

Chapter 6: Telling Stories, Swapping Lives

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A lifestyle role-exchanging program developed and valued highly by HSTV after *Super Girl*, it is an innovative program that adopts the model of documentary+reality format, known as the ‘new ecological documentary (*xin-shengtai jilupian* 新生态纪录片)’. The two parties participating in the program exchanged roles in seven days to experience each other’s lives. The program was filmed throughout the entire process, and authentically broadcasted after rough editing.

<http://zixun.hunantv.com/lanmu/bxj/index.html>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The storyline of *X-Change* is simple, with two parallel narrative lines focusing on the transformation of urban youth and rural youth and their families respectively. With the intention to “push the exchange to the extreme”, in producer Qian Liu’s (2006) words, *X-Change* generally pairs protagonists who are very different from each other. While the selected urban youths are mainly from first- and second-tier cities, such as Shanghai, Xi’an, Chengdu; the rural youths are selected from poverty-stricken areas in West China such as Huining in Gansu, Basha Miao Village in Guizhou, Xinzhuang in Yunnan. Usually urban youths are raised by affluent families in which one or both parents are from elite class or the cognitariat³; by contrast, the parents of ru-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

X-Change 1.0 obtained approvals from official institutions⁴ and won several national and international television awards soon after it was broadcast. In 2006, the show was awarded first prize in the Hunan television ranking, and won the “Annual Creative Program” award issued by the journal *New Weekly*; in 2007, it was awarded the “best reality TV program” at the Singapore Asian TV Festival, and the “Annual Public Welfare Program” in the television selection organized by Sohu. In 2007, HSTV established the *Hope Project – Hunan Satellite TV “Happy Growth Foundation”* to provide financial support for rural areas. Furthermore, when collecting materials on the Internet, I found that many middle schools use *X-Change* as a supplement to mental health education, and have uploaded multiple episodes or clips of *X-Change* on the school website for teachers to broadcast in the classroom or for students to watch after class. The ways in which the series integrates charitable institutions and reaches out to schools partially confirmed the credibility and educational value of the show, and helped to transform the “vulgar” and “naive” cultural labels and public images of HSTV formed by *Super Girl*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6.4 Conclusion and discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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