

Urban and Rural Encounters in Chinese Postsocialist Film and Media

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines mainstream popular forms of nonfiction film and media in postsocialist Mainland China. I trace how these programs reflect and shape contemporary Chinese visions of reality—in particular, how these programs capture China’s rural-urban divide, and the way it shapes social structure, class, and identity within China. The primary areas of inquiry include nonfiction viewer address, the adaptation of foreign media forms, and the consumption of images of rural space by an implicitly urban viewer. These popular documentary and reality television shows use an essentialized vision of rural space to instruct viewers in proper social behavior and orientation. While new media offers rural users themselves an opportunity to participate in the creation of the rural imaginary, the videos these users create complicate but do not efface rural-urban divisions.

Each chapter focuses on a different television program or new media platform, and the dissertation proceeds roughly chronologically from television documentary in the 2000s to contemporary mobile video sharing on Kwai. Chapter one considers how a China Central Television (CCTV) documentary update program rebroadcasted and updated documentaries from the 1990s, a period of upheaval in the representation of regular people on television. These updates depict reform era change through a developmental logic that leaves little space for the ambivalence and varied perspectives the original films represent. Chapter two focuses on a Hunan Satellite Television (HSTV) reality program, *X-Change*, which was loosely inspired by the UK reality program *Wife Swap*. The HSTV show, which depicts urban and rural youth swapping places to learn from each other's lifestyle, reinforces a spatially determined understanding of social division. Chapter three looks at how predominantly urban-oriented dating shows (focusing on Jiangsu Satellite Television's *If You Are the One*) assist viewers and contestants alike in navigating a mediatized reality and use data and expert commentary to rationalize romance. Chapter four focuses on Kwai (*Kuaishou*), a popular video sharing application that is associated with rural users, and argues that Kwai is structured as a social space that allows users to engage in alternative forms of visibility.

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Introduction



Figure 1: Urban aggression at the cinema

The second short in the 2014 omnibus film *One Day (You Yi Tian)* begins with a scene of jarring social tension in the cinema. A young man entering a Huayi Brothers Cinema shoves a young boy begging for change, shouting that he “has seen too many brats like him in Beijing” (fig. 1). This brief altercation situates some of the most pressing forms of social conflict in the People’s Republic of China within the public space of the profit-oriented movie theater: the conflicts between urban wealth and rural poverty; between those enjoying the fruits of China’s rapid development and those left on the margins; and between generations which have achieved security and generations for whom security seems elusive.

The cinema provokes the altercation, and it also harmoniously resolves it. The theater’s kindly manager, played by well-known actor Wang Qianyuan, becomes the boy’s savior. The

manager confronts the criminal who has beaten the boy and forced him to beg for money, and the cinema becomes the seemingly mute youngster's new home. One day, while watching *Tai Chi* (Stephen Fung, 2012) a period martial arts film, the boy gets up, runs to the screen, and wails until the manager must dismiss the audience and refund all the tickets. The theater manager realizes the scene is of particular importance to the boy; he has recognized his rural hometown in the background of the fight scene. As the title foreshadows, the manager then takes the boy home to the rural idyll from which he was kidnapped. The short film ends with onscreen text that directly appeals to the audience and specifies what they should do when they encounter such children, such as taking photos of suspected victims and informing authorities.

The public service announcement with which the short film concludes is not the only way the film blurs the lines between fiction and reality and between public service and entertainment. *One Day* is a self-described 'film for the public good' (*gongyi pian*) sponsored—not coincidentally—by Huayi Brothers. The tickets were only five yuan (~75 cents USD), and the promotional materials emphasize that the celebrities who participated did not receive a salary.¹ With such low ticket prices, what viewers contribute is not money—as organizations like the Will Rogers Institute have solicited from American theatergoers for decades—but their attention to the film's educational message, which in and of itself is presumed to help unfortunate children.² This short, *Take Me Home (Huijia de lu)*, was directed by Shine Yang, an American-educated, Taiwanese director who has also worked for the Discovery Channel.³

¹ A Mo 阿墨, "900 tian zhiwei *You Yi Tian*" 900 天只为《有一天》 [900 days for just *One Day*], *Qinggan Duben* 情感读本 18 (2015): 11-14.

² "Institute FAQs," Will Rogers Institute, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://wrinstitute.org/about/institute-faq/>.

³ "Shine Yang," Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://www.tieff.org/en/directors/shine-yang/>.

I begin with this example because it neatly encapsulates the central concern of this dissertation: the way in which nonfictional and semi-fictionalized visual media serve as a forum for negotiating tensions between the rural and the urban in contemporary China. The rural is personified through the character of the innocent child, who suffers in the city he has been forced to inhabit. As for the urbanites, represented through the young theatergoer, they find rural people's presence in the city irritating but also enjoy watching films set in rural areas. As a media product intended to both move and educate its viewers, the filmmakers of *One Day* also assume the film's viewers are urban and in a position to help these children if properly persuaded—i.e. if they are inspired by the example of the theater manager. Although the film's setting is clearly product placement for Huayi Brothers, the token fee viewers paid to watch the film and the actors' eschewing of financial compensation also suggests an ambivalent attitude towards contemporary Chinese society's orientation toward profit. The entangled relationships between growing social inequality, anxieties about commercialization, and urbanites' simultaneous attraction and repulsion to rural spaces and people are what this project will map out. Furthermore, what does it mean for nonfiction texts—and particularly those responding to growing marketization and increasing competition—to depict rural spaces and people? As the example of *One Day* demonstrates, the sense that mass media should contribute to society and that film viewing is not merely about entertainment continues to circulate despite the emphasis on profit. How do the producers of films and television shows satisfy viewers' desires for entertainment while remaining within the good graces of state censors who expect that these texts will engage viewers in politically and socially advantageous ways? Finally, when social media facilitates self-representation even for poor rural users, how does that shift complicate the relationship between the viewers and the viewed?

This dissertation focuses on mainstream nonfiction, which I define as films, television shows, and short-form video that may be viewed through officially sanctioned sources within Mainland China. In these formats specifically, class has been turned into space. In the postsocialist era, the tension between the urban and the rural encodes class-based distinctions, and the symbolic depictions of each mode of life (which both overlap and surpass actually existing rural and urban locales) serve as the ideological stage for questions of both the proper social behavior of the Chinese citizen and China's future as a nation. Depicting these spaces in nonfiction is always fraught because the places and the people who live there must represent how producers hope the imagined audience will understand the divisions of society, class, and social roles. I understand these popular texts as central to understanding Chinese society in the context of globalization and its "distribution of the sensible" in Jacques Rancière's sense of the systems of "what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done."⁴ Much of the scholarship on Chinese nonfiction in English focuses on independent documentaries that are essentially inaccessible for regular Mainland Chinese, but it is these widely available popular nonfiction forms that shape how most Chinese understand their own society. And the questions of performance, ethics, and reception raised by independent documentaries are by no means absent from these more mainstream texts.

In the remainder of this introduction, I contextualize my work through an outline of what the rural-urban divide has meant in twentieth century China, particularly in the era since market reforms were initiated in 1979. I then explore the relationship between my project and existing scholarship on PRC documentary, as well as popular nonfiction media from around the globe.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), 85.

