in constant ideological renegotiations specific to China in the postrevolutionary and market economic reform era.