Mainstream Culture Refocused
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Epilogue

Intellectuals, Mainstream Culture, and Social Transformation

In arguing in my Introduction for the need to focus on mainstream Chinese culture, I contended that mainstream culture is where discursive or ideological struggles take place. The previous chapters demonstrate more specifically what I mean in saying that various cultural and historical legacies inform such types of cultural production as the television drama and its representational mode. In television drama, different ideological positions and perspectives coexist, manifested, melodramatically, via representations of different ideas and competing values in response to social change and the tensions and problems that follow. This characteristic is shared by subgenres I am unable to include in this book, but it is to be hoped that further studies will continue to explore the complexity and implications demonstrated in those genres.

I would like to conclude by highlighting a theme that implicitly runs through this book, namely, the changing relationship between mainstream culture and the role of intellectuals in the postrevolutionary socioeconomic transformation in contemporary China. Future studies of Chinese mainstream (popular) culture need to take into consideration the formation and development of, for a lack of a better word, a “cultural ecosystem” in the last three decades in China with four major forces or groups dominating meaning production, namely, guan, mei, chan, xue, or officials, the media, industry, and the academy.¹ It is no longer accurate to assume a monolithic entity called “Chinese intellectuals” independent of these forces when the cultural production of meaning has become multifaceted and tension-filled. Nor is it accurate to apply ready-made labels to voices from within these forces without fully understanding their contextual, dialogic, and ideological implications.

Indeed, to reiterate, since the early 1990s, the role of Chinese intellectuals has become more diverse and complex than before. In the 1980s intellectuals appeared collectively to share an oppositional position vis-à-vis the “state,” a
position that was largely informed by a readiness to say good-bye to revolution (gaobie geming) and an impatience for China to pursue (what turned out to be an American style of) “modernization.” The irony within this “opposi-
tional” stance was that when it came to the desire for modernization, intel-
lectuals were in fact not so oppositional after all. The majority shared with the
reformers in power a developmentalist (fazhan zhuyi) oriented modernization
imaginary and contributed to a delegitimization of the revolution led by the
Chinese Communist Party by associating it with “traditional culture” (chuan-
tong wenhua), which, as indicated in the famous television essay serial He shang
(River elegy, 1987), was represented as being responsible for China’s being luo
hou, or lagging behind in “modernization.” More than two decades later, this
frame of argument has been proven historically unsophisticated. The social,
environmental, cultural, and human costs of rapid economic development and
the much increased polarization between the rich and the poor have compelled
a new understanding of “development” and “modernization” and generated
heated debates among intellectuals themselves.3

Indeed, around the year 2000, when I began to pay attention to the phe-
nomenon of television drama as a dominant form of storytelling in contem-
porary China, the turn of the century had already witnessed debate, among
intellectuals in China regarding different assessments of the economic/market
reforms, legacies of Chinese socialism and the communist revolution, and the
ideological positions that inform the different assessments. These new debates,
as I have noted in the book, are manifested in television dramas when writer/
critic/scholar intellectuals engage with this major form of storytelling, either
in creative or in critical terms. Such participation (and its lack) is itself part
of the yet to be fully explored story of the changed and changing relationships
between mainstream culture and intellectuals and between the power structure
and its critics, and of the discursive struggles among the increasingly divergent
groups of intellectuals and the cultural elite in China.4

On one level, if, to echo Yin Hong, there is an “accomplice,” or gong mou,
relationship between the state and the market, the interests of the aforemen-
tioned power groups are deeply entangled. By identifying these four groups as
“accomplices” I do not suggest that this is a phenomenon particular to China.
It may well have been the structural and cultural consequences of China join-
ing the “tracks” of globalizing capitalism and adopting its cultural logic that
resulted in the formation of a new cultural elite whose positions and perspec-
tives both inform and are informed by the socioeconomic structural changes
and by their shared “modernization” imaginary emphasizing mainly wealth
and power. The development of contemporary Chinese “mainstream culture”
is closely related to such reformation within the larger structural and cultural
logic of global capitalism. Recognizing that Chinese intellectuals’ positions are implicated is an honest assessment and a first step toward recognizing different kinds of entanglements with globalizing capitalist power in China’s postrevolutionary reform era.

On another level, against the backdrop of the rapidly changing socio-economic system in the name of market reform and the corresponding reformation of the cultural system, the formerly (in the 1980s) shared “oppositional” stance by intellectuals rapidly became transformed into different and even conflicting responses to the “new” social, economic, and political circumstances. Various articulations of these different perspectives constitute genuine ideological struggles among different worldviews both in response to and as part of the changing cultural system in contemporary China. As a result, the relationship between mainstream culture and intellectuals, as I have tried to indicate in this book, is itself troubled, layered, tension-filled, and carries multiple implications.

China’s cultural and historical legacies and the social and economic problems that the developmentalist pursuit of modernization has created and will continue to generate serious debates about the direction of China’s economic reform, the Chinese “modernity” imaginary, and the role of intellectuals in such ideological struggles. These debates are not only symptomatic of ideological tensions both within and among the aforementioned four groups, but are also part and parcel of the “cultural ecosystem” in today’s China.5

The fact that intellectuals are themselves deeply entangled with the existing cultural system in China will continue to manifest itself in the ongoing debates about different intellectual perspectives and positions and about the nature of China’s economic reform and China’s path to modernization. Such debates will also continue to influence mainstream (popular) cultural production of meaning. It remains to be seen in what ways Chinese intellectuals’ role in meaning production will affect the discursive struggles to imagine a society that is not dominated by the logic of globalizing capitalist culture and a society that dares to imagine a different path to social equality and justice.