The Rural-Urban Divide in Contemporary Chinese Society

The problem of rural development has been a central issue for intellectuals, revolutionaries, and reformers throughout the twentieth century in China. For revolutionaries in the 1920s and 1930s, one's position towards rural China defined political identity.⁵ In Xiaorong Han's history of political discourse about the rural, revolutionaries and intellectuals first valorize the rural for its untainted nature, supposedly free of the corrupting influence of foreign products and ideas rampant in the cities. They later recognize the power of rural people, but "peasants were believed to be potential, not actual revolutionaries. They needed to be inspired, mobilized, and organized by the intellectuals. If the revolutionary intellectuals or political activists were able to awake by themselves, then the peasants had to be awakened by others."⁶ Even when the political power of peasants is acknowledged, intellectuals nevertheless characterize them as recipients rather than sources of knowledge. Kate Merkel-Hess's concept of the "rural modern" examines a different historical possibility for modernization, which a range of rural reformers from the 1920s-1940s hoped to catalyze through rural education, that would depend on rural people's own bottom-up initiative.⁷

Even after the Chinese Communist Party's victory in 1949, due in a large part to rural mobilization, ambivalence towards rural people continued. Officials saw peasants as powerful agents of revolution but still understood the countryside as harboring stronger ties to tradition and superstition. Daniel Kelliher argues that the Cultural Revolution was an extreme example of this "dual nature" theory: "On the one hand, the Party sent urbanites down to the villages to learn

⁵ Xiaorong Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant, 1900-1949*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 17.

⁶ Han, 53.

⁷ Kate Merkel-Hess, *Rural Modern: Reconstructing the Self and State in Republican China*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

from peasants as simple exemplars of revolutionary spirit. On the other hand, the left wing of the Party attacked capitalist tendencies with renewed zeal, condemning peasant nature for giving rise to such ‘tails of capitalism’ as raising chickens or pigs in one's yard for extra income.”⁸ The valorization of revolutionary spirit and condemnation of traditional or capitalistic tendencies contributed to an ambivalent relationship between rural and urban.

This ambivalence hardened boundaries between rural and urban people, spaces, and cultures. Han notes that philosophers such as “Zhang Dongsun and many others noticed that the urban–rural difference was so dramatic that it actually made the Chinese cities and villages different kinds of society.”⁹ Given the momentous scope of political, economic, and social change in Mainland China in the twentieth century, it is remarkable how many Chinese continue to perceive the rural-urban divide in the same way.¹⁰ Intellectuals, revolutionaries, and reformers often understand the reconciliation of these “different kinds of societies” as the ultimate goal of China’s national project. Yet, because of rural China’s perceived connection to tradition, it sometimes served as a way out of foreign-influenced modernization projects. For example, Alexander Day explains that the New Rural Reconstruction Movement, which dates from the late 1990s, connects directly to the rural reconstruction movements from the beginning of the 20th century that Merkel-Hess studies.¹¹ Day explains that, “Critical of the assumption that modernization equals urbanization, Li Yuanxing, for example, characterizes the NRRM as the latest stage of a century of attempts to find an alternative modernization path based on rural

⁸ Daniel Kelliher, “Chinese Communist Political Theory and the Rediscovery of the Peasantry,” *Modern China* 20, no. 4 (1994): 397.

⁹ Han, 80.

¹⁰ See examples of current understandings of this divisions in relation to Kwai in Chapter 4.

¹¹ Alexander Day, “The End of the Peasant? New Rural Reconstruction in China,” *boundary 2* 35, no. 2 (2008): 60.

China instead of urban China.”¹² Day contextualizes both projects in terms of their global orientation, as finding a way to resist global capitalism through something other than the Western path of industrialization and urbanization.¹³ The anthropologist Zhao Xudong also connects urban and rural divisions to the spread of Western ideas—and in particular, binary thinking—which was further entrenched after the establishment of the PRC.¹⁴ Zhao seeks to challenge contemporary understandings of the rural-urban divide as irreconcilable opposites and to return to a neo-Confucian version of the complementary relations between the city and the country as a way out of current antagonisms between the two environments.

My project focuses on how the rural-urban divide is portrayed in media, and how regular urban or rural viewers approach, understand, and ultimately participate in the media representation of these spaces. My understanding of this process is rooted in the recent work of anthropologists such as Emily Yeh, Jenny Chio, Li Zhang, and Mun Young Cho, who engage directly with these spaces, populations, and media figures as part of their attempts to understand the everyday lives of rural people or rural migrants in urban areas. Zhang and Cho look at rural migrants within the cities, while Yeh and Chio consider how these relations play out in rural areas. Cho’s ethnography of the urban poor in Northeast China contributes an important understanding of how downwardly mobile urbanites, former employees of state-owned enterprises who lost their jobs due to market reforms, distinguish themselves from recent rural

¹² Day, 60.

¹³ Day, 49-50.

¹⁴ Zhao Xudong 赵旭东 and Yang Xiuye 杨修业, “Zhongguo chengxiang guanxi de lixiang leixing: jiyu yizhong wenhua zhuanxing renleixue de tansuo” 中国城乡关系的理想类型——基于一种文化转型人类学的探索 [The ideal type of urban-rural relations in China in the perspective of cultural transformation of anthropology], *Yunnan Shifan Daxue Xuebao* 云南师范大学学报 49, no. 1 (2017): 48-63.

migrants and blame the newcomers for straining public resources.¹⁵ In Cho's account, even within cities, residential status (based on the *hukou*) trumps class and leads to divisions within the concept of "the people" and who belongs in the city.¹⁶ Zhang emphasizes how such divisions are exacerbated by media portrayals of migrants and their communities as dangerous, unclean, and crime-ridden. Zhang explains, "these images and anecdotes circulate in the city, eventually running together to become elaborate urban myths that shape the popular urban imagination about migrants and their communities."¹⁷ For Zhang, the media works against rural migrants to blame them for their own poverty.

Emily Yeh and Jenny Chio focus on rural spaces and how media images contribute to the understanding of contemporary rurality, with particular attention to the physical space. Chio's concept of "rural modernity" emphasizes the constructed, political nature of the rural, created in part through developmental plans and modeling. For Chio, rural tourism, as the driver of economic development, exhorts rural people to "make a spectacle of yourselves."¹⁸ Chio concludes that as scholars, we must "account for how power shapes the spectacle of development but also how those who constitute spectacle may reshape the desired or intended effects of power."¹⁹ Yeh similarly emphasizes the importance and power of the image in governmental narratives of development through a focus on housing in Tibet. Yeh argues that changes to the built landscape, in the form of housing "gifted" by the central government to Tibetans, signifies

¹⁵ Mun Young Cho, *The Specter of "the People": Urban Poverty in Northeast China*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 43.

¹⁶ Cho, 43.

¹⁷ Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 140.

¹⁸ Jenny Chio, "Rendering Rural Modernity: Spectacle and Power in a Chinese Ethnic Tourism Village," *Critique of Anthropology* 37, no. 4 (2017): 418.

¹⁹ Chio, 435.

differently for the givers and the receivers, as either evidence of generosity or as a symbol of governmental power.²⁰ These anthropologists point to how binary divisions between rural and urban, whether drawn from Western conceptions of modernity or through older Chinese traditions, shape social status, city space, and interpersonal relations. Yeh uses fluid Tibetan notions of rural and urban to challenge the ideas of scholars like Zhao Xudong cited earlier who suggest Han culture did not create sharp divisions between the two spaces.²¹

In contemporary Chinese society, notions of modernity, however, do not merely influence intellectuals or circulate among politicians and thinkers. Instead, as media forms move fluidly around the world, narratives of the rural and urban borrow and adapt media forms from Western media—documentary television programming, reality television formats, social media platforms—while simultaneously navigating local ideas and culture. These negotiations with foreign media form an important facet of my project, but they must first be grounded in a brief historical overview of Chinese nonfiction and its social or didactic orientation.

