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THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF AFFECT AND EMOTION

A CASE STUDY OF CHINESE REALITY TV

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The Cultural Politics of Affect and Emotion

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[transcript]

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Acknowledgements

List of Abbreviations

CCTV China Central Television
CDA Critical Discourse Analysis
CPC the Communist Party of China
CRTV Chinese Reality Television
DHA Discourse-Historical Approach
HSTV Hunan Satellite Television Station
NRT Non-representational Theory
NRTA National Radio and Television Administration (2018-now)
PRC People's Republic of China
SAPPRFT State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (2013–2018)
SARFT State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (1998–2013)
SOE State-owned Enterprise
U&G Uses and Gratifications
WTO World Trade Organization

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What we now have is drama as habitual experience: more in a week, in many cases, than most human beings would previously have seen in a lifetime.
— Raymond Williams, *Drama in a Dramatised Society*

We need to meet the universe halfway, to take responsibility for the role that we play in the world's differential becoming.
— Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*

We won't have any camera shooting positions at home, so that we can ensure that he is always in a real state.
— Zhao Jia, director of *X-Change*

Our country's poverty alleviation battle was a complete victory...the arduous task of eradicating absolute poverty has been fulfilled. We have created another miracle in the annals of history! This is the great glory of the Chinese people, the great glory of the Chinese Communist Party, and the great glory of the Chinese nation!
— President Xi Jinping, speech at the National Poverty Alleviation Summary and Commendation Conference

1.1   Locating affect and emotion in reality TV

This book focuses on reality TV, a hybrid television genre distinguished by appeal of the real, which observes ordinary people or celebrities by cameras in their everyday or out-of-the-ordinary environments. Since *Big Brother* (in

Europe and the UK) and *Survivor* (in the US) began breaking rating records and causing wide debate in the early 2000s, reality TV has become a high-rating component of prime time programming in the past two decades, a sustainable global "phenomenon" generating considerable popular fervor. However, with the proliferation of digital, network, and mobile media technologies, we have inevitably entered the "post-broadcast era" (Turner & Tay, 2009). Television has retreated from the ranks of "new media" to "old media" and was predicted to be dying. But in recent years, an increasing consensus amongst academics is that television is not dying but has merely entered a new phase (e.g. Katz, 2009; Gray & Lotz, 2012). From the media practice of reality TV in the digital age, it can be seen that not only is the global proliferation of reality formats facilitated by the international distribution networks, but the new marketing model of "affective economics" (Jenkins, 2006a) also relies on convergence in media technology. Put differently, far from disintegrating, the TV industry has gained new vitality through innovative communication technologies and the accompanying new production and business models. What we see is that, while new media has fundamentally transformed the ways television affects viewers, television still occupies "a dominant layer of media experience" and has a profound impact on our understanding of the world (Straubhaar, 2007, p. 2). Therefore, rather than viewing the arrival of the "post-broadcast era" as a confirmation of the imminent demise of television, it is better to say that the new televisual practices spawned by digital technologies have posed new theoretical and empirical challenges to television studies.

Although many studies on changes in the media landscape are based on observations from the West, the reality genre has also attracted global media scholars' attention to its practices in non-Western contexts (e.g. Fung 2004, 2009; Kraidy, 2010). Importantly, the key to its success is the adoption of the "format franchising" model, through which program concepts and ideas can be adapted to different cultures and regions around the world. The format acts as a recipe, a package, or a "cultural technology" (Keane, 2002, p. 85) that looks at production, content, and consumption from the point of view of an increasingly hybrid and porous global–local relationship. It is in this practical and academic context that my focus on Chinese reality TV began. Almost at the same time that Western reality shows became trendy, this new and flexible television genre has quickly attracted the interest of Chinese television producers, who urgently needed to increase viewership as a result of marketization and commercialization reforms. Since the broadcast of *The Great Challenge for Survival* (*Shengcun datiaozhan* 生存大挑战) – the first localized

version of *Survivor* – produced by Guangdong TV in 2000, various reality formats have been introduced and created. After two decades of market testing, exploration, and expansion, reality TV has moved a long way from its low-budget small-scale beginnings. Benefiting from high investment and large-scale production, it has become a staple of Chinese television, achieving consistently high ratings and continuing to attract impressive audiences in the domestic television market.

This book aims to unpack the cultural politics that operate on the affective and emotional dimensions of Chinese reality TV through a case study of the life-exchange show *X-Change*, which has a ten-year broadcasting history. Reality TV shows are infused with emotions. Even without any empirical analytic support, sophisticated viewers could perhaps realize that reality shows immerse them in a large repertoire of emotions. The semi-scripted nature of reality formats determines that some emotions are deliberately performed by the protagonists, while others seem to be "given off" as spontaneous and involuntary reactions. In order to create dramatic scenes that maximize audience appeal, producers often create extraordinary conditions intended to evoke intense emotional responses in the participants, which are often accompanied by overt bodily expressions such as tears, laughter, and screams. Scholarly research has also confirmed that, the typical reality TV show "provides its audience with a near-continuous series of emotional displays" (Krijnen & Tan, 2009, p. 467–68); and that reality TV formats are strategically deployed emotions in the stories so that the viewer can experience a simulated micro-social and "emotional journey" (Mast, 2016). It can be said that one of the keys to popularity for reality TV is its effective deployment of emotions, with the goal of inviting and ensuring the affective engagement of the audience.

Although the ubiquitous presence of emotions in reality shows has been well identified, still little systematic study has been performed to explore the position and function of emotions as an integral part of the show. In many cases academics and general audiences seem to pay more attention to (negative) social and moral impacts of reality TV. The public's response to this is almost unanimously denouncing: the shows and producers are condemned as using tools like dramatization and exaggeration to exploit participants' emotions in the unyielding pursuit of ever higher viewer ratings. Similarly, many media researchers also criticized reality TV as manipulating emotions to entertain the public, or representing the actual world in a distorted or illusionary way, constructing what Adorno (2001) calls "pseudorealism" and looping au-

diences into mechanisms of cultural power. Additionally, or rather because of this emotional excess, reality TV is considered to be "dumbed-down" television or a cheap form of "trash TV" that presents nothing of social value and is even responsible for the decline of social morality (cf. Weber, 2014). This debasing attitude towards reality TV is in congruent with the disapproval of popular culture as a whole; Bainbridge and Yates (2014) claimed that,

> popular culture is often seen to lack psychological and emotional complexity: whereas 'canonical' works of literature, poetry and drama are seen to offer 'timeless' commentary on aspects of human nature, popular culture is conceived as little more than a form of psychological escape from uncertainties of the present. (p. 4).

As a result, concerns over the negative effects of (excessive) emotions dominate the field to a large extent, which inevitably leads to a dismissal of the complexity of emotions in reality TV. Fortunately, in recent decades other approaches began to emerge, focusing on the significance of affect and emotion in and by reality TV (e.g. Kavka, 2008, 2014; Skeggs, 2010; Lünenborg et al., 2021). Researchers have explored their melodramatic aesthetics, their roles in the entire communication circuit – in reality TV production, in audiovisual texts, and in the reception of the audience; as well as the relationship to broader questions of power, ideology, subjectivity in contemporary society.

The new interest in affect and emotion in reality TV, and more general, in media and communication studies (e.g. Döveling, von Scheve & Konijn, 2010; Dill, 2013; Lünenborg & Maier, 2018), has derived from the contemporary "affective turn" (Clough & Halley, 2007; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010) in challenging dominant Western rational thought and the structuralist and constructionist approaches that are obsessed with finding "deep structures of meaning", absolute truths, and progress (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 164). However, these theoretical and empirical studies tend to focus on Western political, sociocultural, and historical contexts, ignoring differences in the working mechanisms of affect in other contexts and histories. This book attempts to fill this gap by offering a critical cultural analysis of the role of affect and emotion in the media practice of reality TV in contemporary China, a country that has experienced drastic neoliberal and capitalistic reforms but whose political system is still primarily defined by the top-down authoritarian Party-state. I am interested in how mediated affects and emotions are produced and performed under such unique socio-political contexts. Briefly, the critical cultural study in this book is primarily concerned with how CRTV (re-)produces the "struc-

ture of feeling" (Williams, 1961), and with how subjectivities and social forces are mutually constituted in the larger contexts of contemporary and modern Chinese history.

Traditionally, while most theories recognize that emotion involves both meaning and feeling, both mind and body, in empirical analysis emotion tends to be reduced to one side or the other of these dichotomies: it appertains either to universally identical biology or to a locally specific sociocultural tradition. What we often see in media and cultural studies is that emotions appear as objects of specific discourses and narratives, and as "merely the aura of ideological effects" (Grossberg, 1992a, p. 79). As a consequence, emotion is discussed in binaries: positive/negative, good/bad, for/against, and liberal/conservative, etc. For the affective turn, while the Spinozan term "affect" is reactivated to refer to a pre- or post-human force that subsumes emotion but cannot be reduced to specific feelings, such an approach also runs the risk of dualism – specifically, an inverted dualism with a focus on the socially and discursively irrelevant field of affect, which is inaccessible to empirical inquiry.

This is where the relational approach to affect comes in: instead of viewing emotion as residing "in" the individual or the social, this approach considers emotion as a cultural-material hybrid that constitutively enmeshed with the "mattering maps" (Grossberg, 1992a) of affects. Associated with the renewed understanding of emotion, affect is understood as *relational dynamics between evolving bodies in a setting*" (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019, p. 27, italics in original). In this way, affect and emotion are inherently interconnected and in a circular relationship: affects can spark cyclical chains of feeling wherein affects transform into emotions, which spark affects, which move into emotions, and so on. It is based on this relational approach that emotion studies have the possibility to challenge conventional oppositions and to look at "how the biological and social continually charge each other" (Harding & Pribram, 2009, p. 16). In other words, relational affect rejects the privileging of any social structures, institutions or categories as deterministic explanations of social phenomena. By shifting the analytical focus to developmental processes, changes and transformations that are driven by the relational dynamics and intensities between bodies – human as well as non-human, such an approach enables us to foreground alternative ways of recognizing the complex and dynamic causal relationship between our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it.

On this basis, my analysis takes reality TV as a privileged media platform to investigate the reciprocal transformation between socio-culturally fixed emotions and relational dynamic affects in contextualized and historicized ways. To borrow from Shaviro's (2010) perspective on film studies, I view reality TV as *expressive* – both *symptomatic* and *productive*. He writes,

> [...] recent film and video works...are symptomatic, in that they provide indices of complex social processes, which they transduce, condense, and rearticulate in the form of what can be called, after Deleuze and Guattari, 'blocs of affect'. But they are also productive, in the sense that they do not represent social processes, so much as they participate actively in these processes, and help to constitute them. (Shaviro, 2010, p. 2).

So understood, reality TV, like other media works, are technologies that have the capability of generating and transmitting affects, and as "repositories of feelings and emotions" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7). Therefore, it is necessary to not just asking what emotions are and where they are located, but more significantly, what emotions "do" in reality TV (Ahmed, 2004). Specifically, asking what emotions are and where they are located may fix us in the spiral of dualism of questioning whether they are biological or psychological, universal or particular, individual or collective. But the question of what emotions do will orient our attention to how emotions create, fix and change the position of a subject and the identity in affective interactions in relational scenes. According to Ahmed (2004), emotions circulate in a social formation, and "attach" to ideas, people, objects, and events, saturating them with affective intentionality and emotional meanings. Significantly, at the level of cultural politics, the relational approach allows me not only to discover how emotions in reality TV represent "the structures of feeling", but also how emotions (re-)constitute social relations and identities within the formative settings of the medium. Therefore, for this analysis of reality TV, emotions are not interpreted as the expressions of the inner feelings of individuals (either biological individuals or social individuals), but rather, as the products that rely on the construction and communication of the televisual medium – reality TV, to produce social difference and/or repetition in dynamic relations.

Both reality TV and emotions cannot be considered outside their specific social and historical contexts. For this study, the "specific" context refers to the media environment and social context in which CRTV is located. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese television industry has experienced a substantial commercialization since the late 1980s, facilitating increasingly market and

audience-oriented programs to be produced, including diverse reality TV formats introduced from the West. As the approach of cultural hybridization (e.g. Kraidy & Murphy, 2008) suggests, when global cultural products enter new cultures and markets, they are often indigenized to fit local values, worldviews, and traditions in order to produce later versions that can be more applicable to the domestic media industry and acceptable for local audiences. The process of localization includes not only ideology and values but also the adaptation of emotions. As a product of the cultural industry, reality TV uses a variety of framing techniques in routine production to manage protagonists' emotional performances and limit the possibilities for their interpretation in order to conform to local emotional repertoires and feeling rules. Thus understood, the mediated emotional performance is shaped by the interplay of global formats and local cultures (Wei, 2014).

For an in-depth exploration of the role of emotion in reality TV, I will conduct an empirical analysis of the Chinese reality show *X-Change*. *X-Change* is the first and most successful life-exchange reality show produced by Hunan satellite television station (HSTV) in 2006. Set against the urban-rural divide in post-reform China, it juxtaposes urban and rural youth by arranging for them to experience the life of their counterpart for a certain period. It was once praised as a new style documentary, as it applies documentary techniques and records youth participants' activities for 24 hours during their stay in their counterpart's home. According to the director Shuyuan Liang, in 2005, HSTV specially sent an elite team of about 50 people for a month's intensive study of television program production in UK. The team then developed the format *X-Change*, which exploited and cloned the overall scheme of the global formats of *Wife Swap* and *Trading Spouses* while also undergoing elaborate localizing processes.[1] An unusual fact is that *X-Change* has launched three times during the three periods of Chinese media adjustment: the first launch was from 4th September 2006 to 29th April 2008, through Season 1 to Season 4. After a three-year interval, it re-started with Season 5 on January 2012, continuing to Season 12 in 2015; the third launch was from Season 13 in 2017, up to Season 19 in 2019. The three broadcasting periods of *X-Change* from 2006–2008, 2012–2015, and 2017–2019 offers me an opportunity to not

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1   Like other local versions of reality shows at that time, HSTV did not purchase the copyrights of the above two formats, the producers prefer to simply exploit program ideas, enough to avoid charges of law violations and reduce costs at the same time (cf. Keane, 2002; Keane & Moran, 2008).

only analyze the affective production in specific medial and social contexts, but also tracing the shifting mediated "structure of feeling" along with the deepening of economic reform in China.

In specific, focusing on analyzing *X-Change* as both an audiovisual text and a sociocultural practice, my research first asks: how are the emotional performances arranged in the narrative and story of the reality show? I then track the circulation of emotion in detailed way, to observe how it articulates with subjects, things, ideas, values, and events, and works to (re-)produce social identities of the protagonists, as well as (unequal) power relations. Thirdly, I ask about what affective potentiality CRTV holds for audiences, either at the cognitive or experiential level? Finally, by articulating the deployment of affects in CRTV with the sociocultural and economic contexts, I want to investigate the ways in which CRTV is linked to the capacity to (re)present and constitute the public sentiments and perceptual realities of living in contemporary China in a time of transition.

1.2   Overview of the chapters

This book has nine chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the general academic and empirical background of this research, as well as its significance, research objectives, and chapter outlines. Chapter 2 elaborates on the context of political economy in China and the Chinese television system in particular. Chapter 3 establishes the theoretical framework. Chapter 4 presents a literature review. The research methods and design are discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 examines the narrative structures of the case *X-Change* in three periods. Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 explore the production of affects and emotions in the storylines for the urban and the rural respectively. Chapter 9 concludes the book with a preliminary discussion of Chinese affective structure in a transitional era.

Specifically, Chapter 1 introduces reality TV as a globally proliferated "phenomenon" and its key appeal of producing and transmitting emotions, followed by a discussion on the relational affect approach I applied and the contribution of this research, then an introduction of the reality show *X-Change* selected for case study, and concludes with an overview of the nine chapters. Chapter 2 depicts the socio-economic contexts and political ideology that have had impacts on the development of popular culture in China and reality TV in particular; it discusses the practices of neoliberalism in socialist China, the

formation of the dual pattern of urban and rural areas, and media cultural market reform. Chinese media are constrained by both political and economic factors, which are empirically illustrated by the localizing processes of global reality formats in China's television industry. I take these social contexts not simply as the "background" but the very conditions for the actualization of mediated affects and emotions that I analyze in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 builds the theoretical framework for the book. I begin with a review of traditional thoughts on emotion in both Chinese and Western theories, then an exploration of the two dominant trends in the "affective turn" since the mid-1990s. In the following, I elaborate on the social-relational understanding of affect and emotion as the theoretical basis of this thesis. Finally, I apply the theoretical framework to analyze reality TV, through which I view reality TV as a distinctive affective-discursive practice.

Chapter 4 reviews the understandings of reality TV in both Chinese and Western scholarship, and how previous studies approach affect and emotion in and by reality TV as primarily articulated with the themes of emotional realism, affective convergence, emotional labor, neoliberalism, and affective capitalism. By straightening out these relevant studies, this chapter also clarifies the position and contribution of my research in the academic context.

Chapter 5 is an introduction to the research methods and design. Taking arrangement thinking as the methodological approach, I produce two levels of analysis: a micro level and a macro level. The micro level focuses on the media text itself, narrative, textual and filmic analyses are conducted to track the production and circulation of emotions in the show *X-Change* over its three broadcast periods, respectively. Then the macro level analysis offers further interpretation by situating the reality TV text within the larger institutional, social, historical, and political contexts, which follows the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA).

Chapters 6–8 then empirically implement the theoretical framework and research methods. Chapter 6 is a structural-narrative analysis. Deconstructing the narrative structure of *X-Change* shows that different representational patterns of emotional performances are applied in the three periods. Chapter 7 explores the dominant narrative line of the redemption and transformation of urban youths. It turns out that the affective strategies of eliciting emotional outbursts is combined with both a Western psychological approach and Confucian family values. Affects produced are not oriented towards compassion between different social classes, but interpellated by the "ultrastable structure of Chinese society". Chapter 8 explicates the narrative line that focuses on

the adaptation and learning of rural youth. Positive discourses that promote self-improvement and dream-fulfillment are used to encourage positive emotional expressions, as well as to preempt the negative potential of narratives of suffering. But it turns out that while the affect of *kuqing* (bitter emotions) has frequently been subsumed by capital or disciplined by authorities, it is embedded in the public sentiments of Chinese history and revolution and cannot easily be oppressed or eliminated; the latter has retained impressions of the past and left them open to new articulations. While Chapter 6 provides with superficial ideological negotiations, Chapters 7 and 8 reveal how affects circulate in the complex network of relationships at once interlocking and in tension that is represented in the audiovisual media texts. These three chapters work in tandem to identify the sense and meaning-making mechanisms of *X-Change.*

Chapter 9 is the concluding chapter and invites future research. In this final chapter I review the previous chapters and reflect on the crucial role of affect and emotion in understanding the cultural politics of reality TV and our everyday affective encounters with it. Then I develop Williams's (1961) term "structure of feeling" and Zhou's (2013) term "Chinese feeling" to "Chinese affective structure" as a more explicit concept to capture the complex and dynamic ways in which affects mediate and transform power, ideology, and identity in the Chinese context. In this sense, I hope to insert this analysis into a larger project of thinking through the complex vibrations of social transformation. Finally, limitations and perspectives for future research are also reflected in the last chapter.

Chapter 2: Mass Media and Reality TV Formats in Post-socialist China

This chapter provides a study of what is happening in the contemporary Chinese media landscape. As media are "socially, economically and politically organized apparatuses" (Hall, 1977, p. 343), it is almost impossible to analyze Chinese reality TV without any consideration of the changing sociocultural context of China and the continuously shifting political ideology of the Communist Party of China (CPC), regardless of whether they exert influence directly or indirectly. Therefore, this chapter first discusses the general historical and social backgrounds of China's reform and transformation, then examines two main themes that closely relate to the prevalence of reality TV in China and the creation of the show *X-Change* in particular: the urban-rural dichotomy and the propagandistic, market-driven Chinese media system. In this context, the production of *X-Change* and its adjustment of affective strategies can be seen as negotiating the tension between economic pressure, political regulation, and cultural values. But the negotiation between these forces is not always balanced, which also leads to ambiguity and unpredictability in emotional articulation. My purpose in this chapter is not to conduct a comprehensive review; rather, I intend to trace some of the most significant trends at play in the popular media fields, in order to set the analytical contexts for the case analysis of *X-Change* later in this book.

2.1   Chinese economic reform and social transformation

2.1.1   Economic reform and the introduction of neoliberalism

Since the late 1970s when the CPC carried out the market reforms of the so-called "reform and opening-up" policy, Chinese society has experienced

unprecedented changes, which has transformed it from a socialist-planned economy to a largely authoritarian-capitalist society, and from state socialism to "socialism with Chinese characteristics".[1] Some Chinese studies scholars have applied a series of terms attached to the prefix "post", such as "post-Mao", "post-socialist", "post-reform" and "post-broadcast" to emphasize the profound impacts of reform and opening-up on various fields of Chinese society, economy, politics, ideology and culture (e.g. Dirlik, 1989; Zhang, 2008). At the beginning, economic reform may well have been an independent decision by Chinese leadership – led by Deng Xiaoping – to face the dual difficulties of political uncertainty and years of stagnation under the socialist regime of planned economy. However, while the economy has experienced dramatic progression with the implementation of a set of practices of neoliberalism[2], including the de-collectivization of agriculture, the opening up of the country to foreign investment, the privatization and contracting out of many state-owned enterprises (SOEs), Chinese society has also gradually transformed in the process of market economy formation. In place of families, communities, schools and other social groups, business enterprises and the corresponding productive organizations have become the main agents of reproduction mechanisms in China (Meisner, 1999). In a sense, China's reform cannot be considered as merely an economic event, more importantly, it has profoundly subsumed entire socio-economic, political and cultural mechanisms into the market trajectory. David Harvey (2005) emphasizes that Chinese political economy in the era of reform "increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control", and calls it "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" (p. 120).

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1   "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" is a broad theoretical system representing the combination of Marxism with the specific reality of China, first proposed by Deng Xiaoping in 1982 and then gradually expanded to include Three Represents (Jiang Zemin), Scientific Outlook on Development (Hu Jintao), and Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. For details, see the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/19thcpc/baogao.htm.

2   In the past decade, neoliberalism has become increasingly dominant around the world. In this book, I understand neoliberalism not "as a universal arrangement", nor is it merely the economic policies of market deregulation, liberalization, privatization, and globalization; rather, I view it "as a mobile set of calculative practices" (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 9). What is special about neoliberalism is its flexibility and compatibility that can articulate diverse political environments in a contingent manner.

It is barely possible for contemporary Chinese people not to feel the changes (and sometimes even sudden reversals of fortune) in their lives induced by this rapid economic reform. If in the Mao era the Party-state determined what proper life should be, leaving little room for individuals to make their own decisions, reform and opening-up have unlocked the realm of free development where people are now encouraged to pursue personal glory and grasp life with both hands (Zhang & Ong, 2008). Especially after the reform and restructuring of SOEs in the late 1980s, Chinese citizens are no longer identified as either a "workplace person" (*danwei ren* 单位人) or "institutionalized person" (*zhidu ren* 制度人) whose work and life is organized by the public sector, but as a "social person" (*shehui ren* 社会人) who is forced to find new jobs in the competitive capitalist employment market (Sun, 2015, p. 17). As Deng Xiaoping's famous "cat theory" – "It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white; as long as it catches mice, it's a good cat" – has shown, as long as the market economy can develop productivity, it can be used in the practice of socialist countries. By appealing to "powers of freedom" (Rose, 1999), the CPC have actively transformed Chinese citizens from collective subjects into neoliberal subjects who are dedicated to self-responsibility, entrepreneurship, self-improvement, and self-governance.

To make these transformations effective in practice but controlled, the Party-state deliberately defined its ideological framework. During economic reform, de-politicized terms such as "market economy", "modernization", "reformation", and "scientific development" are applied to replace terms like capitalism, privatization, and deregulation, etc. – terms like that might "cause immediate public backlash in a society that is still officially socialist and emotionally sympathetic to socialism" (Wu & Yun, 2016, p. 194). Indeed, as the communist party who publicly claims to represent Chinese workers and farmers, CPC is afraid of being charged with critiques of "capitalist restoration" (Petras, 1988).

However, despite the cautious rhetoric of political propaganda, it is difficult to neglect the rapid neoliberalism-oriented transformation of Chinese society, including the sweeping marketization of production, privatization of public institutions, and commercialization of everyday life. Moreover, as China actively sought to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the 1990s, its legal framework and institutional arrangements were drastically changed to adapt to the requirements of WTO in order to integrate into the global capitalist system. This move further indicates that the official has largely embraced neoliberalism and market fundamentalism. No wonder

Alvin So (2007) purports that "up to the early 2000s, the Chinese state had been faithfully carrying out the policies of neoliberalism in its globalization drive" (p. 62).

2.1.2   "Socialism from afar"

Despite these developments, China has never officially and openly pronounced itself to be a neoliberal state; some may even find it counterintuitive to describe China as neoliberal. Politically, China has maintained a one-party socialist dictatorship. The neoliberal principles of private accumulation and self-interest are not allowed to touch key areas that are still firmly controlled by the Party-state (Ong & Zhang, 2008). The hallmark of neoliberal structure in terms of strong institutions, rule of law, and transparent markets are largely missing. Most importantly, despite decades of spectacular capitalist growth, Chinese market economy reform from its inception has been a top-down execution process – a national practice – during which state permission to pursue self-interest (mainly in retail and manufacturing sectors) is aligned with socialist controls over designated areas of collective or state interest. Thus, ostensibly, there exist developments in both China's economic policies and its cultural landscape that parallel the Western neoliberal turn. Yet it would be a mistake to simply equate the Chinese state with neoliberal market authoritarian states elsewhere in the world (Zhao, 2008).

Thus when looked at carefully, China has taken a fairly idiosyncratic route in which state power is not disabled but reanimated with the infusion of neoliberal ideas. Specifically, as identified by Aihwa Ong (2006), the "Chinese model" or "Chinese state capitalism" actually deploys the twin modalities of neoliberal governmentality – "neoliberalism as exception" and "exceptions to neoliberalism" (p. 3). While "neoliberalism as exception" is deployed by the state to manage and subject certain populations, spaces, and socio-economic domains to neoliberal norms and market calculations; "exceptions to neoliberalism" are also invoked in policies, in order to exclude certain populations and regions from the benefits of capitalist development. Then what we have witnessed as a whole, is "China's selective embrace of neoliberal logic as a strategic calculation for creating self-governing subjects who will enrich and strengthen Chinese authoritarian rule" (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 10). Zhao explains that this is, in essence, "a kind of State opportunism" (2015, p. 15) embedded in the deep structure of Chinese culture.

At the same time, the CPC has adopted a series of institutionalized measures, including the normalization of the replacement of high-rise authorities, allowances for controlling mass political participation, and the adjustment of ideological guidance, etc. While these changes, which are referred to as the "authoritarian resilience" by Nathan (2003), may be heavily restricted and even sometimes contradictory, it is through their implementation that the Party-state has successfully sustained political legitimacy and adapted to the ever-changing international and domestic environments. With institutional adjustment, the Party-state has voluntarily transformed itself from the past coercive "commander" to the current "guider" and a more or less efficient service provider (Chen, 2007), yet it should be noted that it is more a pragmatic strategy premised on market growth within the orbit of the state. Throughout the process of economic reform, state authorities continue to regulate from a distance, and the monopoly of political power held by the CPC remains intact (Lee, 2014). This pattern, which Zhang and Ong (2008) call "socialism from afar" (p. 3), is formed by the combination of neoliberal practices and the remote regulation by state authorities. Thus, unlike the assumption that market forces will cause substantial transformation of the political system, the CPC has tactically re-oriented the basis for its political legitimacy from ideological indoctrination in the tenets of Communism to practical purposes of "delivering the goods" and raising people's living standards.

Admittedly, economic reform in the past 40 years has successfully increased the country's material wealth and improved its international status. China has turned from a poor socialist country into the second largest economy in the world. The Chinese model of social transformation, coined the "Beijing Consensus" (Ramo, 2004), denotes a different development path from the Washington Consensus, which is dominated by free-trade neoliberal dogma. While some scholars highly praise China's economic accomplishment under this model, the reform process is not entirely smooth and uninterrupted. Rather, accompanying the rapid progress of economic development, urbanization and technological innovation, significant signs of disruption in the social fabric, decline in civic virtue, and intensified social problems with regard to the deepening wealth gap, unequal resource distribution, and class stratification have emerged (Sun & Guo, 2013). The Chinese sociologist Sun Liping (2004) called contemporary China a "fractured society". With the deepening of economic reform, pre-modern, modern and post-modern phenomena and their components coexist but are deeply differentiated and interdependent, and hence fail to form an organically integrated society.

Among these emerging social issues, some sociological and social psychological scholars have noticed the (negative) impacts of rapid market transformation on spiritual value, social relations, and social mentality. For example, Sun and Wang (2010) find that unlike the old generations who tend to follow traditional collective ideology, the young generations in China are more likely to regard self-development as the most important thing in life. Sun and Ryder (2016) also argue for the rising individualism accompanied by China's rapid economic growth. As traditional social relations are dispersed, post-reform Chinese society has rapidly moved from a society of acquaintances to a society of strangers (Jiao, 2015), which may further elicit negative emotions such as anxiety, loneliness, depression, resentment, or other potential psychological problems, especially for migrant workers and the elderly (cf. Xiao, 2014; Cheng, 2009; Li & Li, 2007; Yan et al., 2014). Therefore, the impacts have happened not just on economic, political, and legal systems, but also indicate a confrontational but also cooperative process between new social forces and the original forces. Both are trying to sculpt the daily life of Chinese people, striving for positive cognitive evaluation, emotional investment and commitments to action. Informed by the above studies, my analysis pays particular attention to the entanglement and transformation between neoliberal practices, the construction of identity, and the emotional norms of Chinese society; these lay the framework for the actualization of affects in contemporary China.

2.2 The urban-rural dual structure

One of the concentrated manifestations of social fracture is the urban-rural dichotomy formed as the result of the Chinese government's eager pursuit of the transition from traditional agricultural economy to modern industrial economy after the foundation of the PRC in 1949. The issue of an urban-rural dichotomy is particularly presented here for it constitutes the direct social background for the creation of the reality show *X-Change* – the exchange of roles and lives between urban and rural youths. In general, the status quo of China's urban-rural duality does not happen naturally, but is the result of structural inequality (cf. Yang, 1999; Yang & Cai, 2000; Wen, 2005; Cho, 2013). In the planned economy period (1950s to 60s), the urban-rural dual structure was established by the government through implementing a set of coercive "exploitative" policies and systems, primarily including the system of

people's communes, the dual urban-rural household registration system, and state monopoly on purchase and marketing. From 1953 onwards (until 1985), the state monopoly of the purchase and marketing system required farmers to sell surplus grain to the state in accordance with the state's prescribed grain types, purchase prices, and planned purchase distribution figures. The state would then provide planned supply to urban workers; private traders were prohibited and food markets were cancelled.

In 1958, the household registration system (*hukou* 户口), which is the basic institution for documenting population information and distributing public resources, was established in order to create a clear distinction between rural and urban areas. It gives urban citizens birthright to the benefits of the social welfare system, including not only basic necessities like food and clothes supply, but also employment, housing, education, labor insurance, medical care, pension, employment, etc. On the contrary, in rural *hukou* it is difficult to enjoy high levels of social security and public services. Correspondingly, the population flow between urban and rural areas is strictly restricted. The people's commune system was introduced in the same year, requiring farmers to conduct collective production under the unified command and organization of production teams, production brigades, and people's communes. So understood, the flourishing Chinese urban economy was achieved on the basis of the exploitation of agriculture, villages, and peasants. This structural inequality, as Wang Hui points out, "quickly transformed itself into disparities in income among different classes, social strata, and regions, leading rapidly to social polarization" (cited in Harvey, 2005, p. 142–143).

In the aftermath of economic reform, obstacles to population mobility were gradually eliminated, causing "the laborer tide" (*mingong chao* 民工潮) – an unprecedented growth in the number of migrant workers (*nongmin gong* 农民工) who originally registered in rural areas but now migrating out of the countryside in search of work in the cities (especially in the southeastern coastal cities). However, migration to the cities would not guarantee them stable employment, incomes, and welfare, and their residence in the city is still firmly controlled. As a consequence, the urban-rural dual structure has not been swayed but has broken through geographical restrictions to reproduce within the city. With low incomes and unstable employment, a large number of migrant workers have to live in "villages within cities" (*chengzhong cun* 城中村), and their children, whom they cannot afford to house and educate in cities, are left behind in villages. Therefore, while cities take advantage of national preferential reform policies and their own strength to get rich

rapidly, the urban-rural gap keeps on expanding, and has undoubtedly hindered China from building a well-off society and achieving modernization.

The opportunity for a change in CPC's attitude towards rural issues occurred in 2000, when an open letter to former Premier Zhu Rongji and the book *I spoke the truth to the Premier* were published by Li Changping, a former rural cadre from Hubei province, in which he claimed that "the peasants' lot is really bitter, the countryside is really poor, and agriculture is in crisis". Catalyzed by this event, public attention began to focus on the serious "three rural problems" (*san nong wenti* 三农问题) of "agriculture, rural society and the peasantry", and heightened pressure from public opinion was placed on state leadership to find effective countermeasures. At the 16th National Congress of the CPC in 2002, the state put forward a new strategic mode of balancing urban and rural economic and social development. The next year, at the 16th Central Committee of the CPC, concrete reform policies were discussed intensively, and the single-minded pursuit of GDP growth was replaced by comprehensive development strategies that gave top priority to equal development in all regions. Later these thoughts were further clarified as the "scientific concept of development". From 2004 to 2022, nineteen consecutive "No. 1 Central Documents" were issued by the Central Committee of the CPC and the State Council, all of which have been designed to emphasize the "top priority" of solving "three rural problems" of Chinese modernization.

In 2006, the state abolished agriculture taxes and launched a major new program for the construction of a new socialist countryside (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun* 建设社会主义新农村). The aim was to make use of state investment to alleviate severe rural problems, and to enable the rural population to also enjoy the benefits of modernization (He, 2007). In 2008, on the Third Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the CPC, the state claimed that they realized "'three rural problems' are the root of many social contradictions and problems, and also the 'bottleneck' in future reform and development" (Xinhua, 2008). The *Decision on Several Big Issues on Promoting the Reform and Development of Rural Areas* was passed in this session, which powerfully accelerated agricultural growth and rural development. More recent efforts include the opinions on strategy for rural revitalization implemented by the State Council in 2018, which aims at deepening rural reform, and promoting agricultural modernization and new rural construction (Xinhua, 2018).

In line with such a strategic transformation, the beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed a shift from a period of urban bias within govern-

mental strategy to one characterized by "industry nurturing agriculture and cities supporting countryside", and the "harmonious economic development" of both urban and rural areas (Li & Hu, 2015). As a consequence, the urban-rural dual structure still exists yet has been gradually transformed. The discriminatory benefits of residence, employment and social insurance included in urban *hukou* have partly been eliminated, by contrast, rural *hukou* has entailed increasing social welfare benefits, including new rural cooperative medical insurance and new rural social endowment insurance, as well as benefits in terms of decency and dignity. Industrialization and urbanization no longer rely on sucking the countryside dry, instead, rural areas have obtained resources transferred from urban areas. With the implementation of agricultural subsidy policies and the promulgation of regulations restricting the expansion of industrial and commercial capital into the countryside, the interests of farmers have also begun to be protected.

However, the longstanding and solidified urban-rural injustice and the consequent intense social contradictions cannot be erased easily or in the short term. Social reform may benefit Chinese farmers by increasing their senses of subjectivity, competition, and openness; as Xing (2008) claimed, Chinese farmers are gradually moving towards modernity in social psychology. But it is difficult to ignore the pain and suffering of rural people in the process of class and status changes. For example, although migrant peasant workers want to integrate into the city, the reality is often that they are marginalized and excluded at all levels of economy, societies, and culture (Liu, 2001; Lu, 2007). Today, rural citizens and rural areas are suffering not just from material deprivation, but also cultural impoverishment. According to the Chinese sociologist He Xuefeng (2020), now the main problem in the current countryside is not low income or heavy labor, but the imbalance of social relations, and the collapse of traditional value systems and cultural identity. These impacts of Chinese rural issues on individual psyches, patterns of relations, and social emotions are also reflected on different levels in the reality TV show *X-Change*, a phenomenon which I will detail in a more specific analysis in the following empirical chapters.

2.3 Reform of the Chinese media system: between market and state

In order to fully understand the emergence of reality TV in China and the broadcasting of *X-Change*, it is necessary to investigate the Chinese media system and the discursive space within which both are embedded. Since the 1980s, China's mass media system (and the whole cultural system) has also undergone an unprecedented transformation by extensive commercialization. Prior to the initiation of Dengist economic reforms, like many industries in China, the media business was state-subsidized and Party-controlled. As a legacy of communist rule, the Chinese television industry was structured as an integrated part of the state's political system. Programming was didactic and propaganda laden, and displayed a "surprising uniformity" that comprised mostly serials and news broadcasts (Harrison, 2002, p. 176). Without allowing any commercial activities, including advertising, the functions of media under a centrally planned economic system were limited to providing guidance, propaganda, and education, and the only judgment criteria for media was its social effect. As Mao Zedong stressed, the mass media have four tasks: they "should propagandize the policies of the Party, educate the masses, organize the masses, and mobilize the masses" (cited in Lu, 1979, p. 45).

2.3.1 Marketization and transformation of the Chinese television industry

While there is no doubt that the Party-state continues to exert influence on the overall content of media, other forces, especially the market, come into play. At the 11th National Radio and Television Work Conference in 1983, in accordance with the state policy to promote a socialist market economy, the authorities proposed two guidelines. One was to transform the traditional "Two-level" television system (central, provincial) to the "Four-level" television system (central, provincial, city and country), with one station often broadcasting on more than one channel. The other guideline was the new industry development policy of "opening up new financial sources, increasing economic benefits" (cited in Zhang & Zhang, 2019). Facilitated by this move, governments at different levels all invested in television station buildings, and this led to a

proliferation of local radio and television stations.[3] Correspondingly, a variety of new television forms and genres were created to fill up airtime. However, it inevitably caused a huge waste of resources; large amounts of repetitive building, production, broadcasting and coverage among television stations at each level consequently resulted in repetitive investments and increasing costs (Yang & Wang, 2019).

After Deng Xiaoping's southern speech tour in 1992, the business forces that had started to accumulate in the 1980s quickly gathered into a tide that swept Chinese society. Accordingly, China's cultural and media policy firmly turned toward total marketization. Cultural institutions were defined as part of the "third industry of services", and cultural products were considered as commodities. In 1998, the Chinese government decided to gradually loosen their monopolistic control, and terminated subsidies for local and provincial broadcasters. This new policy did not imply that the previous role of serving as the mouthpiece and ideological instrument of the authorities was obsolete, but it did urge television stations to commodify their products and become responsible for their financial self-sufficiency. Subsequently, a series of financial and management reform measures were implemented to alleviate economic pressures and improve consumer choice, including the introduction of advertising as the chief financial resource of media revenue, the adoption of Western management practices and thinking, the restructuring and establishment of broadcasting conglomerates, the listing of parts of non-production business on the stock market, which were then made partly open to private and foreign capital after entering the WTO, etc (cf. Sun, 2010; Hong, 2014).

During these processes, China's once state-subsidized organs of propaganda have been forced to become financially independent, and transformed from "command mouthpieces" to advertisement-based and profit-driven media enterprises that increasingly cater to consumers and niche markets

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3   By the end of 2007, there were 263 radio stations and 287 television stations in China, an increase of 2.83 times and 8.97 times respectively over 1978 (Sina, 2008). To this day, this policy is still continuing and in effect. According to the latest data released by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), as of the end of 2017, there were 2,106 county-level radio and television broadcasting organizations nationwide, and a total of 503 radio and television broadcasting organizations at the city level and above (SAPPRFT, 2018a; 2018b).

(Zhao, 1998; Sun, 2012). Correspondingly, the structure of the Chinese television system has also changed profoundly; different TV stations have different daily practices and varying degrees of freedom to pursue commercial interests (Wang, 2019). Since the mid-1990s, although the only central television network in China – CCTV, remains the market leader, provincial TV stations such as Hunan TV, Zhejiang TV, and Jiangsu TV have been among the fastest growing players, especially since they were permitted to launch satellite channels (*shengji weishi* 省级卫视) in 1998 and vie for a share of the market. As competition for advertising intensified, many entertainment channels were established, and mass entertainment programs skyrocketed as their economic potential to attract a large proportion of audience was scouted.[4] While in the pre-reform era, the ideal mode of socialist *wenyi* (文艺, literature and art) was to cultivate new socialist subjects and guide them towards the great cause of "serving the *masses*"[5] and constructing a communistic society; in the reform era, the discourse of commercialized and mass entertainment tends to interpellate *audiences* and encourage them to invest in personal consumption in the capital economy.

Entertainment trends since the 1990s have paved the way for the introduction of global reality formats. In 2004, Hunan satellite TV (HSTV), also the producer of *X-Change*, officially launched the slogan "Happy China" and committed to "[creating] China's most dynamic TV entertainment brand", making it the first domestic TV station to clearly position and build its own brand (Tongxiang, 2017). When HSTV scored astounding popularity and commercial success with *Super Girl* (Chaoji nüsheng 超级女声) – a talent show for young women based on the British *Pop Idol* format – in 2005, it gradually established its status as the "leader of entertainment" (Lei, 2019). Soon, new entertainment formats began to flood into China's television industry, strengthened by China's further integration into the international media market; this trend developed well into the new century.

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4   To be sure, entertainment is not a novel thing in China, yet what could be considered as television entertainment before the 1990s, such as artistic performances, music programs, spoken dramas, and operas, were not known as "entertainment" (*yule* 娱乐, i.e., amuse and delight), but as literally "literature and art" (*wenyi* 文艺), which implied their status as a kind of high art embodying a socialist-oriented mission to enhance the public's aesthetic taste.

5   This phrase is taken from Mao's "double serve principle" – "Literature and art serve (proletarian) politics and the masses", proposed at the symposium on literature and art in May 1942 (cited in Guangming, 2012).

In order to compete for the limited attention of the audience, it is not surprising that the producers made a conscious effort to learn from media experiences of the western television industry that was valorized as more "advanced" and "professional" in the production of entertainment programs. With the success of *Super Girl*, HSTV has obtained the wealth code of "interactivity" by imitating western reality formats. The cornerstone of this interactivity is to turn a passive audience into a "participatory audience" (Jenkins, 2006b) through vote-in mechanisms and fan engagement. Allowing the audiences to participate in the show as both contestants and judges, reality TV has established a "parasocial relationship" (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and "a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection" (Duffett, 2013, p. 2) between the audience and the protagonists.

In the new millennium, the exponential growth of the Internet and other new media technologies has allowed more convenient ways for the audience to be emotionally engaged and socially networked. Although telecommunication infrastructure is still largely state-owned in China, Internet service and content providers are largely comprised of private enterprises who usually treat communication as nothing more than publicity and marketing, which released more space for television to try new economic models. One such model is the "idol-centered business model" (Yang, 2009), which further enables Chinese television producers to extract affective capital by incorporating converging technologies into the structure of the program.

