

## Chapter 7: Emotional Excess and Therapeutic Governance

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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 positions become visible and recognizable. In accordance with the quasi-documentary genre, *X-Change* 1.0 still surreptitiously hide conflictual scenes behind 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 affective encounters of urban and rural protagonists. I consider how emotions – in particular anger, anxiety, and sadness in these scenes – as cultural and relational 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 including 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 urban 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' anticipation 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 web-pages 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 “judgment 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 Shun Yao 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)<sup>1</sup> in contemporary China.

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1 The conceptual metaphor *zhong ti xiyong* (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 Shun Yao'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 Chen-zheng 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 (*qingqing*) the most privileged human emotions and the foundation of all other emotions. According to Mencius, *qingqing* 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 *qingqing* 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 (*qingqin* 亲亲), the second is benevolence towards other people (*renmin* 仁民), and finally the care for all creatures (*aifu* 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 *qingqing* 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 Shun-yao 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 *qingqing* and transform into the perfect urban middle class successor.