Chinese Approaches to Pedagogical and Nonfiction Media

Many scholars have noted the importance of social education goals to Chinese film from its early history.²² Zheng Zhengqiu is a key figure in Republican era culture (1912-1949), because he bridges theater and film and was particularly successful in both forms. Film scholar Zhong Dafeng analyzes Zheng Zhengqiu's writing and argues that it emphasizes the combination of popular narratives and moral guidance: "As a critic he was greatly concerned with the social

²⁰ Emily T. Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 236.

²¹ Yeh, 197-200.

²² For example, see Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution After the Cultural Revolution*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 160.

and educational function of the theater, believing that, ‘Theater is the laboratory of social education, and actors are the good teachers imparting this education.’ He was not simply didactic; rather, he sought to convey ideas through right material and effective plots.”²³ What is significant about Zheng’s films for Zhong and others is that they succeeded in combining didactic goals with a pleasurable narrative form. In the same period, director Cai Chusheng also understood cinema as a tool to reach a mass audience.²⁴ As an outreach tool best suited to those who would not otherwise think about ideological questions, cinema should address those drawn in by entertainment, since those who would seek out an explicitly political film do not need the education it provides. While Cai understands spectators as diversified, he also clearly understands the filmmaker’s role as an authoritative figure who will instruct those with less knowledge and consciousness of ‘reality.’ Thus, Cai hoped to combine didactic motivation with entertainment. This combination differs from Zheng’s more generalized social didacticism and points forward to certain facets of Maoist understanding of mass spectators. At the same time, Cai proposes an ideological looseness and focus on entertainment that, for the most part, would not continue.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, nationalism and box office pressure ceded their place to ideological correctness and spectatorial address as the primary focus of film production, consumption and critique. As Chris Berry argues, this era established a formal and narrative system that, like classical Hollywood, operated through standard

²³ Zhong Dafeng, “From Wenmingxi (Civilized Play) to Yingxi (Shadowplay): The Foundation of Shanghai Film Industry in the 1920s,” trans. Zhen Zhang and Yingjin Zhang, *Asian Cinema* 9, no. 1 (1997): 50.

²⁴ Cai Chusheng, translated and quoted in Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 43.

conventions of character development, editing techniques, and narrative patterns.²⁵ Moral and political messages coincide; a good citizen adheres to the political doctrine, and films encourage this behavior through a coherent mode of address and explicit textual models, whether socialist realism for most of the seventeen years period or the aestheticized model opera theory of three prominences during the Cultural Revolution. Jason McGrath argues that in model opera films, aesthetics and formalism were heightened to the point of paradoxically obscuring the films' ideology. He argues that it is "precisely at the point when political determination of artistic form appears to be at its height that ideology might suddenly fall victim to form itself. The culture of the Cultural Revolution thus may have sown the seeds of its own ideological collapse."²⁶ After the Cultural Revolution, the changing political and cultural climate led to rapid changes in the subject matter, style, and form of narrative filmmaking.²⁷

Documentaries in the Maoist period and the early reform era both emphasized the authoritative voice of the text. Yingchi Chu describes this as the "dogmatic mode," because it greatly restricts viewer interpretation in favor of filmmaker control.²⁸ Ying Qian complicates Chu's "dogmatic" label through an analysis of Maoist documentary's visionary and imaginative aspects; documentaries were as much about envisioning a possible future as dictating viewers'

²⁵ Chris Berry, "Writing on Blank Paper: The Classical Cinema Before 1976 as Didactic Paradigm," in *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution After the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 27-76.

²⁶ Jason McGrath, "Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films and the Realist Tradition in Chinese Cinema," *The Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 2-3 (2010): 344.

²⁷ Tony Rayns, "Chinese Vocabulary: An Introduction to *King of the Children* and the New Chinese Cinema," in Chen Kaige and Tony Rayns, *King of Children and the New Chinese Cinema* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 1-58.

²⁸ Yingchi Chu, "The Dogmatic Documentary: The Missing Mode," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 13, no. 4 (2015): 409.

relationship to present reality.²⁹ Nevertheless, the dominance of the Soviet-influenced “illustrated lecture” (*zhuanti pian*) style of PRC documentary through the 1980s left ample room for stylistic innovation and new documentary subject matter that would be taken up by independent and television producers in the 1990s.³⁰

The New Documentary Movement and the *Diceng*

Extensive English-language scholarship analyzes the New Documentary Movement from a variety of perspectives and considers a range of predominantly independent filmmakers.³¹ Because most Chinese independent documentaries depict marginalized subjects from the lower social strata (*diceng*), many of the arguments about independent documentary in China focus not on reception (which is limited in any case, especially domestically) but on the ethics of production. J.P. Sniadecki and Yiman Wang explore this issue through David MacDougall’s sense of intersubjectivity or co-authorship. Wang emphasizes that “the ‘reality’ that is documented does not necessarily pre-exist, but rather develops from the circumstances of the here-and-now, and the way it develops has to do with the specific configuration of co-authorship.”³² Similarly, Sniadecki finds a reflexive impulse even in works in which the directors

²⁹ Ying Qian, “Visionary Realities: Documentary Cinema in Socialist China,” (dissertation, Harvard University, 2013).

³⁰ Hong Zhang, “The Internationalisation of Chinese Television: Manifestations and Power Interplays, 1978-1991,” *Javnost—The Public* 18, no. 2 (2011): 61.

³¹ Chris Berry, Xinyu Lu, and Lisa Rofel, eds., *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement for the Public Record*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011). Zhang Zhen and Angela Zito, eds., *DV-Made China: Digital Subjects and Social Transformations after Independent Film*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015). Matthew D. Johnson, Keith B. Wagner, Tianqi Yu and Luke Vulpiani, eds., *China’s iGeneration: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-first Century*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

³² Yiman Wang, “‘I Am One of Them’ and ‘They Are My Actors’: Performing, Witnessing, and DV Image-Making in Plebian China,” in *The New Chinese Documentary Film*

does not appear onscreen through the notion of an “embodied camera” that imprints the image with traces of the subjectivity of the person who wields it.³³ The question of the conditions of production dovetails with Lü Xinyu’s idea of self-ethics as central to documentary filmmaking. As Yomi Braester explains, Lü’s concept of self-ethics shifts the question of who can represent the *diceng* from the identity of the filmmaker to the choices they make in positioning themselves vis-à-vis their subjects.³⁴ For Wang Xiaolu, this position is defined by the shared position of filmmakers and their subjects. He argues, “The film-subject and the filmmaker are in an equally powerless situation, and this parallels the development of civil society in China. Being outside the environment of power does not provide much freedom of action, so in order to face such a hard reality, filmmakers can only implement this observational style.”³⁵ Without opportunities to act, filmmakers instead just document and witness the society around them.

While this scholarship focuses on the relations between the filmmaker and the subject, reception and concepts of the documentary viewer are central to reconsiderations of documentary outside China. Stella Bruzzi’s work on new documentary posits that documentary film and viewers have always been conscious of the fabrication necessary in the filmmaking process and thus the search for the truth of the film is not present in the filmmaking process, through non-intervention as argued by direct cinema practitioners, but instead at the moment of reception. For example, archival images in a found footage film can be reused in an oppositional way that

Movement: For the Public Record, eds. Chris Berry, Lü Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 227.

³³ John Paul Sniadecki, “Digital Jianghu: Independent Documentary in a Beijing Art Village,” (dissertation, Harvard University, 2013), 84.

³⁴ Yomi Braester, “For Whom Does the Director Speak?: The Ethics of Representation in Documentary Film Criticism,” in *Filming the Everyday: Independent Documentaries in Twenty-First Century China*, eds. Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 33-49.