To sum up, since media system reform, the Chinese media has entered a "pan-entertainment" era (cf. Zhou & Liu, 2011; Li, 2013). Unlike the "mouthpieces" of earlier communist regimes, current television stations are driven by the competitive market and unyieldingly pursue higher viewer ratings, which demands that audiences are continually entertained. Some television stations have decided to transform themselves into "entertainment vendors" (Bai, 2005), turning other non-entertainment television genres such as news programs and public service programs into entertainment. Global reality formats are introduced to cater to ever-changing needs, in turn, they also affect the production model of Chinese television, from program genres and media content, to macro market structure and ideas of television governance. Inevitably, the production of *X-Change* reflects the move of media marketization in some ways. For example, its narrative structure has been able to go beyond the documentary tradition of Chinese TV, and become increasingly align with "Western" reality shows. More analysis on this will be offered in

Chapters 6 and 7. Next, I will focus on another key factor influencing Chinese media: political authority.

2.3.2 State control and ideological reconstruction

While with the introduction of market- and audience-oriented mechanisms, Chinese television stations have gained more autonomy in nonpolitical and entertainment content, as well as more independence in their daily operations and management, the nature of Chinese media as the state apparatus that is owned by the propaganda departments of CPC remains unchanged. According to Pan and Chan (2000), media reform has resulted in what can be called the "market-based party organ model" (p. 256). In this model, Chinese media is defined as both a political superstructure and an information industry – as compromised entities that are "cause-oriented enterprises (*shiye* 事业) in nature, but managed as profit-oriented businesses (*qiye* 企业)" (Li & Dai, 2008) – and is required not only to serve ideological propaganda goals but also to reproduce itself through profit-making activities. Thus, Chinese television stations need to serve two masters, the Party and the market, "to strike a balance between ideological mission and profitability" (Pan & Chan, 2000, p. 256).

The unique aspect of China's media reform is that state control predominates; throughout the process of media system reform, it was the cultural policy of the state that encouraged television stations to compete for advertising revenue and respond to audience desires. As Zhao (2004) states,

> rather than creating a new institutional structure, market relations have been adopted and contained by the existing Party-controlled media structure. Thus, the market-oriented transformation of the Chinese news media occurred within the orbit of the Party-state. (p. 189)

Investigating cultural governance policy and actions, it is not difficult to find that the regulation of mass media under the control of rigid political principles has been normalized as a long-term activity of the CPC. In the 1990s, adhering to the thought of "catching with two hands" (*liangshouzhua* 两手抓) – "pushing for material advancement on one hand and cultural and ethical progress on the other, grasp with two hands and both hands should be powerful" – the Party-state set out to reassert media control and upgrade its ruling technologies (cited in Yang, 2011). This act fortified the state's entire propaganda apparatus and elevated ideological and political works within the party

leadership (Zhao, 2008, p. 22). In practice, Chinese media is consistently defined as the state ideological apparatus and is required to follow the course of the Party-state unconditionally. In February 2016, Xi delivered a speech on the Party's news and public opinion work symposium, once again clarifying the ambition to strengthen the party's supervision of the media (Zeng, 2016). "Sticking to the Party spirit" (*dangxing yuanze* 党性原则)" has become the first rule of the media transformation: media must fulfill political missions allocated by the central and municipal governments before they could seek to make profits from various commercial activities, or perform other functions such as overseeing social phenomena and providing mass entertainment products.

To maintain the ideological function of television within the Party's propaganda work, both punitive and defensive measures have been applied. Since 2002, a series of directives has been issued to curb entertainment. To ensure that the rules are followed, specialized departments, represented by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), was created to control and censor television content. Thus, no matter how softened, secular or even cynical media content becomes because of the influence of the market, media and all other symbolic interactive approaches, such as education and art, are always subject to rigid political control by the Party-state through institutional, political, and financial means. Another significant way to guarantee the state's authority and dominance is through limiting private or foreign capital in key ideological areas (Bai, 2007).

Apart from these active interventions, the propaganda department also exercise passive control in the form of self-censorship – meaning that media organizations often feel an invisible space of control and are trying to evade political minefields with creative activities (Lu, 2003; Rui, 2009). They regularly adopt proactive or positive propaganda strategies, for instance, facing excessive entertainment, the Party-state re-advocated the notion of television as "public service" and appealed to Chinese traditional and socialist values in constructing a harmonious socialist society. In the Party's words, the core values of media propaganda are "unity", "stability", "encouragement" and "positive publicity", and it is media's responsibility "to arm Chinese people with scientific theories; to guide Chinese people with correct public opinion; to develop Chinese people with noble spirit; and to encourage Chinese people with outstanding product" (Jiang, 1994).

As a result, political control is tightly maintained, leaving only sporadic occasions on which media workers can cross official ideological boundaries.

Luo (2015) proposed that the Party-state is simultaneously the owner, funder, regulator and censor of the media system (p. 54). It is unrealistic to assume that the Party-state is incapable of resisting the trend of neoliberalization and globalization, or let the values of liberalism, freedom, democracy and so forth drive straight in. More likely, the commercialization of television is not an antagonistic force but a supportive force that helps the Party-state tame the market with political superiority in order to satisfy popular needs for diverse cultural products, and more importantly, to justify ideological legitimacy and accumulate capital for their own sake (cf. Lee, 1990; Zhao, 2008).

However, it is necessary to point out that political control is not as top-down, one-sided, and unsurmountable as in the collectivist economic era. In fact, the party seems primarily concerned with the overt compliance of the media, and less whether they internalize the party's ideological requirements in their daily operations, which makes it difficult to guarantee a specific effect. The National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA)[6], one of the highest decision-making institutions with regards to Chinese media, is the administrative department authorized by the State Council to promulgate constructive or guiding regulations, such as notices, documentaries, and prohibitions. However, these regulations do not have legal effects. They are hysteretic reactions targeting specific problems, rather than dealing with underlying structural formations in a predictable, systematic, and far-sighted manner. This reactive nature of the NRTA's regulations leaves television producers much space to operate freely. Strictly speaking, the NRTA is more like a political broker who mediates contradictions and competitions between different interest groups, in order to achieve a balance or stability acceptable to all parties to the extent possible.

2.3.3 The "disjunctive media order"

Overall, the Chinese television industry has experienced a substantial marketization from the mid-1990s. The proliferation of television stations, growing commercialization, the gradual erosion of public service broadcasting, the introduction of digital services, the fragmentation of audiences: all played their

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6   The predecessor of NRTA is the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 2013-2018), and before that, the Chinese television and radio industries is governed by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, 1998–2013).

part in transforming the media landscape we once knew. A new era was ush-
ered in where television stations have turned into a multi-way system that
reconciles market rules with political supervision. Bai (2014) proposes to view
such a complex and dynamic media landscape as a "disjunctive media order"
in post-socialist China:

> Disjuncture describes an order of things that are simultaneously discon-
> nected and interrelated, and a disjunctive media order is one in which the
> development of media is driven by more than one logic. To be sure, most
> media systems in the world are shaped by a variety of political, economic,
> social, and professional forces. But what makes disjuncture a dominant
> feature of the Chinese media is the coexistence and interpenetration of two
> equally powerful forces, neither of which dominates or collapses into the
> other: the political and the economic. (p. 13).

The two dominant forces of state control and market imperatives are shap-
ing China's media ecology in a complex and sometimes contradictory way.
When these two forces align, television producers have to try their best to
satisfy their restless desires, but when they conflict, producers must seek a
cautious balance to avoid offending either. In a similar sense, Lee, He, and
Huang (2007) proposed that in China's media landscape, the state and capi-
tal are not external to each other but inherently intertwined, forming a rela-
tionship pattern that can be called authoritarian "party-market corporatism".
Indeed, the market works as a strong power to force the unyielding pursuit
of ever higher viewer ratings, which has led to an entertainment storm since
the 1990s. More and more market- and audience-oriented programming, in-
cluding reality shows have been produced, making television entertainment
a primary site for capital accumulation. However, contrary to the conception
that light entertainment programming is politically less sensitive and hence
less likely to be disciplined by the Party-state (than news and informational
content), Chinese mass media as a whole, is excessively subject to the control
of party leadership and maintains its role as an ideological vehicle to promote
a "harmonious society" and a "happy China".

With regards to the introduction of Western reality TV shows, while the
Chinese government hopes to activate the local TV industry through the intro-
duction of global reality formats; they are simultaneously also vigilant against
the penetration of Western ideology embedded in the formats, and aim to pre-
vent them from undermining socialist ideology like Trojan horses. To this end,
they strengthened the management of model programs through circuitous

supervisory and administrative measures, and used local adaptation as an important means to maintain party ideology. Thus, the traditional propaganda mission of the media has not been abolished in the process of commercialization. Political consciousness and the coupling effect of politics and capital have prompted TV producers to use special narrative strategies to achieve high program ratings while maintaining the correct political orientation.

The complex role that Chinese media play in the dynamic relations between political frameworks and commercial imperatives requires a more nuanced examination. If the Chinese media outlet is *X-Change*, a reality show with decades of broadcasting history and produced by a provincial television station – HSTV, how do the various social forces I have discussed work in articulation and rearticulation with the emotional performances in *X-Change*? What happened in the dynamic tension between these forces along with the historical revision of *X-Change* and what kind of mediascape does it provide in the entanglements of political, economic, cultural and affective negotiations? Chapter 6, Chapter 7, and Chapter 8 of my book work in tandem to answer these questions. In the following chapter, I will first clarify my theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 3: The Turn to Affect and its Application to Reality TV

This chapter concerns the theoretical perspective and framework of the book. First of all, I review the ways emotions have been conceived in both the history of Western and Chinese thought. Secondly, I introduce the recent trends of the affective turn across the humanities and social sciences as a response to theoretical and practical challenges in contemporary societies since the mid-1990s. I offer an overview of the two dominant approaches in this trend – affect as bodily intensity, which is typically associated with developments in philosophy and the humanities; and affect as elemental state, which has its roots in psychology and neuroscience. Then in the third part, I discuss the third strand of inquiry into affect that emerges in communication and cultural studies, which is also the strand I am following in this book – the social-relational understanding of affects. This strand attempts to bridge or mediate the two dominant accounts, in which affects are not assigned to individual traits, but actualize relationally in the interaction between subjects and objects. Based on this approach, the theoretical framework applied to analyze reality TV is elaborated in the fourth part, in which I also show how relational affect can complement the representational and ideological paradigms by offering a more embodied and dynamic optic. Above all, this chapter establishes a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the workings of affects and emotions in reality TV.

3.1   A brief history of emotions in Western and Eastern thought

3.1.1   Ideas of emotions in Western history[1]

The history of Western thought has never ignored affect and emotion, although discussions of both tend to assign them a backseat to reason. The contention between emotion and reason can be traced back to Ancient Greek philosophy. In the *Republic*, Plato divides reason (a rational soul) from passion[2] (a non-rational soul, which he further divides into "appetite" and "spirit"), and emphasizes that reason should rule passion just like a skillful and controlling charioteer in charge of a pack of wild horses. In a similar vein, Aristotle argues that the non-rational soul "is in a way persuaded" by reason, but is more confident in the power of the *pathē* and sees it as a central facet of ethical life. He argues that the truly excellent person will not only reason well but will have the appropriate emotional dispositions in particular situations, and emotional education through training the agent in the correct responses of pleasure and pain, will habituate him in choosing and acting well (cf. Price, 2010). For this reason, *pathē* are in effect more crucial to a good life. However, compared with Aristotle's optimistic outlook on the *pathē*, the Stoics expressed greater intolerance, stressing their cognitive, eudaimonistic, and moral failings. Emotions are literally pathologies of the mind for them, thus to the extent possible, the Stoics propose to practice certain kinds of mental discipline to eliminate, rather than to moderate the capacities of alien passions (cf. Schmitter, 2021).

In general, in the Classical age of Greece, emotions are widely recognized as a fixture of human life that cannot be ignored, but ought to be controlled and moderated by rationality. The philosophical belief on rationality is followed by Renaissance scholars who embraced a humanist approach, empha-

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1   In this section, I discuss the history of Western emotion ideas in general chronological order, with the goal of capturing some of these recurring themes and extracting some of the essential points discussed by the philosophers who proposed them, that also form the cornerstone of the affect theories discussed in the next section of the book.

2   When reviewing the works of different philosophers, I find that different terms are used to express the concept of emotion, including pathos, passion, sentiment, émotion, affekt, feeling, etc. For the convenience of illustration, I use "emotion" in this section as an umbrella concept to denote the broad and heterogeneous emotional phenomena, and I also indicate the specific terms used by an author when a difference in connotation is implied.

sizing human dignity and the capacity for reason. In *The Passions of the Soul*, René Descartes (1985) constructed the mind-body dualism, which also involved a contrast between emotion and reason. Emotions or passions are, according to in his "body first" theory, actions of the body (Hatfield, 2007). Descartes conceived the initial process of bodily responses to be entirely mechanical: when sensory stimulation causes a bodily response, this results in the passions of the soul.

Descartes's mechanized interpretation of emotions was reversed by the British Empiricists, especially David Hume. Hume, who described himself as a "pagan" philosopher, discussed emotion at length (cited in Plamper, 2015, p. 23). In his view, "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume cited in Blumenau, 2002, p. 292). He argued that human instinct drove people to seek good and avoid evil, and passions are the engine for all our deeds; they are impressions – strong and lively perceptions with a certain "feel" and a direction, or impulse. Reason, however, is inert and incapable of generating impulses or drives to move by itself. What reason can do is to connect various ideas to fulfill the ends given by passions/desires. Based on this sentimentalist bent, Hume considers our moral judgements to be rooted in motivating emotions (Kauppinen, 2014).

In contrast to Descartes, Baruch de Spinoza rejected any dualism between mind and body, reason and emotion. In *Ethics*, he proposes that there exists a single divine substance, the mental and physical are two aspects or manifestations of it. Spinoza's parallelism holds that whereas the human mind is a mode of thought, it is necessarily embodied, and can only experience itself as a mode of extension (e.g. a physical body) entangled with other modes of extension because "the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else" (Spinoza cited in Robinson & Kutner, 2019, p. 114). Affects, according to Spinoza, are "the modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modifications" (Spinoza, 1997/1678, Definition III). The increasing and decreasing of bodily power is related to the possible changeability of these bodies. He recognized three primary affects: desire, joy or pleasure, and sadness or pain, "each one generally being called by a different name on account of its varying relations and extrinsic denominations" (Spinoza, 1985, p. 541). Spinoza's philosophy has been heavily re-read by contemporary theorists

of affect, yet has also resulted in confusions about the use of affect, which I will return to with more details in the next section.

However, the division between emotion and reason was greatly sharpened during the Enlightenment period in the seventeenth century. For example, Kant defended a reason-centered model that privileges reason over the crudeness of the "senses". For him, emotion is "the feeling of a pleasure or displeasure in the subject's present state that does not let him rise to reflection" (Kant translated by Louden, 2006, p. 149). Whereas emotions could become a "temporary surrogate of reason", passions lay far beyond the range of an ethics governed by reason. This means for Kant that emotional subjects are "bad" subjects because being "subject to affects and passions is probably always an *illness of the mind*" (ibid, italics in original). In short, in Kant's normative hierarchy of knowledge, "our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason. There is nothing higher than reason" (Kant, 1998, Part 1.2.2.i). As a consequence, affect and emotion are often located as opposites to rationality and cannot occupy a space in these theoretical frames.

Traces of emotions can also be found in the writings of classical sociologists since the 19th century. For them, emotions are not merely interior processes that occur in the mind and body of individuals, but inherently social phenomena involving social relations and social structures (Harré, 1986). For example, Emile Durkheim claimed that emotions are the glue that holds society together. The social body is connected when the "collective emotion" or "common feeling" is transmitted and felt within people (Durkheim, 1964/1895). Norbert Elias argued in *The Civilizing Process* (2000) that Western civilization has always relied on affect control structures – systematic mechanisms which regulate individual behavior to ensure the smooth functioning of society. Max Weber posited affectual action as one of the "four ideal types of social action" (Weber, 2019/1920, p. 83). In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber also discussed the role of emotions in economic action, for "it is the anxiety provoked by an inscrutable divinity which is at the heart of the capitalist entrepreneur's frantic activity" (Illouz, 2007, p. 1). Overall, their main focus is on the rationalization of modern societies, and emotions are located in the social-constructionist scope that can only be understood as part of the culture in which they have meaning.

As a whole, what we witness in the history of Western thought is not a dismissal of the significance of emotion in human nature; instead, there is a long history of debates about the role and place of emotion, about which emotions

are desirable and which are impedimentary or even disruptive, and about
how to manage them. Among them, the empiricism represented by Hume
may be the most intensive discussion of emotion. Yet, perhaps because em-
piricism fails to reach a universal consensus, it has reached a deadlock where
we can only get the feeling about the feeling. Briefly, under the undisputed
dominance of the rationalist paradigm, the tendency to associate rational-
ity with knowledge-making and science was matched by a lack of interest in
emotional dimensions. In these paradigms, reason is prioritized as the safe-
guard of objective knowledge and democratic societies, as Lakoff and Johnson
(1980) pointed out, "the view that we have access to absolute and uncondi-
tional truths about the world is the cornerstone of the Western philosophical
tradition...For the rationalists, only our innate capacity to reason can give us
knowledge of things as they really are" (p. 195). On the contrary, emotion has
tended to be understood in terms of its irrelevance and even deviance from
ideals of the public sphere. As a consequence, the superior rationality and the
notion of an essentially emotionally-detached, rational state of human be-
ings has established the rise of modern science. However, this paradigm has
faced analytic challenges as emotions are increasingly visible and prominent
in contemporary societies, leading to the increasing significance of affects
and emotions as the focus of analysis in various disciplines. Before expound-
ing on this turn in the next section, I will briefly review traditional Chinese
thought about emotions.

3.1.2 Ideas of *qing* (情) in Chinese history[3]

Whereas Western ideas of emotions are primarily derived from philosophy,
and more recently, from science, ideas of emotions in China are generated
from the moral values and aesthetic thoughts of Confucianism and Taoism.
In other words, rather than as a philosophical enquiry of the pursuit of truth,

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3   Different from the chronological discussion of Western emotion ideas, in this section,
     my discussion of Chinese ideas of *qing* is focusing on Confucianism and Taoism, which
     form the basic "structure of feelings" of traditional Chinese society. Those familiar
     with traditional Chinese culture may know that Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism
     are often discussed together, because they have penetrated and merged with each
     other in the long river of Chinese history. But here, regarding the thought of *qing*,
     the Buddhist influence has added some views, but the basic structure has not been
     changed, so it is omitted here, and interested readers can refer to Sundararajan (2015);
     Zhao (2020).

Chinese thoughts of emotions are more a form of life wisdom, or practical wisdom, with the very realistic goal of improving people's spiritual realm, or *jingjie* (境界, "mental world") through the cultivation of morality, physicality, and aesthetics.

In Chinese philosophy, perhaps *qing* (情) is the concept closest to "emotion" in English. It is often used in conjunction with *xing* (性, "nature") to form the term *xingqing* (性情), so that *qing* often implies something/someone is genuine, natural, essential or sincere (Graham, 1986). *Qing* is also often used in combination with *gan* (感), a verb that means to affect/stir or being affected/aroused, resulting in the term *ganqing/qinggan* (感情/情感), which is very close to the Spinozan concept of affect. The location of *qing* in Confucianism can be roughly grasped from the classic Confucian Guodian chu slips (n.d.), which argues,

> 凡人虽有性,心亡奠志,待物而后作,待悦而后行,待习而后奠。喜怒哀悲
> 之气,性也。及其见于外,则物取之也。性自命出,命从天降。道始于情,
> 情生于性。……好恶,性也。所好所恶,物也。
>
> While all human beings possess *xing*, their *xin* (heart-mind) lack a fixed intention. It depends on (external) things to become active, it depends on pleasure to become functioning, and it depends on practice to become fixed. The *qi* (vital force) of happiness, anger, sadness, and grief is *xing*. When it appears on the outside, it is because (external) things have laid hold of it. Humanity derives from Fate, the Fate descends from Heaven. The *dao* begins in *qing*, *qing* is derived from *xing*….Liking and disliking is one's nature. What is liked and disliked are things.

So *qing* is not understood in opposite to rationality, but as an externalization and expressive form of *xing*, and hence as an inherent part of it. Accordingly, Puett (2004) paraphrases *qing* as "one's emotional disposition… the way that one's emotions will be pulled out in particular circumstances" (p. 46). Another Guodian scholar, Andreini, states that "on the one hand we have 'emotions, passions, feelings' and on the other the idea of 'real, true, genuineness'" (2006, p. 151). Closely related with the sense of authenticity, in Chinese culture *qing* is considered to be in contrast to *mao* (貌, "appearance", "guise", or "description") and *xing* (形, "form" or "shape") (Middendorf, 2008, p. 117).

In general, *qing* in Confucian thought has three layers of meaning (Tu, 2017, p. 59–60): first, the *situation*, referring to the factual state of things/matters themselves. In Hansen's (1995) words, *qing* is "the apprehensible, reality-based criteria for shared, objective naming...a kind of *authentic* standard" (p.

197, italics in original). As mentioned repeatedly above, this meaning is derived from its close relation with *xing*, and is often applied to describe an objective state – there is no such thing as good or evil. Secondly, *emotion*, referring to a certain mental state of a subject. Similar to the basic emotion theory in the West, Confucianists also argued for the existence of a basic *qing*. The theory of seven basic *qing* has been proposed in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 礼记), including joy, anger, sadness, fear, love, hate, desire – "these seven we are capable of without having learned them" (*Liji* as cited in Hansen, 1995, p. 202). The third is *social affection*, which refers to the medium and the capital used to maintain and communicate interpersonal relationships, leading to the formation of the Chinese society of favor and *guanxi* (关系, "relations").

The value judgement of *xing* and *qing*, that is, the questions of whether *xing* and *qing* are good or evil has been inconclusively debated in the history of Chinese thought (cf. Tu, 2017). Nevertheless, as a kind of practical wisdom, Confucianism attaches greater importance to the refinement of emotions in real life, primarily through the pedagogy of rites and music. The classical text *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhong yong* 中庸) (Zisi, n.d.) claims that,

> 喜怒哀乐之未发,谓之中；发而皆中节,谓之和。中也者,天下之大本也；和也者,天下之达道也。致中和。天地位焉,万物育焉。
>
> While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of Equilibrium. When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of Harmony. This Equilibrium is the great root from which grow all the human actings in the world, and this Harmony is the universal path which they all should pursue.

So understood, the best state of emotions is balance and moderation, that is, a harmonious state (*he* 和/和谐) where things combine in balanced proportions. Thus, there is the theory of "regulation of emotions" (*zhiqing* 治情). This idea of improving character and virtue by managing emotions is similar to the ethics of the Greek philosopher Aristotle; but in my opinion, Confucianism is more concerned with the practicality of ideas than the formation of theoretical wisdom and logical contemplation. Therefore, unlike Western philosophy, which pursues theoretical rigor and systematization, Confucianism focuses more on how to internalize a stable character through the practice of the doctrine of the Mean in daily life, in order to become a gentleman, a sage; as the Confucianist Yan Yuan stated,

> 古人正心修身齐家，   专在治情上著工夫。治情专在平好恶上著工夫,
> 平好恶又在专在待人处物上著工夫。
>
> The ancients who focused on rectifying the mind, self-cultivation and reg-
> ulating the family, focused on the regulation of emotions. For regulation
> the focus is on distinguishing the good from the evil, for distinguishing the
> good from the evil the focus is on manner of dealing with people. (cited in
> Peng, 2002, p. 100).

In order to become benevolent or a saint, desires and ambitions within the
affective sphere need to be kept in moderation so as not to proliferate unnec-
essarily. As Xunzi ("Zhenglun", n.d.) claimed,

> 欲虽不可尽,可以近尽也; 欲虽不可去,求可节也。所欲虽不可尽,求者
> 犹近尽; 欲虽不可去,所求不得,虑者欲节求也。道者,进则近尽,退则
> 节求,天下莫之若也。
>
> Although desires cannot be completely satisfied, they can be close to sat-
> isfaction; although desires cannot be completely removed, it can be con-
> trolled...Acting in accordance with the *Tao*, try to satisfy your desires when
> you can meet them, and restrain your desires when you can't. There is no
> better principle in the world.

In addition, according to Xunzi, the most important means of emotional reg-
ulation, or more appropriately, of emotional refinement, is *li* ("rites/rituals"
礼) (cf. Neville, 2010; Tan, 2012). The Confucian *li* refers to all the norms and
rules for human actions, roles, and institutions of ancient society, including
hierarchical order (Guo, 2018). It originated from customs becoming institu-
tionalized and ritualized, and gradually becoming a state of life. For Xunzi,
the rationality of *li* is built on the real *qing*, and he proposed to "establish ritual
practices in accord with *qing*" ("Lilun", n.d.). Therefore, unlike the emotional
regulation prevalent in Western tradition, the Confucian tradition privileges
the improvement of emotional qualities from within the emotional system,
as a practice of self-cultivation. The benchmarks of emotional refinement in-
clude more elusive goals such as creativity, growth and development (Sun-
dararajan, 2015). The ultimate goal is to guide people's natural desires and
emotions with the rationality defined by *li*, and sublimate them to ethical uni-
versal goodness, which in turn guides people to live a reasonable and good life
(Peng, 2002).

   To make emotions work in tandem with *li*, Confucianism also proposes to
refine them and cultivate dispositions by using *yue* (乐), which mainly refers

to "music", but also includes poetry, literature, calligraphy, painting, dance, opera and other cultural forms (Chen & Wu, 2021). In classic Confucian texts, *yue* also connotes happiness, as Xunzi said, "Music (*yue*) is happiness (*yue*). The noble people find happiness in attaining their *Tao*, while the petty people find happiness in attaining what they desire" ("Yuelun", n.d.) The significance of *yue* lies in that by impressing, moving and resonating with one's soul and heart, good *yue* can naturally, viscerally, and spontaneously draw out proper *qing*, as well as corresponding physical reactions such as bodily movements. Together, *li* and *yue* are effective paths for moral transformation; it is through the right emotions and feelings that one is enabled to cultivate virtue (Chan, 2009).

Supplementing Confucian moral emotions, Taoism offers an aesthetic form of emotions in pursuit of emancipation and freedom, "to occupy oneself with the spirit-like operation of heaven and earth" ("Zapian", n.d.) and attain the harmony between man and heaven. This perspective can be found in a dialogue between Huizi and Zhuangzi:

> 惠子谓庄子曰："人故无情乎"庄子曰："然。"惠子曰："既谓之人,恶得无情"庄子曰："是非吾所谓情也。吾所谓无情者,言人之不以好恶内伤其身,常因自然而不益生也。"
>
> When Huizi asks Zhuangzi: can a man indeed be without *qing*? Zhuangzi answers: he can. Huizi asks again: but on what grounds do you call him a man, who is thus without *qing*? Zhuangzi replies: "What I mean by being without *qing* is that a man does not inwardly harm himself by likes and dislikes, but instead constantly follows the spontaneous and does not add to what is natural in him." (adapted from Graham, 1986, p. 62).

Here, being without *qing* does not mean to deny *qing* itself, but to deny the specific kind of *qing* that is being confined or trapped by things. For Zhuangzi, it is important to keep *qing* in its original, natural, and genuine state, rather than being stirred by external stimulus or being directed by cognitive appraisals. What Taoism pursues is self-satisfaction (*zideqile*, 自得其乐), a kind of happiness that can be achieved by returning to innocence, tranquility, and "inaction" (*wuwei*, 无为) or by letting nature take its course. According to Fung Yulan (1966/1948), the insistence on naturalness has given birth to "the romantic spirit" of Taoism (p. 231). It results in what Sundararajan (2015) called "a cult of spontaneity", "characterized by a paradoxical combination of impulsivity...and a more subtle sensitivity for pleasure and more refined needs than sheerly [sic] sensual ones" (p. 113).

In order to experience the aesthetic emotions, rather than through *li* and *yue*, Taoism adopts the cultivation methods of *Zuowang* (坐忘, "sitting and forgetting"), which means forgetting the difference and opposition between self and the universe; and *Xujing* (虚静, "void and peace"), refers to a state of mental concentration in which all distractions, such as desires and rational thoughts, should be dispelled to attain peace and purity of the soul. In order to keep the spontaneity of *qing*, Taoism proposes to abandon all forms of material and spiritual control, and distance oneself from utility, morals and institutions. Only in this way can man maintain the pure and poetic emotions necessary to enter the realm of aesthetics. As Zhuangzi said, "His words proceed from the void and peace, yet reach to heaven and earth, and communicate with all things, this is what is called the joy of heaven" ("Waipian", n.d.).

To summarize, instead of investigating what an emotion is, Chinese thought is more concerned with the practices and functions of emotions. Though aware that emotions include both cognitive appraisal and bodily experiential components, it is more focused on how to refine the "mental worlds" of the Chinese through spiritual development or self-cultivation. Confucianism and Taoism complement each other and advocate moral and aesthetic emotions that constituted part of the "practical reason and optimistic culture" of Chinese traditional culture (Li, 2008). Sundararajan (2015) stated that "one thing seems clear, namely that the Chinese notions of *qing* focus on the upstream, whereas the Western theories of discrete emotions, downstream of the river called emotions" (p. 200–01). In this way, Chinese philosophy seeks the noumenon of morality, the grasp of rationality, and the transcendence of spirit in the emotional world, daily life, and interpersonal relationships. Nature and man are united, emotion and reason are integrated; this is China's traditional spirit, the so-called Chinese wisdom, and this kind of wisdom is practical and aesthetic.

Chinese conceptions of emotions are more practically advanced than theoretically grounded. Being effective for thousands of years, the emotional norms, social relations, and the cultural-psychological structure framed by traditional Chinese thought have inevitably influenced how contemporary Chinese people feel and express emotions, yet they have also experienced transformations with the dramatic changes of the Chinese society. In this book, I take traditional Chinese thought on emotions more as analytical objectives than theoretical resources. In the empirical chapters (7 and 8), I will explore the media representations of these thoughts in contemporary

society, with a focus on their maintenance and changes as they face the challenges of modernization and urbanization. Before that, I will develop my theoretical framework in the next section, which is mainly derived from a critical reflection of the recent affective turns.

3.2 The different "affective turns" in the humanities and social sciences

The affective turn emerges at a time when critical theories have faced the dual challenge of reality and theory. Unlike previous eras when human emotions were less emphasized, contemporary societies are marked by an "emotional culture" in which emotions are actively present in all spheres of human and social life (Martínez & González, 2016). In order to compete for the limited attention resources of audiences, mass media and marketing increasingly resort to affectively charged elements, making private emotional experiences extremely easy and cheap products to obtain in the market; in politics, many political activities are often driven by the emotions of politicians or the public; voters, though often well informed and politically aware, think "with their guts" (Westen, 2007, p. xv). For politicians, the ability to show themselves as "human" and "authentic" through emotional expression is now seen as a central quality for leadership; and the booming of various courses and institutions that teach people to improve emotional intelligence also reflects the public's eagerness to manage and control overflowing emotions. The increasing visibility of affects and emotions in contemporary societies, either interpreted by some critics as a "regression" (Geiselberger, 2017) to a pre-modern state, or identified as a specific structural characteristic of Western late modernity (Reckwitz, 2020), nevertheless suggested "that which had been 'repressed' and 'controlled' in modern societies – affect, emotion, passion, desire – now takes centre stage" (Bens et al., 2019, p. 11).

The emotional boom not only signified the change of status of emotions in social life; it also raised fundamental questions for academia on how to understand these emotions in theory and practice. When talking about emotions, readers may start with the idea of individual subjective feelings or psychological responses to external stimulus – a conventional psychological understanding; but I want to emphasize here that my focus on emotions in this book is not on individual bodies but on the emotions represented, produced, and amplified by the media, especially by reality TV. This is not merely adding

a new topic to the field of reality TV analysis; the aim is to re-understand the working mechanism of reality TV, specifically examining its relationship with subjectivity, identity, and power through the lens of affect and emotion (see Chapter 3.4 for details). Such an approach is greatly inspired by the "affective turn" (cf. Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), which proposes more dynamic, vitalist, and process-based perspectives on the capacity of subjects, objects, or events to affect and be affected. Therefore, in order to advance a solid theoretical foundation for this book, it is worth reviewing the debates concerning the concepts and approaches to affect and emotion in "affective turns", and how to construct my own theoretical framework for analyzing emotions in popular culture based on a critical analysis of them.

As a broad field of research, the "affective turns" seem to have diverse theoretical approaches, and different analyses have different references and understandings of the concept affect. Seigworth and Gregg (2010) point out that affect theory might best be understood as an "inventory of shimmers" (p. 1) that ranges from classical sociological, psychoanalytic and Marxist to more cultural, new materialist and non-representational conceptions. Still, among the complex and often contentious conceptualizations of affect, two dominant strands can be identified (Ott, 2017). The first approach, which is typically associated with writings of philosophers of Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, treats affect as an intensive force, and emphasizes the significance of relationship among pre-linguistic bodies, affect and subjectivity. This tradition is reflected in Massumi's theory of autonomous affect and Nigel Thrift's non-representational theory. The second perspective, drawing on the research findings of behavioral sciences, especially psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary anthropology, tends to view affect as an innate human biological response. This tradition is reflected in Silvan Tomkins's theory of primary affects and Antonio Damasio's theory of basic emotions. Recent extensions of this tradition include the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lisa Cartwright, and Teresa Brennan. This section provides a review of the two approaches, focusing on the different understandings of affect and emotion, and concludes with critiques of them provided by scholars represented by Ruth Leys.

3.2.1 Affect as bodily intensity

The turn to affect which views affect as pre-individual bodily intensity can be traced back to a renewed interest in the Spinozian notion of *affectus*, and

then Deleuze's reinterpretation of Spinoza. As noted above, Spinoza was a monist who believed that there is only one substance in the universe. Thus, he describes affect (*affectus*) or emotion as both body and thought, nevertheless with different attributes; as he explains in *Ethics* III, emotion is "the modifications of the body by which the power of action of the body is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time the idea of these modifications" (Spinoza cited in Thrift, 2008, p. 178). In his "Notes on the Translation" to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987/1980), Massumi elaborates on the term as follows:

> AFFECT/AFFECTION. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). L'affect (Spinoza's *affectus*) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. L'affection (Spinoza's *affectio*) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include "mental" or ideal bodies). (p. xvi).

Based on his translation of Spinoza's work of distinguishing *affectus* from *affectio*, Massumi attempts to make a crucial distinction between affect and emotion. He proposes that "emotion and affect – if affect is intensity – follow different logics and pertain to different orders" (1995, p. 88). Massumi claims that human organisms operate via two parallel yet autonomous systems: one of quality and one of intensity. Whereas affect works on the "unassimilable" level of intensity, emotion works on the system of quality that is the "recognized affect, an identified intensity" (2002, p. 61). Specifically, affect is an inhuman, pre-subjective intensity that "embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin" (1995, p. 85). It exists outside conscious intentionality and social signification – it is defined by "indeterminacy" by "an openness to an elsewhere and otherwise than it is, in any here and now" (2002, p. 5). In contrast, emotion is individually and socially intelligible. As he stated in the article "The Autonomy of Affect", one of the foundational texts of the turn to affect,

> An emotion is a subjective content, the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of

intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. (1995, p. 88).

To support this perspective on affect, Massumi makes use of Libet's neuroscientific experiment that supposedly shows that there is a half-second lapse between bodily affect and its outwardly directed, active expressions. Massumi takes this missing half-second as a moment in which higher functions of the brain such as volition are performed but automatically and outside of consciousness. It is not an empty period but a "realm of *potential*" full of incipiences and tendencies (1995, p. 91, italics in original). He describes this as the *virtual* – "a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect" (ibid.), and as opposed to the *actual* – the concrete expression of a single possibility in reality. Then for Massumi, affect is neither a psychological event nor a moral sentiment. Rather, it is an "operative reason" – "the experimental crafting of negentropic induction to produce the practically impossible" (2002, p. 110–112). Affect has its own autonomy; it is real but cannot be seen, it is asocial, but not pre-social. For this reason, the cognitive system can influence the affect level, but it is through external resonance or interference with affect to achieve the effect of strengthening or weakening it.

The view that affect is nonconscious, asignifying, and presubjective is also reflected in Nigel Thrift's non-representational theory (NRT), which "copes with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds" (Lorimer, 2005, p. 83). Thrift (2008) characterizes NRT as consisting of seven tenets. Notably, Thrift does not attribute equivalent gravitas to each tenet. Rather, he recognizes that social life is messy, uneven, fragmentary and in a constant state of flux (Thrift, 2008, p. 5–15). First, NRT tries to capture the "on-flow" of "everyday life", to delve into lived life, the ebb and flow of sensory life, and the pre-cognitive. Second, NRT is anti-biographical and pre-individual: singular individuals are noted only for their effects on the present, on the existential performative. Third, it recognizes the value of embodied practices. Fourth, NRT asks us to give due weight to "the vast spillage of things". Fifth, it is unapologetically experimental. Sixth, it recognizes affect and sensation as concept-percepts that are as important as signs and significations. Seventh, it refers to a new paradigmatic shift that stresses the potential of bodily practices, of "promoting a 'politics' based on intensified attention to the present and unqualified affectivity" (Thrift, 2000, p. 42).

Drawing upon the seven tenets of NRT, Thrift explicitly gives emphasis to politics, showing how affect can enhance our understanding of power, knowl-

edge, and politics, and examines the new form of politics emergent in the "affective swirl that characterizes modern societies" (2008, p. 25). For Thrift, the manipulation of affect for political and commercial ends has reached new heights of impact in the present moment, he argues,

> the envelope of what we call the political must increasingly expand to take note of 'the way that political attitudes and statements are partly conditioned by intense autonomic bodily reactions that do not simply reproduce the trace of a political intention and cannot wholly be recuperated within an ideological regime of truth'. (Spinks, 2001, as cited in Thrift, 2004, p. 64).

For Thrift and Massumi, then, the plane of affect is firmly claimed as where power and other intense forms of manipulation – ranging from advertisement campaigns and viral marketing to political propaganda and techno-somatic agitprop – do their real work. With the notion of "affective fact", Massumi (2010) describes how the future reality of threat is continuously fed by a creation of uncertainty and pre-emptive actions, such as through positing double conditionals (would have, could have) of "war precautions" despite any lack of evidence. However, affect as intensity in flux is fundamentally ambiguous and completely open – "*Its autonomy is its openness*" (Massumi, 2002, p. 35; italics in the original). It is because of the autonomous and pre-cognitive status of affect that the affective response can never be determined and guaranteed; the transmission of affect may even suggest the emergence of counter-politics. According to Thrift, it is a "politics of hope":

> There seems to be a movement to new forms of sympathy – new affective recognitions, new psychic opportunity structures, untoward reanimations, call them what you like – forms of sympathy which are more than just a selective cultural performance and which allow different, more expansive political forms to be built. (2008, p. 254).

In general, affect for scholars like Massumi, emerges as part of a new vocabulary that is supposed to bring us beyond the limits of the hegemonic linguistic and (post-)structuralist paradigms that have dominated cultural theory over the past decades (Hemmings, 2005). The turn to affect, then, does not simply add topics referring to emotion to previous studies; more significantly, it "signifies a more extensive ontological and epistemological upheaval making a moment of paradigm change" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 2–3). Massumi (2002) criticizes the restrictions of hegemonic cultural theories: since they insist on social categories in a "self-augmenting" way: bodies and subjects are fixed in

cultural and social positions and coded on often essentialist identititarian descriptions of gender, race, class, and so on and thus remain enclosed within Enlightenment humanism. What they lose is "the expression *event* – in favor of structure" (Massumi, 1995, p. 87, italic in original).

Although Massumi, Thrift, and other affect scholars including but not limited to Barad (2007) and Clough (2008), have been criticized for their insistence on the (material) bodies and their autonomous, irresistible, yet unpredictable capacities for affect, I find this approach beneficial for my analysis on popular media in three ways. First, it is useful to distinguish between the concept of affect and emotion. Although, like many critics, I do not think the two are distinctively different, it is helpful to think about how media work at the affect/intensity level beyond representation and signification. Secondly, focusing on the body entails seeing the body not as a dumb object but in terms of its ability to affect and be affected. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari[4] suggest defining a body (human or non-human) not by "its organs and functions" or its "Species or Genus characteristics" but by the affects of which it is capable. Again, it helps to consider subjectivity not just in terms of identity, knowledge, and ideology, but also the affecting and being-affected processes through which identity, knowledge, and ideology are produced, reinforced, or contested. Thirdly, it helps to shift the focus to the dynamics, movements, and lived features of social life. Put differently, I follow their call for an epistemological turn through rethinking "body, subjectivity, and social change in terms of movement, affect, force, and violence – before code, text, and signification" (Massumi, 1995, p. 66). Applying it to reality TV analysis enables the analysis of the sense and meaning-making mechanisms of reality TV that have been "left out" of analyses focused on signification, ideology, and difference. Yet it also raises methodological problems in dealing with affect in the empirical analysis of social sciences, to which I will return with details in Chapter 5.

3.2.2 Affect as elemental state

The other approach of viewing affect as an elemental state has its roots in psychology and neuroscience (cf. Ott, 2017). This approach to affect is primarily

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4   It should be noted that although Massumi draws a lot from both Deleuze and Guattari and Spinoza, their interpretations and applications are not always consistent, so when citing specific concepts and ideas, I try to clarify where they come from.

adopted by Sedgwick and Frank and originates from the work of Silvan S. Tomkins and Paul Ekman. Tomkins is typically cited as the modern inspiration for the "basic emotion" approach. While Massumi's Deleuzian interpretation of affect is as intensity characterized by an increase or decrease in bodily power, Tomkins decomposes affect into several distinct parts. He identifies nine *affect programs*, which scholar Nathanson (1992) calls the "hard-wired, preprogrammed, genetically transmitted mechanisms that exist in each of us" (p. 58). They are the "basic building blocks" of emotions and are arranged in three types or categories – two affects that are basically positive: (a) interest-excitement, and (b) enjoyment-joy; one that is neutral: (c) surprise-startle; and six others that are negative: (d) distress-anguish, (e) fear-terror, (f) anger-rage, (g) shame-humiliation, (h) disgust, and (i) dissmell. Each of them is a full bodily reaction that can be distinguished on the basis of their neural, bodily, behavioral and expressive features, and each colors our conscious experience and quality of feeling particular to an activity. Taken together they are known as the "affect system".

Ekman (2003) calls these affect programs "central information storages", positing that "stored in these central mechanisms there must be sets of instructions guiding what we do, instructions that reflect what has been adaptive in our evolutionary past...program refers to mechanisms that store information written before" (Ekman, 2003, p. 65). Thus affects are non-volitional forces, yet they are central factors in shaping our motivation and action. Unlike psychologists like Freud who theorize affects as only subordinate to the drives, Tomkins believes that affect is "the primary motivational system", that "it is not the drives that heighten or animate affect, but the affects that amplify drives" (Tomkins rephrased in Ott, 2017). His work proposes that affect can have far more freedom with respect to drive and can focus on many different kinds of objects, "There is literally no kind of object which has not historically been linked to one or another of the affects" (Tomkins cited in Sedgwick, 2003, p. 19). In other words, there is no necessary logic in affect; any object may be attached to any affect, and vice versa.

Tomkins pays particular attention to the face, not simply seeing it as a site for the expression of affect, but more significantly, it *is* affect in process:

> [A]ffects are not private obscure internal intestinal responses but facial responses that communicate and motivate at once both publicly outward to the other and backward and inward to the one who smiles or cries or frowns or sneers or otherwise expresses his affects. (Tomkins, 1962, p. 297).

