

Chapter 9: Conclusion and Discussion

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

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

9.1 Rethinking the cultural politics of Chinese reality TV and affect

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

9.2 From the Chinese experience to Chinese affective structure

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

9.3 Limitations and perspectives for future research

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

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

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

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

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

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