³⁵ Translated in John Paul Sniadecki, “Digital Jianghu,” 103.

leaves space for the images' original meaning to coexist with the compilation film's contradictory aim. Bruzzi explains, "Just as [Esther] Shub and those who follow her create a dialectical relationship between original film and its recontextualisation, so they do not believe that the marked clarity of their own political position will stand in the way of audiences formulating their own opinions."³⁶ Thus, the key moment is reception, when active spectators will critically examine the evidence provided and come to their own conclusions, despite the filmmaker's politically explicit voice.

Chris Cagle complicates the notion that filmmakers trust in the active, critical viewer through an analysis of contemporary documentaries that seem intent on diminishing the formal markings of didactic documentary without actually surrendering control over how viewers will read the film. For Cagle, films like *Hoop Dreams* (James, 1994) are examples of a form of "postclassical narration [that] combines elements of classical and direct-cinema narration. Its structure and argumentation suggest the openness of direct cinema without relinquishing the clarity of classical documentary."³⁷ To what extent, then, do contemporary filmmakers and television producers, working in an age of varied nonfictional audience address, anticipate a critical viewer capable of considering the film or television program as an argument? And how might the pedagogically driven media history of the PRC influence the imagined position of the nonfiction viewer?

Cagle's argument that contemporary documentary combines direct cinema's openness and classical documentary's rhetorical control sheds light on Luke Robinson's discussion of contingency and metaphor through the concept of *xianchang* in Chinese New Documentary.

³⁶ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 2nd ed, (London: Routledge, 2006), 29.

³⁷ Chris Cagle, "Postclassical Nonfiction: Narration in the Contemporary Documentary," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 1 (2012): 54.

Xianchang was a term that originally denoted filming on location and can be translated as “on site.”³⁸ For Robinson, the first phase of the New Documentary movement depended on a managed version of public filmmaking that anticipated and minimized contingency, despite a focus on the *xianchang*, in order to facilitate a metaphorical invocation of larger society through the experiences of regular people in a public location. This phase of the movement is about space instead of time, and the various scenes presented in a documentary do not suggest a linear timeline, but instead are organized in order to make an argument about the space’s metaphorical meaning.³⁹ Unlike Cagle, who emphasizes the openness of direct cinema texts, Robinson understands Frederick Wiseman’s influence on the new documentary movement as encouraging a rhetorical use of metaphor. He sees Wu Wenguang’s *Jiang Hu: Life on the Road* (1999) as allowing the viewer to “analyze broader social change. The metaphorical or allegorical mode thus becomes the form through which the relationship between daily life and more abstract socio-political issues can be traced in a more concrete manner, imbuing both with meaning.”⁴⁰ The second phase of the movement, in contrast, focused on the particular and the private and rejects this use of metaphor, which Robinson connects to a longer tradition of learning from socialist models that I discussed briefly in relation to PRC film history earlier in this introduction.⁴¹

³⁸ Yomi Braester, “Excuse Me, Your Camera is in My Face: Auteurial Intervention in PRC New Documentary,” in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, eds. Chris Berry, Lü Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 197.

³⁹ Luke Robinson, “From ‘Public’ to ‘Private’: Chinese Documentary and the Logic of *Xianchang*,” in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, eds. Chris Berry, Lü Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 182-7.

⁴⁰ Robinson, “From ‘Public’ to ‘Private,’” 187.

⁴¹ Robinson, “From ‘Public’ to ‘Private,’” 192.

The way in which Chinese documentary depicts the relationship between the individual and their larger social reality cannot be neatly attributed either to foreign models of documentary or to socialist understandings of media. Chris Berry cites Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue, and Li Hong as examples of Chinese filmmakers uncomfortable with foreign media like the BBC's singular interest in supporting Chinese documentary that deals with social issues.⁴² Instead, the filmmakers Berry profiles want to make films about individuals that are not constrained by either the ideological boundaries of domestic Chinese television or the social issue expectations of foreign media. In Berry's account, filmmakers who participate to some extent in the mainstream, domestic system in the PRC and also make their own films seek funding from various sources are not focused on disseminating explicit dissent. Instead, the openness of first phase New Documentary films like *The Square* that Robinson interprets as metaphorical, was instead about the possibility of adding a different perspective on Chinese reality while retaining plausible deniability as to the films' social meaning.⁴³ If Bruzzi's understanding of Shub's work posits a particularly strong critical viewer, who can recognize both the filmmaker's argument and the intent of the original footage, then the independent filmmakers Berry considers hope instead to deceive weak censors with indeterminate images that may or may not speak to slightly more savvy viewers.

Those potentially savvy viewers encountered New Documentary primarily through its connections to television. Lü Xinyu emphasizes that the new documentary movement cannot be isolated within independent circles and "took place for the most part on television, and that's an

⁴² Chris Berry, "Independently Chinese: Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue, and Chinese Documentary," in *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, eds. Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 118-9.

⁴³ Berry, "Independently Chinese," 114.

important phenomenon.”⁴⁴ She emphasizes that not only are both independent and mainstream work part of the movement, but also that they develop simultaneously: “It must be said that the new documentary movement was born at the same time both inside and outside the system.”⁴⁵ Jiang Juan echoes Lü’s ideas when she discusses the development of independent documentary. Jiang explains that in the early 1990s, “Chinese mainstream documentary and independent documentary shared a short and precious moment of intersection and synthesis.”⁴⁶ My dissertation begins with that moment of synthesis to think through how independent and mainstream work grapple with rural-urban difference and approach documentary production differently. In later chapters, I consider how Chinese nonfiction media, particularly reality television, draws inspiration from non-Chinese formats, negotiating global and local forms of ideology and viewer address.

Reality TV in China and the West

For many media scholars, reality television tempers the threat of global media homogenization brought on by direct import of foreign television. Localized adaptation of popular formats, so it is believed, will at least be made in local languages and address aspects of local culture, a step better than directly importing foreign (usually American) content.⁴⁷

Programs directly adapted or influenced by Western formats in the PRC offer a compelling

⁴⁴ Lü Xinyu 吕新雨, *Jilu Zhongguo: dangdai Zhongguo xin jilupian yundong* 记录中国: 当代中国新纪录运动 [Record China: the contemporary Chinese new documentary movement] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2003), 17. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

⁴⁵ Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo*, 16.

⁴⁶ Jiang Juan 姜娟, *Zhuti, shidian, biaoda: Zhongguo duli jilupian yanjiu* 主体·视点·表达: 中国独立纪录片研究 [Subject, perspective and expression: studies on Chinese independent documentary] (Beijing: Zhongguo Chuanmei Daxue, 2012), 34.

⁴⁷ Silvio Waisbord, “McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats,” *Television and New Media* 5, no. 4 (2004): 359-83.

opportunity to consider how a similar structure can be made to fit radically different media contexts. Chinese film and media, in view of the particular media history noted above, respond to audience expectations distinct from those of the Anglo-American context.

Scholars, particularly those writing in English, usually understand reality television as the expression of an ideology of neoliberal self-management.⁴⁸ Wendy Brown argues that neoliberal politics imply that “[the] ‘rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action [...] the problem of the ‘mismanaged’ life can become a way of depoliticizing social and economic powers.”⁴⁹ In this context, reality television shows serve to instruct viewers on how to avoid such mismanagement and instead maximize their personal potential through a transactional understanding of selfhood, relationships, and society as a whole.⁵⁰ Many viewers and critics dismiss Western reality television as the lowest form of entertainment, a bad object to mock and distance from the national image.⁵¹ Reality television in China, by way of contrast, attracts the attention of viewers, popular commentators and academics alike conversely as an opportunity for open expression and even the potential development of democracy, notably in reference to the shows *Super Girl Voice* (*Chaoji Nüsheng*) (Hunan Satellite Television, 2004-6) and *If You Are*

⁴⁸ Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living through Reality TV: Television and Post-welfare Citizenship* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

⁴⁹ Cited in Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living*, 76.