Tomkins's study of the face as a means of learning affect influenced the work and ideas of Paul Ekman and Carrol Izard, who performed cross-culture research and reported the pan-cultural similarities in facial expressions of at least *six* emotions (anger, happiness, surprise, disgust, sadness, and fear). This finding was later developed to an approach known as *Discrete Emotion Theory*, which holds that basic emotions can be "diagnosed" or "read-out" from the way they are manifested in the organism (Colombetti, 2009, p. 410). In recent years there has been increasing criticism of this emotion theory. Scholars such as Russell (2006), Barrett (2006), and Leys (2011) believe that this theory is reductive and unable to address the variability of emotions and sensitivity to context. Yet for decades it has been very influential, and has greatly inspired many affective neuroscientists such as Antonio Damasio, who links emotions strongly to the body, as well as scholars in humanities and social sciences such as queer feminist theorist Sedgwick and Frank.

For Sedgwick, Tomkins's work on affect provides the potential to go beyond Foucaultian as well as Freudian discourses of sexuality, which she sees as dominated by the drive system. According to Sedgwick, the central problem facing Theory today is its own critical paranoia, wherein relentless attention to the structures of truth and knowledge obscures our experience of those structures, or what she calls as the "structural dominance of monopolistic 'strong theory'" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 145). She advocates instead a "reparative" turn to the ontological and intersubjective, to a pacifist, non-conflictual, "weak" theory of non-differentiation of affects and co-existence of different performatives. In Chapter 3 of *Touching Feeling* (2003): *Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins*, co-authored with Adam Frank, Sedgwick explains how the "analogic", "many-valued", and "qualitative" theory of the digital models a better theory of affect:

> This part of Tomkins's theory could thus be schematized as analog – digital – analog – digital. What that (digitalizing) schema misses, though, is that Tomkins's theory ramified toward a many-valued (and in that sense analogic) understanding of affect: if the on/off of 'neural firing' is qualitatively undifferentiated, the on/off of affect activation is qualitatively highly differentiated – among no fewer than seven affects. (p. 102–103).

While I have reservations about Sedgwick's assertion that today's theory is an outdated "paranoid project" (see also Barnwell, 2020), her efforts to find a "different place to begin", and to get away from the analytic routine trapped in the polarized splitting of epistemology/ontology, subject/object, and re-

pressive/oppressive have inspired me to rethink the ways in which I interpret media texts. For example, she noted limitations in the transformative potential of a reading practice in literary criticism that she perceived as trapped within a cycle of shame dynamics. As Edwards summarizes,

> Sedgwick has pondered whether the ongoing repetition of shame dynamics might not provide a plausible explanation for why generations of scholars shaming, criticising and exposing various repressive ideologies within a wide variety of texts has not necessarily made our world a significantly less oppressive place. (Edwards, 2008, cited in Johnson 2015, p. 116).

Under the heading of "reparative reading", the researcher first becomes compassionate towards and intimate with the object of analysis, rather than criticizing, judging, and exposing to the object. As I understand it, this is a critical inspection of critical theories, a reimagining of the role of the critic; affect is used as an alternative method for the researcher to approach the object, through reflecting on what experience tells, to "delve deeper into moments and experiences of fracture and surprise" (Moreno-Gabriel & Johnson, 2019, p. 8). I find this approach inspirational when tackling popular texts outside our intellectual structure, especially as critical analysis has reached an impasse in clinging to the "hidden" meanings of the text and emphasizing its repressive implications. As Bruno Latour (2004) also argues, the explanatory structure of critical theory is increasingly similar to that of conspiracy theories, except that the former adopts "more elevated causes—society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a miserable bunch of greedy people with dark intents" (p. 229). In contrast, the approach of reparative interpretation no longer assumes the audience to be naive, unable to detect the ideologies manipulated by media, thus orienting researchers towards a close/surface reading with a more humble attitude to the texts, embracing "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts" (Best & Marcus, 2009, p. 9) by an ethical and affective stance.

To briefly summarize the two approaches to affect – the philosophical and the psychological, despite their use of different theoretical frameworks, their intentions are similar: to extend our analytic attention to focus on embodiment, on lived experiences, on the mundane and subtle forms of power and force. In both cases the turn to affect is far from a return to psychologism or emotivism, but on the contrary, they aim to broaden the scope "from purely psychoanalytic or cognitive model of emotion by recasting affect in the

post-modern political scene" (Hsieh, 2008, p. 230). While their theories equip me with useful concepts and a radically new perspective, I often find myself haunted when reading their works against (post-)structuralism and decon-struction. Certainly, I am not the only one in this regard; in current research there has been a growing tendency to challenge their theoretical assumptions, put forward especially by the intellectual historian Ruth Leys. As a conclusion to this section, I will offer a review of these criticisms and then follow with the social-relational approach of affect for my analysis.

3.2.3 Criticism and discussion

In her analysis, Leys (2011) highlights the firm linkage between these two ap-proaches – namely, their commitment to anti-intentionalism:

> they all share a single belief: the belief that affect is independent of signifi-cation and meaning…that there is a gap between the subject's affects and its cognition or appraisal of the affective situation or object, such that cognition or thinking comes 'too late' for reasons, beliefs, intentions, and meanings to play the role in action and behavior usually accorded to them. The result is that action and behavior are held to be determined by affective dispositions that are independent of consciousness and the mind's control. (p. 443).

Leys further argues that the ontological primacy of affect over cognition will lead us to affective determinism, in which human judgments and actions are always primed by affects in a rather unmediated, stimulus-response way. As in the view of Massumi, "the skin is faster than the word" (1995, p. 86); affects emerge automatically and quickly on the surface, so fast that conscious aware-ness and thought can only do a kind of "post-hoc rumination" (Leys, 2011, p. 443). The latter may monitor the results, but may also fail to catch affects at all. Besides, other scholars such as Papoulias and Callard (2010), and Brinkema (2014) have also criticized such affect scholarship as being flawed with re-gard to the underlying empirical-experimental evidences. In their view, it of-ten shifted attention away from affects themselves and onto the somatically sensed body, to proprioceptive responses at the molecular level, as if affect were simply material relations between bodies.

  Paradoxically, it seems that the turn to affect that once opposed dualism has eventually reproduced the Cartesian dualism between mind and body, only in the reverse order of giving ontological primacy to the body and its af-fects (Kristensen, 2016). For Gartens (2014), although Massumi claims Spinoza

as a precursor, this reversed body/mind dualism involves a fundamental mis-reading of Spinoza, since dualism is precisely what Spinoza as a monist tries to avoid in his system. Put differently, the pure intensity (which for Massumi is synonymous with affect) that operates outside meaning and cognition for Spinoza always already involves thinking, but a kind of embodied thinking, not necessarily cognitive thinking. Spinoza insisted that "the thinking substance and the extended substance are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that" (Spinoza cited in Robinson & Kutner, 2019, p. 113).

By clarifying Massumi's theoretical connection to Deleuze and Guattari, Uhlmann (2020) states that Massumian affect theory loses the relationship to the concept of power, making it difficult to develop an effective critique of power. In effect, the autonomous model of affect constrains social scientists' possibilities to empirically analyze affective phenomena. As Wetherell (2015) argues, "it becomes impossible to ask how affective experience might be socially constituted and organized as a particular kind of emotion" (p. 145). If power works "autonomically", bypassing reason and criticality and seizing the body at the level of neural circuits and nervous systems, then any effort of emancipatory transformations aimed at breaking the existing (oppressive) reproductive cycle of social relations seems doomed to be powerless and futile. As an undesirable consequence, the entire history of counter-hegemonic contributions of postcolonial and feminist theorists is ignored (cf. Hemmings, 2005).

In a helpful overview, Grossberg suggests distinguishing between three dimensions (or plateaus) of affect – (1) the ontology of immanence or virtuality, (2) the reality of the actual as affective, and (3) certain modalities of incorporeal effects (2010a, p. 194). According to him, the first two dimensions "describe the virtual and expressive strata" (or *affectio* as an abstract register of intensive force relations), whereas dimension (3) "refers to the multiplicity of regimes, logics, or organizations of intensities or passions (*affectus*) which define the affective tonalities and modalities of existence, behavior, and experience. This is a second articulation of expression" (ibid.). Then viewing from this scheme, the above two approaches seems reductionist in that they usually depend on the conflation of the three different dimensions of affect. As Grossberg critiques Massumi and like-minded scholars for their direct "leap from a set of ontological concepts to a description of an empirical and affective context" (Grossberg, 2010b, p. 314). While others have the problem of

"identify[ing] the ontological sense of capacity with the actualized bodily capacities" (Grossberg, 2010a, p. 195).

Then according to Grossberg, it is this *affectus* – affect in the form of effectivity as "a kind of materialist investment" that has been largely dismissed. He emphasizes that, the dimension of *affectus*, simply irreducible to the ontological category, rather, it is "a system, a particular arrangement…a machinic assemblage that would take on various forms, and could be recognized. A kind of range of possibilities. A virtual realm of machinic assemblages that organize the energy or investment in life" (2010b, p. 312). Therefore, it would be incomplete or insufficient to simply equate affect with the pure intensity which bypasses or exists prior to the symbolic and consider it as the universal ontological nature of reality beyond ordinary experiences.

3.3 The social-relational framework of affect and emotion

It is necessary, here, to introduce the third strand of inquiry to affect that foregrounds the sociality, relationality and situatedness of affect and emotion (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Burkitt, 2014; Röttger-Rössler & Slaby, 2018; Kahl, 2019). This is found predominantly in cultural studies, media and communication studies and anthropology, forms part of the theoretical framework of this book, and proposes that,

> [A]ffect is best understood as a matter of dynamic, intensive relations unfolding between human actors in and with complex environmental settings, material formations, (urban) landscapes and designed spaces, various artifacts, technologies and media. (Röttger-Rössler & Slaby, 2018, p. 3).

This represents a more integrated understanding of affect, emotion and the process of meaning-making, emphasizing the interdependence and co-existence between diverse components of affective phenomena. Such an approach agrees with the previous two strands of the "affective turn" in asking for analysis that goes beyond the dominant (post-)structuralist paradigm and "allows in much more of the excessive and transient aspects of living" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 55). Yet it declines to regard affect as a desubjectivizing force that operates outside the economy of the sign. As Grossberg (1992a) argues, affect is trans- or a-subjective, but by no means desubjective,

> Too often, critics assume that affect – as pure intensity – is without form
> or structure. But it too is articulated and disarticulated – there are affective
> lines of articulation and affective lines of flight – through social struggles
> over its structure. The affective plane is organized according to maps which
> direct people's investments in and into the world. These maps are deployed
> in relation to the formations in which they are articulated. (p. 82).

Developed by the Collaborative Research Center (CRC) *Affective Societies* in
Berlin with a philosophical framework that privileges relationality and on-
togeny, this approach then directs our attention from dualistic ways of
thinking and dichotomies such as affect/cognition, body/mind, subject/ob-
ject, etc., and towards the relational dynamics between individuals and in
situations. In other words, instead of asking *who* is affecting *whom* in a given
situation, this angle on affect calls for a fundamentally sociocultural (and
research-amenable) exploration of *how* a relational dynamic of affecting and
being affected evolves in such a multiplicity and variety of affective appara-
tuses and mediations (cf. Slaby & von Scheve, 2019; Kahl, 2019). The focus of
attention is on the generative process when the boundaries of individuals
and collectives become consolidated or transformed. As Kolehmainen and
Juvonen (2018) claim, affects can be sites of change and transformation as
well as sites that arrest, stick and solidify. Accordingly, suggested by Fox and
Alldred (2017), the objectives of research would be to

> explore how affects draw the material and the cultural, and the 'micro', 'meso'
> and 'macro' into assembly together…to reveal relations, affects and affect
> economies in assemblages, the capacities (and limits to capacities) produced
> in bodies, collectivities and social formations, and the micropolitics of these
> capacities and limits. (p. 169).

Along this third path, affect is analytically separated from but not diametri-
cally opposed to emotion. It is better to think about them along a continuum,
with a (sliding) point of cognition, acknowledgment, or articulation marking
their difference (Nelson, 2016). To make it clear, here affect is conceived as "a
fundamental 'mode of being' and a continuous bodily orientation towards the
world with meaningful evaluative qualities" (von Scheve, 2018, p. 55). Emotion
is viewed as the capture, closing, and naming of affect, or as "the ideological
attempt to make sense of some affective productions" (Grossberg, 2010b, p.
316). Thus, technically, affect differs from emotion in that it precedes it. Af-
fect is "virtual", always in the process of becoming, and holds as possibility

multiple connections and ways of being (Wetherell, 2012, p. 59). Under certain situations, affect can trigger cyclic chains of feeling in which affects flow into emotions such as hate, jealousy, shame and disgust. But such chains are complex, unpredictable, and indeterminate; affects may not completely enter emotions, because not all affects are realized and conceptualized as socioculturally coded emotions.

In this way the study of affect does not imply that we should discard the understanding of social formations, since affects are always being articulated and contextualized. The point is rather to "go back to things themselves", and to understand affective phenomena in their embeddedness within ongoing complex situations, or in Grossberg's statements, the "'mattering maps', and the various culturally and phenomenological constituted emotional economies" (2010b, p. 316). Such an approach of affect also provides an opportunity to expand the existing understanding of emotion: emotion can be regarded as a sub-component of broader affective encounters that link human bodies to their physical and social environment (Fox, 2015). So understood, it is not physio-psychological *or* sociocultural, but physio-psychological *and* sociocultural; the location of emotion is shifted from the category of psychology and into the entanglement[5] of larger social, political and cultural developments.

Highlighting the interconnection and mutual transformation between affect and emotion, the dynamic-relational approach then makes it possible to include nuanced analysis and conclusions from various perspectives. For this book, works from Margaret Wetherell, Sara Ahmed, and Lawrence Grossberg provide important conceptual tools for capturing both affect and emotion in media texts; they cover a significant area that involves both the psychological and the social.

Embedded in the emerging fields of social psychology and critical discursive psychology, Wetherell (2012) develops the concept of "affective practice," which views affect as an organic complex, "always intersecting and interacting" (p. 24) with the psychosocial. Here, practice can be briefly described as

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5   Here, the use of the term entanglement is borrowed from Barad's (2007) work on the co-constitution of matter and meaning, and refers not to "just any old kind of connection, interweaving, or enmeshment in a complicated system" (p. 160), but refer to the "intra-action" of entities in constitutive, transformative and open-ended relations. As Barad states, "Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (Barad, 2007, p. ix).

an embodied, performed, and regulated "set," "nexus," or "array" of "doings and sayings" (Schatzki, 2001, as cited in Reckwitz, 2012, p. 248). One of the strengths of employing the concept of "practice" is to acknowledge that people are both agentic and constituted in actions. Affective practice can be used as a basic analytic unit for social sciences; it is a compelling concept for emotion research because of its potential to capture both patterns and dynamics in the flow of affect. Accordingly, Wiesse (2019) summarized three basic assumptions of the affective practice approach: "(1) Practices are bodily activities. They are thus always already affecting their participants in some way. (2) Practices are inherently public affairs, and their affective dimension is no exception ... (3) Practices unfold in a processual manner" (p. 132). Bringing them together leads to an understanding of affect as "a joint, coordinated, relational activity" that helps people navigate everyday social interactions, which already indicates that different practices may intertwine. Then it is important to investigate not just the emotional nature of the specific practice, but also to identify how and why particular "affective practices" are situated, related to and resonate with other practices, emotions, language, discourse and meaning—wider "institutions of intelligibility" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 79).

Ahmed's (2004a, 2004b) work is also concerned with how emotions are relational and are realized socially and collectively. By employing the term "affective economies", she emphasizes what she refers to as the "sociality" of emotions: affect involves but "does not reside in an object or sign, [it] is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value)" (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 45). Thus affect works like capital, adding value through circulation, exchange and sharing, and the subject is a nodal point in the process. Her analytical focus is not on the circulation of emotions, but on the movement (or what she calls "surfacing") between people and things, signs and bodies, and the accumulation of "affective value" over time as an effect. Ahmed (2004b) writes,

> In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective. (p. 119)

Based on this Ahmed describes how emotions are produced by "sticking" to objects and how they circulate, which involve orientations towards others and

the definition of identities. In this "stickiness" a group is constituted as a collective, the "impressions" of "surfaces and boundaries" that differentiate it from others are produced, and the types of relationships with other people and environments are shaped. Therefore this approach to affect, especially affective economies, has implications for opening the dynamic process of how subjectivities are constituted.

Grossberg (1992a, 2010b) uses the notion "mattering maps" to identify how affect moves individuals to action, and how affect shapes the contours of social as well as bodily space. As he argues, "the image of mattering maps points to the constant attempt, whether or not it is ever successful, to organize moments of stable identity, sites at which we can, at least temporarily, find ourselves 'at home' with what we care about" (Grossberg, 1992b, p. 60). It is through the affective demanding on difference that identity and power principles are invested in, and together, they interpellate individuals to invest themselves in certain cultural forms and practices. For Grossberg, the entanglement of affect, ideology, and power constitutes a network of empowerment, which he refers to as an "affective alliance": "an organisation of concrete material practices and events, cultural forms and social experience which both opens up and structures the space of our affective investments in the world" (1997, p. 44). In a similar vein, Gandhi (2006) uses the term "affective community" to capture the empowering power of affect to disrupt existing power relations. Instead of aligning oneself with members who share the same nationality or identity, the constitution of affective communities calls for an "affective cosmopolitanism", which has the potential to form a "co-belonging of nonidentical singularities" (p. 24).

These theorizations of affect show that affect and emotion are not simply generated from "within" or from external social structures; instead, they gain power in the interaction and connection between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective. It is therefore instructive to locate affect and the potentiality it attaches to popular media in the light of Deleuze's (2013) concept of the "double-movement of liberation and capture" (p. 72). Affect – the "virtual" – is liberated from and again captured in the actual, it is a continual passage. As a whole, this third strand of affect theories orients our attention to view affect as unfolding in social-relational dynamics "in the midst of things and relations (in immanence) and, then, in the complex assemblages that come to compose bodies and worlds simultaneously" (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 6).

3.4 Understanding reality TV: relational affect as a critical optic

In general, the terms affect, emotion, feeling, and mood are differentiated, and each of them are discussed differently according to different theoretical approaches and research objects. But there is increasing agreement on the entanglement of biology and culture in processing the emotional. Taking the strength of relational affect, my analysis is performed along this orientation and aims to promote our understandings of complex emotional processes. The point is that affect is not solely the bodily-sensual states of an individual, but also involves normative and performative aspects. Social norms and display rules not only dictate how one should express their emotions, but also inform people of what can be felt and how to feel, and can facilitate or curb sensory experiences. However, affect includes embodied experiences that move beyond the codification, consolidation or capture of the Symbolic; it is something that is fluid, amorphous, and lived from moment to moment. In this sense, the turn to affect along the approach of relational affect has foregrounded alternative ways to theorize the psychic and the social as interrelated, and points to a dynamism that recognizes bodily matter in relationality and their entanglements with historical, cultural, social and political practices. Based on this, in this section, I will further discuss how to theorize affect and emotion in the specific mediated settings of reality TV.

In this book, I propose that reality TV can be thought of as a unique social laboratory to investigate the working of affects and emotions, not only for empirical and practical reasons, but for theoretical and ontological concerns as well. Reality TV offers a fertile ground for a huge diversity and amount of emotional communications and creates intimate relations across the screen. The emergence of reality TV can be viewed as a signifier of contemporary "emotional culture". As Lawrence Grossberg (1992a) points out, "The terrain of commercial popular culture is the primary space where affective relationships are articulated; the consumer industries increasingly appeal not only to ideological consensus, but to the contemporary structures of affective needs and investments" (p. 85).

I therefore view reality TV as a perfect platform to explore specific mediated modes of affective realizations and conceptualizations. Instead of viewing the (excessive) emotions in reality TV as a sign of the further decline in morality and social responsibility in popular culture, I take a step back, suspend moral and value judgements, and view these emotions as opportunities to reveal the affective-meaning-making mechanism of reality TV, which

is both closely related to and operates beyond cognitive, representative, or ideological interpellations. This also means that I view emotions as both an integral part of the sociocultural–media construction and an expression of affective intensity and force; the two are not isolated from each other but integrated in the relational dynamics of affecting and being affected. Put differently, as a product of the cultural industry, reality TV is obviously artificial and often constructs dramatic settings or uses post-production to maximize (or avoid) certain kinds of emotional performances, yet the complex communicative modalities of television (see Chapter 5.2.2 for details) lead to great uncertainty between the emotional expressions as performed and represented in reality TV, the affective potential afforded by aesthetics, form and temporality, and the actual emotional reactions in the audience. Together, these constitute reality TV's complex affective communicative system.

While emotions can be found both in the media text and in the audience, this book concentrates more on the former: how emotions are performed, represented, and built in the 19-season program *X-Change*, and how TV texts may provoke emotional reactions in audiences.[6] Oriented by the relational approach, I view emotions in televisual texts as a distinctive affective–discursive practice: it is *performative*, *discursively constructed* through televisual narratives, enacted through audiovisual technologies, and may accumulate *collective* and *political* implications through articulation, circulation, and contagion. In this way, affect studies in new materialism (see Chapter 3.2) and theories from sociology of emotions (cf. Hochschild, 1975, 1983; Burkitt, 1997, 2014; Turner &

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6   It should be noted that the emotional reaction in audiences is discussed in a hypothetical, discreet way under the presupposition that reality TV invites the audience to feel (Smith, 2003), based on the four-level model that distinguishes emotional reactions into perceptual affects, diegetic emotions, thematic emotions, and communicative emotions (Eder, 2008). However, without a solid audience survey, this study cannot answer questions concerning the actual emotional responses of real audiences. From existing research, media psychology has conducted many empirical analyses focusing on the role of emotions in media reception and effects (cf. Nabi, 2009; Döveling et al., 2011; Konijn, 2013). For entertainment media, interested readers can refer to Zillmann and his colleagues, who developed several theories to explain the entertainment experience in communication processes, including Affective Disposition Theory (1977), Mood Management Theory (1988), and Empathy Theory (2006). In general, media effects studies locate emotion in individuals and essentially consider it as part of internal psychological and cognitive processing; yet the laboratory conditions in these media experiments and the individual-oriented approach made contextual clues difficult to be analytically included.

Stets, 2005; Turner, 2009) are incorporated: emotions in reality TV are fundamentally relational, realized in the interactions of individuals, the media, and sociocultural-historical contexts. I do not assume that emotions are purely socially, culturally, and politically constructed and do not exist outside discursive constructions; instead, I accept the corporeal, dynamic, and ambivalent nature of affect. It is important to reflect on the analysis, so that it is not limited to current explanatory structures, models, or patterns.

Concretely, first of all, emotion is *performative* in televisual texts, in that it is based on the performance of participants, with rules set in advance by the production team. What concerns me is not whether the emotional expressions of the participants are authentic, but that they are always about something: identity, morality, aesthetics, community, etc. Drawing on a dramaturgical view of emotions (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983), I consider that emotions are verbally and physically performed by participants in the constant back-and-forth between onstage and backstage. Based on this, I ask how emotions gain value through circulation, what modes of association are produced between subjects, objects, and signs, and to what extent they conform to or deviate from cultural scripts.

Secondly, emotion is *discursively constructed* through the televisual narrative. This means that emotions in the program are not viewed as participants' internal psychological states but as mediated emotional expressions that have been filtered by televisual interpretations, situated in the routine practice of television production, and thus are inherently ideologically implicated. This draws on Foucault's work on governmentality (more specifically, scholars' extension of his work; see D'Aoust, 2014), and Gilles Deleuze's writings on the control society, which view emotion as a tool for discursive and corporeal discipline. In this case, emotions as mediated through television narratives cannot be uncoupled from the power relations that characterize and permeate the social realm.

Thirdly, emotion is enacted through audiovisual technologies, which means that reality TV not only *narrates*, but also *registers* the emotional through semiotic and aesthetic techniques, allowing for viewers' affective and embodied engagement. Film theories, especially cognitive and phenomenological film theories, offer analytical resources to explore how films, or, in a broader sense, audiovisual moving images, use narrative, rhetorical, visual, audio or other means to manage the audience experience. For instance, Greg Smith's (2003) "mood-cue" approach assumes that films do not consistently generate emotions but rather diffuse broad moods through

so-called "emotion cues." With the coordinated work of multiple emotion cues, the film as a whole creates a strong emotion or a mood orientation. Other scholars, such as Vivian Sobchack (1991, 2004), Laura Marks (2000, 2002), and Jennifer Barker (2009), focus on the concept of "embodiment," which is also analytically helpful in encouraging scholars to think about affective phenomena as a whole, rather than being separated by categories such as emotion, feeling, or mood.

Fourthly, emotion is *collective* and *political* in that emotion includes value judgements about how individual and society should be, and accumulates its political potential in performance and communication. This perspective is based on appraisal theory, which assumes that emotion is elicited by appraising situations, acts, or events (Scherer et al., 2001). A private, individual emotion comes to matter collectively (and is qualitatively changed) when it is articulated with similar appraisals, dispositions, intentions, concerns, and moral values, leading to convergence in emotional response (Nussbaum, 2001; Parkinson et al., 2005; von Scheve & Ismer, 2013). Meanwhile, emotion becomes political when it communicates shared claims for justice and social change. It is through the work of emotion that abstract political ideas become close and even tangible, or as in Nussbaum's (2013) concept of the politics of emotions, creates "a sense of 'our' life in which these people and events matter as part of our 'us', our own flourishing" (p. 11). The analysis emphasis oriented by this perspective is placed on the tension between transforming the potential of emotions and the practice of power that seeks to condition and regulate specific ways of feeling, expressing and enacting emotions.

To sum up, integrating the above understandings of affect and emotion, I aim not only to capture the broad and diverse presence of emotions in reality TV but also to locate them as an integral part of the cultural and political claims that are mediated by narrative forms, professional codes, discursive patterns, aesthetics and technological affordances. Put differently, a relational approach of affect accordingly calls for the focus to be placed on investigating specific scenes or "locations" of emotions, including their social, material and technological settings and with an awareness of the role of power. The socially and culturally constructed emotional expressions staged in reality TV are not individual traits, but rather a collective realization of the mediated politics that is affectively produced in the formation of an emotional culture. Thus, reality TV offers a platform for us not only to explore how "structure of feelings" (Williams, 1961) is represented, but also to ask how these feelings – driven by the affective network – engage and create individual psychologi-

cal and bodily responses, articulate with ideologies and identities, and shape social action. Reality TV itself acts as a productive "affective generator" (Reckwitz 2017, p. 123) that participates actively in power relations and social processes, and helps to constitute them.

The epistemological shift, when looking at reality TV and media trends in general, is a transition to rethink how reality TV matters in contemporary societies and cultures. Through continuous affective (re)production, reality TV constitutes a form of repetition wherein affects circulate, and the memories and histories of encounters between racialized, gendered, nationalized, and otherwise differentiated bodies accumulate. It is important to explore the mediated emotion and dynamic relationships that produce these repetitions and differences. Following the inventive logics of "difference and becoming" (Deleuze, 1994) rather than merely the structural-functional approach of "being and identity", reality TV, then, is not located on a broadcast model between production and reception, rather, is analyzed as the communication system in dynamism that articulates "between the nervous, technical, and social system which constitute the total human fact" (Stiegler, 2006). Thus the optic of affect not only draws our attention to the depth of texts, but also the flatness, networks and relationality: the surface.

This is not simply to abandon the work of representative and ideological paradigms, but instead, to build on their foundations, investigating the complex processes of affective mediation in ways that discursive and non-(or more than) discursive elements are co-constituted and organized immanently in material assemblages. In this way the relational affect offers a hopeful alternative to social structuralism, by positioning subjects and objects not in a binary opposition, but in the becoming process where they are constituted through their relationality. Therefore, the mechanism of ideological hegemony is not simply understood as working through representation and discourse, but through affective investment in specific "conjunctures" (Grossberg, 1996). I will elaborate on this further in the methods section of Chapter 5. In what follows I will offer a literature review of the research on reality TV with regard to the analysis of affects and emotions.

Chapter 4: Reality TV Analysis: From Authenticity to Affect

This chapter reviews existing studies on reality TV in Western and Chinese scholarship, concerning the role of affect and emotion in media texts, as well as their effect on audience acceptance and appropriation of reality TV shows. The proliferation of reality programming in the global television landscape has generated increasing scholarly interest in recent years. But relatively speaking, the role of affect and emotion has not drawn much attention; media scholars are more concerned with the narrative, media industry, genres, and sociopolitical implications of reality TV (e.g. Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Murray & Ouellette, 2009; Kraidy & Sender, 2011). While the intense performance of emotions in media texts on reality TV has been recognized and discussed, scholars have mainly focused on criticizing the production and manipulation of human emotions for certain economic and cultural purposes, and the terms affect and emotion are often seen as self-evident, leading to a lack of theorization. The affective responses of audiences have primarily been discussed in a general sense, or replaced by other terms such as desire and pleasure within the approach of media psychology. With the "affective turn" renewing interest in affect, research on different ways of rethinking how affect and emotion function in reality TV texts and their audiences began to appear. The final part of this chapter will focus on the growing research inspired by the affective turn, and summarize the above literature on my research.

4.1 The politics of emotional performance on reality TV

Media scholars have addressed intense emotional performances in reality TV texts. According to Ellis (2009), reality TV has given new visibility and prominence to emotions that were previously maintained in the private sphere. Kri-

jnen and Tan (2009) also confirmed that the typical reality TV show provides its audience a near permanent emotional display. Statistics show that "every scene featured emotion portrayed in images or apparent from dialogue" (p. 459). Besides, the scope of emotional expressions of the participants "varied widely from helpless loneliness to intentional forms of aggression", far beyond what media critics envisioned. They then assert that reality TV actually "constitutes an emotional laboratory providing its audience with a vast array of situations in which they can observe participants, identify with them emotionally, and access their feelings and inner life" (p. 468). In this way reality TV enables its viewers to develop "moral-emotional repertoires" through which they imagine alternative outcomes in terms of emotions or reflect on moral decisions and choices (Krijnen, 2011).

These emotional performances are construed as significant ways to generate a sense of reality. Mast (2016) stated that the claim to realness of reality TV is inherently entangled with the "appeal to the experiential – or, the credibility of emotions, confessions, articulations of the intimate – and to the transparent – or the sincerity of (self-)reflexivity" (p. 914). Such an idea is based on traditional thinking that our belief of authenticity is largely affected by emotions (cf. Frida & Mesquita, 2000). Citing from Ang's (2003) concept of "emotional realism", Mast extended this thinking and used it to explain the experience of watching reality TV. When analyzing the viewer appreciation of *Dallas*, Ang (2003) found that rather than a sense of empiricist realism or classical realism,

> the realism experience of the *Dallas* fans…is situated at the emotional level: what is recognized as real is not *knowledge* of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a 'structure of feeling'. It is emotions which count in a structure of feeling. Hence emotions form the point of impact for a recognition of a certain type of structure of feeling in *Dallas* (p. 45, italic from original).

In a similar way, emotion is the key to understanding the hybrid viewing experience of reality TV. Kilborn (2003) pointed out that while viewers are fully aware the nature of managed artificiality of the medium, they are also at once immediately implicated in "flesh and blood" social relations (p. 52). This peculiar relationship between reality TV and viewer is described by Jones (2003) in the term "reality contract" – audiences appear to be able to suspend their disbelief and actively negotiate mediated reality with their "personalized reality contracts" (p. 404). They are often engaged in "a sophisticated, dynamic

and, so it could be argued, strategic shifting to-and-fro deconstructive and reconstructive positions" (Mast, 2016, p. 914). The emotional performances of the participants, then offered significant evidence for viewers to identify how true they are being to their "real selves" (Hill, 2005). According to Kavka (2014), it is in the mutual reciprocity between the appeal of real and emotions that affective responses serve as proof that participants on screen are their "true selves", and the fact that people on screen are real in turn verifies viewers' affective responses.

Researchers have criticized the manipulation of "emotional realism", or the exhibition of "heartfelt" feelings of reality TV as a reproduction of the cultural industry. For this, Grindstaff (2002) applied the term "money shot", which originally refers to the shot of male ejaculation in a pornographic film, now to describe the culminating moment on daytime talk shows. This shot shows participants' emotions as unexpected and uncontrollable, often confirmed by tears or other bodily signs of true feelings. Grindstaff (2002) made convincing arguments about how reality producers heavily rely on participants' performance of the "money shot"; these shots not only anchor an episode, but are rehashed and replayed in episodes, promos, and recaps throughout the show. With the circulation of money shots in new media platforms, Grindstaff and Murray (2015) argued that the "money shot" has experienced a branding process, attached "to a variety of popular media and consumer products" and promoted to "branded affect" (p. 111). For them, the production of branded affect is central to reality TV's industrial mode of "ordinary celebrity" production. On this basis, Arcy (2018) extended the term to "digital money shot" to describe the normalization and intensification of emotional performances in convergent TV and new media sites.

Other scholars have criticized the exaggerated display of emotions on reality TV as reproducing identity inequalities in terms of gender, race and class. The show *The Bachelor* is particularly noticed in gender studies, perhaps for the reason that the emotional climaxes in the show are closely tied with the women contestants' aspirations and identities. As Gray (2009) pointed out, every week, the show climaxes with a "rose ceremony", "resulting in a 10-minute showpiece full of, first expectant and, then, joyous or crushed reaction shots" (p. 264). Drawing from Grindstaff's (2002) distinction between a "soft-core" and a "hard-core" money shot – the "soft-core" money shot is confessional, "feminine" and "based on heartache or joy rather than conflict and anger (the basis for the "hard-core" money shot)" (p. 26), Dubrofsky (2009) found that excessive emotional outpouring in *The Bachelor* can be equated to the hard-core

"money shot", which is represented in the show as a problematic inability for women to contain intense bodily responses. Consequently, those who provide the shot are considered unstable, unsuitable, and dangerous, and always eliminated afterwards.

Kristyn Gorton's (2009) analysis of reality TV shows such as *Wife Swap* is more theorized. Her understanding of affect and emotion is more influenced by feminist theories dating back to the 1980s, and focus on specific concerns "such as 'the personal is the political', 'language as affect', and 'shame'" (p. 68). By doing this she aims to encourage a rethinking of the specific ways discrete emotions work to elicit actions, shaping subjectivities and relationships. One interesting finding in Gorton's work is that emotions in reality TV often function as pedagogic tools for the viewers to learn how to tackle intimate relationships, and obscure differences of class, gender, and race. As she analyzes,

> Using devices such as the video diary and the staging of final meetings between the participants, these programmes use emotion as a tool to suggest that differences of class, race, sexuality, and gender can easily be overcome through the emotional medium of a 'good cry'. Indeed, *Wife Swap* fashions emotional responses as a way of overcoming differences between the participants and between viewers and participants (Gorton, 2009, p. 100–01).

The emotional representations of other social identities such as race and class have also been explored. For instance, Dubrofsky (2009) found that the emotional performances in *The Bachelor* are also raced, that "women of color are never cast as viable romantic partners (unless they are 'whitened')" (p. 356). Lovelock (2017) explored the potential effect of emotional displays on the construction of sexual minority identities (focusing on *Big Brother* UK). He argued that while the emotionally intimate representations of certain gay and transgender subjects may signal an era of "tolerance" and "acceptance" for LGBT people, "a kind of queer emotional suffering" is commercialized and worked to reify heteronormativity (p. 452). In research that examined the reality show *The Luxury Trap*, Hirdman (2016) analyzed how classed otherness is constructed by the repetitive operation of shaming. She argued that class and shame are intrinsically linked together in the mediated affect spectacle, "giving body and form to the un-named, to that which drives us towards affective judgements and to the un-making of subjects" (p. 294).

The confessional and therapeutic mode of emotional performance, and its effects on making sense of the self and society have also attracted the atten-

tion of scholars. As Aslama and Pantti (2006) claimed, reality TV reinvented the confessional monologue that offers opportunities for ordinary people to disclose their feelings. Such emotional and psychological narratives are at the core of reality TV. They continued to suggest that reality TV has transformed "from a mass medium to a first-person medium addressing masses of individuals" (p. 180). Ironically, it has been said that the obsession with emotion and authenticity is a way of dealing with experiences of insecurity in late modernity (Gidden, 1991). However, drawing from Dovey (2000), the first-person medium commodifies this universal desire and recreates an individualized society. Meštrović's (1997) statement of a "postemotional society" has often been revived to describe the intensification of individual emotions and its negative social impacts (e.g. Aslama & Pantti, 2006; Bonsu et al., 2010; Collins, 2014); Meštrović worried that our emotional capacity has been continuously impaired by the repeated experiences of vicarious, mediated and often highly intensified emotions, and is now hardly able to experience genuinely felt emotions in real, self-experienced and idiosyncratic events.

As a whole, research focusing on emotion performances in reality TV texts has recognized the intensity of emotions and critically analyzed the situations and ways in which these emotions are manipulated by capital and power, particularly in relation to the contexts of consumerism, identity politics, and neoliberalism. But it can be argued that such research in general lacks a theorization of affect and emotion. Affect in this field is less investigated; sometimes it is used interchangeably with emotion, on other occasions it is used to describe physiological and bodily responses. Critical analyses based on feminist theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and critical race theory often view emotion as objects of specific discourses and narratives, as phenomena of social lingual construction. The emphasis is on how the affective dimensions of social life is interpellated by the market, power and ideology, hence, the questioning of emotion is mainly performed under the framework of subject identities and differences divided by sexuality, race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

4.2 Negotiations of emotion display rules in (Chinese) reality TV

With the circulation and adaptation of global reality TV formats in different cultures and regions, scholars have noticed the influence of both global and local elements on emotional display in this process. As noted by Waisbord

(2004), the trend of reality TV is geared by the global "format franchising" model of contemporary television (p. 360). With the facilitation of transnational television companies and international distribution networks, reality programs turned themselves into a global palette of available formats that could be adapted into different markets around the world (cf. Moran, 2009, 2013). As mentioned in Chapter 2, the proliferation of reality TV shows in China is also closely linked to changes in this global TV programming models, beginning with the introduction of the popular format *Survivor*. The hybrid nature of Chinese reality TV and its controversial context have attracted academic attention and become an ideal object of analysis for exploring the tension between globalization and localization.

Theoretically, it is argued that, instead of considering the global and the local as antithetical, it would be better to think of them as reciprocally constitutive, as suggested by the concepts "glocalization" (Robertson, 1992) and "hybridization" (Pieterse, 1994, 2004). According to Moran (2009), TV format

> refers to a method of practising television whereby a kind of unspecific, universal or de-nationalized program template or recipe is developed, which in turn can be customized and domesticated for reception and consumption by specific audiences in local or national contexts. (p. 115–116).

Hence, the format of reality TV is simultaneously global and national in its nature. Reality formats are very "open" and easy to localize (Waisbord, 2004), and it is essential for TV content to connect to the norms, values, beliefs and all other sociocultural elements of a local audience in order to gain success. Keane (2004) suggested that format adaptations "are influenced by specific structures of feeling" (p. 14). It is neither the process of homogenization nor of heterogenization, rather a mixture of both, yet in ways that "cannot neglect power issues inherent to global communication dynamics" (Kraidy & Murphy, 2008, p. 351).

Under this framework, empirically, scholars have mainly focused on the management of emotion "display rules" during the adaptation of TV formats. The term "display rules" (Hochschild, 1983) which is originally used to describe how workers learn to manage their emotions to meet organizational expectations in workplaces (for example a stewardess is expected to have a "modest but friendly smile"), is applied in this field to explain how emotions are managed in transnational reality TV formats, in order to maintain a global appeal while producing a local version that may be more applicable for domestic media industry and acceptable for local audiences. For instance, van Keulen and

Krijnen (2014) compared the Australian version of *Farmer Wants a Wife* with the Dutch version, and found that due to cultural and media systemic differences, while the Australian version has a strong focus on sensation, conflict and emotion that aims at "addressing the viewer on the basis of fantasies and 'guilty pleasures'", the Dutch version has a more docu-dramatic elaboration that "deals with everyday life and issues the viewer can relate to" (p. 286). Campaiola-Veen (2012) explored the hybridization process of *Nouvelle Star*, the French version of American *Idol*; at first the global format is transformed by traits of distinctive French identity, "intellectualism and musical taste" (p. 89), but there is a return of a global economics model that emphasizes popularity and emotions. She concluded that although on the surface the hybridization process may seem like an endless contest between aesthetics and affect, both are in fact absorbed by the global commodity scheme of mass production and distribution. Focusing on the production aspect, Sūna (2018) explained how reality TV producers negotiate between allegedly universal emotions and local emotional display rules, "which are bound to a market logic or commodification" (p. 9). She claimed that the sense of belonging is specifically addressed to create cultural proximity to the viewers.

In a similar vein, media scholars have examined the localization of emotion display rules embedded in Western reality formats in the Chinese context. For example, Wu (2016) found that Chinese television producers sacrificed an important formula that made reality TV prevalent around the world when producing the lifestyle reality show *Exchanging Spaces* (*Jiaohuan kongjian* 交换空间) – presenting anxiety and desire. Instead, they turned almost simultaneously to positive reality shows that are infused with "positive energies" such as "family feeling", "brotherly love", and "happiness", in order to call for a return of socialist core values. Drawing on another reality show, *China's Next Top Model* (*Dingji chaomo* 顶级超模), Wei (2014) explored localization strategies for the meaning of emotional performances. He observed that, on the one hand, Chinese producers emulated those emotional displays that do not violate local cultural values and ideologies that emphasize social harmony. On the other hand, for other emotional performances that unabashedly conflict with such ideals, producers applied textual framing strategies to subtly revise their meanings, including:

(i) defining what caused the feelings that led to the emotional display as culturally appropriate, (ii) portraying the emotional display as not reflecting

the performers' true feelings and (iii) ensuring that the performers' feelings are resolved within the show's narrative in an appropriate manner. (p. 216).

Zhang Yuanchen (2018) and Sheng Qu (2018) both analyzed the singing competition show *The Voice of China* (*Zhongguo haoshengyin* 中国好声音), and discussed how the attempt to achieve socialist inclusion is reflected in "dream-fulfillment" discourses. Zhang (2018) applied Paul Ekman's (1972) neurocultural theory of emotion to reveal the impacts of Chinese collectivist culture on both elicitors of emotion, display rules of emotion and the consequences of emotion arousal in the show. As she pointed out, this is primarily realized by bringing the protagonists into relationships of family, group, and country (p. 44); and regulating them through family values, group harmony, and social commitment (p. 46). In this context, Sheng Qu (2018) located the emotional displays in the show in the tension between market forces and ideological requirements. Under the pressure of audience rating competition, the producers constructed a melodramatic narrative to highlight emotional expressions. Oftentimes the show was even transformed into a "crying game" as many contestants emotionally solicited votes from judges, live and television viewers (cited from Xiao, 2006, p. 64). The show also deliberately managed the performance of dream stories. A neoliberal theatre style inundated with burning ambition for "music dreams" was abandoned, instead, dream stories were interpreted as a realization of professionalism in the name of "real music, true strength and genuine emotion" that satisfies the Party-state cultural and moral will (Qu, 2018, p. 139). It is essentially "an art of balancing" for local producers to pursue ideological filtration and reconstruction (Zhang, 2015, p. 121).

