

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” (*fu xing zhi lu* 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 sophisticated, 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 (*qingqing* 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 tical 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 helplessness. 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 forces¹. 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-representation (both verbal and physical), self-ignorance, self-sacrifice, dedication, and

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 Antigonic – 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*

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 "in-harmonious 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 production” to “the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development 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 priorities of the whole party’s work” (cited in Xinhua, 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 discourses 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 reconciling mobilization with control, Xi’s ideological work aims at avoiding a tricky situation in which “relaxation causes chaos, control causes deadly silence” (*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, ‘effects 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 either 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 history and revolution is so strong that it is far more than an individual feeling (that can be dissolved with psychological governmentality), but more importantly, *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.