⁵⁰ Laurie Ouellette, “Enterprising Selves: Reality Television and Human Capital,” in *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, eds. Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 90-109.

⁵¹ Brenda Weber, “Introduction: Trash Talk: The Gender Politics of Reality Television,” in *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality & Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television*, ed. Brenda Weber (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 1-2.

the One (Feichengwurao) (Jiangsu Satellite Television, 2010-present).⁵² This kind of understanding marks out a place for reality television in direct opposition to more directly political and supposedly antiquated forms of media, like narrative films with explicit propaganda value termed “main melody films.”⁵³ This contrast raises important questions: to what extent do the political connotations of the format travel as it is adapted in a new social context? How can reality television encourage individualism at the expense of social services in one nation and be used to reflect Confucian values or democracy in another?

Michael Keane, Anthony Y. H. Fung and Albert Moran have written extensively on the question of Chinese television as format television. In their co-authored monograph on new television in East Asia, they point to a changed relationship between the program and viewer in reality television. They cite the idea that, “the advent of new television formats — reality TV and information challenges — requires viewers to think *as if* participating, *as if* performing” and suggestively extend this argument to East Asian television, asserting that, “The psychological activity of ‘watching as if participating in television’ may well intensify the normative functions of the texts.”⁵⁴ In later chapters, however, these ideas receive only marginal attention and support. They link *Super Girl Voice* to a historical concept of the “socialist main line” through

⁵² Shuyu Kong, “Are You the One?: The Competing Public Voices of China’s Post-1980s Generation,” in *Restless China*, eds. Perry Link, Richard P. Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013) 129-49. Bingchun Meng, “Who Needs Democracy if We Can Pick our Favorite Girl? Super Girl as Media Spectacle,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 2, no. 3 (2009): 257-72. Wang Mumu 王木木, “Zhuanguotouqu bukan ni—yige 80 hou yanzhong de *Feichengwurao*” 转过头去不看你——一个 80 后眼中的《非诚勿扰》 [Turn around, I won’t look at you: *If You Are the One* in the eyes of someone born in the 1980s], *Dongbei zhi chuang* 东北之窗 10 (2011): 56-58.

⁵³ Michael Keane, Anthony Y.H. Fung, and Albert Moran, *New Television, Globalisation, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 138.

⁵⁴ Keane, Fung, and Moran, *New Television*, 28-29.

the participation of everyday people, yet also claim the show challenges the “state-sanctioned role models” of previous programming.⁵⁵

This dissertation foregrounds question of reception and viewer position as a way to think through the connections and differences between various mainstream nonfiction forms. Mark Andrejevic’s work on reality television offers one possible bridge between non-fiction forms. Andrejevic emphasizes the complex relationship between viewers and the construction of reality: “If reality TV caters to our own skepticism by showing us how mediated appearances are constructed by the apparatus of the culture industry—if it enacts what it displays by simultaneously debunking celebrity and creating new stars—we can concede that the savvy attitude becomes a strategy for protecting artifice by exposing it.”⁵⁶ Andrejevic ultimately condemns the skeptical viewer position as failing to more deeply analyze the programs and instead playing into the producers’ game of reality hide and seek. But what happens to this skeptical position when reality television shows are adapted for Chinese audiences, who approach television through a distinct media history and different habitual viewing positions? Furthermore, reality television in the PRC is a commercial entertainment form, yet it must also satisfy state expectations, which necessarily complicates any adaptation process. Placing such texts in the context of social divisions between the urban and the rural is essential to complicating links between media in the Maoist era and the contemporary postsocialist environment. While Chapters 2 and 3 engage with these issues through two reality television programs, namely *Bianxingji* or *X-Change*, a *Wife Swap*-inspired transformative journey for rural and urban youth, and the aforementioned dating show *If You Are the One*, the first chapter begins

⁵⁵ Keane, Fung, and Moran, *New Television*, 132, 138.

⁵⁶ Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 16.

with how television documentary prepared for the arrival of reality television and the fourth then considers how such notions of regular people's performances continue and change in the context of social media.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter considers the distinctions between newly constituted independent documentary and television documentary through a series made for China Central Television (CCTV) in the early 2000s. This series, entitled *The Weight of Time: A True Record of Chinese Folk Existence (Shijian de Zhongliang: Zhongguo Renmin Shengcun Shiji)*, not only rebroadcast a range of documentaries, including some made by New Documentary figures mentioned above, but also produced updates on what happened to the original films' subjects in the intervening decade. Television documentary was extremely popular in the early 1990s, and between the 1990s and the early 2000s, when *Weight of Time* aired, the television industry changed dramatically. By attending to various versions of the same documentaries and how they were made into a television program, I argue that this series makes documentary into a kind of reality television, in which compressed time accelerates social transformations and each person depicted can be related to through straightforward narratives of national development and nostalgia. Rerecorded voiceover and host introductory remarks also direct the viewer's understanding of how the individual subjects reveal a wider Chinese reality to which all viewers are expected to connect their own experiences.

The second chapter develops the notion of accelerated transformation in the context of a reality television show *X-Change (Bianxingji)*, a Hunan Satellite Television (HSTV) program that depicts rural and urban children swapping lives to experience and learn from the other's

lifestyle. I trace the origin of this idea through American documentary and educational film history by analyzing the career of Arnold Shapiro, the director of *Scared Straight!* (1978). Both the HSTV show and many of Shapiro's productions enlist a notion of juvenile delinquency to rationalize and even valorize subjecting young people to uncomfortable or exploitative constructed situations. In *X-Change*, the rural becomes the site for these transformations, and one family's home and daily life are someone else's lesson in hardship and humility.

The third chapter turns to *If You Are the One (Feichengwuraao)*, a dating show that also instructs viewers on how to navigate Chinese urban reality through the creation of a studio space in which data dictates human worth. As an implicitly urban version of social reality, rural participants are marginalized and the PRC is instead understood through not its domestic divisions but through its place in an international world order.

The fourth chapter takes up the question of how rural people represent themselves through an attention to Kwai, a social media videosharing platform associated with rural China. Comparisons with YouTube and Instagram establish how Kwai differs from other social media platforms, and attention to the educated, urban exoticization of Kwai maps out how the discourse surrounding the platform reflects the rural-urban divide. I also consider specific video genres that illuminate how individual users engage with these issues through parody and haptic visuality. Furthermore, the chapter returns explicitly to questions of grassroots morality and social instruction through user-generated serialized narratives that address the viewer as moral subject.

Chapter 1: Updated, Revised, Rebroadcast: Television Documentary Programming and Rural Transformations

“Are you destined to swing back and forth like a pendulum between the city and the forest? Where will you go after your tribe leaves the mountains to settle down in town?”⁵⁷ A China Central Television (CCTV) newscaster asks these questions of Liu Ba, a young woman of Evenki ethnicity, who was the subject of the documentary *Fading Reindeer Bell* (Sun Zengtian, 1997). The interview was part of an episode of *News Night Talk*, broadcast on July 20, 2002, as the government initiative to move the Evenki and all of their reindeer out of the mountains and into a permanent settlement was nearing completion.⁵⁸ After showing a clip of Sun’s documentary, the host asks Liu the questions above. He then asks if the forest will feel empty once her tribe no longer inhabits it, and Liu Ba starts to cry. Only a few months after this news program was shown, Liu Ba drowned accidentally, perhaps due to her excessive drinking.