In related articles published in Chinese, it is noticeable that Chinese scholars primarily stand with the Party-state, act as "counsellors" to the television industry, and apply themselves to developing strategies to guide and govern the industry. They focus on advising on how to successfully slough off inharmonious emotional displays that are considered as facilitating Western ideologies. As Chris Shei (2013) noted, "in the case of China, culture and politics work together to rule out the possibilities and standardisation of global media" (p. 43). For example, Xue Xiang (2019) proposed that it is necessary to guarantee a positive value orientation of the emotional conflicts displayed. He pointed out that reality shows should not only resonate with, but also enlighten and offer compassionate care to the audience, to inspire them to "rethink the true meaning of life, and realize self-reflection..." (p. 112). In a

recent study, Yan Qing (2020) observed the emergence of *kuqing* (苦情, bitter emotion) culture in media spectacles and especially in reality shows. He especially emphasized the function of *kuqing* as a motivator of sympathy and as "an artistic promotion" for entertainment programmes. Thus, he concluded with a suggestion for the reality TV producers, it is necessary to reduce focus on sensational competitive games, but to pay more attention to the expression of everyday emotions with more social ethics, and create a new observable space for everyday life; only in this way can the shows become healthy and positive (p. 59). However the effects of ideological guidance may not turn out as assumed. Liu and Chang's (2016) analysis found that though TV producers have shifted their concepts of reality shows from purely sensational enjoyment to an effective way to rebuild value systems, practically, the implanted positive emotional scenes have inevitably been dispelled and decomposed by the entertaining nature of reality TV. Even worse, the positive values embedded may lose their attractiveness when over-emphasized and belabored in a didactic and stiff way.

4.3 Emotional labor and affective capitalism

4.3.1 Affective economics as a new television marketing model

In addition to studying emotional performances in reality TV texts, scholars have also focused on the transmedia circulation of specific emotional scenes and the emotional labor generated by audience participation. In *Convergence culture* (2006a), Henry Jenkins assumed the business model of reality TV as an "affective economics" – a new configuration of marketing theory that seeks to profit from human emotions (p. 62). Its logic is to encourage companies to transform their brands into what one industry insider calls "lovemarks" and to blur the line between entertainment content and brand messages. In ultra-competitive market like television, brands have to work hard to get customers' attention, and building an emotional relationship with a customer through a variety of "psycho-techniques" may be the surest means of expanding consumer loyalty (p. 63). Beverley Skeggs (2010) also claimed, "by manipulating affect, reality television engages the audience in 'feeling' about the things that matter to them" (p. 49). Jenkins (2009) cited *American Idol* as a quintessential example of affective economics and describes its strategy of "the empowerment of consumers" through "experience-based, access driven marketing" (p.

349–350). He is quite optimistic about the collective intelligence of fans, whom he views as "textual poachers" – "active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 24). He then argues that it is not the media but the audience who truly controls emotional capital, viewers can either invest their emotions in a certain program or brand, or withdraw and transfer them at any time, perhaps even using emotion as a resource to build their own brand community that in turn affects television producers.

Chinese media scholars have applied the concept of "affective economics" to analyze the new television industry trends in China, since the phenomenal success of the second season of *Super Girl* in 2005, which Yang (2014) argued "ushered in a whole new era of reality television, showcasing the genre's ability to captivate the hearts and minds of the whole nation" (p. 520). She pointed out that the affectively engaging format of *Super Girl* is what makes the show simultaneously the most commercial and the most democratic reality show in China:

> On one hand, the paid voting system, while it enhances the pleasure and stakes of fan participation, constitutes a form of economic exploitation of fan emotion and fan labor. On the other hand, fans also exploit the genuine voting opportunity to create a vibrant civic space where they can form new alliances, perform fan activism, and articulate alternative values and visions. (p. 518).

Here, emotions are owned by the audience, or more accurately, by fans, and are considered to be the main source of fan empowerment. Many Chinese intellectuals view the wide audience voting of reality TV as an alternative form of political participation, and they value the democratic potential contained therein. Such an optimistic perspective comes from their expectation of new media technologies and the action of fan communities. As Meng (2009) stated, *Super Girl*, for the first time in history, allowed Chinese audiences to enjoy the enfranchisement to pick their favorite candidates; with the help of new media and their convergence, fan communities have formed, eliciting both online and offline discussions, and actively campaigning for their favorite contestants. In particular, such participation is based on an equipotentiality, rejecting a model of hierarchy. As Jenkins (2006b) affirms, "fan culture is dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational" (p. 150). In this sense, Jingsi Wu (2011) proposed that *Super Girl* not only brings Chinese audiences a refreshing entertainment experience, but also it has tremendous political implications for

taking "a provocative and revolutionary step" that invites wide audience voting (p. 53).

4.3.2 Emotional labor in late capitalism

Emotion works as more than a new commercial strategy for marketers to manage and manipulate audiences. As Mark Andrejevic critically stated in his book *Infoglut* (2013), Jenkins's approach lacks a theorization of affect. Since strategies of mobilizing emotional engagement have been around for a long time, the newness of this discourse seems to hinge more on the enhanced ability of audiences to actively participate through the use of convergent technology. Thus what Jenkins mainly focuses on is not the role of emotion but the affordances of interactive media technologies that create the trends of a "participatory culture" and "collective intelligence" in the television industry.

Focusing more on the role of emotion, recently, other scholars have articulated the marketization of emotion, feeling, and intimate life in reality TV with concepts such as emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983/2003); affective labor (developed from autonomist Marxist scholars such as Hardt & Negri, 2004); emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007) and affective economy (Skeggs, 2010; Skeggs & Wood, 2008). These concepts articulate the evolution of reality TV with the structural changes and transformations in the society. According to Skeggs (2010), it represents an era when "capital extends its lines of flight into new spaces, creating new markets by harnessing affect and intervening in intimate, emotional and domestic relationships" (p. 30). In such an affect or attention economy, there is an ongoing "real subsumption" of the social reproduction of biological and everyday life into capitalist value production and exchange (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Emotions come to serve as an exploitable resource; as Massumi (2002) puts it, "affect is real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory" (p. 45).

The once private spaces (such as the home) and activities related to privacy (care, help, and nurturing) are now visualized and staged by reality TV for public entertainment (Nikunen, 2019). As Hearn (2010) also claimed, reality TV is a significant site of both material and ideological production: what the on-air participants do are not only acts of performance but also an affective form of "immaterial labour". While such activities may not count as traditional wage-earning labour and are not easily recognized as "work", they can still be tamed and contribute to the production of a commodity that generates worth and value. Andrejevic (2011) thereby argued that reality TV pro-

vides a new model for rethinking shifts in the mode of labor and exploitation in the "social factory", "not just in terms of profits and surplus value, but also in terms of alienation or estrangement" (p. 28). This is a process of "economic subjectification", according to Kiersey (2014), the choice made by reality TV that consciously utilizes capacities of affective labor suggests the reinvestment of subjects "in an emotionally and financially oppressive mode of capitalist valorisation" (p. 359).

Much of the research in this area has situated discussion on the circulation of women's emotions as a form of labor on diverse media platforms, especially on how women's lives and experiences become commodified through affective capitalism. In their seminal work on reality TV as a technology of affect, Skeggs and Wood (2008; Wood et al. 2009) explored the valorization of intimate relationships through the visualization of women's domestic and emotional labour (on reality shows such as *Wife Swap*).

> Women across the board can now see a great deal of their labour made visible and public. Yet the format of 'reality' television – where transformation is one of the main dramatic mechanisms – means that just like in the 1950s their labour is usually found wanting, in need of expert advice, guidance and improvement…As domestic and emotional labour develops through the new affective economy…it also becomes further subject to governance and scrutiny, attached to the wellbeing of the nation and new forms of exploitation. (p. 147).

Hearn (2016) also argued that the *Real Housewives* franchise specifically launches the affective labor and value creation in gendered or "housewifized" ways, which "recall the appropriation and denigration of the value of women's work by systems of capitalist expansion in the 16th and 17th centuries" (p. 10). On this basis Psarras (2020) developed the concept "emotional camping", which married the concepts emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) and camping (Sontag, 1964), to describe "the self-branding identity work of successful Housewives" across platforms (p. 3). She observed that the characteristics of these successful women are: a dedication to Bravo, an inclination to present as a walking GIF, and perceived authenticity (ibid). The work of emotional camping reveals that while emotional labor may take new forms in new mediums, the goal remains the same – to serve capitalist expansion and to satisfy the institutions where such work is conducted.

Affective capitalism in the context of reality TV also refers to the capitalization of "immaterial aspects of (voluntary) labour or participatory activities

of maintenance, caretaking, supporting, and sharing in digital environments" (Nikunen, 2016, p. 167). Such a perspective is less optimistic about the audience's power than affective economics studies and fan studies, and more focused on the new forms of capitalist appropriation and exploitation with new tools and technologies, such as big data, algorithmic culture and datafication. Terranova (2000) argues that the digital economy has made the audience work as a form of "free labor" that constitutes a fundamental moment in the creation of value in late capitalist societies. Voluntary activities on the Internet including work such as writing/reading/managing and participating in mailing lists/Web sites/chatlines are acting out desires for affective and cultural production "that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (p. 37). It can be seen that with the affective technologies of reality TV, audiences' affective responses have been turned into participation, quantified online presence, and voluntary donations, following the logic of affective capitalism. The result, as Andrejevic observed, is the merging of two forms of audience participation: "the effort viewers put into making the show interesting to themselves and the effort they devote to taking on the role of production assistants and attempting to provide feedback to writers and producers" (2008, p. 26).

4.4 The role of emotions in the audience experience

Reality TV's emotional appeal to audiences has also attracted the scrutiny of empirical psychology. Research in this area is mainly carried out under the theoretical framework of media psychology. Based on the expectation that reality TV is a genre of entertainment and designed to facilitate viewer enjoyment, the notion of enjoyment has drawn scholarly attention. Nabi et al. (2006) related cognitive assessments and emotional reactions to the concept of enjoyment, and found that in general, happiness, relief, parasocial relationships, voyeurism, surprise, and social comparison positively related to enjoyment whereas negative outcomes, anger, and self-awareness negatively related to enjoyment (p. 442). In another research exploring the factors that contribute to the enjoyment of nine reality sub-genres, Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak (2017) found that hidden camera, docusoap, and game shows were rated as significantly more enjoyable, whereas court shows were reported as the least enjoyable (p. 354). Furthermore, the impact of appeal factors on viewers' enjoyment varies across sub-genres, for example, whereas love and watching

others increased enjoyment of dating/romance, makeover/lifestyle, docusoap, and sitcom subgenres, the appeal of love diminished enjoyment of law enforcement and court shows (p. 357–58).

However, on the premise that reality TV requires "real people" to expose their private matters and intimate experiences, several studies critique reality TV for serving as a guilty pleasure (e.g. Pozner, 2010; Stevenson, 2019), and viewers are drawn to participants who are trapped in a "circuit of voyeurism and exhibitionism" (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 180). A study conducted by Tal-Or and Hershman-Shitrit (2015) verified that the more media characters disclose their inner feelings and thoughts as the show progresses, the more attractive they are to viewers. The ambiguous space between authenticity and constructiveness may invite voyeuristic enjoyment. However, extent research on the relationship between the tendency to use media for voyeuristic purposes and the consumption of reality programs has revealed inconclusive results. For example, Nabi et al. (2006) suggest that though voyeurism appears to be a key distinguishing gratification between reality and fictional programming, it is not always a predictor of reality television enjoyment. In a similar study, Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) identified that only those viewers who do not go out very often (low mobility) and have only a few social relations watch reality TV out of voyeurism and companionship.

Such inconsistencies in the findings, Baruh (2010) argues, is at least partly due to a lack of an agreed upon conceptualization and hence measurement of voyeurism. In this situation, Baruh (2010) made a distinction between "trait voyeurism" (*voyeuristic uses of television*) and pathological voyeurism (*sexually motivated uses of television*, p. 207). He claimed that recent studies are mostly focused on the former, in which "the common voyeur will seek sanctioned and less risky means through which the desire to take a peek at what should normatively not be accessible can be satisfied" (p. 204). He then reported that there exists a positive relationship between trait voyeurism and the consumption of reality programming.

Apart from voyeurism, empirical researchers also explored other social motives and psychological aspects of viewers which have an influence on television exposure, primarily based on the theoretical basis of uses and gratifications (U&G). For example, in a survey for reality TV viewers, Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) found that reality TV satisfies three motives of the audience: reality entertainment, relaxation, and habitually passing time, wherein entertainment and passing time are the most salient motives that were mentioned frequently. In a survey of college students' consumption patterns in

regard to reality TV, Lundy, Ruth, and Park (2008) found that while participants were embarrassed or hesitant to disclose the actual amount of reality programs that they watch, perhaps due to social stigma, they continue to watch because of entertainment, an escape from reality and living vicariously through others. Moreover, Reiss and Wiltz (2004) found status to be the most significant motive for watching reality TV, namely, reality TV gives psychological significance to viewers' perceptions of superiority. They also found that reality TV viewers are more motivated by vengeance than are non-viewers (p. 373–74). In a recent study, Hershman and Cohen (2018) tested the role of humiliation as a motive, but found that enjoyment of viewing realty TV is not related to humiliation but rather to a positive assessment of participating in reality shows. This finding indirectly supported the idea that empathy but not voyeuristic desire is why people enjoy these shows.

In sum, media psychology understands emotion as the key to the appeal of reality TV. From the above audience studies conducted based on U&G, researchers have already noticed emotion as a significant dimension among diverse gratifications. Emotion acts not only as the outcome of entertainment product consumption, but also as the driving force for the audience to make certain viewing choices. It is also noticeable that researchers take more interest in the audience experience as a whole; the term emotion is often mixed up with other terms such as enjoyment, voyeuristic desire, and pleasure, to be viewed as a part of motivation or satisfaction of TV viewing. There is an increasing agreement that reality TV offers its audience a host of affective, cognitive, and behavioral experiences, which are not just associated with pleasure or fun, but also include strong feelings of elevation and perceptions of the program as moving and thought-provoking, as a form of meaningful entertainment (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016).

4.5 The affective turn in reality TV analysis

After years of exploration, the significance of emotion and affect in reality TV has been fully confirmed. Whereas earlier, inheriting the critical academic tradition on television, media scholars criticized reality TV as "trash TV" or "dumbing down" (Dovey, 2000) that hardly provided diverse affectivity. But developed in tandem with the genre itself, academic scholarship has experienced significant expansion. As I have shown, this includes a careful scrutinization of the work of emotion and affect on reality programming, the way

they circulate in culturally diverse contexts, and their effects on audience media exposure. Affect is a mark of reality TV, and the diversity and power of affect and emotion in reality TV far exceeds what scholars once presumed.

In the last part of this chapter, I will review the recent affect studies on reality TV, focusing on the new ways developed to understand embodied audience practices around reality TV shows (e.g. Skeggs & Wood, 2012; Kavka, 2014; Lünenborg & Maier, 2019). These studies differ from the tradition of both textual-cultural studies and psychological analysis on emotion and affect. As a part of the recent "turn to affect and emotion in media studies" (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018), fresh angles on reality TV have emerged that build on different affect theories (as elaborated in Chapter 3). In these studies, affect is less connected with the individual's psychological state, but more with practices that are fundamentally social, connected with meaning-making processes, and have the potential for change.

Among them, Misha Kavka is one of the first theorists interested in the "affective power" of reality TV. In the book *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality Matters* (2008), she considers affect more for "the *productive* aspect of the sensing body, out of which arise specific emotions, objects, judgments – and even antecedents, *ex post facto*" (p. 30, italics in original). For her, affect constitutes a meeting point or "cusp between the individual and the collective psyche" (p. xi), wherein its nature is "taken as dynamic – transportable, transmittable, and mobile" (p. 31). Kavka claims that by placing these ideas together, "objects of emotion" can be taken as "materially sensible" as these emotions are of significance to the audience (2008, p. 33). "The screen is a join," she writes, "that *amplifies* affect and *connects* real people on one side with real people...on the other side" (p. 37, italics in original).

This angle on affect allows her analysis of reality TV to move "beyond the semiotics of representation to the affect of presentation" (2008, p. 7). Using case studies of reality TV formats that "link affect to intimacy" instead of having a "high degree of sensation/alism" (p. xi), Kavka particularly considers the power of reality TV in creating intimacy across space and time. Reality TV "pursues intimacy (emotional closeness) through immediacy (temporal closeness), coupling the proximity of the 'here' with the urgency of the 'now'" (Kavka & West, 2004, p. 137). This is a process set in motion by the potential of the medium:

> The actuality strengthens the effect of immediacy; immediacy strengthens the effect of social community; and the community creates a sense of in-

timacy with performers…This conjunction of immediacy, actuality and intimacy is dependent on a temporal framework which must be worked into the technical and rhetorical fabric of reality TV programmes. (Kavka, 2008, p. 19).

In addition, she considers reality TV in its affective capability of establishing a social space somewhere between the private sphere and the public. By connecting with feminist philosophers such as Carol Gilligan and Iris Young, she aims to include affectivity in the conception of the public. The way in which reality TV overlaps in the public and private spheres is not like "bringing private persons into realms of public discourse" as described by Habermas, but on the contrary, "television brings the public sphere into private spaces, binding public discourse to the interested, invested *Intimsphäre* (for Habermas, the intimate space of the conjugal family)" (Kavka, 2008, p. 50). This is achievable by affects's ability to create connectivity between off-screen viewers, audience, onscreen protagonists, and "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) of viewers. She goes on to suggest that "In this way, the private extends the public, giving it capaciousness through our mediated intimacy with people we have never met, but who are 'out there'" (Kavka, 2008, p. 77).

Nikunen (2016, 2019) focused on suffering in humanitarian reality TV, and the emotional responses and moral engagement it may invoke. Her work is based on Sara Ahmed's (2004) idea of an "affective economy", which offers a new approach to investigate what emotion does, and how it creates "others" by "working through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds" (p. 191). Ahmed's idea of emotions is highly recommended in the field of affect studies, though she herself insists on the word emotion rather than affect, "the word affect didn't have that kind of everyday resonance", she stated (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 97). For Nikunen (2016), by tracing the sticky signs deconstructed and re-constructed through the narrative of the show *Go Back to Where You Came From*, she describes how the show produces the feelings of being a refugee, and "evokes emotions from disgust to compassion and galvanizes this emotional sentiment towards action and donations" (p. 277).

Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood's book *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (2012) primarily focuses on the affective and cognitive responses and reactions to reality TV programs in the UK. They consider affect as "a force in the social relations between audiences and television", and "as the feelings that produce an effect" (p. 5). Combining textual analysis, the "text-in-action" method, and individual and focus group interviews, they not

only trace how research participants source their responses from different platforms, but also their responses to the materiality of the television object. Unlike most audience research that rely on accounts of the audience's cognitive reflexive, the "text-in-action" method attempts to bypass the inevitable filtering of audience responses in interviews, by drawing attention to significant reactive moments. The emphasis is on situating television viewing in a communicative framework "established through performative and ritual *acts*", in order "not only to think about television as texts and representations but also to think of their interactive potential" (p. 124, italics in original).

With a close combination of these methods and their work on the social production of class, they show how reality TV has affected the dominant order (framed by gender, class, motherhood, and work), in a different way from Foucaultian governmentality. By introducing a theory of value, they argue that "it is value that is the most significant element in making affect count" (p. 228). Affect circulates and distributes between the text and the audience, and engages both the participants and audiences in "extended circuits of value". In this way their emotional investments are extracted for value and ultimately contribute to a wider production of "a mediated economy of personhood" (p. 9). They elaborate on this, noting that:

> the model of person value that we propose can be accruing, defending and relational and is based on connecting to others not just, or even for, social or (moral) cultural capital, but for affective reasons, for connection beyond self-interest – for love, care and connection. (p. 10)

While they agree with Eva Illouz (2007) that capital subsumes the performance of intimacy, they still maintain that some affects are beyond subsumption and exist in a space beyond exchange. These affects call upon a set of intensities by which viewers "could sometimes circumvent potential ideological messages of governance" (p. 228). Elsewhere Skeggs (2010) stated that it is exactly affect that can disrupt the mechanism of exchange. Reality TV acts as a cultural technology that is pedagogical and experimental with regard to the emotional practices of viewers; "as viewers adjudicate the value of performed relationships they may also learn...that unfair exchange is also accompanied by exchanges that we want, that may or may not seem fair" (p. 48). Thus, she refers to a process of economic exchange that is a composite of the relationship between affect, evaluation and socio-economy.

The affective strategy of shaming, humiliating, or ridiculing lower-class people in reality TV has received particular academic attention, probably be-

cause reality TV (primarily makeover shows), compared with other televisual genres, often presents class differences and conflicts for dramatic development, climax and closure (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Scholars have demonstrated that through the "middle-class gaze" (Lyle, 2008) and in a strongly situational, ritualized way (Hájek et al., 2021), lower-class participants are constructed as excessive, reckless, parasitic, or repulsive, incapable of conforming to middle-class norms, lifestyles and cultural tastes; they are publicly ridiculed, shamed, humiliated, or at least embarrassed, through camera angles, editing, and comments from other participants and the narrator (Eriksson, 2015, 2016; Stiernstedt & Jakobsson, 2017; Reifová, 2020; Reifová & Hájek, 2021). In this (problematic) production mode of reality TV, the exposure of class divisions does not point to social structural inequality but to the realms of psychology and morality, perfect for later interventions through the cultivation of neoliberal subjectivization and the dissemination of neoliberal values such as consumption, competition, and self-transformation (Couldry, 2008; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Redden, 2018). These scholars see reality TV as a form of neoliberal governmentality and a technology of the self, in which social inequalities and injustices are magically erased, forming part of the neoliberal "theatre of cruelty" (Giroux, 2008, as cited in Barton & Davis, 2018).

In these studies, shame provides a productive lens to explore socio-economic and cultural boundaries, including perceptions of who "we" are and who "they" between different classes are established and foregrounding questions concerning the often dispersive, distributed operations and formative workings of "biopolitics" and neoliberalism (Foucault, 2010). As Reifová (2020) states, "by enabling and endorsing reciprocal judgements of the participants' lifestyles, RTV discourse engages—under the guise of mere television entertainment—in 'doing class'" (p. 2). In this way, reality TV invites viewers to enter into a process of "othering," learning to distance themselves from the humiliating and negative constructions of "national abjects" and "wasted humans," as well as to convince themselves that they are dignified social beings (Tyler, 2013).

Marsha Cassidy focuses on the audience aspect, especially audience's responses to onscreen bodies. Her book *Television and the Embodied Viewer: Affect and Meaning in the Digital Age* (2020) builds a bio-cultural approach combining the humanities' philosophical and cultural account of affect, and the neurobiological empirical account of the brain and body. But rather than the term affect, which she thinks is "so unsettled", she prefers to use the terms *sensation* and *bodily feeling*, and merely maintains affect "interchangeably in this

narrower denotation, retaining its distinction from emotion and accentuating its multisensory nature" (p. 7). By focusing on the representation of female dwarfism on the reality show *Little Women: LA*, she shows that reality TV has potentials to provoke a somatic union with dwarf women by offering a bodily encounter with their everyday lives, particularly through depictions of "their unique mobility, sexual expression, and experience of childbearing" (p. 11). But she also argues that such an explicit bodily representation risks charges of "enfreakment" as in freak shows (p. 75). From her point of view, the emphasis on the body is far from equivalent to thinking viewers as the slaves of some pre-reflective automatic sensory circuits, but offers an opportunity to reveal how bodily responses work in tandem with complex human emotion and reason, and how they are fundamentally shaped by politics, culture, and history.

Aside from Cassidy, some scholars are also thinking about the bodily appeal of reality TV in the viewers, with the help of new perspectives inspired by affect theories. Hirdman (2011) pointed out that the emotional plot in many reality shows has combined elements from melodramas with the display of highlighted physical reactions (often accompanied by fluids) as in hard porn, which illustrate what she identifies as a media trend "towards a conceptualization of bodily emotionalism" (p. 21). Smit (2013) pays particular attention to the staging of the "human body in visceral, affecting detail" (p. 92) in reality TV formats that are designed to evoke gut responses in the audience. Similar to Cassidy, she is also interested in the "relationship television fosters between bodies on either side of the screen" (Smit, 2010, p. 6). Based on Caldwell's concept of "televisuality", Smit coins the term "tele-affectivity" to identify an aesthetic tendency in reality TV that combines "exhibitionism and a drive for intimate access to the body" – as "a branding of intimacy" (p. 97). With this term she suggested that "television theory needs to be more sensitive to the ways in which the medium appeals to the embodied, affective responses of viewers" (2010, p. 195). By combining the study of affects with the pragmatic tradition drawing from the semiotics of Charles Peirce, Andacht (2012) argues for "the index appeal of reality television" (p. 38), wherein the visual effects of reality TV can be understood as a quasi-tactile lure through indexical signs that engage the audience affectively and viscerally. In a similar vein, Oksanen (2014) also applies Peirce's semiotics to analyze the affective material of the reality TV show *Celebrity Rehab*. He claims that instead of offering information about treatment and the dangers of drugs, dramatic affective contents including displayed emotions, bodies, and bodily parts become the primary

material of the show. In this sense, the power or the constant appeal of reality TV not only comes from its narrative and discourse, but also, and more primarily, from its affective affordances as visual images.

The book *Affektive Medienpraktiken: Emotionen, Körper, Zugehörigkeiten im Reality TV* (*Affective Media Practices: Emotions, Bodies, Affiliations in Reality TV*) from Lünenborg, Maier, Töpper and Sūna (2021) offers a systematic and holistic analysis of the emotional repertoires produced and distributed by the reality TV format *Germany's Next Topmodel*. Their work is also grounded on a relational concept of affect, that considers affect as relational intensities between human bodies and media technology, and emotions as "central building blocks of social order that are culturally shaped" (p. 48). They particularly use the concept "emotional repertoire" to denote the dynamic process in which emotions are established and expressed on various levels of the body, discourse and practices by individuals and collectives within specific social-cultural contexts (p. 32). With the help of practice theory, they view reality TV formats as affective media practices, and develop an empirically feasible method for emotional audience research – a combination of textual television analysis and video analysis with situational maps (Lünenborg & Maier, 2019). As a consequence, the patterns of affective relations formed between media texts, viewers, and the material contexts of media use can be revealed.

In summary, with the renewed interest on affect and emotion provoked by the affective turn, new perspectives on the affective effects of reality TV formats have emerged. In these studies affect and emotion are not taken as static, inert phenomena that are waiting to be constructed and determined, but have the dynamic and fluid capacity to affect other bodies (both human and non-human). With emphasis on the affective capacity of reality formats, these studies have opened up new windows to consider how reality TV *matters*, how reality TV works on viewer affect that is beyond ideology, discourse and meaning, along with the effects it creates in articulation with power relations and in the current sociopolitical conjuncture. This is also where I start my analysis of affect in Chinese reality TV.

While many of the empirical studies have applied affect theories in audience research, my analysis focuses on the media text itself. The fact is that we cannot expect to understand the affective responses of the audiences without developing a more thorough evaluation of how media create sense and meaning-making mechanisms through particularized narrative, discursive and material arrangements. Based on this, I argue that as a cultural product which focuses on emotional performance, changes and transformations,

modifications of subjectivities, and in-betweens or becomings, reality TV programs cannot be viewed merely as a representation of social complexity, or simply an attribute that affects the audience's acceptance; but as a mediated sphere where affect actualizes and makes a difference. Moreover, it is obvious that theoretical reflections and empirical analysis have so far been based primarily on Western academic traditions and have focused on Western reality shows; the overall analysis of Chinese reality TV has been focused more on observations and descriptions of the phenomena, yet theory building still seems thin. How, then, does affect work in the totally different media context of China? Through a close observation of Chinese reality TV, my research hopes to address this gap and contribute to theoretical reflections on relational affect and emotion.

Chapter 5: Researching Affect in Reality TV Text

This chapter addresses methodological reflections and research methods. Based on the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3, I consider the mechanism of reality TV as not just work on the plane of *signification* but also the plane of *affect*. These two planes do not exist in polarity but in constant interaction. Together they invite and engage the viewer into an affective relation with the audiovisual texts of reality TV. In order to investigate such an entangled and dynamic mechanism, I produce two levels of analysis: a micro level and a macro level. The micro level focuses on the media text itself, a synthesized analytic approach that combines methods of narrative, textual and film analysis is developed, in order to capture the *representational*, *experiential*, and *environmental* constitutions of the text. The macro level focuses on the "situatedness" of reality TV text within the larger institutional, social, historical, and political contexts, which follows the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA).

To be specific, in this chapter I first clarify the analytical challenges of performing qualitative television research with affect and emotion. Secondly, the synthetic analytic approach is elaborated. Finally, I illustrate how I select the Chinese reality television show *X-Change* as the case, and introduce the research design. As a whole, I approach affect not as prediscursive or precognitive somatic reactions but rather as "inextricably linked with meaning-making and with the semiotic (broadly defined)" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 20). This allows me to trace the becoming and transformation of affects in the multimodal text, as they are either integrated with ideological framing within the narrative structures that manage emotional performances or registered in and through a certain affective dynamic internal to the audiovisual images.

5.1   Rethinking affect and social structure

The renewed interest in affect has offered an opportunity to reconsider televisual culture. As noted in the theoretical chapter, the affective turn and the various theoretical strands it entails ask us to extend our analytic attention to focus on materiality, space, embodiment and ontology, often presented in contrast to contemporary theory, specifically, post-structuralist and social constructivist theories (Koivunen, 2010). In this sense, the dominant approach of television studies that focuses on questions of representation, ideology, and discourse should be re-examined. Indeed, media scholars have invested considerable time and energy into the ideological valences and influences of media texts. Baudrillard (1988) claimed that "all Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange" (p. 170). In his canonical essay "Encoding/Decoding" (1980), Hall suggested that dominant ideologies are encoded into media texts and that audiences mainly decode them in three ways: the dominant/hegemony, where audiences accept the meaning as it was encoded; the negotiated, a mixture of accepting and rejecting the message; and the oppositional, where audiences decoding a message in a contrary way. Along this approach, academic attention has been paid to how reality TV texts are ideologically laden and how audiences interpret the ideological codes and hegemonic patterns of media forms. Correspondingly, detailed analyses have exhibited a strong discourse orientation, and to a large extent only focused on spoken or written language.

However, not just an ideological battleground, reality TV also offers a mediated field for affects and emotions to perform, communicate and accumulate. In the last chapter I reviewed literature about the role of emotion and affect in and by reality TV, revealing that the power of this television genre lies more in its ability to create affective resonances, rather than in the ideological implications. It functions similar to a "qualia machine" (Eder, 2016), inviting the audience to engage affectively with the represented world. Hence, the perspective of affect offers an alternative lens to break the limits of representational analysis, so that we can re-imagine the affective potentiality of media texts. As Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) proposed, "there is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author)", being in every sense is entangled, connected, indefinite, impersonal, shifting into different

multiplicities and assemblages (p. 23). Therefore, from the perspective of re-lational affect, rather than merely discussing what the emotions in reality TV are and whether they are authentic or fake, I pay more attention to exploring the specific ways they articulate with signs, bodies, objects, etc., and how they work to maintain or challenge existing power relations and social identities.

How then, can we perform qualitative television research with affect and emotion? While a growing field of research has begun to develop methods for investigating emotions, mainly in media textual analysis and audience analy-sis focusing on the micro level of the inner psychological perception of view-ers (as discussed in Chapter 3.3), academic research on the methodological implications of affect has remained rather limited. In many cases, the term affect is used to describe trans-subjective, non-representational, and imma-terial intensities that are outside the social and resistant to structure, and dif-ficult to grasp in any type of stabilized empirical material (cf. Massumi, 2002; Brennan, 2004; Clough, 2008). This division between dynamic affect and rigid structure in particular has often created what Margaret Wetherell has termed a "methodological nightmare" saturated with "blocks for empirical research" (2015, p. 152). In effect, it would lead us to the unexpected understanding that only socio-culturally constructed emotions are the appropriate field of social scientific research, and the core motives of affective phenomena are excluded (Brown & Tucker, 2010). As Hemmings (2005) also argues, "we are left with a riddle-like description of affect as something scientists can detect the loss of (in the anomaly), social scientists and cultural critics cannot interpret, but philosophers can imagine" (p. 563).

Furthermore, as I also mentioned in Chapter 3, when criticizing social constructionism and post-structuralism for being unable to grasp embod-iment, the moment of becoming, ontogenesis and qualitative growth, some affect scholars have redirected their attentions to more body-centered, some-times even psychological and physiological frameworks of analysis. Empiri-cal-experimental evidence from scientific domains including biology, quan-tum physics, cognitive science, affective neuroscience, as well as developmen-tal psychology have been appropriated to verify the "naturalized" organiza-tions of affect. For example, the neuroscientific discovery of so-called "mirror neurons" are often drawn on to verify the capability of a person to understand intention, action, and also another's experience – which is what we typically mean by "empathy". However, some critics (cf. Hemmings, 2005; Leys, 2011; Papoulias & Callard, 2010) expressed their concern that this use of neuro-science is a strategic and rather dubious one. For Cromby (2012), "unless these

moves to the language of neuroscience actually add explanatory force, this is mere neurobabble" (p. 299).

In line with the theoretical framework of relational affect established in Chapter 3, my methodology in the study of affect and emotion in reality TV is based on the *working concept* "affective arrangement" proposed by Slaby, Mühlhoff and Wüschner (2019). It functions as a generative template that can facilitate micro-analyses of socio-material settings, relational affect, and their mutually formative combination. Accordingly, they propose to take *arrangement thinking* as a particular thought style and a methodological orientation for qualitative research:

> an affective arrangement is a *fragmentary*, *open-textured* formation...the concept only finds application when there is a characteristic 'intensive' mode of relatedness that holds the elements together, a specific *mode* of affecting and being affected. In such a dynamic interplay, the elements sustain a local sphere of affective intensity and thereby both initiate and give shape to characteristic affective relations and agentive routines. (p. 33–34, italics in original).

Orientated toward the situatedness of affect, arrangement thinking views the dimension of materiality and expression as operating independently but in an intimately connected manner. Affect is understood here not as opposed to social and semiotic structures of meaning, but as a process that involves biological, psychological and social dimensions, without privileging any one dimension. In this sense, it allows affect to be approached empirically, rather than being confined to the realm of intensity. Moreover, such thinking avoids a return to either biological essentialism or rational-structuralism because it emphasizes neither the individual nor the social structure, but the unfolding of affects in specific social and material arrangements. Indeed, "[t]he aim of affect theory is to get closer to the nebulous currents that animate everyday life", and it is more important to "find a suitable scope, be it of scale or temporality, with which to register and interrogate" (Barnwell, 2018, p. 32).

To take affective arrangement as "an explorative schema", I view my object of research, reality TV, as an affective-discursive site arranged with heterogeneous elements (material, bodily, practical, discursive, medial, imaginary etc.). Therefore, the analytical focus is on how interacting agents (both human and non-human) are interrelated in the affective arrangement of reality TV, and the dynamic effects triggered, mainly referring to the two counteracting tendencies that can be observed: "The first is a tendency towards the

consolidation – even, at times, ossification – of the arrangement into a stable pattern. The second tendency runs counter to the first towards transformation or even dissolution" (Slaby, Mühlhoff & Wüschner, 2019, p. 37).

5.2 Developing methods to analyze affects in reality TV

In order to analyze affect and emotion in the audiovisual texts of reality TV, I develop a synthesized approach that is based on a reflection of the advantages and limitations of discursive and textual analysis. As I have aligned human affects with the social and semiotic structures of meaning in the above, I do not assume a completely a-discursive analysis which is often adopted by some affect theorists who highlight the autonomous status of affect. Instead, I take the perspective of relational affect as an opportunity to supplement previously dominant methods, which put questions of representation, ideology and discourse in the foreground, and brings embodiment, materiality, relationality and dynamics more into focus. In this book I underscore the entanglement between affect and discourse by observing the multimodal and entangled dynamics of the affective and socio-semiotic processes in the mediated arrangement of reality TV.

5.2.1 Rethinking discourse analysis

Existing research on television texts is largely in line with the paradigm of discourse research, which is a well-established method that aims to identify and theorize the patterns, regularities and forms of order in talk and texts (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). However, emphasizing the linguistic features of the text, discourse analysis has been criticized for only allowing the study of expressions of emotions while being incapable of tackling affect. It is true that the discursive approach has its limitations. As reviewed by Berg et al. (2019, p. 41–42), discourse analysis to emotion can be roughly divided into two broad strands. One is linguistic ethnography and conversation analyses, focusing on the manifestation, interpretation, and communicative processes of emotions, or very specifically, how people talk about emotions (e.g. Fiehler, 2002). In these viewpoints, emotions are seen as a semantic domain, and the emphasis is on the meaning of language to signify and analyze emotional experiences. A second strand is a broader, Foucauldian influenced approach that concentrates on how subjects and subjectivities are formed in social processes (cf.

Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA, Fairclough, 2003), with language as its core focus, has been widely used to decode ideology and power in emotional discourses.

Along these discursive and textual approaches, media texts like reality TV programs are often analyzed for the underlying meanings of narratives and images. This is usually achieved firstly by identifying the signs and symbols in the mediated representation and secondly, by relating those signs and symbols to socially constructed concepts such as race, culture, sexuality, and class, which helps to delve beneath the denotative elements of a scene. Finally, assumptions relating to the dominant ideologies are examined. By and large, researchers focus on the overall narrative, describe the main characters, or simply reproduce the main verbal statements. Emotion is reduced to discourse; living, embodied subjects are equated with speaking subjects; and what exceeds discourse in joint inter-subjective activities is either bracketed out or simply unrecognized (McAvoy, 2015). Furthermore, audiovisual moving images are not just linear texts, they activate intensities and affective energies that cannot be reproduced by language alone. But in this discourse approach, the main focus is on verbal texts, which leads to the neglect of audiovisual performance, or merely regard the audiovisual analysis as a supplementary explanation of the verbal text.

To fully understand the affective power (or the "sticky nature" coined by Ahmed (2004)) of reality TV, we need to move away from simply "reading" TV as a verbal text to treating it as the complex communication process that it is. While subjects and identities are structured through language and discourse, but without affect, an understanding of how this structuring process happened and why certain identifications prove to be more forceful and alluring than others cannot be comprehensive in the first place. Affect, in this sense, is a key component in the construction of meaning and subjectivity itself. The actualization of affects in reality TV shows include not only verbal utterances, but also non-verbal communications. Both are arranged in a three-dimensional space, captured by camera actions, and finally dynamically through cuts and montage, while sound effects and musical scores are simultaneously added. These carry both meanings and intensities, and pre-structure the range of possibilities of reception by viewers.

Hence, I agree with Wetherell's argument that a combination of affect and discourse is helpful in addressing "the feel and patterning of bodies in action, the lively flow of social life and sticks closely to participants' perspectives" (Wetherell, 2013, p. 364). To restate my viewpoint in Chapter 3, I understand

affect as a cultural-material hybrid, which cannot be understood without its discursive productions, reflexive representations, and verbal articulation. Affect is not outside or in opposition to language but in tension with it. From this perspective, it is precisely because affect, body, cognition and language are indissociable that affects are therefore traceable; body and language are not solely expressional sites of affects (as external to affects), but are affects themselves (as an integral part of affects) – affects in process, in movement, and in becoming.

5.2.2 Toward a multimodal textual and filmic analysis

Accordingly, I propose a synthesized analytic approach which combines a focus on affect and discourse in the multimodal (language, images, and sounds) arrangement of reality TV. This is achieved, first of all, by taking reality TV as a multimodal text and an audiovisual synthesis. By using the term "multimodal text" I am following Wildfeuer and Bateman (2017) who take text not simply as a linguistic and verbal construct for symptomatic interpretations, but as a meaning-making entity that is "radically *multimodal*", "necessarily described in terms both of *dynamic inferential process* and at varying levels of abstraction and *time-depths*", and that is "grounded fundamentally in *materiality* and *embodied perception*" (p. 15, italics in original). This extended understanding allows me to view the text of reality TV as a fruitful surface to analyze the unfolding of affects in different communicative modes that work either individually or collectively to form meaningful wholes. As Kress (2011) also stated, "the meanings of the maker of a text as a whole reside in the meanings made jointly by all the modes in a text" (p. 37). The framework of multimodal analysis focuses on both the specific work of each mode and the interaction and synergy between the modes.

On the premise that reality TV is inherently a multimodal medium, I further integrate Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) methodology of "reading images" that focuses on the structures or "grammar" of visual design. The visual grammar, particularly in its depiction of how "elements—people, places and things—combine in visual 'statements' of greater or lesser complexity and extension" (p. 1), offers a means of approaching media texts as mediated discourses, with equal emphasis on patterns, systems, and dynamic processes. Among the ideas and concepts they present, I specifically integrate their statements on the dynamic dimensions/qualities of visual text, which helps me to capture narrative processes comprised of "vectors" that "realize the rela-

tion between participants by means of a spatial configuration" (p. 55). Camera shots, positions, and angles that make some elements more prominent than others can direct the gaze of viewers and establish an imaginary interactive relationship between the people on the screen and the viewer. In the following chapters, I will apply their grammar to the empirical analysis of moving images in reality TV shows. In general, my aim is to empirically explore the sense and meaning-making mechanisms in the tangled dynamic of the affective and socio-semiotic processes within the specific media arrangement of reality TV.

To this end, I have developed an analytic framework to (conceptually) separate the communication modalities of reality TV into three modes: discourse, figure, and ground. The aim is to clarify the specific object and scope of the empirical analysis of affect and emotion in reality TV, which will be further developed in the next section. This framework is advocated by Ott (2010) to analyze cinematic rhetoric, in which not only the symbolic and sensory aspects of the programs are taken into account, but the very technologies of communication that underlie them can be captured, as Table 5.1 shows:

Table 5.1: Analysis of the three modalities of reality TV text (adapted from Ott, 2010, p. 41)

Mode	Level	Entails	Enacted
Discourse	Representational	Signification & identification	Symbolic & narrative
Figure	Experiential	Sensation & feeling	Semiotic & aesthetics
Ground	Environmental	Space & presence	Medium & technology

First of all, the discourse layer refers to the question "what does the program say and mean?" and describes those rule-governed elements, namely narrative and language, that compose an orderly whole (Ott, 2010, p. 41). This layer is recognizable and functions with representational means to invite the viewers into a cognitive engagement with the program's story world. Secondly, the figure layer responds to the question "what does the program

do and incites viewers to do?" The term "figure", derived from Lyotard (1971), describes the unbounded energies and forces expressed and experienced through the semiotic and aesthetic (Kristeva, 2001).[1] This layer is closely intertwined with the work of the discourse layer and is crucial to understand how ideology and political ideas are subtly instilled in audiences. It is through these operations that the program not merely *represents* or *narrates* the social world, but more significantly, *affects*—charging and transmitting affects, "[swaying] viewers somatically as well as symbolically" (Ott, 2010, p. 41); yet also leading to the ambiguity and complexity of the show's meaning-making mechanism. The third layer, the ground[2], focuses on the question "what does the programme look and sound like?" This layer is concerned with the technological affordances that facilitate the specific discursive and affective practices of reality TV. Different semiotic materials are equipped with different affordances (Gibson, 1979), shaping (without determining) the conditions for different actors. Based on its audiovisual technologies, reality TV has shaped a specific form of watching and being watched across the screen, that created an environment that frames possible meanings and experiences. As such, I locate my analysis on affect and emotion in reality TV in the continuous interplay, melding, breaking, and transforming of these three modalities.

