Chapter 1: Introduction

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

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

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

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

1.1   Locating affect and emotion in reality TV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2   Overview of the chapters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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