The interview was show again on another CCTV show, an hour-long documentary program entitled *Jianzheng-Yingxiangzhi*, as part of a series of documentary updates entitled *The Weight of Time: A True Record of Chinese Folk Existence* (*Shijian de Zhongliang: Zhongguo Renmin Shengcun Shiji*) (hereafter, *Weight of Time*). *Weight of Time*’s version emphasizes the tragic elements of the story and how they affected Liu Ba’s young daughter. By the time *Weight of Time* shows portions of Sun’s original documentary and the news program, eleven years have passed since Sun started making his original documentary and the footage of Liu Ba has been incorporated into at least three versions of her story. *Weight of Time* juxtaposes news interview

⁵⁷ “7 yue 20 ri Xinwen yehua: shenlu de nü’er” 7月20日《新闻夜话》：神鹿的女儿 [July 20th *News Night Talk*: the daughter of the sacred deer] *Sina News*, last modified August 2, 2002, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2002-08-02/1641658803.html> (accessed May 20, 2019)

⁵⁸ *News Night Talk* is the program’s own English translation of 新闻夜话.

footage of Liu Ba expressing bewilderment at the idea of explaining the Evenki to her future grandchildren, with images of her daughter in Beijing experiencing a changed, increasingly westernized society, looking at foreign advertisements and eating at KFC. As the young girl rides the Beijing subway, another symbol of urban progress, the *Weight of Time* voiceover concludes that her life will be very different from her mother's; she will be fully integrated into urban life. At the end of the episode, host Chen Xiaoqing emphasizes that she will not have the same "identity confusion" as her mother, but that this transitional period, for both Liu Ba and the Evenki people "makes people sigh with sorrow." Chen optimistically suggests that Liu Ba's daughter will not be stuck between worlds as she was, but implicitly recognizes that a clear sense of self comes at the price of her ethnic traditions. Such sacrifices are only motioned to through an emotional sigh and the powerful editing that underscores the stark differences between the modern, urban lifestyle, signified by KFC and the Beijing subway, and the life in the mountains raising reindeer, which Liu Ba loved. Thus, the forced urbanization of a minority group serves as a microcosm of the larger changes taking place in Chinese society, presented as inevitable, and offers viewers an opportunity to mourn for a particular woman who was caught between the rural and urban at that historical moment.

Weight of Time, as the title suggests, emphasizes the passage of time through its before-and-after updates of the lives of documentary subjects, regular people who have experienced economic and social upheavals during the 1990s and into the 2000s. Through its structure and particular attention to rural space, *Weight of Time* exemplifies the changes that Chinese factual television underwent in the 1990s and the different role it would play by the 2000s. The structure of the program shares some of the pleasure of accelerated change offered by the before-and-after

makeover transformation so common to reality television.⁵⁹ An analysis of *Weight of Time* will demonstrate how the New Documentary movement desire to show reality unfolding, in all its contingent unknowability, becomes both structurally formulaic and ideologically deterministic under pressures of both a market challenged by Discovery Channel imports and restrictions in the very modest opportunities for alternative documentary voices that were briefly available on television in the 1990s. To put it simply, *Weight of Time* edits and revises television documentary, including some New Documentary films, through a proto-reality television format that processes the effects of social and cultural changes in the 1990s and 2000s for viewers. What matters about this program, its episodic structure, and editing of 1990s documentaries, is that it lays out the process through which an independent or alternative documentary becomes part of a CCTV television show. While it may be of historical interest in terms of marking the boundaries of what could pass censorship at that time, *Weight of Time* is significant in the context of this project because the program models how television makes malleable documentary material meaningful, particularly through the lens of rural-urban difference.

A wide range of documentaries, made by various filmmakers in a variety of production contexts, become part of one series, with an overarching message about regular people's lives, or "folk existence."⁶⁰ *Weight of Time* offers two main narratives of social change for rural and urban residents: a developmental drive towards progress and a nostalgia for what has been lost in that process. This chapter will explore questions of time and the importance of both immediacy and sustained relationships between filmmaker and subject; social distinctions between

⁵⁹ Brenda Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

⁶⁰ Table 1 at the end of the chapter lists the episodes available on *Weight of Time* DVD box sets, their original titles, years of production and update information.

filmmaker and subject; and the programs' guided versions of documentary spectatorship. Before analyzing these narratives in depth, I will first provide further background on the CCTV program and how the factual television industry changed in the 1990s.

Turning Documentary into a Television Program

For documentary producers within the mainstream media system, the 1990s was a period of upheaval and uncertainty, of dazzling popularity at the beginning of the decade and sharp decline by the end.⁶¹ Shanghai Television's program *Documentary Editing Room (Jilupian Bianjishi)* (1992-) initiates television documentary's focus on everyday stories and regular people. CCTV's *Life Space (Shenghuo Kongjian)* followed soon after, along with similar programs on provincial stations across the country.⁶² While documentaries about regular people had been made in the 1980s and before, the perspective on these new television programs was much less heavy-handed.⁶³ International pressure, as when Discovery Channel and National Geographic programs were imported in the late 1990s, sparked a reconsideration of the program model of documentary production, described as *lanmuhua*.⁶⁴ By the end of the decade, Chinese television producers faced challenges similar to those described by Jon Dovey as leading to the development of factual entertainment and reality television in the United Kingdom. Although

⁶¹Cao Wei 曹玮, "'Dianshitai zhizao' jilupian de kunjing yu chulu" '电视台制造'纪录片的困境与出路 [The challenges and future opportunities of the 'television studio' documentary], *Dianshi yanjiu* 电视研究 10 (2002): 58.

⁶²Zhang Kunhua 章焜华 and Huang Xinyan 黄新炎, "Shanghai dianshi jilupian 30 nian zhongheng tan" 上海电视纪录片 30 年纵横谈 [A broad discussion of 30 years of Shanghai Television documentary], *Dianying pingjie* 电影评介 13 (2016): 2.

⁶³Zhang and Huang, "Shanghai dianshi jilupian", 2.

⁶⁴Li Xiang 李祥 and Zhong Xuejun 钟学军, "Tan dianshi jilupian de yulehua" 谈电视纪录片的娱乐化 [A discussion of making television documentary into entertainment], *Lilun daobao* 理论导报 11 (2004): 42.

Dovey describes a situation in which a glut of independent producers propose non-fiction programs, he nevertheless talks about, “the diminishing resources available for documentary production which contrast with the increase in the number of hours being produced,” and the competition among those pitching shows as creating a situation in which reconstruction, or outright falsification, takes the place of a more sober production of non-fiction media.⁶⁵ Chinese television producers also faced pressure to achieve ratings, even as available resources contracted. The question of the amount of resources available may be a relative question. Yunnan TV producer Cao Wei describes a division of resources where little was allocated to the popular program-format (*lanmuhua*) shows, but plenty was available for those making prestige documentaries meant to win awards, domestically and abroad.⁶⁶ This would explain why regular television producers encountered financial difficulties while award-winning directors, like Jiang Yue, easily secure funding in China.⁶⁷

In 2000, Chen Xiaoqing was chosen to head a documentary program for CCTV-1, entitled *Jilupian* or *Documentary*, which started airing in November of 2000. While it originally focused on historical and cultural material, in May 2003 the program’s name was changed to *Jianzheng* or *Witness*, and its first series was *Weight of Time*.⁶⁸ Chen describes the series’ update format in this way:

⁶⁵ Jon Dovey, *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 11.

⁶⁶ Cao, “‘Dianshitai zhizao,’” 59.

⁶⁷ Berry, “Independently Chinese,” 118.