Moreover, I understand reality TV shows as highly intertextual and context-dependent, that is, I view reality TV as not merely audiovisual texts but also social practices embedded within specific sociocultural and historical conditions of production and reception. Hence the texts of reality television always include relations of *recontextualization*, "whereby texts (and the discourses, genres and arguments which they deploy) move between spatially and temporally different contexts and are subject to transformations whose nature depends upon the relationships and differences between spatially and

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1   The distinction between "the symbolic" and "the semiotic" is drawn from Kristeva (2001). While the symbolic is the rule-governed aspect of language, which shows itself in the grammatical structures and syntactic structures, the latter is defined as the matriarchal aspect of language that shows the speaker's inner drives and impulses, "These unconscious drives manifest themselves in character's tone, their rhythmical sentences and the images they use in order to express what they want to convey" (Sadehi, 2012, p. 1491).

2   According to Ott (2010), the term ground comes from the work of Marshall McLuhan (1988), who argues that media produces an environment that can unconsciously change the way we perceive the world.

temporally different contexts" (Wodak, 2011, p. 629). Thus, while I do not claim to fully follow the Discourse-Historical approach (DHA; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), I align with its premise that one can identify, understand and explain the process of meaning construction through tracing the specific context-dependency and discourse-historical trajectory of recontextualized elements, which are often manifested across four heuristic "levels of context", including:

(1) *intratextual* (text internal, the immediate text of the communicative event in question),
(2) *intertextual* (between utterances, texts, genres and discourses),
(3) extra linguistic social and environmental variables and institutional frames of *a specific "context or situation"*,
(4) the broader *sociopolitical and historical contexts* which discursive practices are embedded in and related to. (Wodak, 2011, p. 628–29).

Therefore, with its multi-level concept of context, the approach of DHA enables a systematic analysis that addresses both the unique text of the programme on the micro level (as regards what is displayed in the image and the specific design for this display), and the broader intertextual forces referenced by the programme, "without having to rely on purely hermeneutic interpretative procedures" (ibid., p. 629). I illustrate the multi-level context of reality television text as shown in the figure below:
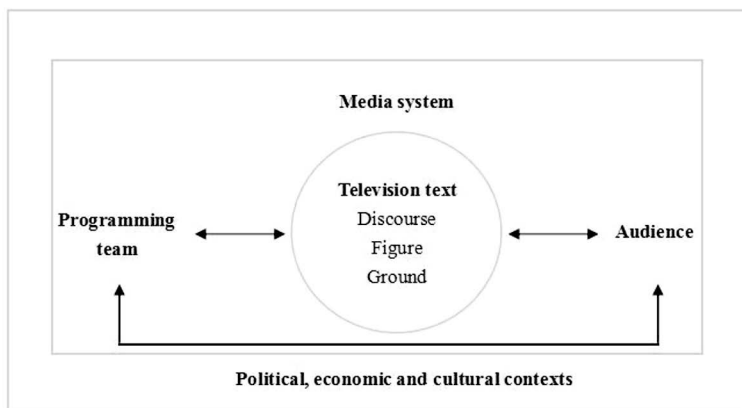
Accordingly, I produce two levels of analysis for the television materials with a particular focus on the affective-discursive mechanism: a micro level and a macro level. The first part of my analysis focuses on the main texts of emotionally charged moments extracted from the Chinese reality show X-Change, and locates them in the discourse-figure-ground framework, primarily addressing what the DHA regards as the intratexual and intertextual aspects of the segment. Then in the second part of the analysis, I focus on the "situatedness"/communication situation of reality television within larger institutional, social, historical, and political contexts, or what the DHA considers the third and fourth levels of analyses. This second mode of analysis is more aligned with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that helps to scrutinize relations among symbols, social settings, and power relations (e.g. Fairclough, 2003).

5.3 Case selection and research design

The basic research design is a case study. Case studies can articulate theory and practice through the study of a single case, and then form a specific, unique, and bounded system (cf. Stake, 2005). Therefore, although it is a single case, the in-depth analysis it allows can lead to a rich and comprehensive knowledge of a phenomenon or a problem that would not be achievable through other approaches. Yin (2003) suggests that the case study is particularly suitable for exploratory research questions and especially for interpreting meanings. For this reason, a case study was chosen to examine how affect and emotion are produced in Chinese reality TV in order to expand the understanding of the working mechanisms of reality TV.

In particular, the case I choose to deploy the analytic framework is the Chinese reality TV show *X-Change*, the first and most successful life-exchange reality show produced by Hunan TV in 2006. The show takes the form of a social experiment by primarily following two families from rural and urban areas swapping children for a limited period, exposing contrasts between social status, geography, family values, and lifestyles. These contrasts are typically linked to social factors as class, gender roles, and ethnicity, in addition to other determinants of social identity and distinction. Imitating the formats of *Wife Swap* and *Trading Spouses*, the show can be viewed as a variation of the "reality soap" subgenre – the *swap documentary* or "lifestyle experiment program" (Hill et al., 2007, p. 24). Accompanied by stationary cameras and live

shooting, the participants act in artificial settings under extraordinary conditions, and the plot is formed by their interactions in a new situation. They have to get along with themselves, with the other participants, and with the role of the camera crew in a new environment. The main idea of these formats is to confront different ways of life, which may result in conflict-laden or emotionally charged situations (Lünenborg et al., 2011, p. 30).

I consider the three versions of *X-Change* during three periods of 2006–2008, 2012–2015, and 2017–2019 as a perfect platform to not only investigate the effectiveness and becoming of affects and emotions in the televisual arena in a specific context, but also to perform a diachronic analysis on the dynamic processes through which affect mediates and transforms hegemonic power and ideology alongside the deepening of reform and opening up in China. A range of analytical tools are applied to identify the three modalities of communication:

First of all, narrative analysis provides a useful starting point. Like other reality TV shows, *X-Change* uses narrative structures as a frame to build up drama that enables the inputs of particular emotion-laden characters, dialogues, confessions, physical responses, and conflicting events while precluding others. Therefore, a structural-narrative analysis is applied to identify recurring patterns of storytelling and the dynamics in the three versions of *X-Change* respectively. While classic narrative analysis mainly concerns discourse represented (e.g. Labov, 1972), or uses Saussurean linguistics to understand narrative structure, here I follow Hogan (2011) who offers a systematic reflection on the role of emotion in narratives and extends classic narrative analysis to explore emotions built in recurring story structures and components. I offer a combined analysis to reveal the shifting narrative patterns of the show in order to reveal the ideologies and values it promotes.

Secondly, by recognizing the recurring emotionally charged scenes in these narrative structures, textual and filmic analyses are applied to address how the feelings and experiences of the participants are evoked, expressed, and represented, and, what ideology, class consciousness and values can be found in them. In line with the refined notion of "text" mentioned above, textual analysis here deals with both verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources, including:

(1) *figural emotional performances* in the text of immediate communicative events that can be found in the signs of language and body. Specifically, the following indicators are recorded: a) subject of emotional expression;

b) elicitors of emotion: person, event, expectation, memory, etc.; c) signs of emotional expression: bodily movements, bodily fluids, bodily sounds, facial expressions, verbal conflicts, verbal compassion, verbal confessions (besides the use of direct emotional words, specific language features, such as adjectives, adverbs or figures of speech, are also charged with emotions), voice intonation, speaking rhythm, "discourse bodies" (Berg et al., 2019),[3] etc.

(2) the *thematization* of experiences and emotions, which refers to the verbalization of an experience or an emotion and makes it the topic of the interaction (Fiehler, 2002, p. 86). This can often be observed in the show *X-Change* when participants comment on their interactions in confessional interviews, in the introduction narrative offered by the show's host and guests, and in interpretations and summaries by the voice-over. According to Fiehler (2002), people often use *a complex experience thematization* that involves more than one practice among the four that can be distinguished: a) verbal labeling of experiences and emotions, b) description of experiences and emotions, c) designation or description of the events and circumstances relevant to the experience and d) description or narration of the situational circumstances of an experience (p. 87). Through analyzing emotional *thematization*, it is also possible to identify the display rules of emotions (Hochschild, 1979)—rules that determine, to a great extent, how people feel, manifest, and process emotions—in reality TV.

Thirdly, emotions are also produced by television professionals through the use of audiovisual technologies. In this sense, cinematic techniques provide useful tools to analyze how images of emotional performance are portrayed. Bordwell and Thompson (2017) direct attention to some of the cinematic techniques that are central to the power of image: techniques of image, sound, and time:

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3   The term "discourse bodies" is used by Berg and her colleagues (2019) in referring to "the various transpersonal entities within discourse that are defined by their relations to other entities, either material or representational/ideational" (p. 50). I find this term analytically useful in opening up a new perspective to include the bodily and material dimensions of language into considerations on levels of discourse and text. Discourse and text analysis can not only be applied to analyze talk of emotions, but can also be extended to discuss the lived experience of emotions.

(1) there is the image whose composition relies on the following factors: camera angle, color schemes, mise-en-scène (literally, all that which is put into the picture: persons, costumes, makeup, props, lighting, setting).

(2) motion pictures usually contain acoustic signs including: music, sound effects and ambience sounds (either on-screen or off-screen).

(3) the dimension of time: motion pictures consist of a series of images shown in succession, slow motion, freezing, repetitions etc.—different styles of temporality are deployed. Hence the following shooting and editing techniques are taken into account: camera movements, montage, and cutting frequencies.

To make an interim summary, the above-mentioned analytical methods mainly focus on the intra-and inter-textual aspects of reality TV shows. These methods are applied in order to record emotions in the interweaving of narratives, discourses, bodies, images, and sounds. Based on arrangement thinking as the methodological orientation, I view the emotional performance of participants in reality TV not as personalized subjective expressions or a performance only played for the audience, but as a performative manifestation in the mediated arrangement of relational dynamics among (non-)human bodies, cultural, and technological components in a specified space and time. Crucially, this focus renders both sociocultural constructions of emotions and moments of affective intensification as symptoms of the underlying affective arrangement. I am attempting to avoid using the discourse, figure, and ground as rigid procedure and analytical method, for processes of becoming, transformation, consolidation, and dissolution of affect cannot be simply quantitatively measured. As I argued above, affect works inside and outside social constructs and always in tension with discourse. The way reality TV "touches" or moves an audience can reflect a synergy between affect and discourse, but sometimes the emotional performances, aesthetic constructs, and temporal dynamics that create embodied experiences may disrupt and even oppose the work of narrative and discourse.

In the next part of the analysis, I focus on the third and fourth levels of the DHA. This is based on the understanding that the meaning construction of a single, individual text cannot be fully understood without an interpretation of its social contexts. First of all, *X-Change* is a television program presented by a collaborative group consisting of producers, directors, scriptwriters, editors, camera operators, etc. They are real authors who have the power to shape emotional performance in their routine production practices (Zhang, 2018).

Their actions are inevitably influenced by the nature of the channel or broadcaster, the media system, and the regulation of the industry (Moran & Keane, 2004). These intertextual elements are reflected in characteristics of the show. Secondly, the participants are not isolated individuals or only functional roles, but social roles inseparable from their social contexts. Based on these considerations, the following cultural dimensions were taken into account in the analysis: social identity (focusing on class, religion, age, gender), history, traditions, lifestyle, norms and values, etc.

To summarize, in the encounters among participants, producers, and actual/imagined audiences in the realm of reality TV, while social and medial forces try to elicit, define and regulate affective experience and expression, in Wetherell's (2012) words, "'forms of encounter' or social relationships arrive with the affective slots for actors already sketched" (p. 125). There exist the elusive, imprecise, shifting and contingent dimensions of affective experiences that have yet to be fully symbolized by figuratively or linguistically entailed speech, but nonetheless give rise to novel experiences, emotions, and are open for processes of becoming. I argue that an empirical analysis of this realm of experience is possible but requires looking for not only emotional performances and thematization in regular representational patterns, but also for the disruption, disfluency, and hesitation among these patterns, especially speech acts, bodily and material revelations that seem to be both affectively powerful and unruly. These manifest themselves in the temporal and formal dimensions of affective processes, and invite audiences to feel/experience without determining the type of discourse created. Such empirically grounded contextual research can reveal the complexities of texts, the resonances and dissonances between texts and contexts, and also helps to understand the emotional effects of reality TV (in a broad sense) on the living experiences of Chinese people.

As a supplement, I also collected a range of intertextual materials surround the show, from Internet sites, TV listing magazines, newspapers and the television programs that feed from reality television. Chiefly, I take the 14 year old television show *X-Change* as a vantage point from which to observe the "structures of feeling" of Chinese society. China has been exploring a distinctive path to development and has been experiencing drastic transformations during the reform and opening-up. In Deng Xiaoping's words, this is "to cross the river by feeling the stones"; these transformations not only concern political economic structures in society, but also the everyday life of all Chinese people. Taking relational affect as a critical optic to view affect

as a cultural-material hybrid and to trace both the consolidation and transformation of affects in the texts and how social forces try to colonize these emotions, I hope to understand not only individual experiences but also the social, cultural, and political frameworks in which they experience, perform, and narrate their emotions.

Chapter 6: Telling Stories, Swapping Lives

This chapter offers a structural-narrative analysis to respectively reveal the symbolic reality of the show *X-Change* in the three stages of broadcasting, focusing on how stories of exchange unfolds and the ways urban and rural participants are (re-)presented in a given space-time. Although *X-Change* frequently asserts its authenticity based on the documentary mode of representation and its "unscripted" nature, it is nonetheless carefully designed around clear formulas to provide the audience with a consistent narrative trajectory; and the development of its narrative is not deviate from the specific sociopolitical and cultural contexts after China's reform and opening-up, as discussed in Chapter 2. By tracing how the producers adjusted the show's theme, narrative strategy, and target audience, driven by the changing demands of the government, the market, and the public, I attempt to reveal the shifting representational patterns of emotional performances in *X-Change* and the ideological orientations embedded within it. Along with the next two chapters that are close readings of selected affectively charged moments, *X-Change* is analyzed as a multimodal text whose affective power depends upon the distinctive interplay of its narrative content, its formal structures, its aesthetic dimensions, and its underlying technological apparatus.

6.1 *X-Change* (2006–08): "The miracle of ordinary people"

As introduced in Chapter 2, reality TV, a type of Western-derived programming, was introduced into China when Chinese television was undergoing dramatic marketization and further participating in the global media system after entering the WTO. The history of the development of Chinese reality TV from introduction to prosperity is also a dynamic process of wrestling between diverse social agencies: the Party, the government, the market, the

media, and the audience. So far Chinese reality TV programs have become greatly diversified, encompassing a wide variety of subgenres and variations. Among them the global formats of talent contests, dating programs, game-docs, and lifestyle documentaries have gained increasingly prominence. In comparison, *X-Change* and the subgenre of *swap documentary* or lifestyle experiment programs that feature personal transformation and issues of class have received less academic attention. For related research, *X-Change* was either disregarded as a trash TV program or criticized for its distorted representation of social reality, especially of the countryside and rural people. Indeed, representations have limitations; as this book will also show, *X-Change* has in effect worked to reaffirm and reinforce a sense of social fixity through its narrative of self-improvement, rather than offering a critique of social differentiation and class consolidation. But this (mis-)representation is only one way of meaning and sense making in forging a mediated experience of living in a ruptured society. As the first step of empirical analysis, this chapter will focus on the narrative layer – on the (shifting) identities, beliefs, and ideas communicated in the storytelling framework.

X-Change can be viewed a living fossil of the history of Chinese reality TV. Since Hunan Satellite TV (HSTV) launched the first season of *X-Change* during prime time (19:30) in September 2006, this reality show has become a veritably longevous show, having aired for 19 seasons until 2019. The launch of the show happened when HSTV was heavily criticized by the authorities, especially when its phenomenal show *Super Girl* was suspended for being "vulgar and manipulative" (Meng, 2009). In 2006 and 2007, the SARFT issued a set of strict and detailed regulations to discipline reality shows, aiming at "cleaning up the screen, resolutely resisting the wind of vulgarity" (SARFT as cited in Yun, 2014). Faced with this situation, *X-Change* was developed as an aggressive move by HSTV to break the deadlock through seeking new reality formats. Like other localized versions, when imitating the idea of exchanging lives from western reality formats of *Wife Swap* and *Trading Spouses*, HSTV have carefully translated it into cultural forms that accommodate the specific social characteristics of Chinese society. While the core formula of role-swapping and family life as the center have been retained, the Chinese version abandoned the design of swapping wives because of its possible conflict with Chinese traditional family ethics.[1] Instead, the show is concentrated on

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1   In fact, there used to be a reality show called *Exchange Housewife* (*Jiaohuan Zhufu* 交换主妇) produced by Shandong TV Qilu channel in 2007, which is more faithful

the presentation of role switching of children from families at extreme opposites, figured in terms of regional and class difference; and the cash prize from *Trading Spouses* was also removed, so as not to preach materialism.

In order to highlight the difference from other purely entertainment-oriented and overly sensational shows (like *Super Girl*) that either drew criticism or were cancelled by SARFT, *X-Change* avoided using the term "reality show (*zhenren xiu* 真人秀)" in the announcement. Rather, it claims to be a life experiment or quasi-documentary program that "authentically broadcast (*yuanshengtai bochu* 原生态播出)" raw recorded materials with minimal editing. On its official website, *X-Change* describes the program tenet as follows,

> A lifestyle role-exchanging program developed and valued highly by HSTV after *Super Girl*, it is an innovative program that adopts the model of documentary+reality format, known as the 'new ecological documentary (*xinshengtai jilupian* 新生态纪录片)'. The two parties participating in the program exchanged roles in seven days to experience each other's lives. The program was filmed throughout the entire process, and authentically broadcasted after rough editing.
> http://zixun.hunantv.com/lanmu/bxj/index.html

The attempt to underline the program's ambitious and positive social value can also be found in interviews and releases, in which the producers frequently declare their determination to draw upon the difference of families, and especially to include those in remote and impoverished areas. They refer *X-Change* as "one of the most difficult productions in their life" in terms of logistics and production conditions. Deputy Director Zhang Huali called *X-Change* as the Whampoa military Academy of HSTV – most of HSTV's production team participated in the production of the show and experienced training in the process. In the book of the same name published by the producer, Zhang described their hard work:

> in the remote Chinese mountain village, our directors slept in a small room temporarily partitioned by wooden boards, with pigsty and bullpens underneath…They mocked themselves as 'wake up earlier than chickens, sleep later than dogs, do more work than donkeys, and eat worse than pigs'. It is

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to the Western formats, but it was criticized as low, scandalous, and unethical, and soon disappeared from the screen.

our tradition of 'fighting to death' that has created such a sincere *X-Change* today. (*X-Change* group, 2014, back cover)

The first phase of *X-Change* (2006–08, including 4 seasons, 16 stories, hereafter referred to as *X-Change* 1.0) is experimental. Using the slogan "the miracle of ordinary people", the first three seasons of *X-Change* are not limited to the problem of urban-rural differentiation, but attempt to reflect the living conditions and problems of manifold social strata in the process of rapid economic reform, to produce "an image version of Chinese social class analysis", in producer Li Hongli's words. As Li recalled, the originality stems from her shocked feeling about China's social division:

> the society today is a society with a clear gap between the rich and the poor, whether we admit it or not, this is an objective reality. But in real life, it is difficult for us to realize its existence. In a sense this is a secret society. (Li, 2006).

Her intuition reflected the emerging social changes that divide and isolate social members; as I illustrated in Chapter 2, the process of modernization has also caused a decline in traditional forms of social belonging and disintegration of family structure, leading to a significant increase in social conflict, inequality, and class stratification (Sun & Guo, 2012). But what I want to add here is that *X-Change* is not simply a recording of the "secret society" around us: the medium itself is simultaneously co-conspirator and collaborator in the social experiment that directly intervenes and changes social reality via the televisual format of role-exchange. By offering the opportunity to "walk in another's shoes", *X-Change* 1.0 attempted to promote a kind of empathy to the audience in an effort to achieve the self-assigned social task of cross-class communication and understanding from top to bottom. In this sense, the production team referred to *X-Change* 1.0 as the "new Down to the Countryside Movement (*xin shangshan xiaxiang yundong* 新上山下乡运动)"[2] (Zhao,

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2   The "Down to the Countryside Movement" was a political movement that took place during China's collectivist economic period, from about 1955 to 1978. During this period, the Party-state organized tens of millions of urban educated youths (*zhiqing*) to settle and farm in rural areas, to "receive re-education by the poor and lower-middle peasants." This movement can be seen as a large-scale (idealistic) social implementation of Mao's theory, aimed at eliminating the three major differences: between workers and peasants, between urban and rural areas, and between physical and mental labor.

2008), through which the differentiated social strata, values, and lifestyles could have the opportunity to communicate with each other.

Season 1 consists of four exchange stories. The first, *Internet Change* showed an urban youth and a rural youth; the second story, *High School Mother-Daughter Exchange*, as the name suggests, focused on the identity exchange between a mother, a high-school teacher and her high-school age daughter. The last two stories are called "unilateral change (*danbian bianxing* 单边变形)"; one invited the director of the Quality Supervision Bureau to serve as a village official in Yongzhou (*Old Kong becomes Village Officer*), and the other arranged for two Americans to act as instructors in a special walking education school, walking through the desert with "problem" students (*Go, Go, Go*). However, the audience rating showed that only *Internet Change* gained in popularity. While the producers tried to cover social members with diverse identities, market pressure has forced them to compromise by narrowing the topic and selection of participants. From Season 2, the show gradually solidified the format of urban and rural youths (10–18 years old) exchanging lives. Song Dian, director of the Hunan TV Innovation Research and Development Center, explained this as follows: "We found that the audience is very concerned about the children, which may come from our blood relationship. This is a natural instinct" (cited in Huang, 2012). Though exceptions can still be found in Seasons 2 and 3 – for example, the second story of Season 3 is centered on World Anti-Drug Day, in which two middle-aged men who had a history of drug use exchanged lives – starting from Season 4, the show officially shifted to exchange stories between urban and rural youth.

The storyline of *X-Change* is simple, with two parallel narrative lines focusing on the transformation of urban youth and rural youth and their families respectively. With the intention to "push the exchange to the extreme", in producer Qian Liu's (2006) words, *X-Change* generally pairs protagonists who are very different from each other. While the selected urban youths are mainly from first- and second-tier cities, such as Shanghai, Xi'an, Chengdu; the rural youths are selected from poverty-stricken areas in West China such as Huining in Gansu, Basha Miao Village in Guizhou, Xinzhuang in Yunnan. Usually urban youths are raised by affluent families in which one or both parents are from elite class or the cognitariat[3]; by contrast, the parents of ru-

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3   This classification is based on the research of Chinese sociologist Sun Liping (2004), who divides Chinese society into four interest groups: 1. The general elite class, who despite the small numbers occupy the majority of social resources;

ral youths are either peasants or migrant peasant workers. In terms of their own personalities, the selected two protagonists have represented the typical urban and rural personalities formed in the process of Chinese modernization (Zhou, 2011). Based on business relationship, the former is manifested in shrewdness, openness, enjoyment, self-orientation, heterogeneity in behavior, and aggressiveness; while the latter is embodied as honesty, hard-working, closed, other-oriented, homogeneity in behavior, negative self-preservation, and based on blood and geographical relationship.

Taking the basic storyline of two episodes in Season 1: *Internet Change* and *The Pain of Growth* as representative: an urban youth who comes from an affluent family but typically "bratty" ones with "modern diseases" (*xiandai bing* 现代病) such as internet addiction, school dropout or school-weary, spendthrift, apathy, rebelliousness, bad-tempered, and so on, at the request of his/her helpless parents, was arranged to go to the countryside by the program; as an exchange, the rural youth who is typically a left-behind child but with good personal qualities such as diligence and thrift, simplicity and honesty, being tough and hard-working, lives as the son/daughter of the urban family for a limited time. Without figuring the experience in terms of money and fame as is common in other entertainment programs, parents from both rural and urban families frequently remarked that they want to take this opportunity to learn from each other, or gain new insights that could contribute to the growth of their children.

Following the "introduction-rising-climax-falling-ending" structure of storytelling, each episode starts with a description of the living environment of both parties before entering the exchange journey. The extremely poor rural families are visually presented with close-ups focusing on dilapidated houses, emaciated bodies, inedible food, etc., which contrasts sharply with the introductory scenes of the materially rich and superior urban families, allowing the show to create an emotional intensity and turbulence from the start. After a long trek, both participants arrive at their new home and the

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2. The cognitariat, who are not the middle class but are mostly well-educated and actively participate in various social fields as intellectuals; 3. The civilian class, who form the largest proportion of the population; 4. The "bottom" class, a considerably large-scale "weak" or "vulnerable" group (*ruoshi qunti* 弱势群体) consisting of peasants, rural migrant workers, and urban unemployed impoverished people, who have suffered economic disadvantage and marginalization because they were failed to accumulate capital in the resource re-aggregation since the 1990s.

exchange officially begins. The new child is usually asked to adhere to the daily routine and lifestyle of the child he replaced, according to a manual left for him that explains his role in the family and the duties he holds. The middle part of each season focuses on the experiences of living with new families and studying in new schools. Predictably, entering a totally new environment elicits emotional conflicts and interpersonal disputes. Each episode typically dramatizes their struggle to cope with the apparently extreme conditions, those confrontational and even violent scenes serve as the key drama in the middle episodes. Finally, the story ushers in a happy ending – the hearts of urban youths' were greatly moved and transformed, as demonstrated when they take the initiative to improve their relationship with their parents and re-enter school education after they have returned to their normal lives; meanwhile rural youths also "broadened their horizons" and garnered donations from the cities to improve their living conditions. The series follows this consistent formula, repeating it weekly. Despite the apparent sense of unpredictability based on different personalities of participants, locations, and specific situations, the exchange stories are arranged around this standardized narrative structure in a predictable and repeated pattern. This formula is essential to the program's representation and negotiation of repetition and difference.

To claim its authenticity and boost its credibility, a set of manipulative narrative techniques are applied. The episodic development of each season is chronological, moving from the beginning of the exchange to the end, and the shot-to-shot development of each episode being largely chronological as well. With clear temporal markers such as "before leaving", "the first day of transformation", "time to go back" and so on, the show gives the audience a notion of the producers not having manipulated "communicative time" – the sequence of events as they are presented in the discourse – for dramatic effects, but insists on the "original" presenting of the protagonists and events (Keating, 2013).

In line with the self-positioning of the "new ecological documentary" as I mentioned above, the shooting style in this phase is also documentary-like and captures the events in an objective and neutral manner. "The first principle is to keep everything simple", stated chief videographer Liu Ke, in order to reduce the interference of external factors such as manpower, equipment, and light, since "when there are fewer disturbing factors, the nervousness of the interviewee will gradually ease, which can more truly reflect the authentic state of the interviewee when recording" (Liu, 2012, p. 24). According to

him, large-scale shooting equipment such as large-scale cameras, illuminating lamps, and microphones are replaced with small, lightweight, hand-held TV cameras, stationary cameras, and even hidden cameras whose "screen effect is very poor, but can capture interactions among participants in an authentic way" and lend a unique realism to the program (ibid). Furthermore, the show includes the omniscient and all-knowing voice-over style. The narration of the mature and calm male voice-over from Liu Wei, a host of HSTV, throughout the show acts as the "voice-of-God" that inserts interpretations of the events into the already established expository structure; sometimes his voice even substitutes the participants' own narrations of their inner feelings. Above all, these documentary-quality elements and techniques in fact lend the show an air of "sobriety" or have a sobering effect on the show. Such an effect, according to Nichols (2001), satisfies the audiences' expectation of truth and objectivity, and avoids them interpreting the show as a trashy entertainment show.

X-Change 1.0 obtained approvals from official institutions[4] and won several national and international television awards soon after it was broadcast. In 2006, the show was awarded first prize in the Hunan television ranking, and won the "Annual Creative Program" award issued by the journal *New Weekly*; in 2007, it was awarded the "best reality TV program" at the Singapore Asian TV Festival, and the "Annual Public Welfare Program" in the television selection organized by Sohu. In 2007, HSTV established the *Hope Project – Hunan Satellite TV "Happy Growth Foundation"* to provide financial support for rural areas. Furthermore, when collecting materials on the Internet, I found that many middle schools use *X-Change* as a supplement to mental health education, and have uploaded multiple episodes or clips of *X-Change* on the school website for teachers to broadcast in the classroom or for students to watch after class. The ways in which the series integrates charitable institutions and reaches out to schools partially confirmed the credibility and educational value of the show, and helped to transform the "vulgar" and "naive" cultural labels and public images of HSTV formed by *Super Girl*.

Despite *X-Change*'s meticulous acts of adaptation through addressing pain points of contemporary Chinese society, unfortunately, after two years of broadcasting, it failed to fulfill economic imperatives. Facing continuously

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4   Such as the Ministry of public security, the publicity department of the central committee, the publicity department of the Hunan provincial committee, Hunan communist youth league committee, etc. (cf. Sina, 2015a).

declining audience ratings, the production team have had to cut this show and divert their efforts to new reality formats. In 2009, HSTV produced the dating game show *Take Me Out* (*Wo'men yuehuiba* 我们约会吧), which is a licensed local version of the British reality format *Take Me Out* from Fremantle Media, yet was outmaneuvered in the competition by Jiangsu TV's program in the same genre *If You Are the One* (*Feicheng wurao* 非诚勿扰). While the latter gained huge popularity, it was simultaneously embroiled in a series of public controversies when some of the participants "expressed a strong desire to pursue materialism or arrogantly showed off personal wealth" (Guo, 2017, p. 492). As a quick response, the SARFT issued a document in which dating shows represented by *If You Are the One* were criticized for "advocating materialism" (SARFT, 2010).

In October 2011, the SARFT further issued the "Opinion on Strengthening the Regulation of Television Programs on General-Interest Channels", which was informally known as the "cutback on TV entertainment" (*xianyu ling* 限娱令). The targeted genres include dating shows, talent shows, tabloid talk shows, game shows, variety shows, interview-based talk shows, and other reality shows. This new regulation allows only 9 reality shows in total but without sub-genre repetition to be broadcasted during prime time (between 19:30 to 22:00 at night), and reduces the number of reality shows broadcast on each satellite television to a maximum of two every week. To replace the production of reality shows, all satellite general television channels are required to focus on news and propaganda, to place at least two hours of new programs between 6:00 to 24:00, and must launch a "morality building" program to promote Chinese traditional virtues and the socialist core value system. SARFT stated that their purpose was to prevent the proliferation of homogenized talent shows which promote vulgar language and poor taste (SARFT, 2011).

6.2 *X-Change* (2012–15): "Strength from distant mountains"

During this extensive television market adjustment, HSTV revived *X-Change* with Season 5 in 2012 as a premier program. The second phase of *X-Change* (hereafter referred to as *X-Change* 2.0) is explosive; 8 seasons with 34 stories in total were broadcasted daily until 2015. While the latter retains the original scheme of exchanging lives between urban and rural children, an obvious modification can be identified, that is, learning from lessons of failing to impress the audience, *X-Change* 2.0 abandoned the ambition to touch the

grand problem of social distinction, and instead addressed the educational problems of the urban middle class. With a new slogan, "The strength from distant mountains", *X-Change* 2.0 is apparently more concerned with predicaments faced by urban parents and children in the face of rapid social changes, especially in terms of value conflicts and crises of value caused by neoliberal practices. The producer Xie Dikui interpreted their intentions as follows:

> The social environment needs a documentary program like *X-Change* that directly hits the social reality. Various entertainment shows that focus more on the form than the content have caused widespread aesthetic fatigue, various trends in pursuit of fame and fortune make it urgent for society to rebuild moral conscience, the only-children are pampered and spoiled, they cannot tell corn from turnips, they are indolent, and energielos, causing headaches for parents, *X-Change* is a good medicine we find in remote mountainous areas to treat the only-child disease in cities that has made many parents lose confidence. (Xie, 2009, p. 17).

Indeed, in a society with highly uncertain resource allocation and inadequate social security, the middle class is constantly worried about personal gains and losses. In order to guarantee their social status, Chinese middle-class parents pay particular attention to investment in education, and even make the competition for high-quality educational resources an arms race of sorts (cf. Zhou, 2016). However, rapid economic transformation and urbanization have caused new problems amongst juveniles, as represented by the rebellious and violent urban youths selected by *X-Change*. Facing this dilemma, the so-called "good medicine" Xie provided in the above is to send urban bratty youths to receive an embodied "suffering education" (*kunan jiaoyu* 苦难教育) in the countryside, which implies that the "sick" city could seek its roots in the rural cradle of socialist, equalitarian culture, and receive education and purification from the countryside.

Thus, albeit still designed with parallel narrative lines, it is not difficult to find that the show is produced from the urban perspective and is oriented towards an urban audience. The processes of transformation of urban youths is unquestionably settled as the core narrative of the show. At the narrative level, they are the ones who hold the key to the transformation. Then the suffering in the countryside, including hard physical conditions, heavy field labor, and a closed living environment, are instead transformed into educational opportunities, appropriated to stimulate the bratty urban youth to reflect on their own easy life and cherish the opportunity to study what many rural youth yearn for.

As a happy ending, they receive redemption and return to the normal life order of their class, having transformed from being tired of learning to actively receiving school education, which is considered the right path for the middle class to achieve success (Zheng, 2006). To a certain extent, *X-Change* 2.0 has become an effective release valve for the current anxieties of the Chinese education industry and many middle-class families facing similar problems.

Although *X-Change* 2.0 has undergone multiple adjustments in terms of narrative and audiovisual techniques, these only work to reinforce the core narrative line of the urban side. First of all, a new concept of "team-change" proposed in terms of the increase in urban participants: the fixed one-for-one exchange mode is expand to two-for-one (Season 8, 12), three-for-one (Season 9, 10), and even four-for-one (Season 11, in which two pairs of urban father and son/daughter exchanged with a rural child). The program recording cycle is also extended from a week to a month or forty days in vary. If in the first phase of *X-Change* the producers found it difficult to persuade urban teenagers to participate, with the increasing social influence of the program, more and more urban teenagers sign up after figuring out the program's flow. In effect, *X-Change* provides an alternative way for the "rich urban second generation" to gain popularity and profit. Whether it is Yi Huchen (Season 5), Shi Ningjie (Season 7), Li Hongyi (Season 9), or Han Anran (Season 11), Lin Zihao (Season 12), once the show is broadcast, their number of fans on social media such as Weibo and Tieba rises sharply, and their potential commercial value is subsequently fully activated. While *X-Change* 2.0 is satirized as "*Become a Star (bianxing ji* 变星计)" which deviated from its original intention and became a celebrity producer, the inclusion of more expressive urban participants has undoubtedly made the show more entertaining and eye-catching. With higher media literacy, participants are more adept at perceiving the requirements of producers to pursue program effects, and learn to intensify their emotions through bodily performance in "acting out" the social conditions of being watched (Kavka, 2008).

Secondly, the "objective" quasi-documentary shooting style is replaced by a reworking of the dramatic formula that appeal to indeterminacy and unpredictability to evoke the excessiveness of the ordinary. No longer content to simply record in an "authentic" way, the production team admitted that a set of sensuous and dramatic techniques is adopted, including: selecting inherently dramatic participants, designing particular micro-situations, and instructing on performances on scene. The producer Xie Dikui called such a strategy as "design tasks, record truthfully", in order to make *X-Change* a

"reality drama" on the request of senior leaders of HSTV. Xie (2012) gave an example to explain their intervention in producing:

> For example, when an urban child goes to the countryside, we may let him experience the suffering of farm work, and when a rural child goes to the city, he may experience the difficulty of selling. Although the task is designed, the children's performance is completely real…These activities are indeed beneficial to the growth of children, but due to the design of some plots, in addition to the occurrence of various unexpected situations of the participants, the program is full of twists and turns, and it does have a feeling of reality drama. (p. 18).

Thus sacrificing the proportion of "sobriety" and "original" in *X-Change* 1.0, *X-Change* 2.0 is apparently more market-driven and increases the proportion of "drama" with interventional techniques, making dramatic conflict scenes – or to borrow Grindstaff's (2002) term – the "money shots" become the most highlighted moments throughout the show. In such scenes, the irrational, spontaneous intensities and breakdowns of participants, as well as between participants and producers are managed in narrative dynamics to accumulate an effect of surprise to the audience. A close reading and interpretation of the meaning and function of the money shot will be offered in Chapter 7. What I want to point out here is that *X-Change* 2.0 reworked the "affective economics" (Jenkins, 2006a) formula of the global formats that it once despised and scorned, and such a formula is only used to serve the interests of the urban middle class, including middle-class program producers (media practitioners are considered to be part of the typical new middle class), middle-class participants, and middle-class audiences.

Thirdly, powerful shooting technology and intricate post-editing techniques are also applied, accompanied by diversified soundtracks, screen texts, and voice-over comments, all transforming the original rough picture quality into dramatic audiovisual effects that comparable to a blockbuster. For example, in the introductory scenes of each series, the image of colorful and fast-tempo city life is built via superimposed shots or fast sliding lenses that focusing on busy streets, high-rise shopping districts, and feasting bars, etc., coupled with dynamic and quick music. Rural mountains, rivers, terraces or deserts are presented with slower aerial, lifting, and panning shots, supplemented by soothing ethereal music, highlighting the simplicity, tranquility and purity of the countryside. The patterned audiovisual expressions of environment and life are consistent with the images of the protagonists,

and also pave the way for their subsequent expressions of words and deeds in cities and rural areas. As a result, the poor, dilapidated countryside in *X-Change* 1.0 is transformed into idyllic organic countryside in *X-Change* 2.0, just like the "peach blossom valley" depicted in Tao Yuanming's pastoral poem, which featured a beautiful natural environment and harmonious neighborhood relations. In this way, the huge difference between rural and urban becomes a difference in lifestyle. This also implies that the difference between tradition and modernity and between industry and agriculture is more a lifestyle choice in contemporary China.

Despite high ratings and popularity, the new version was criticized severely for faking contradictions between participants and sacrificing rural children, changing from a public welfare programme to a pure celebrity-making entertainment show (e.g. Han, 2013). The re-entertainment of *X-Change* 2.0 is not an isolated phenomenon, since 2013, the subgenre of outdoor competition reality formats (so-called "Korean variety show" (*hanzong* 韩综), represented by *Running Man* (*Benpaoba xiongdi* 奔跑吧兄弟) that adopt the formula of "super stars+game+pure entertainment" have proliferated in the television market. Entertainment once again proved itself as a panacea to capture audience segments. Such a trend propelled SAPPRFT to issue a special notice in July 2015 to regulate the broadcast of reality shows, which is an enhanced version of "cutback on TV entertainment". The regulation covers all aspects including the theme, content, introduction of global formats, production cost, high-priced celebrities, the balance between authenticity and performance and so on (SAPPRFT, 2015). In August, to implement the regulations, SAPPRFT opened a special reality TV training class entitled "How to make a good reality show?" for all senior leaders of domestic TV stations and the directors of some reality TV shows. Tian Jin, the deputy director answered this question with two main points: improve ideological awareness, and persevere in the correct orientation (cited in Sina, 2015b).

Taken together, this new wave of curbing entertainment suggests the authorities' incessant concern regarding the excessive entertainment of Chinese television culture under commercialization pressures. However, as mentioned in Chapter 2.3, the SAPPRFT is the administrative department whose regulations do not have legal effects. Since "excessive" entertainment continues to recur in different guises, it is difficult to assume that government regulations that only focuses on content can completely remove "vulgarity" and achieve socialist inclusivity. But short-term effects are obviously detectable: TV stations are forced to adjust their programming accordingly, more ordi-

nary people (rather than celebrities) are invited to participate, and more education-oriented themes are designed in reality shows to appease the cultural censorship.

During this adjustment, the controversial *X-Change* was removed from the program list of HSTV, until 2017, when it came back on the broadcast platform of Mango TV, which is the official online video platform of HSTV. Since then, *X-Change* has converted itself into a network variety show. In order to accommodate the communication logics of the cyberworld, the life-exchange stories of *X-Change* are packaged in a more entertaining and gamified way. Here, the show seemingly gained more freedom because online video websites are relatively less regulated than traditional cable TV stations, however with the explosion of video websites led by iQIYI, Tencent Video and Youku, and with the emergence of new video channels such as VR and live Internet broadcast, the narrative of *X-Change* had to transform again to survive in the much more competitive and market-oriented online environment.

6.3 *X-Change* (2017–19): "Find yourself in the world of others"

While the third period of *X-Change* is still based on the formula of life-exchange between urban and rural youths, a large number of post-editing techniques from comedy shows are applied. A typical example is the autotune remix of the scene when Chen Xinying, one of the three urban protagonists in the first story of Season 13: *In the Name of Youth*, surprisingly breaks down in tears when rejected by a rural girl (Chen Shuili). He complained, "I transformed, but also went crazy! This is not an exchange show, but a torment show!" Footage of Chen crying has become a punchline repeatedly shown in subsequent seasons. Dubbed in the background music of "A Twig of Plum", dynamic onscreen squiggles such as "Despise you!", "I! tell! you!", with the visual effect of heavy snow added in post-production, "Li-style indifference", "Li-style runaway" and "Li-style crying" have quickly became hilarious emojis that went viral on the Internet. The show also made the top search list on Sina Weibo once aired.

The newly adopted editing techniques are inseparable from the recruitment of the post-90s young generation into the editing team. As a generation of digital natives, they repackage the story with popular online vocabulary and emoji they are familiar with, making serious social topics humorous and more adapted to the fragmentation and acceleration of online communica-

tion. As a result, the conflictual scenes that represent the behaviors of Chen and other urban youths such as smashing furniture, burning weeds, tearing quilts, stealing money and smoking are packaged as laughing points. Along with the voice-over "crushing them", these mischievous behaviors are not criticized as in *X-Change* 2.0 but transformed by popular network catchwords into reasonable and funny plays.

While other seasons of *X-Change* 3.0 continued the regular exchange schema of three-for-one, Seasons 15 and 19 have undergone new experiments. The former, renamed as *The Parallel World*, invited two families from the city and the countryside respectively to exchange life for a month. The two families have similar family structures; both are a typical nuclear family composed of a couple and two children. The special series of Season 19, called *Summer Youth Pie*, is described as "the extreme exchange show" because it adopted the nine-for-four schema that included an unprecedented number of participants – 13 in total, and an unprecedented length of shooting period – 60 days. The environment experienced by the 9 urban youths is also extreme – Alxa, Inner Mongolia, located in the hinterland of the Badain Jaran Desert, the third largest desert in China.

Unlike the previous two phases, *X-Change* 3.0 abandons the dramatic formula that focuses on creating conflicts, and turns to record the ongoing daily tensions prevailing in ordinary families. While the previous urban participants are typical troubled youths, the participants selected in *X-Change* 3.0 are ordinary teenagers who have psychological puzzles, growing pains, and confusions about life in puberty. Examples include Hu Hanwen (Season 18), a warm and sensible boy held a bag of eggs with great care on the way to the countryside, fearing that his gift for the rural family would be broken; Huang Jingran (Season 18), a typical "excellent student" who won awards since a young age; Yuanjie (Season 16), another outstanding student who even took part in the shooting of the show with a whole bag of textbooks to avoid falling behind in academics. Thus, the former routine in which a spoiled rich urban youth who transformed from fighting and brawling to being sensible and grateful hardly appeared.

In general, the dual split between urban and rural areas that was represented in *X-Change* 1.0 and 2.0 has now been smoothed out. In the special 15th season, while "urban-rural exchange" is still quoted in the release, the Zhang family (Season 15) is in effect a wealthy family in the village, having a two-story house and a car. The focus is rather on conflicts between family members, and differences in neighborhood relationships and lifestyles. Moreover,

the Alxa desert selected as the transformative location of Season 19 can hardly be labeled as rural, rather, it is selected for being an extreme human living environment that is rare not only in *X-Change*, but also other programs. The natural landscapes of endless deserts, oasis, and pink lakes are undoubtedly novel and attractive for people who have lived in cities of steel and concrete.

As a result, the program has changed from a social intervention program to transform problem youths to a life-experience "slow variety show" that has flourished on the screen since 2017. Unlike high-paced, competitive television shows, slow variety shows aim to slow down and cure city people from the hustle and bustle of life with an alternative quiet, warm and healing environment. When the urban family in Season 15 worked together to find ingredients and complete three meals a day in the country house, accompanied by a cute dog and chickens in the yard, it is not so much a journey of "suffering education" but rather a simple farm tourism for this urban family. Some Chinese scholars (e.g. Yin & Liu, 2017; Cai, 2020) claim that these scenes showing the slow pace of life in reality shows represent the common longing of Chinese audiences for an idyllic life, as their real lives are accelerated and compressed by the rapid development of modern economic society. However, the concept of audience they used is actually a euphemism, referring to the urban upper-class and social elites. Under the unequal urban-rural dual system, the so-called textured aesthetic experience and emotional healing offered by such shows, I argue, is "old wine in new bottles" – another way of propagating middle-class taste and satisfying their imagination of a better life through storytelling strategies and audiovisual techniques.

6.4 Conclusion and discussion

In sum, what we witness is a delicate negotiation and balancing process of HSTV in order to fulfill the demands of various social agents, during which HSTV has undergone constant experiments in program form and content in the three periods of *X-Change*. Clearly, although the motif of exchange runs through all three periods, it is used to serve different narrative themes: urban–rural division, urban youth education, and youth experiential travel. At first, the birth of *X-Change* as a quasi-documentary show, was a conscious response to the regulations of SARFT, which heavily criticized HSTV for being vulgar and lack "positive orientation of value". Meanwhile, having the dual attributes of both an enterprise and a public institution (as discussed in Chap-

ter 2.3), HSTV is also driven by the self-awareness that as a public platform, it is their professional duty and tradition to channel social and real-world issues. The format of reality TV, operating across the border between reality and fiction, between the scripted and the unscripted, seems to offer HSTV an interesting form to address the social reality of the urban-rural dichotomy, that responds actively to the "new countryside" policy while at the same time getting the attention of wide audiences. Such an ambitious move has made workers and peasantry who used to be the undisputed social mainstream but have now become marginalized in the unequal urban-rural dual system, more visible within the media.

But the original idea of touching the ruptured social realities seems too big a stride to be handled by only a provincial satellite television. After market experimentation, *X-Change* was shifted to the theme of youth education problems against the social backdrop of the urban-rural dichotomy, a much more conservative theme that in effect functions to secure a stable ideological orientation. The program producers, middle-class family participants and new urban middle-class audiences have obviously occupied the active dominant position from which they arrange and judge the narratives according to the interests of the urban middle class, and circulate and promote ideas about middle-class taste and lifestyle. Based on this, it is not difficult to find that the images of the families and children of poor farmers and workers has inevitably (mis-)represented them based on the imagination of urban middle class. While the narrative focuses on their incredible feats of enduring poverty, presenting them as persevering, never complaining, caring, hardworking, tenacious and responsible, it does not manage to provide us with a deeper understanding of social differentiation but legitimizes the poverty of the countryside. In this way, instead of validating the social reality of urban-rural distinction, *X-Change* deploys a narrative structure that normalizes these seemingly diverse and even contradictory representations. The traumatic social ruptures are often downplayed as a matter of different lifestyles, thereby leading viewers to the conclusion that, rural people may be poor, but they are happy and content.

To claim the role of public service agency, *X-Change* has carefully established a sympathetic equilibrium through imageries of donating that presents urbanites as the benefactor. At the end of each story, there is a return visit for the rural youths to see how their material lives improved through donations, in the positive images of gratitude of the rural for the (imagined) alleviation of rural sufferings by the generosity of the urban, and the benefactor's re-

spective sympathy towards the grateful sufferer, the show has summoned up the emotional constellation of gratitude and tender-heartedness, but discovered in the narcissistic self-contentment of urbanites (Hattori, 2003). After all, without an equal and integrated perspective on the city and the countryside, *X-Change* has merely provided a fantasy of contact between distant social classes, and its support for the countryside has also become a downward charity and the pity of the commanding city.

So understood, throughout the program the focus is on how the urban middle class goes through transformation and grows by encountering the suffering of the "other" world, and their emotions are in the center of the social experiment. The lives of the rural operate as a stage on which these emotions are played out. Thus, on the surface *X-Change* offers a platform to represent class difference and even the possibility of class mobility, but in effect, holding the fundamental belief that "city makes a better life", it works to reaffirm the inevitability of urbanization and reinforces a sense of social stability. This is to say, the above narrative analysis verifies the existing research that criticized the misrepresentation and hypocrisy of the show (e.g. Zheng, 2006; Han, 2016; Wu, 2016). It also resonates with the critical analyses of Chinese television as an instrument of ideological hegemony (e.g. Bai, 2014) and cultural-moral governance (Qu, 2018). More generally, the above findings are consistent with research that focus on how reality TV represents and ritualistically reproduces class divisions (e.g. Couldry & Littler, 2011; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). However, as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, this analysis of the representational patterns of the show needs to be combined with a close reading and analysis of specific affective moments; I view the "othering" activity as one inherent mechanism of the affective-discursive practice of reality TV. The next two chapters will focus on the emotional performances (re-)presented by *X-Change* not simply as a manipulation of the producers that cause a distorted/dishonest representation of social reality, but as joint, coordinated, relational performances in which affect and discourse are intertwined in the narrative dynamics of the show.

Chapter 7: Emotional Excess and Therapeutic Governance

With the strength of relational affect that treat affects as always entangled in and inseparable from human meaning-making and discursive practice, the next two chapters aim to unravel the interweaving and entanglement of affect, emotion, discourse, power and class in the media platform of *X-Change.* They examine the show's two main narrative lines that focus on the redemption and transformation of urban youths and the adaptation and learning of rural youths respectively. My analysis is centered not on specific conventional emotions such as hate, fear, anger, and love from a basic emotion view, but on affects unfold and circulate in the multimodal text of reality TV. Taking the Chinese reality show *X-Change* as the case, I track how the emotional articulates with discourses, materialities, actions and the chain of meaning-making events, thus offering an alternative approach to analyze the mediated reproduction of urban-rural dichotomy and class relations, which not just through representation and ideological implantation, but also via the configuration of emotions that strengthen or weaken the agentive power of human beings to affect and to be affected.

7.1   Producing the money shot

As I analyzed in Chapter 6, the core narrative of *X-Change* focuses on the transformative journey of bratty urban youths, viewing the embodied "suffering education" (*kunan jiaoyu* 苦难教育) in the countryside as the antidote for anxious urban middle-class parents. The experiences and emotional responses of the protagonists when they live in another's life constitute the key to transformation as well as the progression of the narrative towards this goal. Among them I particularly focus on conflictual scenes where the collision and

negotiation process between opposing lifestyles, family values, and class po-
sitions become visible and recognizable. In accordance with the quasi-docu-
mentary genre, *X-Change* 1.0 still surreptitiously hide conflictual scenes be-
hind a seemingly observational mode, but in *X-Change* 2.0 they have become
the most highlighted moments throughout the show. Thus in the following
I will perform a close reading of conflictual scenes that represent the affec-
tive encounters of urban and rural protagonists. I consider how emotions –
in particular anger, anxiety, and sadness in these scenes – as cultural and re-
lational constitutes, work to mobilize, solidify or transform issues of urban-
rural dichotomy and class relations.

As I showed in Chapter 6.1 and 6.2, the pre-production process includ-
ing scouting and casting has already laid the groundwork for eliciting such
emotionally excessive moments. The participants, their families, and locations
have been carefully searched and selected, and their images are consistent
with the classic urban/rural stereotypes depicted in Chinese media culture
and popular culture (cf. Zeng, 2011; Zhang, 2011). As a consequence, the ur-
ban and rural are portrayed in separate or opposed scenes – rich and poor,
modern and tradition, industrial and agricultural, commercial and manual,
individualistic and collectivistic – in clear distinction at a glance. It can be said
that *X-Change* has an in-built tendency in its formula to maximize the display
of various emotions to guarantee viewer numbers, and to arouse viewers' an-
ticipation and satisfaction through "roller-coaster emotional rides" (Sullivan,
2016, p. 753).

Basically, each story of the 8 seasons in the period of *X-Change* 2.0 starts
with a retrospective montage summarizing the previous episodes and ends
with a prospective montage previewing the upcoming episodes. Besides,
there are usually miniature prospective montages that last ten to twenty
seconds before the advertising breaks, in which flashforwards and flashbacks
are extensively used. These montages are edited from intense affective scenes
that depict the emotional outbursts of the participants, portraying how they
lost their tempers, shouted at family members or the camera, threatened to
quit program recording, burst into tears, or engaged in aggressive verbal and
physical confrontations with others. Such moments are usually related to
personality clashes, squabbles over program rules, farm work and housework,
and other difficulties of living in close quarters. Accompanied by audiovisual
performances including wobbly camera shots, "pumped-up" soundtracks,
and a set of leading questions asked by a voice-over commentator, these
montages perform the delicate task of managing redundancy, introducing

just enough information to keep viewers engaged in the narrative dynamics, producing the effect of calculated suspense, curiosity, or surprise (Sternberg, 2010).

These condensed shots represent typical moments of emotional excess, or according to Grindstaff (2002) – the "money shot" that the reality genre lives on to keep viewers glued to their sets. Used to analyze talk shows and the emotional displays of participants, Grindstaff defined the term "money shot" as follows:

> Like the orgasmic cum shot of pornographic films, the money shot of talk shows makes visible the precise moment of letting go, of losing control, of surrendering to the body and its "animal" emotions. It is the loss of the "civilized" self that occurs when the body transcends social and cultural control, revealing human behavior in its "raw" rather than its "cooked" form. To draw on a phrase used by Fiske (1989) in another context, it is the breakdown of culture into nature. (2002, p. 20).

Usually confirmed by tears or other bodily signs of "true" feelings, they verify the authenticity of the moment by making visible the spontaneous and authentic affective reactions that are designed as a part of the program structure. As Hirdman (2011) also claimed that, "as a marker for real-ness, the body symbolizes authenticity on a material and tangible level" (p. 23). In the following, by tracing the presentation of both hard-core and soft-core "money shots" – while the "soft-core" money shot is confessional, "feminine", and "based on heartache or joy"; the "hard-core" one is relatively confrontational, "masculine", and based on conflict and anger (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 26–27) in *The Call of Maternal Love* (Season 7) as the case, I explore what emotions do in the multimodal text of reality TV in terms of making subjectivity and sociality. The analysis will focus on (1) what happens; (2) what kinds of affects or emotions are displayed; (3) what kinds of narrative techniques and audiovisual devices are employed to elicit these emotions.

The Call of Maternal Love (Season 7) depicted the life-exchange story between urban "rich second generation" teenager Shi Ningjie (age 16) from Nanchang, the capital city of Jiangxi province, and two left-behind children Jiang Xin (age 15) and Wang Honglin (age 9) both come from Baxian, a small town in Shanxi province. In the introduction, we see that Shi has dropped out of school, is showing off his Lamborghini, wearing luxury clothes from head to foot, clubbing, drinking, and smoking. "The reason of signing up for the show? For fun! I saw the former Yi Huchen, the countryside he went to, feels

like a tropical rain forest. I have never been to that place in my life!" he said in front of the camera (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 20.01.2014, 00:01:45). Clearly he does not see the upcoming journey as one of transformation but rather as an adventure. Then the screen switches to the daily life of Jiang Xin, who lives with his only grandma in the small village because his father has passed away and his mother remarried and moved out. Wang Honglin's situation is almost the same, except that she has a paraplegic uncle who needs care. While Shi is presented as bad-tempered and only pestering his mother for money, Jiang and Wang are early-maturing, have to undertake heavy housework and farm work, and have even become the main labor force of the broken family. The two very different geographic environments, life states, and daily activities are presented in juxtaposed pictures, as shown in figures 7.1-7.4.

Figure 7.1: A juxtaposition of the two exchange locations: Baxian, a small village surrounded by mountains; and Nanchang, a modern provincial capital city (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 20.01.2014)
Figure 7.2: A juxtaposition of the leisure time of both parties: tea-picking with grandma vs. playing video games (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 20.01.2014)

Figure 7.3: Shi is pestering his mother for money (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 20.01.2014)

Figure 7.4: Most of the children in this village are left-behind children, they prefer to play together after school rather than going home alone (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 20.01.2014)

After arriving at Baxian to officially start the transformation journey, Shi's excitement and fresh feeling of the novel world soon turned into full of resentment and disgust at the physical encounter with "intolerable" living conditions, including rugged mountain roads, a ramshackle house, inedible foods, poor hygienic conditions, strongly smelling toilets, and strenuous labor, all of which continually challenged his physical and mental thresholds. He unabashedly expressed his dispositions or attitudes of disgust and disapproval: "such an awful place! nothing but ghosts!" (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 20.01.2014, 00:47:52); "How can people live in this place?...So bothering! *X-Change*? *X-Dead*! Why not just kill me?" (ibid, 00:49:35). Presented from the perspective of the urban youth, the scenes of complaining and cursing vividly visualized the difficulties that may be encountered in adapting to life in the poor countryside, and at the same time generate an impression of how it *feels* to live in such conditions for the urban audience.

The confrontational, hard-core "money shot" is created when Shi's disaffection increases and finally evolves into an emotional explosion after an unpleasant talk with Wang's mother. Shi lacks words but the visual images are more telling in this clip. Through the fixed-camera lens (as shown in figures 7.5 and 7.6), we first see Shi walked back and forth in the house, shown in an unstable state, simmering with frustration and irritation. Then all of a sudden, he kicked the small stool away and smashed the table, portrayed as unable to control his overwrought emotions. It seems that he was still not satisfied until he found a hammer and finally pounded all the furniture one by one into pieces. When the paraplegic uncle tried to stop him, he said, "no matter how much this stool will cost, I can pay you" (Season 7, Volume 2,

Episode 2 from 27.01.2014, 00:42:39). The disruptive behavior of Shi continued in the screen for around one minute until the director stopped him from sabotaging the camera and microphone.

Figure 7.5: Shi kicked over things on the table (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 2 from 27.01.2014)
Figure 7.6: Shi took the hammer and prepared to stand on the small chair to destroy the radio microphone of the program group (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 2 from 27.01.2014)

In the narrative of the show, the affective images are incorporated with interpretive voiceovers that work to fix and consolidate the meanings. Accompany with the "pingping pongpong" noise of smashing things, the voice-over guided the interpretation of Shi's violent behaviors as an authentic, uncontrollable emotional outbreak:

> "As a rich second generation [child] who has sailed through life without ever hitting the rough waters, Shi Ningjie now could not understand why he enters this unbearable environment and adds trouble to himself. He begins to regret...He is so urgently eager to end the transformation journey that...he even let the monster swallow his heart and soul, to indulge himself in destroying the family recklessly". (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 2 from 27.01.2014, 00:41:36-00:42:56).

But in a later in-depth interview, Shi explains that the emotional outburst is an irritated reaction to an elaborate design by on-site directors during casting:

> They forced me to wash uncle's hair. I just said a word, I don't want to, they kept on annoying me with words like: If you don't wash, you won't be able to go back for the whole life and can only wait to die in the mountains. When

> I want to eat something, they said no food because I didn't wash his hair yet, when I want to use the phone, they replied no signal, all in all I was incessantly provoked and stimulated by them. (cited in Zeng, 2015)

Since neither the film crew nor the Wang family responded to his remarks, it is difficult to judge the authenticity of these details. However, through other participants' statements after the recording of the show, it is certain that setting up micro-situations to excavate and exaggerate interpersonal conflicts and communication breakdowns has become routine in production. That is, producing a seemingly spontaneous, unexpected money shot entails a certain amount of "emotional labor" (Hochschild, 1983) from producers backstage. In order to turn ordinary people into commercial entertainment, producers have to actively negotiate the intense tension between scriptedness and spontaneity. Although their strategies of manipulation and intervention have been criticized severely, high ratings and popularity since the dramatic formula particularly used in *X-Change* 2.0 may suggest that, viewers are emotionally involved with the characters or participants despite having already identified the show's tricks to create a form of predictable unpredictability.

Shi's emotional outburst is just one example of the melodramatic and sentimental "money shot" produced by *X-Change*. By previewing such shots in the opening, and relaying them repeatedly in trailers and in subsequent episodes, these intense and explosive money shots are extended in the time and space of the show, and created as the climactic and narratively central moments in the show. In doing so, the show constantly engages viewers "in a potentially never-ending loop of emotions and consequent interpretations, creating a ratings economy out of an affective one" (Dominguez, 2015, p. 157). Facilitated by new media technologies, the "money shot" circulates across proliferating numbers of sites and platforms – from Mango TV to social media, other webpages and traditional media coverage – a "branding" process in which ordinary participants are commercialized and turned to reality celebrities (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015). The circulation of GIFs is a sign of successful "branding" and means that his or her emotional expressiveness is effectively marketized. As a primary channel in mass culture to produce ordinary celebrities, the affective formulas or "typifications" of the show that have generated high ratings in the past has in turn encouraged urban youngsters to voluntarily invest their emotional labor for fame and interest. Consequently, their primary job during the swapping process is the constant self-management for the exuberant

displays of emotions and for submission to persona production according to market principles.

So understood, by appropriating the emotional labor of both producers and participants, *X-Change* has successfully produced ordinary people for mass consumption. The repetitive packaging of such dramatic scenes as impressive and memorable money shots suggests that the actual content of exchange is inconsequential or secondary to the overall narrative, but the visual display of the (urban) participants' excessive emotions is absolutely the main draw of the show. While the semblance of the show is to provide pedagogic messages and to promote mutual understanding between urban and rural, such images of affective and dramatic money shots that emphasize conflict rather than harmony obviously run counter to the program's public claims. Whether unintentional outpouring or deliberate performance, the urban protagonists unscrupulously vent their primal emotions and destroy the already run-down countryside in such scenes, yet the rural families simply endure and tolerate the destruction. In the case of Shi Ningjie analyzed above, he only stopped the smashing behavior when the director on the scene intervened prevent him from further damaging the radio equipment on site; Wang Honglin's uncle and grandma as the masters of the house had almost nothing to do with it.

By affirming and intensifying the offensive power of the urban protagonists while ignoring or restricting the power of the rural protagonists, and making the latter indistinct objects that passively endure intrusions, *X-Change* once again reproduces the priority and superiority of the urban class, and solidifies the pattern of inequality between the urban and the rural. Unlike some Western, especially American and British lifestyle reality shows, that may directly shame, ridicule or humiliate the working class on camera (see reviews in Chapter 4.5), in a socialist state claimed to be led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants, it is simply impossible for Chinese mass media, as public institutions of this state, to publicly devalue workers and peasants. So verbally, the countryside is revered; as the producers have publicly declared, the urban protagonists need to receive the "education" of the countryside. However, their affective and physical performances tell a different story. In money shots, they have become reduced to the very materiality of bodies forced by intensities of anger and violence. Captured by the surveillance camera in the room, proof of the "authentic" emotional display is primarily presented through the body – bodily gestures, postures, fluids and other responses, in alignment with the voice-over to make sure that the signal

emotions have been felt. Thus some scholars (e.g. Grindstaff, 2002; Dubrofsky, 2009) analogize money shots in the reality genre with the way in which pornography generates cathartic physiological satisfactions with explicit sexual content. This may seem too extreme here, but an echo in *X-Change* is that in the driving of ratings and profits, the explicit framing around drama, extremes and hyperarousal is apparently disconnective with the surface ideology that promotes communication and compassion, but towards a strengthening of urban subjectivities and a weakening of rural subjectivities, even though the story takes place in their home court.

7.2   Reprogramming with neoliberal psychotherapy

In *X-Change*, after the participants have been "broken down" and have achieved emotional catharsis in the money shots, they were "reprogrammed" by being truly integrated into the rural world and entering the process of psychological correction. Hence the money shots also play an important role in pushing the narrative progress: in Shi's case, after he has broken all the furniture, the time is ripe for pushing him to perform one of the essential tasks in *X-Change* – working (in this case, mining coal) to earn money and pay the family back. In this way the maladaptive emotional responses operate as a catalyst of transformation as it enables participants to open up to the possibility of changes. In the following I will analyze how the money shots is interwoven in the narrative of self-transformation; and the discourses, ideologies, values, and other cultural resources be enabled to offer negotiation for the meaning of emotional performance.

Usually in a later confessional scene, we hear heartfelt revelations and participants' most private feelings. Despite the visible camera, the confessional is a technological affordance that enables the intensified gaze of viewers in observing "the stage for emotional expression and self disclosure" (Aslama & Pantti, 2006, p. 172). According to Skeggs and Wood (2012), these are "judgement shots" that call participants to account for their actions. Production techniques such as the long-held close-up are applied in these shots to make "explicit and visible that which is so habituated that it is not often recognizable" (Skeggs & Wood, 2012, p. 222). Low-pitched music is simultaneously applied to intensify the emotional release through the act of revelation.

For example, in *Internet Change* (Season 1), Wei Cheng confessed to the camera that he dropped out of school because of a conflict with his PE teacher.

Once he brought beer to the school's group picnic, and his PE teacher thought that he should not drink alcohol as a middle school student. When Wei argued back, the teacher felt disrespected in front of the students, and slapped him. Since then, Wei expressed disgust toward school and refused to go to school. When he participated in the exchange journey and was emotionally crushed, he himself revealed this secret and eventually vented his grievance and frustration. The camera close-up registers Wei's falling tears, flushed cheeks and trembling lips, indexing this moment as one in which Wei was immersed in recalling past experiences and emotions (as shown in figures 7.7 and 7.8).

Figures 7.7 and 7.8: The close up shots of Wei Cheng in crying, after that, he confessed his feelings about dropping out of school (Season 1, Volume 1, Episode 4 from 07.09.2006)

Similarly, in Father's love as a mountain (Season 4), the show declared that the "modern diseases were caused by some untied "heart knots or psychic trauma on the path of growth. Before the journey, the urban protagonist Liu Shunyao was uncooperative. He faced sideways or with his back to the camera, with his head down, showing a state of self-enclosure and resistance to the outside world. The countryside journey, along with rediscovered rural poverty and heart-rending pathos, act as a warning to trigger his transformation. Later, in confessional interview, he opens up to the audience and shares the secret that has hidden in his heart for many years. It comes out that once Liu ran away from home after conflicts broke out with his father. His grandmother was too worried about him and chased him. Unfortunately she had a car accident, and was hospitalized in critical condition. Liu felt profound remorse, he knelt in front of her bed and promised to be obedient and study

hard. But since then, Liu's father always take this promise to suppress and control him, "Twenty-four hours, I was asked to study as soon as I got home", he said. Moreover, Liu's father had absolute authority at home and controlled Liu's life in all aspects: comic books and story books were burned and thrown away, he was only allowed to read and watch classic Chinese cultural books and TV programs; "also, I am opposed to eating any Western food" (Season 4, Volume 3, Episode 2 from 15.04.2008, 00:11:54). The gap between the father and the son widened; when his father forced him into a special education school against his will, Liu mutilated himself, "Eleven stitches were sewn on his wrist, and most of the down jacket was stained with blood", as the voice-over illustrated (ibid, 00:09:05).

Accompanied by narration of personal experience, bodily expressions, in particular "uncontrollable" tears, evoked and exposed as visible corporeal evidences to verify the genuineness of the emotions displayed, and to make claims of the authenticity of the "reality" of the show. As described by Hirdman's (2011), tears, as "a form of para-language" (p. 24) seem to carry a specific quality of truthfulness in that they cannot be counterfeit as words can, hence frequently used as authenticity markers in many reality programs, "it's not just confessions that we partake in, but rather a ritual where transparency becomes central in framing the real" (p. 28). After the heart knot is opened, the narration of personal experience shifts to a confirmation and reflection on personal feelings. In Liu Shunyao's case, soon after the emotional confession, he reflected and stated his innermost feelings of self-harm in front of a camera,

> Because I have a lot of spare time here, I looked at this scar and thought, would anyone think I am very happy to cut myself? No one, right? The reason why I hurt myself is nothing more than to make my relatives and those who care about me sad, mainly my dad, which is really absurd. (Season 4, Volume 3, Episode 2 from 15.04.2008, 00:34:05-00:34:47)

Therefore the confession scenes often indicate that the purpose of the program—to transform "bratty" urban youths into "good" youths—is about to be achieved. Some of the follow-up performances by urban youths, including actively helping the family with housework and promising to study hard after returning, are presented to verify that their hearts have been touched, they have begun to face their problems, and their "modern diseases" have indeed been cured. In the final episode, the cross-edited flashbacks where they act violent and rebellious before the transformation journey, clearly and intensely

show the before and after contrast in affective responses. Thus, the confession scenes are crucial to the integrity of the program's narrative, although they may be performed to accompany the filming by would-be-famous participants. Together with the voice-over sublimating all the hardship and learning undergone by the urban youths into a successful transformation, the show is designed to reassure anxious urban families and restore damaged family relationships.

In sum, the core narrative of *X-Change* on the urban side is to interpret the "modern diseases" embodied in urban youths as individual psychological or familial dysfunctions, thereby susceptible to quick moral and psychological fixes. In *X-Change* 1.0, Zhang Yiyun, a Taiwan born and American educated psychologist, was invited as the emotional counselor to provide her professional knowledge to the television studio. Psychological consultant Wang Yunge was also invited to participate in the whole procedure of shooting, on the one hand, "to offer psychological counseling to the two teenagers, and avoid hard psychological transitions caused by environmental changes. On the other hand, to analyze the psychological state of contemporary teenagers, and to inspire attention to youth education", stated host Wei Zhehao when introducing the two new experts. The experts, who comments from a point of authority, typically functions as "cultural intermediaries" (Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2012), further put the discourse of psychological expertise at the heart of the show and amplified its psychotherapeutic approach.

In the prologue to Season 2, Zhang stated *X-Change*'s role as an experiment in "emotional education" that can produce better effects than simply preaching: "in a sense, the opportunity of experiencing the different life, offered by this programme, is more profound, with regards to touching the youth emotionally and triggering change" (Season 2, Volume 1, Episode 1 from 05.03.2007, 00:02:15). Zhang and Wang did not specify how the effect of this emotional education was produced, but from the design of *X-Change* it can be inferred that this is achieved by arousing the participants' emotional sensitivity with external stimuli. In a completely different environment, what seems natural and deserved has now become strange and extraordinary. Thus, the participants often find themselves governed by forces of happenstance in which they are at a loss as to what to draw on to understand what is happening. While the emotional sensitivity of the participants is mobilized, their cognitive judgments are also invoked, and such judgments will prompt them to improve their current situation by cultivating moral character. Such a chain

of "emotional arousal-cognitive judgment-behavior tendency" has provided a logical potentiality for the realization of personal transformation.

From the perspective of adolescent psychology, Zhang usually suggested three factors from which urban youths' problems originate: 1) a dysfunctional family relationship, leading to a lack of communication or ineffective communication between parents and children; 2) excessive addiction to the virtual world in the Internet and video games, causing them to escape reality; and 3) the typical psychological characteristics of adolescence such as being sensitive and demanding respect. Here, it is not my intention to evaluate the actual effects of this "emotional education" in the program or to suggest that the psy discourse is inherently "bad" or oppressive; but to explore the ways in which information, value, and belief are entangled in the emotional cognitive processing presented by the show and filtered by its production mechanism. Inevitably, understanding emotions as merely individual psychological states is consistent with the solution of "modern diseases" from a psychotherapeutic approach, by that the psychologists suggest paying attention to interiority and feelings. Accordingly, psychological terminology based on the rebuilding of mental order has become the dominant discourse in managing behavioral problems and negative affects in *X-Change*.

Unlike those reality TV shows that were suspended or criticized by the SARFT for vulgarly fabricating human emotions, such as making up sensational stories about extreme emotional topics (SARFT, 2010), the inclusion of Western-oriented psychological knowledge has made *X-Change* seems serious and scientific. The show thus presents itself as a psychosocial experiment for fostering rational, self-disciplined, self-improved neoliberal subjectivity. As Rose (1989) noted, psychological knowledge and treatment methods have been effective at locating the selfhood in "the minute arts of self-scrutiny, self-evaluation, and self-regulation" (p. 222). By witnessing the transformation driven by emotional practice, viewers can compare their questions to those on screen, see the value of transformation based on psychological analysis, and learn how to be good parents or children.

But for a program like *X-Change* that claimed to touch the problems of social rupture and differentiation, such an elite nature of "emotional education" that focuses on psychological self-work is undoubtedly unable to fulfill its original claims. Indeed, "modern diseases" are represented as privately experienced by urban protagonists, but it does not mean that their origins or causes of them are located within individuals. Beneath the surface discourse of psychology, behavioral deviation and emotional dysfunction actually in-

volve underlying political and social problems, and are frequently the side effects of frantic economic development. However, *X-Change* refuses to suggest any larger social causes for these problems, not to mention the need for political reforms to address them. Instead, in this set of discourses, the experience of meaninglessness, anxiety, and pain of living in a transforming society seem to have nothing to do with the economic structure, resource distribution, and social structure, but only the individual's own hesitation and interpersonal disputes. Hence, the modern disease is seen as a purely psychological problem or as evidence of a dysfunctional family that can be "treated" through a psychological approach; in *X-Change*, the embodied practice of psychological knowledge.

7.3 Moral pedagogy with Confucian family affection (*qinqing*)

However, unlike western psychological practice that takes individualism and liberalism as its knowledge base, the psychological practice represented by *X-Change* privileges collectivism and authoritarianism. Family affection is framed as a key transforming motivator, indicating that social relationships and community rather than individual personalities are the guiding force behind the psychological approach. Whether the experience of going "down to the countryside" will really improve their personality development is not the most critical. Rather, the show constantly emphasizes the importance of encouraging young people to pursue self-management and self-control for the sake of family and social harmony; social relations, specially family relations, take precedence over individual subjects. In the following, I will investigate how visceral emotions elicited in the money shots are regulated by the ideological complex that articulates neoliberal discourses of psychotherapy with traditional Confucian family affection (*qinqing*). Through this, *X-Change* presents a balancing act, bridging the ruptures between expressing the interests of the urban middle class and the socialist ideology promoted by China's red political power, with a new application which takes traditional "Chinese Knowledge as the Substance, Western Learning for Practical Use" (*zhongti xiyong* 中体西用)[1] in contemporary China.

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1   The conceptual metaphor *zhong ti xi yong* (中体西用) reflects an idea about learning from the West in Chinese history. It emerged during the late Qing dynasty when China was defeated in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, and the Qing

Take the story of *Father's love as a mountain* (Season 4) as an example. The key triggering event that opened Liu Shunyao's heart is his rural "father"'s ice-cutting action. Because he could not adapt to the extremely arid climate of the Loess Plateau, Liu suffered from skin diseases. In order to let Liu take a bath, the rural father went to draw water from a river more than 20 miles away. In the severe winter the river was already frozen, so the father had to use a chisel to smash the ice and pull it back. The camera focused on his figure dragging the cart with difficulty in the ice and snow from different angles (as shown in figures 7.9 and 7.10), followed with several close-up shots of his wretched feet affected by polio. The affective scenes lasted 7 minutes, and were accompanied by a touching soundtrack and voice-over interpretation of this father's behavior:

> "Within a few days, although he could not offer Liu the best living conditions, this father was willing to devote everything to the urban child, just as he did to his own son. This is the most instinctive and selfless love of parents in the world…Father (*fuqin* 父亲), two simple Chinese characters, but contain the power to move the world. It is hard for us to touch the depth and breadth of the father's love even throughout our lives. No complaints, asks for nothing in return, silently giving, what father gave to us is a stalwart figure that will never be forgotten. His staggering steps and arched back merged into the ice and snow, and gathered into the warmth and moving beauty in the cold world. What is pulled is more than a cart of ice, but the affectionate love of an unpretentious rural father beyond blood!" (Season 4, Volume 3, Episode 2 from 15.04.2008, 00:25:04-00:28:22)

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government began to promote the westernization movement. The idea of *zhong ti xi yong* was applied, with the attempt to save the country by partially and selectively westernizing it while protecting the traditional structures of the late Qing (see discussions in Hao, 2004; Liu, 2021). I apply this metaphor here without the intent to compare the PRC with the late Qing, but hope to point out the powerful accumulative force of traditional Chinese thought resources for more than two thousand years. This has meant that if any foreign thought is to be localized in China (whether it's neoliberalism or Marxism), it must be combined and adapted to the traditional way of thinking. In terms of the production of affects in *X-Change*, this means that the westernized individual-oriented emotion management approach has to be trimmed in order to fit into the collective and Confucian emotion culture.

Figure 7.9: Liu's rural "father" is smashing the ice in a river (Season 4, Volume 3, Episode 2 from 15.04.2008)
Figure 7.10: He is dragging a whole cart of ice back with difficulty (Season 4, Volume 3, Episode 2 from 15.04.2008)

In the seven-minute description, the voice-over pays enthusiastic tribute to the act of chiseling ice, encouraging viewers to be moved and inspired by this father's selfless sacrifice, strength and resilience. This father (who is always named "father" instead of his own name) embodies the quintessential father as his devoted relationship with the son commands his wishes and sacrifices. Paternal love is represented as the natural, visceral, and universal affect that a person will have as long as he has the identity of father, as the metaphor of solid and unchanging mountain revealed. In a similar way, the show has constantly affirmed diverse forms of family affections (*qinqing* 亲情) and "filial behavior" in other episodes. In *Youth Contract* (Season 8), in order to hand in the potatoes that the school required to cover the tuition, a 75 years old rural grandfather got up early at dawn and went from house to house to borrow potatoes, then tottered to school with the bag of potatoes on his back and sobbed, "Teacher, I really have no other way. Please worry about these two children and give them some food. I want to get more but there is no more, there is only this much…" (Season 8, Volume 4, Episode 2 from 30.06.2014, 00:58:50). Moved by his dedication, the urban youth Wang Chenzheng couldn't hold in his tears and hugged him tightly (see figures 7.11 and 7.12).

In such scenes, bodily expressions of crying and hugging have straightforwardly manifested the building of "authentic" affective connections. It is the emotional tears shed in the process of the collective and relational experience that trigger self-reflection. The scene then cuts to Wang as he confesses:

"No one, including my father, my family, has ever treated me like this". In the narrative, the grandfather's affection and actions are exploited to melt the stubborn heart of the urban youth, and catalyzed him to expose feelings about his parents' long-term indifference. In sum, the warm and harmonious atmosphere of the rural family offers a place for urban youth to alternatively experience the family affection that is missing or deformed in their own families. By highlighting such scenes, the show promotes gratitude as a key emotional quality that youths should have. In other words, a good youth should be a grateful and filial subject.

Figure 7.11: Grandfather asks the teacher to give the two urban youths some food, not to make them hungry (Season 8, Volume 4, Episode 2 from 30.06.2014)
Figure 7.12: Wang cries and hugs the old man tightly (Season 8, Volume 4, Episode 2 from 30.06.2014)

The emotional arousal of sacrifice and gratitude between elders and younger generations is rooted in the family-centered social relationship of Chinese Confucianism. It can be said that family as a significant and powerful group is universal in all human societies, yet in traditional Chinese society, family is more than the basic unit of society, but is the original status for human existence (Zhu, 2018). Based on the traditional Confucian sensible intuition that a family relation is an indisputable natural blood relationship, Chinese humanity is established on the basis of a relationship with the family; family life is the way of being in the world, and individual life or social practice can only be meaningful in light of one's conformity to the family order. According to Liang Shuming (1987), a Chinese thinker and one of the early representatives of Neo-Confucianism,

> For a Chinese, the family life is the first level of his social life, while his relationship with relatives, friends, or neighbors the second level. At the two

> levels, where the social and moral obligations and laws can be found, what he asks for can be observed while the boundary of his social interactions is also defined. (Liang, 1987, p.12).

Therefore, there is no strong distinction between public and private in Chinese society, because the laws and ethics applicable to the operation of a good civil society are derived from private family life. Ideas of the sacredness of the patriarchic family and related moral teachings like filial piety, respect for social hierarchy, conformism and the virtue of loyalty to one's community, lie at the root of China's traditional social order (Fei, 2013). Although in the pre-reform period of the PRC, socialist national discourse and the emphasis on universal political life once inhibited the priority of the family; but with the continuous practice of neoliberal economy in which grand political goals no longer directly involve the masses, the traditional embodied family relationship represents ultimate meaning for the individual again. For example, struggling to support one's family naturally becomes the source of meaning for hard work, and this concept of life is also in line with the national goal of pursuing economic performance (Zhao, 2012).

The central position of the family in Chinese society has made family affections (*qinqing*) the most privileged human emotions and the foundation of all other emotions. According to Mencius, *qinqing* is the most natural and primitive emotion, in which there is no distinction between self-interest and the interests of others. For instance, Shun is completely feels the same sorrow and joy as his brother Xiang, "if Xiang is sad, Shun is also sad; if Xiang is happy, Shun is also happy" ("Wanzhang I", n.d.). So *qinqing* lies in the kernel of the Confucian differential "structures of feeling" that are sustained in a continuum from self and family through the state to the universe – the first layer is affection for relatives (*qinqin* 亲亲), the second is benevolence towards other people (*renmin* 仁民), and finally the care for all creatures (*aiwu* 爱物) ("Jinxin I", n.d.). The internal sequence that underlies the logical construction of Confucian ideology corresponds to the "differential mode of association" (*Cha xu ge ju* 差序格局), one of the important conclusions the sociologist Fei Xiaotong attained in his research on rural communities in China. With the metaphor of "concentric circles", Fei proposed that depending on the degree of intimacy, the Chinese human relations are "pushed away layer by layer" and become "thinner" like the radiating ripples of stones in the water (Fei, 1998, p. 26).

Confucianism thus adapts the feeling of emotions to ever-changing interpersonal relationships (Liu, 2014). Then the love for family – *qinqing* is not merely a natural, visceral affect, but more importantly, an institutionalized, normative emotion that regulates human relations and maintains social integration. Whether the rural father is morally "good" and virtuous depends on his familial relationship, especially with the son, and his superiority is best reflected in the act of self-sacrifice. In return, the son should follow filial piety and "to exert his utmost strength in serving his parents" ("Lunyu", n.d.). As I discussed in Chapter 3, Confucianism develops *li* (礼 rites), *yue* (乐 music), poetry, and literature as means of emotional refinement. In the story of *The Name of Youth* (Season 13), the teacher cited the Confucian educational work *Di Zi Gui* to set an example of correct behavior. He said to the urban protagonists: "You have to remember that you are a Chinese. Please read the book called *Di Zi Gui* that should be read at your age...and learn what our Chinese children should do" (Season 13, Volume 1, Episode 5 from 06.05.2017, 00:06:45-00:07:04). Then the whole class recites together: "When my parents call me, I must answer right away. When they ask me to do something, I must not be lazy. When my parents instruct me, I will listen respectfully. When my parents scold me, I must accept and obey them" (ibid, 00:07:05-00:07:22). By emphasizing the ideal relations between benevolent fathers and filial sons, the show promotes the idea that our lives can become more peaceful and smooth if we follow Confucian life ethics. In such a context, patriarchy and tradition, if they enable us to have loving parents, filial children and harmonious family relationships, will be portrayed as beautiful things worth pursuing.

7.4 Discussion and conclusion

Based on this, *X-Change* has achieved its goal of solving the problem of adolescent education of anxious urban middle class, by combining a Western psychological approach and Confucian family value and percepts. Although a psychological approach is superficially applied to analyze the problems of urban protagonists, instead of applying the western perspective of the individual as an integrated whole, the show continues to interpellate its subjects as "dividual" (Deleuze, 1992), as part of the others, and emphasize the need to meet family obligations and social expectations. It is clear that the urban middle class are positioned as educating the rural about social etiquette and city lifestyle, but rural families often exhibit more affection and warmth for their

children than their aspirational urban counterparts. The show has exploited their socialist and collectivist oriented affections, primarily familial *qinqing* as the "medicine" for the urban middle class suffering from the anxiety brought by drastic social transformation and the side effects of ruptured social bonds and a confused family ethical order. In this spirit, instead of providing modern civic education, *X-Change* has promoted a neoliberal psychological education and moral education rooted in Confucian family ethics, in which morality is more important than knowledge – knowledge is only treated as an auxiliary means, moral ideals are the core appeal and the ultimate goal.

It is significant to emphasize that while the producers claimed to promote mutual understanding and communication between the city and the countryside with the exchange formula, affects elicited and displayed in the artificial situations of the show are not oriented towards compassion across class distinctions, but interwoven into the family-centered hierarchical mode of social relationship. To be specific, the micro-situations arranged to promote rural youths' interactions with rural people function well in opening their hearts and eliciting intimate emotional expressions. The scenes in which Liu Shunyao and Wang Chenzheng are moved by the rural families and hugged them tightly verifies the affective dynamics and resonance emerging between originally isolated classes. It is as if the show creates a more universal, indiscriminate and mutual feeling among off-the-center "concentric circles", which can prompt the participants to treat the other social members the same way as their familial relations. Indeed, compared with their initial offensive and rejective attitude, they increasingly showed identification and integration with the locals in the countryside as their journey of transforming progressed. Correspondingly, differences of class backgrounds, prejudice and opposition between the urban and the rural also appear to be dissolved in the emotional reconciliation of hugs and crying. In this sense, the show seems to have exploited the potentiality of affect to create a politics of compassion, connection, and optimism, in which differences between class, identity, and region can be bridged in the mediated practice of affecting and being affected.

However, in each case the compassionate affect is soon interpellated and woven by the "ultrastable structure of Chinese society" that ideologically rooted in traditional Confucian morality and life ethics (Jin & Liu, 1992). While the close interpersonal encounters in the micro-situations of *X-Change* may elicit a visceral and genuine affective flow across social classes, the webs of relations as affect unfolds have already activated the cultural-psychological structure where emotions get embedded. Affect intends us and produces

powerful, attention-commanding states which we must deal with, but it only matters to us after we articulate to them through ideas and discursive works. Here, what the protagonists feels with the affect is part of the historical and present production of a much larger "structure of feeling". It constitutes and arranges past experiences, brings impressions of the past to the present, and links present embodied feelings with the imagination of the future.

Compared with the spontaneous and touching feeling of the urban protagonists in a temporary relationship and unfamiliar situation, their relationship with their original family is the core mode for the construction of subjectivity. Simultaneously, for the rural people who are strangers and typically "the others" in the urban protagonists' past as well as in the future, the very intensity of instantaneous emotional commitment elicited by the arrangement of the show is not sufficient to break the barriers of a differential social system rooted in Confucianism, in that proximity and identification do not necessarily create empathy. In practice, indiscriminate and mutual affect can only be sustained in a single "circle", it is discharged before it reaches further. Thus the following confessional scenes in *X-Change* that focus on the reflexive interpretation of the sympathetic feeling, associated with judgements, and the ultimately turn to self-analysis, can be viewed as moments of phenomenological expression of hierarchical Confucian "structures of feeling", in that they are actively being attuned and attuning themselves and others to the social conjuncture.