⁶⁸ Liu Chunhua, 刘春华, Ju Yong 鞠勇, and Li Menglin 李梦琳, “Jilupian de gushihua chuangzuo: jilupian jinru dianshi lanmu hou de xin tedian” 纪录片的故事化创作--纪录片进入电视栏目后的新特点 [The creation of narrativized documentary: new characteristics of documentary on television programs], *Qingchun jizhe* 青春记者 26 (2012): 62.

And what is particularly clever about the format is that the production cycle fulfills documentary's need to record the process of life unfolding over time, so viewer response has been rather good. We will continue to seek out material and formats that can maintain documentary's specificity for the program.⁶⁹

Thus, the format allows the producers to overcome the challenge of creating a large amount of content each week, while maintaining documentary's special ability to record changes over long periods of time, in comparison to other factual formats like television news. Other producers found the change problematic. Xiao Tongqing, who worked on the *Weight of Time* series described the conflict between the program model and documentary in this way:

A program must have a clear focus, with unified choices, a consistent tone, and a similar form. But these rules harm documentary exploration. Documentary's vitality depends on continuous investigation and innovation. Diversified style and originality of form are particularly important. The documentary program model, on some level, then means documentary's innovation and originality will gradually dissipate.⁷⁰

Thus, while the program created a platform for a greater number of viewers to see documentaries, the need for ratings also meant fitting documentary into a fixed model that constrains creativity and encourages particular expectations on the part of viewers.

For some critics though, this was a positive development, instead of a threat to documentary specificity. Xu Xingming and Ma Mingguo see the shift to a program model as ending documentary's privileged status as being made by and for elite intellectuals.⁷¹ Instead,

⁶⁹ “Yige lanmu de jilupian zhilu: fang CCTV-1 *Jianzheng: Jiluzhe* lanmu zhipianren Chen Xiaoqing” 一个栏目的纪录片之路: 访 CCTV-1 《见证: 纪录者》栏目制片人陈晓卿 [A program's road to documentary: an interview with CCTV-1 program *Jianzheng: Jiluzhe* producer Chen Xiaoqing], *Xiandai chuanbo* 现代传播 4 (2003): 82.

⁷⁰ Xiao Tongqing 肖同庆, “Jilupian lanmuhua shengcun de kunhuo yu chongtu” 纪录片栏目化生存的困惑与冲突 [Complications and contradictions of the existence of documentary programs], *Xiandai chuanbo* 现代传播 4 (2003): 84.

⁷¹ Xu Xingming 许行明 and Ma Mingguo 马明国, “Lanmuhua beijing xia jilupian guanzhu shidian de bianhua” 栏目化背景下纪录片关注视点的变化 [Changes in documentary

they cite the pressures of ratings and employ a familiar trope of the impatient, channel-surfing viewers to justify the need to strengthen the narrative and dramatic elements in documentary programming. They argue:

Thus, the previous focus on the documentary subject gradually shifts to a focus on narrating a story, and this change is precisely how documentary programs can continue in the context of a shift to the program model. The search for the continuation of programs caused domestic documentary development to enter a new stage.

The shift from subjects to story means, however, that the sense of reality referred to as *xianchang* cannot continue under the program model of documentary broadcasting. If the program requires a focus on a story, it needs to have already happened or the outcome predictable enough to not upset the narrative arc, as opposed to the New Documentary *xianchang* ideal, which allows events to unfold in front of the camera without prior expectations about what will happen and how it can be made into a narrative. After the *Weight of Time* series, much of *Jianzheng* programming was historical material, which would permit greater planning and structure.

The studio setup, where Chen's introductory and concluding segments of the show were filmed, orients the viewer each week and offers a stable sense of space. Over the course of broadcasting the *Weight of Time* series, *Jianzheng* changed its studio setup and introductory credits a few times. In early episodes, Chen is framed in front of a desktop computer with a television in the background (fig. 1). The setup emphasizes modern technology, with a desktop

focus in the context of program format], *Xiandai chuanbo* 现代传播 2 (2006): 90-91.

computer, as well as a layered sense of viewership. Chen also has a TV screen, and when the program starts, it will be through that screen so that viewers watch along with Chen. This element remains constant, even as the studio setup changes.⁷² Chen is the viewer's guide among this sea of screens. Other onstage props, like the various desks and tables that recall a broadcast news setting, establish his authoritative position. These segments and Chen's presence give the program a sense of a unified focus, despite the very different films that make up the core of the programming. More importantly, Chen's segments direct the viewer's interpretation of what they

see. Voiceover narration is also rerecorded for every episode, so like Chen's constant presence, the voice of the program also remains consistent. Chen is not a television personality; he is a documentary filmmaker in



Figure 2 *Weight of Time's* Studio Setup

his own right, and I begin my analysis of *Weight of Time's* developmental narratives with two of Chen's own productions that he updated for the series.

Developmental Narratives

Chen updated two of his own films for the CCTV program: *Yuanzai Beijing de Jia* (Anhui Television/ CCTV, 1993) and *Longji* (CCTV/Guilin Television, 1994), and these updates

⁷² Final episodes of *Weight of Time* did not include the host segments at all, allowing the films to serve as their own introductions.

both focus on disadvantaged subjects, namely female rural migrant workers and primary school students in the poverty-stricken mountains of Southwestern China. Chen also appeared on Shanghai Television's *Documentary Talk Show (Jingdian Chongfang, 2002-2003)* to re-present and discuss *Yuanzai Beijing de Jia*. The Shanghai program will be a secondary focus of this chapter, as another model of shaping disparate documentary films into a television program. *Documentary Talk Show* broadcasts documentaries from 1990 on and interviews the film's producers afterwards, usually in front of a studio audience. It was interconnected with independent documentary in direct and indirect ways. *Documentary Talk Show* showed portions of landmark independent works *The Other Bank (Bi'An)* and *No. 16, Barkhor South Street (Bakuo Nanjie Shiliu Hao)* and treated filmmakers as auteur-like professionals who could offer special insight into their films. On both programs, the films that I classify as "developmental narratives" relate the experiences of rural people to wider national narratives of development that encourage viewers to understand such experiences as both universal and dependent upon the individual's actions.

Yuanzai Beijing de Jia in various forms—the original film, the selections presented on *Documentary Talk Show*, and the *Weight of Time* update—negotiates the social gap between the filmmakers and subjects in ways that sometimes offer sympathy and pushback against overarching narratives about the many benefits available to these workers, but at other times, use editing and voiceover to judge their choices and reinforce the connection between urbanization, modernization, and personal success. The film centers on a group of young women from Anhui province, who travel to Beijing to work as maids, or *baomu*. In the film, producers are visible onscreen, asking the central subjects leading questions and actively participating in the filming

process. They also help the young women communicate with their families back in Anhui, bringing messages and transporting gifts as they travel between the two locations.

Yuan zai Beijing de Jia: 1993 Television Film

The most significant difference between the original film and the versions presented ten years later on *Documentary Talk Show* and *Weight of Time* is the inclusion of talking head interviews with experts, meant to explain the *baomu* phenomenon and importance of rural labor entering urban areas. These experts present *baomu* labor conditions in ways favorable to the conscience of their urban employers. They cite figures about the amount of elderly people and children in Beijing to justify the need for household help.⁷³ They also suggest that the young women who come to the city to work as maids do so out of a desire for an urban lifestyle, rather than out of interest in the profession itself, without mentioning the perhaps obvious need to earn money and escape ubiquitous poverty in Anhui.⁷⁴ Finally, they justify what might otherwise be seen as exploitation of young women far from home as about offering an opportunity for education and self-development.⁷⁵ The issue of rural-urban relations is fascinatingly encapsulated in one expert's description of household work in urban areas as "employment of agricultural labor." Lu Xueyi, the head of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences explains:

The labor force entering the city, whether to work as a maid or in other professions, is a form of agricultural labor force employment, particularly for young women. Current information shows that these young women enter the city to work and also to learn and be influenced by urban culture.