Yet, as I revealed above, the re-traditionalization of Confucianism is not simply nostalgia or a complete return to traditional values. To some extent, it is taken up by the show as a symbol of cultural essence to acculturate the entrepreneurial self of neoliberal practices, and also in the service of political ends. For example, as I mentioned in Chapter 3.1, the theory of Confucian "regulation of emotions" advocates curbing emotional expressions, which even evolved into calling for the "smothering of emotions and desires" in the Song and Ming dynasties. But economic liberalization and market-oriented reform have not only emancipated productivity, but also unleashed free space for emotional expression and self-representation, and therefore paved the way for the introduction of the affective formulas of western reality television.

As a whole, the core narrative of *X-Change* has produced a hybrid affective space of class reproduction, in which the emotional performances of the participants are evoked and managed unevenly in combination with middle-class values and tastes. In this sense, class is a simultaneously discursive, material,

and affective phenomenon. The committed goal of *X-Change* – bridging diverse social classes – has turned out to be psychological and moral education serving the urban middle class, and the show's predictable narrative pattern has always assured their current class positioning. As a result, the countryside is only recruited as a summer camp for urban youths to regain long-lost *qinqing* and transform into the perfect urban middle class successor.

Chapter 8: The Politics of Suffering and *Kuqing*

If the core narrative of urbanity is infused with psychotherapeutic knowledge to manage negative emotions in order to deal with "modern diseases", or the side effects of social transformation, then the narrative unfolding around rural youth has primarily appropriated positive emotions articulated with dreams as a means of socialist investment. Distinct from the affective formula applied to urban protagonists, sensational scenes of domestic chaos and relationship turmoil are thus not the major representational mode for rural protagonists. Instead, while their suffering (*ku* 苦) is represented, the meaning of suffering is mediated and sanitized by discourses of positive energy and Chinese dreams. As I will analyze in section 8.1, the rural people represented to us are a group of people living in misery but insisting on altruism, taking "eating bitterness" (*chi ku* 吃苦) as a noble virtue, and always expressing a positive and optimistic attitude towards life.

However, there are unconventional or unusual moments of expressions of bitter emotions (*kuqing* 苦情), that crack open the tightly-sealed dominant narrative, provided an alternative space in which to express the "existential feelings" (Eder, 2016) of lower social strata. Such an affective layer is manifested more in the audiovisual images of the program, and expressed through the bodies rather than the utterances of rural protagonists. In section 8.2, I will focus on the affective scenes of *kuqing*. To better consider *kuqing* not only as a personal or psychological attribute but also as a political affect which can be channeled as a political and collective force, I will detour in section 8.3 to trace the footprint of *kuqing* in the history of the Chinese revolution and modernization. This allows me to reconfigure the representation of *kuqing* and tell a story about living as members of the bottom of society in China, which is different from the dominant narrative of the show. On this basis, in section 8.4, I argue that the increasing positivity of the show cannot completely cover the potentiality of *kuqing*, and I highlight the work of *kuqing* on

intensifying people's attachments to social, economic and political processes, and its potentiality as a visceral, vital affect that contests the ideological and representational functions of the program.

8.1 Mediate suffering through positive energy and dream narratives

It is one thing for a person to be categorized as a marginalized or discriminated group in the social structure, but whether and how they feel marginalized or discriminated against in their lived experience is another matter. Ideological work cannot penetrate into every corner where subject identity is formed and felt, but the way in which social identities are experienced or felt is not solely subjective and individual, but depends on one's relations to social configurations (material and non-material). In *X-Change*, the meaning and feelings of being a rural people are delicately selected and transformed through invoking and mobilizing affect towards emotional performances of joy and happiness. This is achieved by, first, displacing the theme of rural suffering with the discourse of positive energy; and secondly, creating a sense of belonging and identity for the individual within the "Chinese dream".

8.1.1 Articulating affect with the discourse of positive energy

At the beginning of each series, a short interview and montage sequence are presented to introduce the family status and living environment of rural children, most of which show the plight of rural areas. In *The Call of Maternal Love* (Season 7), not only the hard lives and broken families of two rural protagonists – Jiang Xin and Wang Honglin – are introduced, but the camera also focuses on other children in the Baxian village. When the director asks the children in a classroom, "Whose parents were injured because of working outside?" most of them raise their hands. Most adults in the village work as miners out of town. Facing the camera, the children spoke in turn of their experiences: "my dad can only lie on the bed, his leg is broken", "my uncle was blown to death in the coal mine", "my dad is dead, he was buried [in the mine]" (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 20.01.2014, 00:12:50- 00:13:45). In a strikingly straightforward way, the scenes revealed the dangers of poorly regulated coal mining, the suffering of migrant workers and the subsequent plight of families in this remote village.

The narrative strategy encourages audiences to recognize from the start the dark side of rural life and the sufferings of rural people who were placed in an unfairly disadvantaged position during the reform and opening-up. On the one hand, this strategy, helped HSTV increase its credibility by taking social responsibility and transform its "vulgar" and "naive" cultural labels and public image that had been criticized by the authorities. On the other hand, HSTV has successfully attracted the attention of urban audiences. They maybe labeled soft-core "money shots" (Grindstaff, 2002), but when suffering is expressed by children's innocent voices and immature faces, urban audiences can hardly not be touched.

Yet, similar to the interpretations of the "modern diseases" of urban participants, the show does not manage to provide a deeper understanding of social differentiation. Thus, while the editing reserved the scenes showing the suffering in the countryside and suggested the coal mining problem plagued the entire town, the voice-over explained the cause as inevitable collateral consequences of necessary economic development, in which "the children are naturally left behind", and "nobody knows when this practice started" (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 20.01.2014, 00:12:40). This narrative is not an isolated case in the show. In general, while incredible poverty and suffering is represented, and economic and social causes could certainly be found for these phenomena, such possibilities are dismissed. Instead, the show enables two underlying explanatory models (Dhoest et al., 2021) to make attributions of rural poverty and suffering: the natural accident model and the individual accident model, thereby navigating audience judgments and emotional responses to rural people.

Firstly, the local natural and geographical environment is blamed for poverty. Typical excuses are that the steep mountains make transportation difficult or that poor quality land leads to low crop yields. The statement made about Baxian Town (the rural location of The Call of Maternal Love) is a typical example: "It is located in a remote place and has a small amount of arable land", "There was no other way out but to mine" (Season 7, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 20.01.2014, 00:12:32). In other stories, extreme weather, steep terrain, water shortages, lack of resources and barren land, etc. have all been described as the reasons for crop production difficulties and even economic poverty.

Secondly, poverty is implicitly blamed on individual bad luck. When the program introduces Wang Honglin's uncle, the audience hears him calmly talking about his experience of being paralyzed when a mine cart overturned.

The audiovisual techniques applied intensified the emotional intensity of this scene: an extreme close-up shot focusing on the tears in the corners of his eyes, followed with a bust shot showing Wang's grandmother's sad face, then another extreme close-up that captures her rough and cracked hands while wiping tears; this highly personalized visual presentation of the rural sufferers, accompanied by slow-paced, low-pitched background music, invites the audience to empathize with his experience. However, his problems are not framed or interpreted in any structural way. The show did not raise any questions about the frequent occurrence of mining disasters, but depicted his problem as merely "an unfortunate accident that happened 16 years ago". A focus on the presentation of individual stories without broader contextualization is more likely to stimulate sympathy for personal misfortune than encourage debate about the questions raised in the narrative.

Through a mixture of the two explanatory models, while incredible poverty and suffering are presented to appeal to viewer compassion, the show does not manage to provide a deeper understanding of the social and economic causes of urban–rural differentiation. Whether this differentiation is attributed to harsh natural conditions or the ruthlessness of fate, the unchangeable nature of the causes also implies that neither the individual nor the social structure is to be blamed. By emphasizing the specific type of labor they performed: "just getting on with it", "not moaning", "enduring hardships and working hard", the show displaces the theme of suffering with the narrative motif "suffering breeds virtue". This means that suffering is considered to be a sufficient condition for virtue in a self-evident way, which in turn leads to the production of a positive idea of living that coincides with the officially promoted discourse of "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang* 正能量).

For example, in the story of *A Short Distance* (Season 17), after a voice-over introduced the distressing circumstances of Huang Chuyi with a rather heavy tone, noting that the eleven year old boy had lost his parents very early and was raised by his grandparents under conditions of extreme hardship, brisk and happy music began to play, signaling to the audience that the mood of the program changed. The voice-over continued: "despite the rough life, Huang Chuyi is not crushed by the reality of his parents leaving, but grow up warmly beside his grandparents who loved him" (Season 17, Volume 3, Episode 1 from 26.03.2019, 00:07:20). The scene then cut to Chuyi smiling happily and humming his favorite song *Sing As I Like* (*xiangchang jiuchang* 想唱就唱) at the camera:

Push open the window at night / to tell my wishes to the shooting star / I want a pair of wings / to stay closer to the sun / I am learning to grow up on my own / love gives me strength / and dreams are magically nutritional / to speed me up into full bloom. (ibid, 00:08:00-00:08:15).

Then little boy added, "I just want to study hard and live with my grandparents; as long as I am with my grandparents, I feel happy and satisfied". As figures 8.1 and 8.2 show, Huang is represented as the embodiment of positive energy – a child who has lost his parents and grew up in a poor family, but is still positive and optimistic because of the love of his grandparents. Here, overt references to class are downplayed, instead, the painful experiences of left-behind rural children are easily transformed into affect-inducing narratives of unremitting self-strengthening, self-improvement and the pursuit of dreams – a domesticating process that dissolves the moral and political power of suffering, and weakens the potential of turning such representations of suffering into moral imperatives and actions.

Figure 8.1: Huang Chuyi lives with his grandparents, the grandparents always put the meat in Chuyi's bowl and let him eat more (Season 17, Volume 3, Episode 1 from 26.03.2019)
Figure 8.2: Huang Chuyi shouted out his dreams to the mountain (Season 17, Volume 3, Episode 1 from 26.03.2019)

Rooted in the conventional positive propaganda that is known as "main melody" (*zhu xuanlv* 主旋律) and "positive propaganda" (*zhengmian xuanchuan* 正面宣传) promoted by the Party-state, the discourse of "positive energy" aims at promoting positive and optimistic affects, uplifting healthy life attitudes that echo Chinese virtues and ethics to individuals and society (Liu & Chang, 2016). The term "positive energy," with its origins in science, folk beliefs, and most notably Hong Kong-based entertainment news, has been ap-

propriated by the Party-state and widely used in Chinese media over the past decade. This became especially evident after Xi Jinping used the phrase in his meeting with former US President Carter in 2012, when he said, "Both China and the United States should be innovative and make efforts to accumulate 'positive energy' to build a China–US cooperative partnership based on mutual respect and mutual benefit" (cited in Yang & Tang, 2018). The expression has since featured prominently in Party-state rhetoric at the highest levels. If the strict regulations issued by the SARFT work visibly to prevent negative expressions, then the discourse of "positive energy" works distinctively in a subtle and flexible way through targeting the generation of emotions. It shares a common root with "harmonious society" but pushes emotional manipulation one step further. At the crux of reform in the face of various and frequently occurring social contradictions, both the means of hard control and the discourse of soft mobilization are intensely applied to state media, official events, and public culture to dissolve social hostility (*liqi* 戾气), stimulate compassion, build up faith in the Party-state, maintain social stability and promote social harmony (Liu & Chang, 2016).

In this social context, the way that *X-Change* incorporates the discourse of "positive energy" can be viewed as a significant affective approach to revive itself in the face of the ideological tasks and market competition. With the "symbolic resource" (van Dijk, 2001) of positive energy, *X-Change* turns suffering and emotional pain into propaganda opportunities to encourage people (primarily the lower social classes) to endure suffering and believe that it would be repaid with good fortune in the future. As the voice-over stated, "In the face of firm emotions, those stubborn problems in life tend to be easily solved" (Season 12, Volume 1, Episode 7 from 10.08.2015, 00:11:18). Therefore, without a clear definition, the phrase of "positive energy" has become a "floating signifier" (Lévi-Strauss, 1987) that allows the expansion of ideological work to meddle in private lives, personal feelings, and intimate relationships. Through this, the show establishes a positive connection between the endurance of "*ku*" (bitterness, suffering, hardship) and the welfare of the whole family's future. Such connection can be witnessed in the confessions of rural people, including:

> Li Bo's father: "as long as we keep working hard, [our life] will eventually get better, my son will fight for our family's honor" (Season 4, Volume 3, Episode 1 from 08.04.2008, 00:22:25);
> He Zhijun's mother: "I feel hard, but for my sons it should be hard, I hope

they are all promising in the future" (Season 7, Volume 3, Episode 1 from 03.02.2014, 00:09:26);

Ma Jianjiang's father: "I built this road for my child…I only hope that he can study hard…and that he will not be like us [being a farmer] when he grows up" (Season 12, Volume 2, Episode 1 from 13.05.2017, 00:13:38).

While the past and the present are full of difficulties and hardships, but with tenuous hard working there will be a bright future. With the repetition of the pattern of affecting and being affected advocated by official discourse, rural people are enticed to invest in the same objects as the cause of happiness. Thus, rather than only aiming at top-down persuasion or control, the ideological discourse of "positive energy" works as a "governing technology" that features a more dispersive and flexible power structure (Yang, 2013). Its use in the case of *X-Change* is not merely a process of resolving socio-economic issues by psychologizing them, but more significantly, it appears as a process of subjectification by maximizing the potential impact of positive feelings for individuals. This can be understood with reference to Jack Bratich's Deleuzian analysis of reality television within a "control society". He argued that

> As power's assembling shifts from enclosures to open circuits, barriers and walls need to break down. In the case of the individual subject, this erosion puts the subject in relation to an exterior while enjoining that subject to regulate himself or herself. This subject – on call, multitasking, able to respond quickly to emergent commands and unfamiliar scenarios – is the subject par excellence of control societies. (Bratich, 2006, p. 76–77).

This narrative transition to more positive appraisals of the rural situation is more likely to induce responses articulated as gratitude, respect, and hope, thereby diminishing the moral responsibility and intention of action towards rural suffering generated from previous sequence of the show. While positivity becomes the norm, negative emotions such as hate, anger, and sadness as the other side of the same coin, will be conceived as abnormal "negative energies" that are harmful for both individuals and society, and thus should be avoided and opposed. In other words, the discourse of positive energy not only works by evoking positive potentialities (self-realization, self-enterprise, positive feelings, etc.), but also invoking the obligation to oppose any actions that may pose threats to the government. For this reason, there is a representation of the reality of suffering, but without overt expressions of negative emotions from the sufferers. The discourse of positive energy pre-empted

such expressions by instilling the idea that a good citizen should be happy with their humble life and sideline their negative emotions. A positive atmosphere generated by the anticipation of a happy future, although far from realized, makes any negative emotions about the current situation seem inappropriate. After all, a bright future may only exist in the imagination, but the positive emotional experience triggered by the expectation of it is real, making possibility or probability more important than the current "facts". In this context, the most important norm is to look inward, act positively, speak positively, and think positively.

To conclude, portraying rural people as embodiments of positive energy in *X-Change* invites the audience to regard the weak as dignified subjects rather than passive victims waiting for help. This means that it works to avoid the negative effects that are often connected to "compassion fatigue" (Maier, 2015). However, any overt expressions of negative feelings or critical discourse that point to the dark side of society are then stigmatized as "negative energy," which is undesirable and should be suppressed. As a consequence, by releasing, distributing, and preempting both affective potentialities (i.e., the potentiality to and the potentiality not to), *X-Change* works in concert with government projects to simultaneously mobilize and control public expression. In its ritualized performance of positive energy the show encourages public identification with the regime but also affirms powerlessness in the face of poverty and hardship and locates any hope of change in the future.

8.1.2   The dream narrative

Consistent with the ideological principle of positive energy, the urban journey of rural protagonists is wrapped in the theme of pursuing dreams. Whereas in *X-Change* 1.0 dreams are very broad – to step out of the mountains and enter university in a city to study, since *X-Change* 2.0 dreams are far more specific. Dreams of becoming a singer, a dancer, a basketball player, a football player, or a doctor, etc., are key in developing plots of the story. According to Yang (2014), dream narratives have been ubiquitous in Chinese television since the reality talent show *Super Girl* promoted the slogan "Sing out loud when [you] feel like singing" in 2004. The early use of dreams was a more spontaneous, bottom-up action, but after 2012, when the "Chinese Dream" discourse (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦) was officially proposed by Xi as a "political metadiscourse" (Zhang, 2010) of the CPC for developing socialism with Chi-

nese characteristics, the insertion of dream narratives is an even more top-down design, specially intended to articulate with official rhetoric.

The first time Xi advocated for the Chinese Dream was in his public speech when he visited an exhibition titled "Road to Revival" (*fuxing zhilu* 复兴之路)" at the National Museum. After he reviewed China's modern history of the "century of national humiliation" from the First Opium War (1839–1842) to the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945, Xi stated, "In my view, to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the grandest Chinese dream of the Chinese nation in the modern era" (Xi cited in Chinanews, 2013). By recalling the collective memory of suffering, trauma, oppression, and humiliation, the dream discourse attempts to mold individual identity in the image of Chinese national identity and raise popular support for this dream (Wang, 2014). Yet later elsewhere, Xi emphasized that "the Chinese dream is ultimately the people's dream, is the dream of every Chinese" (Xi cited in People's Daily, 2013). Similar to the logic of positive energy, to enable CPC's continued legitimacy across social strata, its ideological work has shifted from emphasizing grand Communist ideals unilaterally, to focusing on the specific, tangible and individual dreams of ordinary people, including education, employment, environment, housing, public health, etc. Wang (2017) argues that the "Chinese Dream" discourse promotes a kind of nationalism that is "at once banal, state and somewhat also cultural" (p. 832). It attempts to create a new relationship between individual and nation, and this new identity is reconfigured by integrating individual interests with the ultimate rejuvenation mission of the nation in the context of market economy.

Subsequently, in the notice issued by the SAPPRFT in 2015, reality shows are officially requested to insist on the theme of the Chinese dream, "to reflect on the great process of China's reform and opening-up, and the unremitting struggle and endeavor of Chinese people" (SAPPRFT, 2015). It is not surprising that *X-Change* has increasingly organized the affective display of rural protagonists under the theme of dream-pursuing, immersing the representation of their urban journey in an encouraging and aspirational mood. In order to mark dream discourse with collective goals rather than any neoliberal doctrine of self-reliance, self-realization, self-empowerment, and self-enterprise (Ouellette & Hay, 2008), the show puts a check on any ostensible pursuit of individual fame and interest. Instead, affects regarding family, hometown and country are requisitioned to tie individual desires to dreams and their realization to broader social, economic, and political objectives.

For example, in *Love in a Distant Mountain* (Season 4), the dream of rural youth Luo Xianwang is to become a teacher in the future, because he hopes to change the backward education in his hometown. He said, "I want to go back to my village as a teacher, so that the villagers can learn cultural knowledge and get out of the mountains". When an urban school invited him to stay and study in the city, he refused, because he did not want to rely on others for help. The voice-over viewed the act of refusal as a successful resistance to material temptation, and highly praised the fact that, "colorful urban life hasn't changed this stoical rural boy"; he is still "holding on to his love of his poor homeland, he doesn't lose his pure, beautiful soul in the prosperous city" (Season 4, Volume 1, Episode 2 from 18.03.2008, 00:32:18).

To cite from another example, in *Hot Young Bloods* (Season 18), 12 year old rural girl Liu Xiaoyu dreamed of becoming a doctor because of her sick sister. In fact, she participated in the show to see if a big city hospital could treat her sister's congenital heart disease. With the help of the program team and urban parents, she got the opportunity to communicate with a doctor director face-to-face and experience the life of a doctor for a day. The close ups focused on her crying face when she reminded viewers of her sister's sickness, "I just want my sister to get better", she said with sobs (Season 18, Volume 1, Episode 4 from 21.05.2019, 00:18:39). Certainly, Liu's tears and words may have expressed her genuine affections for her sister. However, the time and attention spent on emphasizing the recurrence of similar expressions in dream narratives is also an editorial choice to articulate intensified emotions, with the aim of promoting the family values of collective Chinese culture.

Thus, by tying individual dreams to socialist or collectivist values, the show has transformed the connotations of self-reliance and perseverance, with the spirit of hard working preserved while self-interest or materialism are rejected. For Luo Xianwang, Liu Xiaoyu, and other young children represented in the show, they are first and foremost the son/daughter of the family, a member of the village, a member of the country, and finally, themselves. The Confucianist view of happiness is activated here to reinforce such a value orientation: happiness has nothing to do with being materially wealthy or poor but is in fact a feeling of spiritual satisfaction. Compared to the pursuit of external interest and fame, it is more important and valuable to connect one's dreams and happiness with the nation, and to integrate oneself into the society. Despite the show addressing the shared interests between individual and collective, in this system of values, collective goals and harmonious relations are prioritized over the search for individual fulfillment.

But the other side of the matter is that, when rural youths act beyond the scope of dreams that combine nationalism and Confucianism, the show strategically intervenes and resolves inappropriate behaviors with the tools of family affection, moral and social pressure. This is particularly obvious in *X-Change* 1.0, when the show is still experimental and atypical rural youths are not excluded from the casting. In the director's notes on *Internet Change* (Season 1), Liu Xuebo revealed their worries that rural protagonists may get addicted to a middle class lifestyle and refuse to go back. Correspondingly, when the rural protagonist of the season, Gao Zhanxi, expressed fascination with the urban life, Liu (2006) stated, "he has become less and less pleasing to us",

> "In seven days, Gao Zhanxi adapted to the city day by day, he became so-phisticated, learned to bargain with hawkers, learned to play petty tricks, became obsessed with computer games, and even made jokes with us, for example: He took one of our beautiful female director as his god sister, and regarded many of our male colleagues as brother-in-law".

The show draws a clear line between what is acceptable and appropriate behavior and what is not. The reason why Gao was rejected may be that he (as portrayed) violated an important social code: he was too outspoken about his desire for and obsession with a material life. To make sure that Gao "hasn't forgotten his roots", the camera crew decided to "ask him every day if he missed home", but when he firmly answered no every time, their worries gradually became real: "Gao Zhanxi doesn't want to go home anymore, how will the show end?" At last, when Gao heard that his father had sprained his ankle at home, immediately decided to go back and put on the moldy cloth shoes that he arrived in, the narrator is gratified to explain his response to the appeal of his home and family: "at that moment, he seems to have suddenly recovered the memory of that remote but gracious farmyard...those bicycles, snacks, and computers were all left behind by him" (Season 1, Volume 1, Episode 4 from 07.09.2006, 00:16:23). It is not so much Gao's love for his father that moved the producers, but that Gao's return to the simple and natural rural youth got the program agenda back on track, and more importantly, gave the show a happy ending.

Basically, while the show offers a platform for the countryside and rural people to be seen and heard, it has also put substantial constraints on what they can say and how they should be perceived, ensuring that it channels socio-economic inequalities by tapping into psychological or affective inter-

vention. In the framework of the show, the discourse of positive energy and dreams are used to transfer or resolve the negative potentials of the narrative of suffering. Utilizing the motivational forces of family affection (*qinqing* 亲情), individual dreams are articulated with the future of the family and the "great rejuvenation" of the nation and country. As a result, *X-Change* has provided an illusion of class mobility, as both urban and rural protagonists are encouraged to return to their own class. The show is riven by class tensions: to borrow the metaphor of the "two-headed monster" from Gamson's (1998) observation of talk shows, it speaks sometimes from its middle-class head and sometimes from its poor people's head. While "each head claims the space of the talk show as its own," he said, "they are joined at the hip, sisters and twins, sharing the same heart, disagreeing with their self, spitting in their own face" (p. 42). In other words, despite the show's use of different affective-discursive strategies to tackle the two narratives of urban middle and lower classes, in essence both voices are absorbed by the show to produce ordinary people for mass consumption.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that the narrative framing and the ideological promotion of the show are not contested. As a hybrid genre that transcends the boundaries between fact and fiction, information and entertainment, documentary and drama, reality television lies on the uncontrolled and unpredictable to produce surprises and potentials that may emerge outside of the intent of the producers. In between there are ruptures that can never be fully masked or removed. As Schneider (2012) also found, despite the fact that "Chinese TV entertainment is indeed highly effective at collapsing various ideas and concepts into an overarching discourse, this discourse is by no means without its ruptures" (p. 211). In further detail below, I will analyze how the performance of *kuqing* (苦情, "bitter emotions") create affective dissonances and ruptures, and invites a vicarious mode of empathetic engagement of the audience.

8.2   An invitation to empathy: visualizing *kuqing*

8.2.1   Ruptures in meaning-making

Although the focus of this book is on the content of the show, not on the audience's responses to the show, before diving into the analysis of *kuqing*, I will first discuss some comments on social media. The discussion here is not the

result of a systematic and comprehensive audience analysis, but to provide a glimpse into "audience discourse" which serve as evidence about their experiences and uses of media" (Jensen, 2002, p. 169). Such analysis is secondary in the research design, but is helpful in complementing the findings of the multimodal analysis by allowing the research to reveal the existence of a different mechanism of affect and being affected that attaches the viewer to the show. There is a huge gap between the intended and expected emotional responses hoped for by the producers and the actual responses of the audience, which may exceed or even violate the interpretation framework promoted by the program. It indicates a rupture of the frames of meaning that bind and shape the rural protagonists into identities, as well as the ideologies that support the status quo. Let's first read a few excerpts from the comments under the theme of *X-Change* on *Zhihu* (知乎) – the largest online knowledge community in China:

> The TV station uses the donation for mountain children as a shield to resist public opinion, and then successfully earns ratings with this 'novel' program formula. After all, the TV station is profitable, the audience is moved, and the mountain children are funded, is there anything wrong? Anyway, after watching it I feel that, it is the good birth that is the true good!
> dika, https://www.zhihu.com/question/22864046

> This show is a dumb show, what was its original purpose? I thought it was to let people know about the sufferings of the countryside. Only later did I discovered that TV stations had gained ratings, Internet celebrities and rich second generations had gained media exposure, but for the poor, nothing changed, and those rich second generations did not change anything either.
> fengguowuhensuixinerzhi, https://www.zhihu.com/question/24285646/answer/598898485

> One has no motivation to change one's own class, and the other has no power to change one's class, so the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. The program group is carefully designed, but can only please the middle classes.
> Zhangxiaobao, https://www.zhihu.com/question/24285646

It can be inferred that audiences are not necessarily unable to recognize the show's manipulation of the performance of emotions for the purpose of rat-

ings or to meet the ideological requirements. What more likely is that, with the penetration of mass media in daily life, they have become more accustomed to reading and discerning hidden meanings in underlying texts. According to appraisal theory (Scherer et al., 2001), viewers' emotions are triggered by their evaluations and appraisals of characters and situations and thereby orient themselves through moral norms and their own interests. The comments above clearly express negative emotions towards the show: distrust, disgust, and anger. They criticize charitable donations as a charade and mock the middle-class hypocrisy of the show, reactions that were certainly not what the show's producers expected. Furthermore, instead of learning how to educate children according to the pedagogic messages included in the dominant narrative, the audience has expressed higher doses of empathy towards the rural world than the show anticipated. For example, "The experience of the protagonists in the countryside is very heart-rending", said Jiang Qingwei in his blog; "I am also worried about whether rural children can bear this level of gap" (Jiang, 2020); "If not properly handled, there will be shadows, and [it will] affect their growth", said the user Xianzi in the comment section of *Zhihu*.

The show seems to resonate with those viewers who have similar life experiences and emotional responses to the rural protagonists, primarily immigrants and their descendants who moved to the cities during the "the laborer tide" (*mingong chao* 民工潮), as well as ordinary city residents and the urban poor. For example, an anonymous user associated the awkward performance of rural children in the city with their own experience of encountering a wealthy urban aunt:

> In front of them, I feel inferior. Even if it is my house that they come to, I feel restrained and nervous, as if performing a masked performance. Indeed, perhaps, some people don't understand and think it's unnecessary, however, it is my true feelings, and my family members are working hard to entertain them. Every summer vacation, I will be called to my aunt's house...I dare not speak loudly, dare not eat at will, dare not touch anything, I dare not interject when they talk, like sitting on pins and needles, even if their family treats me very well, they can't eliminate the anxiety from my bones...After each summer vacation, I have to recover for a long time, adapt to the life in the countryside, and eliminate the feeling of loss in my heart.
> https://www.zhihu.com/question/20018541/answer/23008414

It can be seen from these online comments that, while *X-Change* has been delicately packaged in a narrative with apparently positive and uplifting features

that support the ideological purpose of HSTV, it has also produced an alternative affective dimension that allows the audience to emotionally identify with the "other". In a certain way, *X-Change* seems to have elicited the common experiences of being leftover in the wave of reform and opening-up. To borrow the concept "archive of feelings" from Cvetkovich (2003), such an experience has not only accumulated in individual bodies, but also in larger communities, which have become their own "archive of feelings" registering impulses "once vibrant, but now 'saved as'" (p. 7). It is not just individual emotional responses evoked by the show, but also the collective feelings of the social group to which they belong, which may facilitate the formation of an affective community – not in a fictional sense but as a part of the social reality.

8.2.2 The affective scenes of *kuqing*

In Chapter 8.1, my analysis showed that although the suffering and trauma of the countryside are visible in the show, they have been represented as inevitable or unfortunate, and shifted to the narrative of dream-realization through the affective investment of positive energy. It seems that rural people are materially poor but spiritually rich; they have true happiness because they live in a harmonious relationship. Though such emotion work is powerful, I find that the dominant representational pattern has been occasionally interrupted by moments of *kuqing*, that present audiovisual images as a kind of indexical sign to provoke the particular sympathy of the viewers. The ruptures, inconsistencies, and contradictions within the *kuqing* dimension of *X-Change* that have added another layer of meaning to the optimistic discursive surface, thus promoting a different disposition for reflection that challenges the mainstream "urbanization" discourse and the superficial socialist fantasy in society. It is through this affective layer that the show registers, rather than narrates, the collective experience of social inequality and division.

To be more specific, I understand *kuqing* as an affective response of the bottom strata of Chinese society to their "bitter (*ku* 苦)" life experiences, and as a felt quality that provides clues as to how we exist. The directly corresponding word in English is "bitter emotion": it can be seen that both Chinese and English use taste words to describe emotions, and bitterness is usually associated with negative emotion/emotion-laden words, particularly with sadness and agony (Zhou & Tse, 2020). I argue that such an association between taste and emotion is not just metaphorical, but an embodied affective practice that is grounded in daily sensory experiences and the linguistic practices of a class

divided China. In this sense, I stick to the Chinese pinyin *kuqing* rather than the bitter emotion of English words, to mark how such an affect is more than the individual psychological responses of sadness or agony, but a hybrid and relational affect that is articulated in contextualized and historicized ways of producing boundaries between the upper and lower classes in China. I will return to Chinese-style *kuqing* culture in 8.3; the following part will first offer a close reading of the performance of *kuqing* represented in *How Far is Spring* of Season 3, focusing on the meaning of *kuqing*, its audiovisual style and the emotional orientation it creates. On that basis, I aim to explore not only how the affect *kuqing* is managed and manipulated in the show, but also its potentials, including how it gives images a powerful presence, and how it may release energy and imagination, create connection, and give potential to political transformations.

Such a scene began when the urban protagonist Jin Dashijie visited the home of Yuexiu, one of his rural classmate. As soon as Jin entered this house, the camera followed his gaze, focusing on the details of the house one by one: "The house appears unable to shelter the family from wind, the old wall is already in danger. There is not even a decent table and bench in the empty room", except for a 15-watt light bulb, "The bag of washing powder is the only proof that the family lives in a modern society" (Season 3, Volume 1, Episode 2 from 09.06.2007, 00:18:56-00:19:28), explained by the voice-over (also see a close-up shot in figure 8.3). To see from the footage, even though the scene was shot during the day, the room is very dark. The screen then switched to Yuexiu, who rushed to kitchen to cook, and the voice-over explained her family status to the audience: her parents took her young brother with congenital heart disease to seek medical treatment, they have been away from home for more than half a year, leaving this ten-years old girl alone at home. The camera then zooming in the scar on her face while she is weeping out her sufferings. This is the second time the camera has been focused on the scar, the voice-over explained here: "it is left when she fell and scratched while washing dishes, but she has no money to go to the clinic to bandage the wound, just stopped the bleeding with a rag" (ibid, 00:21:40). Perhaps feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable, in front of the camera, Yuexiu always lowered her head and kept wiping her tears with her hands (see figure 8.4).

Figure 8.3: A close-up shot of the ragged mosquito nets in Yuexiu's bedroom (Season 3, Volume 1, Episode 2 from 09.06.2007)
Figure 8.4: A bust size shot of Yuexiu when she is weeping out the painful life (Season 3, Volume 1, Episode 2 from 09.06.2007)

Narratively, this moment is not designed to evoke emotional empathy with the urban boy; rather, Yuexiu's expression of *kuqing* is used to elicit the reflection of urban youth (both Jin and urban youth audiences) that they are growing up in happiness but fail to cherish what they have. Similar to the psychological effect of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), by comparing oneself with others, people reflect on themselves, confirm their attributes, abilities, desires, goals, and so on. To judge by the responses, this design is quite successful in transforming them. "Rural children study so hard even though they are so poor…The conditions in our city are so good, what other excuses are there that we don't study hard?" (Season 3, Volume 1, Episode 2 from 09.06.2007, 00:20:40), as Jin articulates this experience with his own identity in the following monologue. The fact that Yuexiu's parents cannot accompany her also made Jin reflect on his impatience and bad temper towards his parents. In the end, when the director asks him inductively: "If you go back what do you want to say to your mother?" he answers: "Mom, I love you!" The director continues to ask: "is it true?" and Jin nods his head with a firm "Hum!" (ibid, 00:25:35-00:25:45). As a result, the affective power of rural people's *kuqing* is appropriated by the program to overcome the family and education problems of the urban middle class.

Similar to the positive energy discourse analyzed earlier, the show soon displaced the expression of suffering itself with a positive attitude towards suffering. In rapid sequence, the crying scene is turned into a narrative that highlights Yuexiu's bravery and tenacity: "The child is so strong, she holds up

this stormy home alone!" (Season 3, Volume 1, Episode 2 from 09.06.2007, 00:21:34). In line with the above analysis, the show prioritizes collective goals and values. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Yuexiu's words expressed a very strong altruistic tendency consistent with Confucian *kuqing* culture (see section 8.3 for details): instead of crying about her own hardship, her tears were attributed to worrying about her sick brother, "When I think of my brother's illness, I don't know how sad I am" (ibid, 00:22:00). With the interpretation of the voice-over and the selection of Yuexiu's words, the idea that "eating bitterness (*chi ku*)" is a noble virtue is attached to the figure of this rural left-behind child. So at the narrative and discursive level, this scene is no different from the dominant positive energy narrative, only offering more visibility for rural children and their living situations. Yet these representations are still dominated and filtered by the urban narrators. The show uses subjective shots, or point of view shots filmed from Jin's perspective. From beginning to end, Yuexiu and her home were passively watched and judged. The voice-over replacing Yuexiu in telling her story to the audience also ensures that the meaning of this unfortunate story is still within the scope of a positive narrative. Meanwhile the potential of *kuqing* to stimulate positive action to alleviate this suffering is also suppressed, because instead of using emotion to inspire resistant actions, the Confucian tradition advocates self-sacrifice, tolerance and devotion rather than attempting to combat misfortune.

It should be noted that Season 3 was broadcast in 2007. At that time, under the leadership of Hu Jintao, China's television media was required to stick to the propaganda guideline of "three closenesses" (*san tie jin* 三贴近; close to reality, close to life and close to the masses). This allowed for the emergence of various realistic drama genres (*xianshi ticai dianshiju* 现实题材电视剧), the scale and intensity of expressions of these were also greater than those under the leadership of Xi (Huang, 2004). But the reason why the producers of *X-Change* adopted *kuqing* is more likely out of practical considerations; as a mass entertainment consumer product, such intensive scenes can in effect touch the audience's senses and capture their attention. The *kuqing* of rural people has been sold twice: to the urban protagonists (more accurately, their parents), and to the urban middle-class audience. One of the head directors, Yu Shujun, admitted that in a public interview,

> If rural children don't move you, it can be said that the show was unsuccessful, or [our] character selection was unsuccessful; of course crying children are a form of expression of our pursuit of being touched – some viewers

watched and shed tears in their hearts! What we guarantee is that the prequel of rural children must make people cry three times, otherwise it will be unsuccessful. (cited in Huang, 2015).

Despite the policy and economic motives of displaying *kuqing* expressions, such an affective scene is powerful, and the melodramatic techniques applied on the audiovisual layers amplified their affective intensity, which cannot be fully captured in the narrative phrase "Yuexiu cried due to her suffering". The scar and the tear-filled eyes that occupy the whole screen are highly powerful energizing entities that spectators find difficult not to respond to and care about. According to Smith (2003), these are affective cues that invite audiences to feel. *Kuqing* seems to be a special case here because it directly addresses the audiences' sight, hearing, taste, touch and other sensory modalities. Such a mechanism of affect is described by Andacht (2016) as the index appeal of reality TV. In effect, the diverse indexical signs work to invite an empathetic involvement that aims beyond language to immediate understanding, thereby oscillating between explicit ideological orientations and immediate, pre-reflexive and empathetic reactions. The visual treatment is further strengthened by the acoustic impact of the background music. In melodrama, Peter Brooks argued that, "the emotional drama needs the de-semanticized language of music, its evocation of the 'ineffable', its tones and registers" (1976, p. 14). In the above scenes depicting Yuexiu, the main theme music (composed by San Bao) named after the famous film *The Road Home* (*wode fuqin muqin* 我的父亲母亲) directed by Zhang Yimou, is played in the background. In a direct and efficient way, the moving and poignant melody adds to the emotional intensity of the scene and provides a medium for the visceral expression of *kuqing*, unfolding misfortunes, suffering, and affective turbulence. So understood, this network of affective cues and processes indicates the potential of the show to create an alternative orientation in mood for the viewers. Based on the recognition and recounting of sufferings, this mood orientation obviously runs counter to the positivity that the show hopes to nudge the viewers toward.

In the narrative of rural youths' exchange life in city, *kuqing* emerges on the scene when they are forced to experience emotional collisions engendered by urban material and spiritual wealth. For example, when Gao Zhanxi (Season 1) leaves a small village and is received by urban parents at the airport, his tears pour down "unexpectedly" in the next three shots: when he sits in the BMW for the first time; when his hair is washed in a salon; and when he is handed

a mobile phone to call his parents, but he cannot make the call as his parents cannot afford a phone. These "money shots" (Grindstaff, 2002) spotlight an actor as he completely loses control of his body and his expressions, and these moments of emotional overwhelm are endlessly replayed in episodes, promos, and recaps throughout the program, accumulating suspense for the audience. The voice-over repeatedly asks: "What is the cause of this sudden tear?" "Why did Zhanxi, who should be happy, start crying?" "What are these secretly flowing tears about?" but the program has no intention of exploring the actor's true feelings and inner world. It is the novelty for the urban audience of seeing rural people's *kuqing* that is of interest to the producers.

Unlike the discursive choices made, affects embedded primarily at the audiovisual layer constructs an alternative space, allowing an empathetic viewing experience. Visually, Gao is highly individualized. In the three shots, the camera zooms in quickly from a medium shot to a close-up and extreme close-up showing Gao's folded arms, crying face, red cheeks and tearful eyes (as figures 8.5 and 8.6 show). Meanwhile the lighthearted background music stops, and the picture briefly falls silent. It is similar to the close-cutting technique employed in melodrama, but here it is deliberately used to create emotional intimacy, drawing the viewer into the visceral feelings of the person depicted. Even though Gao hardly says a word, his body and face speak volumes, the visuality of his emotional outpouring through tears becomes a transparent corporeal sign pointing to an inner reality, inviting the audience to draw attention to and resonate with the "lived" feelings of this rural child.

This is not simply a maladaptive response. Gao's emotions are based on a complex network of class relations in which individual and collective belonging are linked to the feeling of *kuqing* in the face of socially enforced class inequalities. When the camera aimed at the face of Gao, the material visibility of tears on his face shows a rupture between the stereotypical positive representation of rural children and the meaning of *kuqing* as a recognition of their situation of being marginalized as a result of the political economy. "This time, his tears vividly reflected the fear, loneliness, helplessness and hesitation of this rural youth; it surpassed all other plans the directors racked their brains to design", explained editor Liu Xuebo (2006) in his online diary. As a person who has "successfully" completed his transformation by urban culture after living in a city for many years, Gao's tears seemed to elicit Liu's embodied feeling of bygone times. He confesses, "I was deeply touched when I saw Gao's tears, at that moment, I suddenly thought of myself...like Gao, I was also born in the countryside and I didn't even see a big city before I was 15. Looking

at Gao, I seem to see myself ten years ago" (ibid). Gao's symptomatic crying, as verified by the responses of Liu, not only constitutes the core experience of this poor little child, but also functions as a major channel to articulate certain affective dispositions towards suffering in the show.

Figure 8.5: Gao shed tears when he sit in a BMW car. He quickly turned his face away from the camera and the urban "parents" next to him (Season 1, Volume 1, Episode 1 from 04.09.2006)
Figure 8.6: Gao cried again when he was taken to the barbershop for a haircut (Season 1, Volume 1, Episode 2 from 05.09.2006)

Through this introverted mode of affective communication, *kuqing*, be it the grief over the suffering of life; grievance and frustration towards the stark divide between the rich and the poor; fear and anxiety of dealing with the on-going pressures of everyday survivals, are transmitted. Associated with material manifestations including dilapidated houses, gaunt bodies, and crying faces, the performance of *kuqing* has arisen out of a sense of powerlessness of the status quo, and represents the most visceral, instinctive form of emotional catharsis for the marginalized to release feelings related to survival and help-lessness. Thus on the strength of the "the affective productivity of televisual presence" which creates a "domestic space, a zone of intimacy, and of representation" (Kavka, 2008, p. 6), the appeal of *kuqing* in *X-Change* has catered to the common psychological need of the public to vent social pathos in a transitional era. This opens up an alternative affective space that plays on viewers' senses and hearts in a way that is allowed by the mainstream ideology but at a distance from it.

To better understand the performance of *kuqing* on *X-Change*, its dilemma and potentiality, and its effects, it is necessary to trace its emergence in public culture, different appearances along historical vicissitudes, and articulation with sociopolitical and economic forces[1]. Thus in the next part I will digress from the show, and turn to locating *kuqing* in the social historical contexts that enable its actualization. I will illustrate that the expression of *kuqing* of the lower social classes is deeply rooted in Confucian culture. However, in China's long history of revolution and construction, the affective potential of *kuqing* to bring together and mobilize political agents has been constantly appropriated to achieve various revolutionary and developmental ends, yet depending on who is mobilizing and in what way, the effects have not always been under control.

8.3 *Kuqing* culture and the social pathos in a transitional China

I have already mentioned that the display of *kuqing* in *X-Change* does not simply represent an emotional state of sadness that is ubiquitous in different cultures, but a specific Chinese-style of feeling and confessing bitterness (*ku* 苦) that is embedded in the longstanding Chinese *kuqing* culture. The various literary works and television programs discussed below demonstrate that this specific emotion operates as a dynamic affective economy (Ahmed, 2004b) that accumulates value through circulation, articulation, and repetition, forming a particular cultural type. Such a culture privileges self-repression (both verbal and physical), self-ignorance, self-sacrifice, dedication, and

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1   Despite the fact that *kuqing* is quite a universal phenomenon in popular culture, it has received limited scholarly attention. A few exceptions include: Wu, W. & Wang, X. (2008). Cultural Performance and Ethnography of Ku in China, Positions: East Asian Cultural Critiques. 16 (2): 409–33; Kong, S. (2014). Crying Your Heart Out Laid-off women workers, *kuqingxi*, and melodramatic sensibility in Chinese TV drama, in Popular Media, Social Emotion and Public Discourse in Contemporary China, pp. 41–60. London & New York: Routledge; Xie, W. (2019). Mother's Suffering and the Politics of Tears in *Mama, Love Me One More Time*, Monde Chinois, Nouvelle Asie, 57: 59–69. Besides, there are some Chinese literatures to study *kuqing* from the perspective of moral and aesthetic criticism, e.g. Yan, Q. & Jing, Y. (2020). The *Kuqing* Narrative and Inner Texture of Entertainment Culture (yule wenhua de Kuqing xushi yu neizai jili), China Television, 2: 59–63.

follows the logic of "the more miserable, the more morally noble". In a seemingly contradictory way, the subject obtains attention, sympathy, and energy through self-repression, self-attack and even self-destruction. So the drama of *kuqing* (*kuqing xi* 苦情戏)[2] and the representation of *kuqing* that is prevalent in Chinese popular culture cannot be equated with the Western "tragedy" that originated from the ancient Greek in terms of ideas of the individual, humanity, and destiny (cf. Harper, 2019). If the latter expresses a sublime spirit of active resistance and vitality against catastrophe, then the former tends to favor passively enduring evil and misfortune, the dissolution of subjectivity, showing "the secularity of taste" (Xie, 1991, p. 24). Huang (2003) found that,

> It does not reach up to the heaven, like tragedy, for the "hidden god" as the viewer aimed at. Rather, it bends toward the earth and seeks communal memorabilia of grief and relief...Chinese tragedy is more Antigonistic – meaning irresolvable conflicts between Good and Good in the web of interpersonal relations, than Oedipal – concentrating on Providence and redemption. (p. 60–63).

The earliest drama of *kuqing*[3] with written records can be dated back to the Southern Opera (*nanxi* 南戏) in the Song and Yuan Dynasties (960–1368) (cf. Yang, 1994). Since then, the universal tragic sense of life of the lower social classes has articulated with Chinese folkloric culture, and established a particular melodramatic narrative mode of sadness and bitterness. Under the Confucian "structure of feeling", the central protagonists in traditional *kuqing*

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2   Such a genre is also commonly referred to as "*ku xi*" (苦戏, the bitter drama), or "*ku xi*" (哭戏, the crying drama), "*yuan pu*" (怨谱, the resentment scores), and "ai qu" (哀曲, the plaintive opera).

3   From a generic perspective, traditional *kuqing* drama can be divided into four categories based on themes: "first, the tragedy of love and marriage, represented by *Zhangxie Scholar* (*Zhangxie Zhuangyuan* 张协状元), *Wangkui Betrays Guiying* (*Wangkui fu Guiying* 王魁负桂英), and *Chaste Women Zhao and Erlang Cai* (*Zhao Zhennü Cai Erlang* 赵贞女蔡二郎); the second is the tragedy of palace fighting, such as *Majian Yang fei* (马践杨妃) and *The Orphan of Zhao* (*Zhaoshi Gu'er* 赵氏孤儿); the third is the tragedy caused by tyranny, such as *The legend of Meng Jiangnü* (*Meng Jiangnü song hanyi* 孟姜女送寒衣); and the fourth is the tragedy for talents remain unrecognized, one example is *Thunder rumbles Jianfubei* (*Banye leihong Jianfubei* 半夜雷轰荐福碑)" (Yang, 1994, p. 154). These four categories have also delineated the scope of contemporary *kuqing xi*.

xi are often unable to avoid suffering due to their positions in the web of relationships (the "plight" – *kujing* 苦境); there is almost nothing from which to choose. But still having faith in heavenly justice – not in the sense of a Christian God but an overarching moral universe, they show endurance and tolerance in the face of external injustice and oppression. While a series of disasters imposed on the protagonist are enough to elicit tears, what is more moving is their adherence to ethical guidelines, insistence on loyalty and kindness, and conformity to the moral community. The ending is usually accompanied by a serious drama style reunion or restoration of justice, "All sufferings have their reward; awards and punishments rigorously carried out, even the lovers all finally got married" (Yin, 1992, p. 128). Some of the reunion is achieved by resorting to reincarnation, as Huang (2003) argued, "Chinese tragic characters are *homo political* and *homo historien*, as they resort to Time, the future, when seeking comfort for injustice done in the past and when seeking to restore their names" (p. 65).

It can be perceived that Chinese drama has a long tradition of mixing comedy or serious drama to alleviate suffering in tragic stories. According to Yin (1992), this is particularly because Chinese dramatists are deeply influenced by the Confucian aesthetic principle of "resentful but not angry, mournful but not distressing". The feeling of *kuqing* that involves a mixture of loss, anger, sorrow, and a feeling of unfairness maybe caused by various external events (i.e. social structural changes, organizational or domestic calamity) or by personal encounters with such occurrences. As mentioned, the suppression of such feelings has traditionally been recognized as a social virtue, and with the sedimentation of history, these suppressed affects may be accumulated and layered deep in the minds and hearts of the people. Understood through this aesthetic construction and moral sublimation, traditional Chinese *kuqing xi* has facilitated a specific affective orientation or "emotional regime" (Reddy, 2001) towards bitterness in daily life, offering a normative style of emotional management that sustains the political rule of feudal society.

During the May Fourth/New Culture Movement (around 1919), such suppressed affects were rediscovered by modern intellectuals (writers, film directors, and artists) to engage in left-wing revolutionary discourse that connected the image of suffering ordinary people with the weakness and helplessness of the nation. Their mobilization of the idea of national salvation appealed to Chinese people's deepest threats and fears through feelings of collective hopelessness and victimization. At that time, the happy finale and fatalism in traditional *kuqing* dramas were regarded as the deficiency of Chi-

nese national character and have come under fire. The following words from Hu Shi (1918) are quite representative and worthy of translation and reproduction here:

> What Chinese literature lacks most is the sense of tragedy. Whether it is a novel or a drama, there is no other than "grand reunion" endings...This "superstition of reunion" is ironclad evidence of the weak thinking of the Chinese. A reading person clearly knows that things in the world are either confounding right and wrong, or parting from life and death, but he only wants to make "all lovers in the world finally get married", he insists on saying that good and evil are clearly distinguished and retribution is clear. He closed his eyes and refused to watch the tragedy of the world, he refused to honestly write about the cruelty and inversion of the world. He only wants to achieve great satisfaction on paper. This is nothing but the literature of lies. (p. 112–113).

The radical moral criticism is understandable in the cultural atmosphere of May Fourth, when progressive intellectuals were eager to save the nation suffering from the Opium War and to catch up with the advanced world. With the highest priority of saving the country for the time, the affective energy of *kuqing* of common people was merged with patriotic sentiments and collective abjection, and effectively used as a technique for ideological enlightenment and social mobilization against imperialism and feudalism (Wu & Wang, 2008). In this context, the reunion tradition and the Confucian "structure of feeling" are extremely inappropriate, because instead of moving the emotion to action, they advocate self-sacrifice, to tolerate and forgive rather than fight against predestination. It is satisfied by the emotional consolation of the simplistic and essentialist moral belief of "good begets good, and evil leads to evil". For this reason traditional *kuqing xi* is criticized as a shortcoming of Chinese culture that dares not face the sufferings of life squarely, and may whitewash social darkness and hinder the awakening of the people (cf. Ding, 2019).

Later, during the socialist revolution and construction (1949–1978), the appeal of *kuqing* is utilized by the Chinese Communists as an important part of "emotion work" for social mobilization. Prasenjit Duara (1988) pointed out that, one of the fundamental reasons for the Communists to gain power in China is that they can understand the suffering of the people and mobilize emotional energy for revolutionary purposes. Through such techniques as "confessing/speaking bitterness" (*suku* 诉苦), "criticism and self criticism" (*piping yu ziwo piping* 批评与自我批评), "rectification" (*zhengfeng* 整风) and

"thought reform" (*sixiang gaizao* 思想改造), the Chinese Communists reconstructed peasant class consciousness, and heightened emotional commitment for the Communist cause (Perry, 2002). Particularly through public confession of individual suffering in *suku* sessions, the cause of suffering was shifted from a mysterious destiny or reincarnation, to the landlord class and other exploitative classes – a process of inducing and extracting the "life suffering" experienced by peasants in their life world to "class suffering" (*jieji ku* 阶级苦), under the political principle of "taking class struggle as the key link" proposed in 1957 (Guo & Sun, 2002, p. 133). State power-led *suku* sessions have thus demonstrated the targeted use of affect as a political instrument for intensifying a particular mobilization of collective memories and experiences in the "old society", and to contrast these with the "new government and new society" (Sun, 2010). Such emotion work reached its limits at the criticism conference of the Cultural Revolution, when the tradition was turned to a conscious political practice and strategy of psychological control. In so doing, the CPC transformed the Confucian framework of *kuqing* into a revolutionary one, thus discharging the immense potential of *kuqing* in fighting against the class exploitation and transforming the society.

After reform and opening-up (primarily in the 1980s and 90s, before Xi came to power), the narrative of suffering is also evoked as an ideological work by the Party-state to unite people and submit them to a compassionate and heroic state. *Kuqing* is sublimed: with slogans such as "overcoming difficulties together" (*gongke shijian* 共克时艰), the Party-state encouraged people to endure suffering together with the country in bad times (Xu, 2016; Chen & Wang, 2020). CCTV has even developed a programme named "Touching China" (*gandong zhongguo* 感动中国) as an annual national event to honor ordinary people who had overcome difficulties, endured suffering, or made sacrifices to pursue the greater good. In this way, *kuqing* has been used by the CPC to invoke a sense of belonging and identity to the nation, and mobilize emotional investment in economic and social transformation, such as in the process of industrialization and urbanization.

It is at this time that *kuqing xi* began to revive and create a new upsurge in broadcast on Chinese television screens. From the sensational TV series *Yearning* (*Kewang* 渴望, 1990), to Zhang Yimou's film *Lifetimes* (*Huozhe* 活着, 1994), to more recent TV series *Gaqa Kelin* (*Yaba Xin'niang* 哑巴新娘, 2005), *The Chinese Family* (*Zhongguo Jiating* 中国家庭, 2009), *Mother's Life* (*Niangdao* 娘道, 2018), and touching stories such as "go to school with one's mother behind the back", "donate a kidney for one's father" built in numerous variety shows;

kuqing xi have become a remarkable phenomenon in the current popular cultural market. As one TV drama producer, Hai Yan, observed, the proliferation of *kuqing xi* in recent years "speaks to a collective unconscious and social mood that are not addressed by historical costume dramas (the mainstream genre of Chinese TV drama)" (cited in Liu, 2005). In this sense, the dramas infused with *kuqing* of the everyday struggles of workers and peasants have offered opportunities for public sentiments regarding rapid social change to be expressed and felt. It is precisely the affective closeness with everyday reality in which *kuqing xi* arouses the shared experiences and emotions of life, albeit in artificially promiscuous plots. As Kong (2014) proposes,

> Dwelling on the hardships and emotional turbulence of their everyday lives – financial difficulties, inadequate housing, large medical bills, aged parents, lost children, and abusive in-laws – these dramas of human misery and life's torments present a world of victims and losers buffeted by dramatic social changes. They are punctuated by an incessant series of unfortunate events, strained family relationships, and psychological problems and physical illnesses, and their characters are suffused with the feeling of being abandoned by their times. (p. 53).

Apparently, in the new era of socialist construction, the root of *kuqing* is no longer ascribed to the ruthlessness of fate like in pre-modern drama, nor is it attributed to the social oppression caused by feudalism and imperialism. However, as shown in the case *X-Change*, it is summarized as a problem of natural geographical conditions and social culture. In other words, such a type of *kuqing* differs from the former *kuqing* of social suppression and foreign invasion which can be eliminated by getting independent and national liberation, now the nature of the problem has transferred from "contradictions between ourselves and the enemy" to "contradictions among the people", to cite Mao's (1957) classic assertion. Accordingly, the party proposed to resolve the root of *kuqing* not through social revolution but through economic development; "development is the absolute principle", put forward by Deng Xiaoping – the supreme leader of the CPC during his South Tour in 1992. In this context, the narrative of *kuqing* offers an opportunity to emphasize the state's "care about people's suffering" (*guanxin qunzhong jiku* 关心群众疾苦) under the principle of "three closenesses" as I mentioned before, the "grand reunion" endings in traditional *kuqing xi* is no longer related to the cowardly nation mentality, but viewed as "an artistic reflection of the Chinese people's pursuit and yearning for a beautiful and reasonable life, and an artistic reflection of the Chinese

people's optimistic, cheerful, positive national spirit and firm belief in justice" (Zhang & Shi, 1993, p. 144).

In sum, three cultural resources can be identified as shaping Chinese *kuqing* culture: the Confucian tradition, which still has a deep-rooted and subtle influence on contemporary Chinese people; the socialist revolution, which has had a transformative impact on the political system, moral concepts, and emotional culture of China; and the capitalist market economy, which also exerts great power in shaping the values and lifeworlds in its own way. The history of *kuqing* culture is a continuous process in which the power of *kuqing* has been appropriated and regulated by different social forces; but it is also in this process that emotions and voices from the bottom of society are publicly expressed and legitimized in the field of cultural politics. Instead of pointing at any ultimate, transcendent Communist ideology or utopian fantasy, popular culture is highly mundane and focused on the current lifeworlds and social emotions of ordinary people. The expression of *kuqing* has been endowed with political legitimacy in the history of the Chinese revolution, acting somewhat as a "weapon of the weak" (Scott, 1985) – a "weapon" for vulnerable groups to express their own interests and demands by repeatedly crying about their bitter emotions, and gain empowerment by showing their vulnerability and suffering. In this sense, as a part of the extensive *kuqing* culture, the presentation of *kuqing* in *X-Change* is not only an index of historically and collectively painful memories, it operates as an affect in process, structuring life-experience and identity construction, and inspiring emotional support from those committed to the ideals of morality and justice.

8.4 The vanishing of *Kuqing*?

Despite the soaring audience ratings, *kuqing xi* has been ignored or debased by elitist critics for inducing only "cheap" tears in the audience. According to the critics, if in the early stage of reform and opening-up, the representation of *kuqing* was social valuable in faithfully reflecting the impact of social transformation on usual beliefs, family structure and traditional ethics through narratives of suffering, then the current *kuqing xi* is far removed from this purpose, and only reproduced to satisfy the popular psychology of seeking novelty under the prevailing consumerism. As Zheng (2012) criticized,

> In its characterization, it always presents the obvious polarized opposition between 'good' and 'evil' out of reality in order to arouse a strong emotional resonance from the audience. Except for tears, *kuqing xi* can't offer the audience any deeper thinking about life. (p. 8).

This critical attitude is consistent with the attitude toward the cultural industry under a market economy, "In these popular cultural works, what we see is the same genre and the same process, what we hear is the same shouting and the same emotion; unique personal experience and the feeling of living no longer exist here" (Liu & Yan, 2007, p. 179). Seen from these criticisms, *kuqing* evokes attention to social lower classes, yet also raises questions about the uses and meanings of representations of suffering, pain, and victimhood. The repetitive, extensive and homogenized depictions of suffering have weakened the potential of *kuqing* to invite connection, sympathy, and engagement. Even worse, they may produce compassion fatigue and turn the viewers away from such representation.

As before, the SARFT began to regulate the market with administrative orders. Despite the early active promotion of *kuqing xi* to be close to ordinary people, now it is discouraged. In 2009, Li Jingsheng, the SARFT TV series Secretary General, criticized this narrative for being ossified into "three brokennesses and one suffering (*sanpo yiku* 三破一苦, which refers to broken family, broken emotions, broken marriages, and sufferings of the 'stepmother, stepfather, ugly mother')" (cited in Sohu, 2009). He stated that the flooding of *kuqing xi* on the screen has spoiled the widely acclaimed family ethics drama, and should be prevented from flourishing. While there is no direct evidence that *X-Change* is the object of criticism by the SARFT, in effect the narrative of *kuqing* is gradually displaced by the positive narrative. The reduction of *kuqing* in *X-Change* is also the process of how the suffering of the lower classes has been selected, filtered, suppressed, and transferred. By attributing suffering and sorrow to inevitable natural disasters or accidental misfortunes, and by subliming endurance and perseverance not as "sacrifices" but as social virtues, *X-Change* prepares *kuqing* for the intervention of positive energy.

But such strategies are not completely safe. The visibility of public *kuqing* still risks amplifying its power and thus might re-prime discontent and anger towards the state and government. If *kuqing* could be used by the CPC to resist the oppression of the former Communist regime, it could also be used by complaining citizens to express their appeals, which may lead to an increase in "inharmonious sounds" blaming the government, resulting in a moral dilemma

with repercussions for legitimacy (e.g. Dong, 2008; Liu & He, 2014; Perry, 2013). Like I have shown in Chapter 6.3, facing the compression of discourse space, *X-Change* has transformed into a depoliticized "light/slow entertainment" that shifted tactics to handle such a thorny problem. While in *X-Change* 1.0 and 2.0 we can still witness the representation of rural poverty and trauma in doc-style visuals, in the later periods of *X-Change* 2.0 and 3.0, the narrative of *kuqing* no longer addresses the tragic problems that are devastating for a family, such as social turmoil, illness, poverty and laid-off. Instead, the show turns to the fabrics of "trouble" and "annoyance" caused by problems of communication, emotion control and relationship management.

Season 15 *The Parallel World* is a typical example. Unlike the previous broken families, this season's rural family is a happy family of four. Although living in the countryside, their material conditions are far from poor; they have a two-story building and a car, there are also some poultry such as chickens and pigs raised in the yard. In this case the narrative is focused on the ongoing daily household and neighborhood trivia, in which conflicts happen due to the incompatibility of domestic relations and educational concepts. For example, the elder son is dissatisfied with his parents' preference for the younger son, the wife wants her husband to take on more housework, the wife pushes their son for tutoring classes while the husband thinks that happy growth is the most important, etc. With the filtration of existential "*kujing*" (plight 苦境), the show has turned from representing lower social strata struggling to construct "little happiness" in daily life as well as from facing turbulence in China's modernization process, to "reflecting on the bright side of society" (Miao, 2011, p. 98).

Undoubtedly, after more than 40 years of reform and opening up, China's economy has achieved considerable development, and it is increasingly unrepresentative to find rural families similar to Yuexiu's (Season 3). There are not so many survival crises in rural areas as 15 years ago, especially after Xi took poverty alleviation as his key task and claims to have completed the national anti-poverty task in 2020 (cf. Xinhuanet, 2020a). But does that mean the vanishing of *kuqing*? As I argued in Chapter 2, the process of rapid economic development in the past 40 years is simultaneously the process of social differentiation. As gaps between social classes have broadened, the feeling of deprivation, persecution, and inequality has also prevailed. To cite the CPC's judgement proposed at the 19th National Congress (2017), "socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era". Accordingly, the principle social contradiction has evolved from "the contradiction between the ever-growing

material and cultural needs of the people and the backwardness of social pro-duction" to "the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate develop-ment and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life" (cited in Yan, 2018). That is, on the basis that people's basic living needs have been guaranteed, the crux of *kuqing* is more likely to lie in social injustice and inequality, and the accompanied excessive income gap and rich-poor disparity.

Thus, by recognizing social differentiation and the new affective state of *kuqing* in terms of relative poverty and unfairness, the Party-state led by Xi insisted on the importance and urgency of the "Three Rural Issues" (*sannong wenti* 三农问题), with "solving 'Three Rural Issues' as the priority among pri-orities of the whole party's work" (cited in Xinhu, 2020b). Targeting cultural and ideological fields, Xi has adopted both the strict control mode by issuing regulations of the SARFT, and the soft mobilization mode by embedding dis-courses of positive energy and the Chinese dream to displace the narrative of *kuqing* that used to vent social pathos directly in Hu and Wen's era. By rec-onciling mobilization with control, Xi's ideological work aims at avoiding a tricky situation in which "relaxation causes chaos, control causes deadly si-lence" (*yifang jiuluan, yiguan jiusi* 一放就乱,一管就死) as has often occurred before. Still, whether people can truly feel optimism and happiness actually depends on whether there is material abundance and whether society is fair and just.

Therefore, the power of *kuqing* lies more beyond specific media contents – media is not "necessarily the point of origin or cause of 'effects', but simply a vector in a larger process which we might term, following Massumi, 'ef-fects and their interweavings': in other words, 'syndromes'" (Massumi cited by Gibbs, 2002, p. 340). As I have shown above, in China's long tradition of using personal suffering and sorrow in public expression, *kuqing* could be ei-ther constructed or destructed with regards to public sentiments, historical trauma, national crisis and shame, and accumulated as a political force for social mobilization. In fact, the association between *kuqing* and Chinese his-tory and revolution is so strong that it is far more than an individual feeling (that can be dissolved with psychological governmentality), but more impor-tantly, *kuqing* is a response to experienced material and political differences, a culturally normalized sensation that reflects how Chinese people have been suppressed in the repetitive process of experiencing multi-layered suffering. It is an accumulation from the affective histories that "remain[s] alive insofar as they have already left their impressions" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 8); yet also opens up to the future with intentionality towards the sufferings of everyday life. The

dynamism and temporality of *kuqing*, and affect more generally, speak to the wild effects when it articulates with certain sociocultural fabrics, as verified by historical events in the New Culture Movement and the New Democratic Revolution. In this sense, *kuqing* is a double-edged sword that carries the vital energies of becoming, and signals the potentiality of transformation for both individual and collective action, thought and feeling.

Chapter 9: Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this book, as stated in the introduction, has been to investigate the role of affect and emotion in Chinese reality TV. This idea originated from my observation on a gap between the prevalent emotional phenomena in Chinese reality TV, and the insufficient corresponding theoretical and empirical research. To address this gap, I adapted the social-relational theory of affect, which released the term affect from the psychological category and reconsidered it as the imbrication of the social and the somatic. Emotion is then regarded as a sub-component of broader affective encounters, while mediated emotion in reality TV can be viewed as a particular affective-discursive practice, as I elaborated in Chapter 3. I find this approach offers an integrated framework to unfold the sense and meaning-making mechanisms of reality TV. Through the productive lens of affect, reality TV can be explored as an affective technology of identifying a system of difference, through which a complex, porous and sometimes self-contradictory meaning-making process can be revealed. In general, I understand the communicative mode of the show *X-Change* as a multi-modal form of discourse-figure-ground, and locate it in the specific production context of post-reform China. The ultimate goal is to investigate the power of reality TV, its embeddedness in the ordinary lives of the Chinese people, and its combined political, economic, and cultural impacts.

This final chapter will first conclude the discussion on the entanglements between affect, emotion, ideology, identity, and power arising from the examination of *X-Change* in the previous chapters. With the help of the empirical research of Chinese reality TV, some theoretical reflections on the concepts of "structures of feeling" and "Chinese feeling" then follow in order to expand the theoretical framework based on the perspective of relational affect. And finally, the limitations of this book and prospects for future research will be presented.

9.1   Rethinking the cultural politics of Chinese reality TV and affect

A basic finding of my research is that ideological formations operate affectively and intensively. Struggling between the state and the market, Chinese reality TV has become a battleground of competing ideologies between the global hegemony of neoliberalism and socialism. During localization, filtering out undesirable aspects of Western formats and transforming them in line with the hegemonic framework that privileges "Chinese characteristics" is a driving force of the Chinese broadcasting system. In the case of *X-Change*, while neoliberal logics of affective investment in producing enterprising, belabored, and self-branding subjects have been absorbed by Chinese producers, the formula of presenting anxiety and desire that makes reality TV so prevalent in the West is abandoned. Instead, modern psychological thinking and traditional cultural resources of Confucian family affection are appropriated to offer an affective and moral education in order to obliterate the negative effects of privatization and commercialization and to advocate for a collectivist and relational subjectivity. As a result, ideologies of neoliberalism, socialism and Confucianism are not contradictory to each other but juxtaposed, and integrated into an ambiguous yet open "structure of feeling" in a transitional China.

As I have shown in Chapter 7, by producing dramatic "money shots" that work on both the participants and audiences' somatosensory system, Chinese producers have found a successful way to achieve an affective connection with the audience. In this sense, the economic model of Western programs has offered a prototype for Chinese media to recognize the significant presence of emotions in our daily lives, to mobilize them as an exploitable resource, and to recruit then into capitalist infrastructure. This finding verified the views of many scholars who have pointed out that capital has penetrated into intimate, emotional and domestic relationships. Illouz's (2007) research on emotional capitalism is quite representative; she describes it as:

> a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange. (p. 5).

But as I argued in Chapter 2, despite the fact that mass media in China has been nudged into the free market, it is still a (post-)socialist national media

that remains under the supervision of the party and expresses care for and guidance to the public. The producers of *X-Change* are practicing the art of tightrope walking, trying to balance between the interests and demands of the middle class and socialist ideology as well as between entertainment and education, between sensational stories and moral teaching, and between high ratings and official censors.

The analysis of *X-Change* has shown that producers apply different affective strategies to arrange the life swap journey between the city and the countryside. Particularly focusing on the unprivileged, as I revealed in Chapter 8, affective discourses that echo the official "positive energy" and the Chinese dream are used to sanitize and transform narratives of suffering. Such an affective investment attempts to displace the feeling of suffering itself with the image of conquering suffering with a positive attitude. Therefore, while similar to its Western counterpart, Chinese reality TV also promotes middle-class norms and tastes, it has a different representation of lower class people. Instead of portraying them in a negative light or going as far as to ridicule or humiliate them, *X-Change* has given them moral superiority and even portrays them as moral purifiers to save the lost middle class. Through this, suffering is sublimated, and even becomes affectively charged moral capital. However, the fact that this form of capital is very difficult to trade with other forms of capital (social, economic, and cultural) in contemporary China determines that such rhetoric is only a placebo. Or worse, the uplifting of the image of vulnerable groups has concealed the social reality of rural–urban disparity silenced.

As a final reflection on these affective strategies discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, I extract two main conclusions: First, the "emotion work" of mass media has been incorporated into the propaganda paradigm of the CPC as a conscious strategy for its ideological governance. In the decades-long broadcasting history of *X-Change*, we have not only witnessed constant and intensive "hard" government regulations from the SARFT that directly control the content of reality shows, but a range of "soft" mobilizations that function as a general framework to modulate the affective potentials of life (both positive and negative potentials) by resonating with the existing ethics of survival in the ultrastable Confucian social structure. The affective dimension is the key in this evolved ideological work, which adds emotional appeal (rather than just intellectual appeal) to the CPC regime. It can be said that reality TV opens up a space for power to be privatized and to win over people's hearts by tapping into individual desires or emotions. To employ the concept of the

"modern social imaginary" from Charles Taylor (2004), the affective and psychic intervention of the show resonates at an emotional level with the "social imaginaries" designed by the government: the common and shared understanding that determines

> the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things going on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (p. 23).

Secondly, the soft emotion work of the CPC still lacks appeal to the urban middle class. To view from the toolbox they have mobilized, the urban middle class themselves are not buying the ideologies of positive energy and the Chinese dream, which are only targeted at rural people; for themselves what really effective are neoliberal psychology and Confucian family values. Under the cover of these positive ideologies, *X-Change* remains a TV program that proactively replicates rather than questions existing class separations. There is a denial of the existence of social stratification in the show, either by concealing the terms of class, or dislocating problems related to social injustices to the realms of psychology and morality – perfectly equipped for inscribing neoliberal ideologies of self-management and responsibility. Furthermore, associated with intimacy and affect, the show reproduces class differences through a productive process of establishing the relations, based on the way in which the unequal affective-symbolic order of a society that partakes in forming our ability to orient ourselves in society has been distributed. Therefore class and other identities of gender and race are not essential categories or fixed social positions; rather, they are always in the process of being reproduced in social encounters, and the affective responses signify how identity is lived as a "structure of feeling."

However, there are subtle layers of affective meanings expressed that lie beneath or beyond the ideological surface. Despite various ideological efforts to package the emotional performances into an overarching discourse of informing viewers how to feel, where to look, and what to expect; the audiovisual presentation of *X-Change* has to be based on the everyday life of ordinary people, and has to rely on affective connection with the audience. The ambiguous and complex affects and social realities therefore may leak out along the cracks of the "disjunctive Chinese media order" and what Goffman describes as "the dance of identification": a tension between the self and the anticipated identities (1961, p. 144). This makes the meaning space of the show

ambivalent and porous in a way that affiliated and identified by the lower social classes that coexists with the official positivity-oriented affects of the hegemonic class.

Complex mediated affective practices call for a broad methodological approach that takes into account both thought and feeling. I have presented such an arrangement methodological approach in Chapter 5, and suggested a re-reading of the mediated affective phenomena that have been read in terms of subjective disposition. The empirical analysis I offered in this sense is primarily focused on the performance of *kuqing* of the socially unprivileged in the show *X-Change*. Taking into account the confinement of dominant cultural logics and their associated knowledge, skills, experiences and organizing capabilities, rural participants have limited opportunities to dominate verbal expressions. However, the feeling of *kuqing*, primarily by means of the material and communicative bodies "at the very edge of semantic availability" (Williams, 1977, p. 134), has articulated the shared sadness of vulnerable people with a different temporal orientation. As the Chinese idiom says, "family troubles are not a thing to be talked about in public"; to confess one's bitter sufferings to the public through the media is inconsistent with this Chinese traditional cultural mentality, but is an effective approach for the underclass to enter public space. Showing vulnerability and *kuqing* is better viewed as a means of self-manifestation; it reflects a desire to tell others who one is. The despair of disadvantaged status and social inequality are transmitted primarily through tears and bodily expressions, thereby stimulating emotional support from those who feel bound by morals and ideals of justice. In this sense, *kuqing* is not merely a personal psychological feeling, but a vector of meaning that intervenes in the social, moral and political fields.

Admittedly, as many affect theorists (e.g. Ahmed, 2004; Gregg, 2011) have pointed out, affect functions subtly but powerfully in the formation of difference and classed otherness, and hence strengthens rather than challenges a dominant social order. In *X-Change*, by delicately selecting protagonists and ascribing the causes of social suffering, the visceral experience of social inequality is encoded as natural and normal in the process of social reform. Furthermore, affective discourses of hope and happiness are invested in creating the continual deferral of the future promise: "in the future you will have a happy life". The persistence of the Chinese dream resonates with what Berlant (2006) calls "cruel optimism", which describes our attachments to a cluster of promises that maintains our endurance for an object (person) or a fantasy (se-

curity), but that "indeed become obstacles to the flourishing of the subjects whose optimism animates them" (p. 23).

However, to place the performance of *kuqing* of *X-Change* in the broader historical context of *kuqing* culture, it can be seen that its popularity lies at least partly in its embeddedness within profound social ethics and aesthetic experiences. As Williams points out, "certain experiences, meanings and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation" (Williams, 1977, p. 122). By articulating with the "residual" tradition of *kuqing* culture that has gained political legitimacy as a key means of mass mobilization in the history of the Chinese revolution, *X-Change* has revived the collective feeling of *kuqing*, and has created a platform on which contentious voices and visual images from the rural point of view can be expressed. Such an act did not directly challenge the stability of current regime, but certain elements have implied values that had not been incorporated into the hegemonic power structure, making the performances simultaneously inside of and alternative to hegemonic structures of power.

Thus what we witness in *X-Change* is a rather complex and contradictory practice. It neither conforms to theories of hegemony that stress the domination of ideology nor to theories of cultural production that emphasize the cultural initiative and creativity of the working class. The show has to some extent integrated the two seemingly contradictory theories. Apparently urban upper-class culture does have hegemony over lower class culture in every respect, but the performance of *kuqing* of the rural people shows that they still have a relatively independent and "unspeakable" emotional repertoire (Röttger-Rössler, 2016; Lünenborg et al, 2021). Different from the social value system which is clear and stable, the emotional repertoire of the lower social classes is more ambiguous. It is a production of emotional content in relation to their experiences of daily life, and transfers an alternative meaning and potential in the heterogeneous social space of media.

However, as I also emphasized in Chapter 8, the mobilization and actualization of *kuqing* is not inevitably turned into a positive force that can motivate empowerment and emancipation. One might say that the politics of *kuqing* is double-edged: it has the power to move and mobilize affective connections and actions, and is simultaneously articulated with regulation, suppression, and extinction. As the process of depoliticization of *X-Change* 3.0 shows, with the tightening of ideological work, and the negative feedback stemming from

the aesthetic fatigue of the audience, the narrative of *kuqing* has gradually been withdrawn from the show, which also made its transformative potential more difficult to realize. Nevertheless, collective experience can be activated and reactivated during special moments in individual media encounters in the future. The power of affect lies in its interrelationality, sociality, and connection, which speak to an open yet dubious effect, as warned by Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, where they state that "there are no ultimate or final guaranteed – political, ethical, aesthetic, pedagogic, and otherwise – that capacities to affect and to be affected will yield an actualized next or new that is somehow better than 'now'" (p. 9–10).

9.2 From the Chinese experience to Chinese affective structure

Based on the above conclusions of the empirical analysis of *X-Change*, an attempt will be made here to theoretically reflect on Williams's prestigious concept "structure of feeling", and the concept "Chinese feeling" proposed recently by Chinese sociologist Zhou Xiaohong, inviting them in a conversation with the approach of relational affect. I hope this reflection can be help to bridge the West and the East on both affect theories and practices, so as to promote a better understanding of the micro-dynamics of affects in various social and cultural contexts.

On the whole, Chinese reality TV can be viewed as both having represented and reproduced the "structures of feeling" of broader social transformations in China. Such "structures of feeling", as Raymond Williams points out, have created a particular quality of social experience – "the undeniable experience of the present", and gives "the sense of a generation or of a period" (Williams, 1977, p. 128). Unlike "the official consciousness of an epoch, codified in its doctrines and legislation", Williams attempts to figure out the complex nuances of our immediate, lived perceptions of an era (Williams, 1979, p. 159). The "structure" is closely related to class; different classes can shape their own, specific structures of feeling. As my analysis of *X-Change* reveals, different affective responses to rapid social modernization have formulated two different but coexisting structures of feeling in the urban and the rural. These structures are also highly temporal and spatial – instead of being fixed or finished, a "structure" is itself flexible, adaptable, moving, and always in flux. As the Chinese case also verifies, the Chinese structures of feeling represented by

the three periods of *X-Change* undergo constant adjustment and change. In the tension between the dominant ideology of a time and the lived experience of the public, Chinese reality TV has become a hybrid field that emerges in the area of negotiation between different structures of feeling. Williams further elaborates on the structure as:

> a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emerging, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. (Williams, 1977, p. 132).

It is safe to infer that the term "feeling" in Williams's argument is not a physical experience or perception in the mundane and straightforward sense, but can be incorporated into the notion "affect" in the contemporary sense. In this sense, the recent turn to affect has more adequately theorized Williams's idea, and clarified the peculiar "something" he is looking for when he tentatively coined the notion "structures of feeling". Or, vice versa, considering that he attempts to integrate the dimension of lived experience which is "in process" into social and cultural analysis, Williams's work seems to prefigure the conspicuous contemporary interest in affect studies.

While the affective turn is in full swing in western social sciences and humanities, some Chinese scholars, based on their observations on contemporary China who is vigorously pursuing modernization, have also proposed to shift attention to the fatigue, pain and hope of this era, to view the contemporary "Chinese feeling" as a window from which to analyze social change. For example, Sun and Ryder (2016) proposed to explore the psychological implications of sociocultural transformation in China, especially the consequences of rising individualism and depression. In place of the "Chinese pattern" or "Chinese path" that concern macroscopic economic and social structural changes, Zhou (2012) proposed the concept "Chinese feeling" in order to capture the complex and subtle social mentality and spiritual world of the general public in a transitional era. Zhou (2013) argues that,

> On the macro level, the transition of Chinese social structure is endowed with noticeable duality. On the micro level, the changes in values and social mentality, or in "Chinese feeling", have also been characterized by their apparent marginality. This marginality, on the one hand, demonstrates that

"Chinese feeling" is the mental crystallization of social transition and the spiritual legacy of two successive but heterogeneous eras as well as the turn from the former era to the latter. On the other hand, it constitutes a unique perspective of understanding changes in contemporary China and an opportunity to construct social sciences with Chinese characteristics. (p. 21).

Like Williams, Zhou also attempts to incorporate experiential results into the perspective of theory and history, only focusing on the special historical period of China in transformation. However, despite the fact that both notions are rich and innovative, in empirical analysis they remain ambiguous, slippery, and shifting. In many cases they are used as a label to describe the entire lived or felt experience of a period. I have also applied them multiple times in this book, but mostly to identify and emphasize the unique yet universal transitional affective experiences in contemporary China, which have been often omitted or overlooked in structural and macroscopic social analyses. Thus, at the end of this book, after thoroughly exploring the work of affects on specific concrete situations, I propose to push such concepts a little further, by articulating with a social-relational approach and towards a Chinese "affective structure".

Instead of discussing the significance of "feeling" in a general sense, I suggest that a critical cultural studies approach based on the principle of relationality can be more empirically effective to examine how emotions, media, culture, and social formations are entangled in the dynamic sense-making process, and how the distinction and identity of individuals and collectives is constituted in this process. The issue of power inevitably comes to the center in analyzing the process, for mediated emotions are always performed in particular historicized and contextualized ways, highlighting and privileging certain expressive forms while ignoring or suppressing others. As my analysis has demonstrated, emotions in reality TV are framed and manipulated by systems of power, primarily capital and the state. Therefore, understanding the relationship between power and emotion is crucial to understanding the constituting of affective structure, which allows the exploration of why and how emotion is intertwined with certain political and cultural discourses, and how its potential is constrained or mobilized. Significantly, relational affect draws attention to contestations of these systems as much as to the logic by which they work. Put differently, with a focus on the ruptures and traces of movement and transformation in the affective structure, and how they may produce alternative emotional connections, oppositional subjects, and collec-

tive identities that advance social dynamism, the approach of relational affect makes it necessary to investigate the affective structure in the interplay between movement and discipline rather than focusing only on one side.

As I argued in Chapter 3, instead of complicating the endless arguments of various affect theories, we could conduct more concrete and detailed analyses on affective phenomena and processes of social life through the perspective of affect. Emotions are sometimes too pervasive that may lead scholars to overlook the fact that they are relational practices mobilized by different linguistic, cultural, and material resources, and that affective structures can be qualitatively different in their ways of shaping subjectivity and sociality. With the explosion of affects and emotions in social life today, there is an urgency for cultural studies to understand and theorize affects, "simply in order to understand what is happening around us – and to us – in a world where politics, economy, and culture are becoming increasingly affect-driven" (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015, p. 3). Therefore, it is necessary to call for more attention to affective phenomena, and to the complex and intricate ways in which affects mediate and transform representation, knowledge, power, culture, and the economy in various societies and cultures.

9.3 Limitations and perspectives for future research

In general, the analysis I performed in this book attempted to reveal the affective realities mediated by the Chinese reality show *X-Change.* I argued that debasing reality TV as trash television, or applauding it as a criticism of modernity from post-modernity, conceals rather than reveals it to be precisely a site where new understandings of power and ideology are coming into effect through affect and emotion. Therefore, in the conclusion I suggest more serious attention needs to be paid to how reality TV "matters". By revisiting Chinese reality TV's discourse framework and focusing on the affective layer, I have identified a sense-making mechanism, which is manifested on both the interpellation and management of emotional excess along dominant ideologies, and *kuqing* being captured from "real life" as a collective experience that can be described as in process, yet nonetheless situated in the larger contexts of contemporary and modern Chinese history. But due to time and resource constraints, my analysis has excluded a number of issues. Aside from the above contributions on theoretical and empirical analysis of related disciplines: affect theories, Chinese studies, cultural studies and media studies,

this research has a number of limitations. Although I would argue that these limitations do not make the research findings unconvincing, clarifying them can also help to open up new opportunities for more academic investment in the future.

It is obvious that I took the show *X-Change* as the main analytical object, which makes the focus of this research limited. With the attempt to inspire more research on the affective dimensions of media practice, I humbly suggest that cultural and television studies could endeavor to address open questions including: how affect and emotion are produced in other sub-genres of reality TV (such as talk shows, dating shows, makeover shows, etc.), or other genres of popular culture (for instance TV series and film), in other local settings (other media market segments except HSTV could be CCTV, Zhejiang TV, Dragon TV, etc.), take other socio-historical contexts as the background for research (my analysis is mainly based on social contexts of the urban-rural dichotomy and economic reform, others could base theirs on other phenomena of transformations or other periods in history). Besides, since the proliferation of reality shows in China is closely related with global trading patterns, comparative research can also applied to establish the similarities and differences between different societies.

It should also be pointed out that my analysis has primarily explored the product and the production side of the show, focusing on the appeal and potentiality of the audiovisual texts, while the audience side has not been fully examined. Reality TV definitely makes people feel something. How different audiences register affective experiences of encountering a reality show differently, what impact it will have, and how should we understand it, are open questions for future research. With the ever-evolving mediascape, the impact of of digital technologies on television production and consumption, and the fact that the confinement of viewers to the living room is breaking down and new media practices are emerging, have challenged future research to develop a comprehensive methodology to address what the media does in such a new technological environment.

Finally, I hope to particularly emphasize the significance of the Chinese case for affect studies. Chinese media is a particularly interesting case; constant conflict and negotiation between political, economic, and cultural forces has made it a perfect platform to explore the construction of Chinese modernity and its workings. My analysis has shown that including the perspective of affect has strong explanatory power to help us understand the affective structures in contemporary China that are not reducible to but nevertheless

entangled with hegemonic discursive and ideological orders. It has shown that such a complex media practice is implicated in the affective-meaning system and the political economy of Chinese society. With this reflection, I affirm that China's social realities can offer a fresh contribution to current affect studies.

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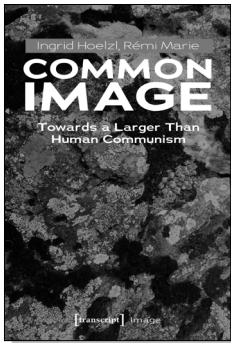Zisi (n.d.). *Zhong yong [The Doctrine of the Mean]*. Retrieved 1 July, 2021 from https://ctext.org/liji/zhong-yong/zhs.

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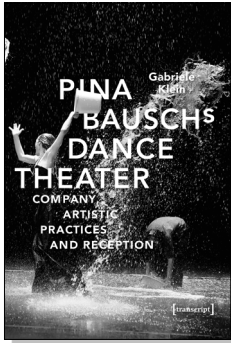
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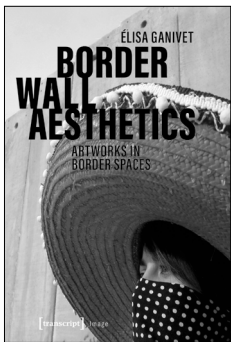PDF: 29,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5055-0

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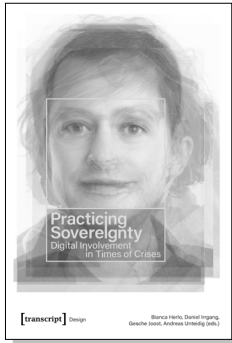**Artworks in Border Spaces**

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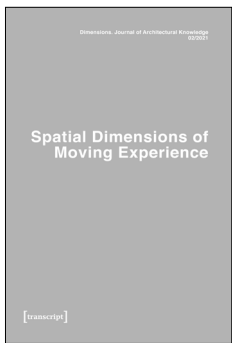
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