⁷³ This explanation is given by 张先民 Zhang Xianmin, the general manager of the employment agency depicted in the film.

⁷⁴ 黎宗剑 Li Zongjian, a PhD student in Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, explains this idea.

⁷⁵ 崔祖瑛 Cui Zuying, the head of the Anhui People's Government Beijing Liaison Office, describes the educational opportunities for *baomu*.

Thus, by hiring maids, Beijingers and other urban families, are not only providing work to a segment of the population that needs it, i.e. rural dwellers who should be working on a farm, but are also providing education and a chance to improve themselves merely by living in an urban area. Thus, the overall perspective provided by the original film is not neutral. Instead, it justifies the employment of *baomus* and paints it as a positive social phenomenon, instead of one that reveals class boundaries and social hierarchy.

Chen Xiaoqing explains in an interview that this expert commentary was the result of conflicts between various producers about the focus of the project. While Chen won out in terms of the title, he explains the conflict through the other proposed title: “The Lesson of Nannies: On Urban Tertiary Sector Development.” Thus, the clash was about whether the film would explicitly analyze social change and take a detached, diagnostic perspective, or focus on the people involved and the young women in particular, with an emotional emphasis on family and distance. The original film pushes back against this narrative of *baomu* self-improvement to a certain extent. Voiceover narration emphasizes that the number of maids who are able to further their education is a small minority, and interviews some young women at the employment agency who relate stories of Beijing employers discouraging them from studying, telling them it’s no use.

Yuan zai Beijing de Jia: 2002 and 2003 Updates

In the updated versions of the film, Chen’s focus on the subjects entirely replaces the remnants of the other producers’ macro perspective. This personal perspective allows the material about the specific women working as *baomu* to take on a greater metaphorical flexibility, as they are no longer tied to the specific, historical phenomenon of migrant women maids. In press interviews, Chen draws a connection between his personal experience and that of

his subjects. Like them, he is from Anhui and describes how he first noticed these young women when he was also traveling back to Anhui from Beijing, where he attended college and worked for China Central Television after graduation. He also talks about the difficulty of not feeling accepted in Beijing during his first years living in the city. He lived apart from his wife, who was still in Anhui, and did not have a private place to stay when she came to visit. As they walked around the city, they wondered when they would have their own space among the lights of tall apartment buildings.⁷⁶ Chen also implicitly acknowledges his difference from these young women, however, when he relates how one of the primary subjects of the film, Xie Suping, called him for help years after the film's production when she ran into bureaucratic trouble over a business license and needed a Beijing resident's aid. Thus, even if his living conditions were not ideal, Chen's stable employment in Beijing allowed him to leave behind his rural roots, achieve urban residency, and access its accompanying privileges. His documentary subjects, however, have a much longer and more precarious road to staying in the city.

The *Weight of Time* update satisfies viewer curiosity about the fate of these women. In 2002 on *Documentary Talk Show*, Chen explains that he lost touch with his subjects five years earlier in 1997, so he doesn't have current information about their lives.⁷⁷ The next year, however, for *Weight of Time*, Chen retraces his steps, returning to Anhui to witness and document the many changes that occurred in the decade following the original production. In

⁷⁶ Liu Xia 柳遐 and Mu Tong 木童, eds., *Jingdian chongfang: Yu Zhongguo zui ju yingxiangli de daoyan duihua* 经典重访：与中国最具影响力的纪录片导演对话 [Documentary Talk Show: Discussions with China's most influential documentary directors], Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2007, 37; Lao Hei 老黑, "Zaikan yiyan, Yuanzai Beijing de Jia" 再看一眼，远在北京的家 [Another Look at *A Faraway Home in Beijing*], *Tiao shipin*, November 28, 2017, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/JDjHIJ-u7z_HLd738KG4Qg.

⁷⁷ Liu and Mu, eds., *Jingdian chongfang*, 39.

these episodes, segments from the original film are labeled with the filming year, 1992 or 1993, and processed into black and white, creating a clear distinction with the update footage in color. The three women receive considerable space to narrate what has happened to them since being filmed as teenagers or young women leaving home, some for the first time. Li Hongchun, who was a rather minor part of the first film, has settled in Shanghai and thus is particularly important for the update, as a success story of a rural woman who has found her place in a top-tier urban environment.

Zhang Jufang, however, is the most important character in the original film, and the update creates a suspenseful narrative structure by first having filmmakers return to Anhui when they hear she will return for the Spring Festival holidays, so that they can film her in the location where the film originally began. She ultimately doesn't show up, however, and filmmakers learn only that she has married and settled in Shanghai. Zhang's living situation will not be revealed until the end of the first episode, so viewers are drawn in by the open question of her current living conditions. Instead, they meet Li Hongchun, who has settled in Shanghai. Voiceover narration explains that Li has lived there for many years and considers it her home. When the filmmakers first encounter her over the holidays in Anhui, she expresses dissatisfaction with her current life, explaining that she wants to own a home and car and have some savings. Her sense of an ideal level of material well-being is one that many Chinese citizens would likely share. When they interview Li again in Shanghai, she reiterates that life in the city is difficult, but it's still better than her hometown. Over a tracking shot of a tall, red brick housing development against blue sky, the voiceover pronounces that "After ten years of hard work, Li Hongchun is finally living the life she wanted." While her actual interviews suggest she hasn't found this level of satisfaction, the voiceover along with the images of the modern, elevator-equipped housing

development, declares her successful. Her journey from migrant worker to city dweller is complete.

The next line of voiceover returns attention to the open question of Zhang Jufang and whether or not she has, like Liu, successfully transitioned to an urban lifestyle. The next scene in the present shows Chen Xiaoqing in a van with a map, navigating to Chongming Island in the Shanghai suburbs. Both the car and the map emphasize the distance they will travel from Li's home, and the editing compares Zhang unfavorably to Liu. The next shots from a ship further underscore the distance and relative inaccessibility of Zhang's new home. The voiceover introduces Chongming Island, home to over 600,000 people. Zhang lives forty kilometers outside the county-level town on the island. As a traditional agricultural zone, it is clear that despite being part of Shanghai, they are back in the countryside. As Chen and Zhang travel down a dirt road, the voiceover echoes this point, "As far as the eye can see, the present scenery is no different from the Wuwei countryside [Zhang's hometown]." The voiceover continues, making explicit the filmmakers' desire to see Zhang change her life by becoming a city dweller and leave behind her roots saying, "The outcome of our search was rather disappointing. Without realizing it, Zhang Jufang was following the same path as her parents and grandparents." The update then returns to the last scene they filmed in Beijing, where ten years earlier Zhang herself says that a good fate will be to find a good job and a bad one will be to return to working in the fields. The editing then cruelly emphasizes this development by cutting to a present-day image of Zhang bent over in a rice paddy, explaining, "And today, she is back where she started." Obvious from both the editing and the voiceover is the expectation that migrant labor is a path to an urban life and that farming means failure to progress, with no consideration of the benefits to Zhang's chosen path. The conception of linear development from rural to urban does not permit variation.

The update redeems Xie Suping as a mother. In the original film, as Xie prepares to leave for Beijing, leaving twin sons in Anhui under the care of their grandparents, her husband's grandmother follows her down the road, and the voiceover explains the grandmother doesn't want Xie to leave. After arguing a bit, the voiceover tells us, "To Grandmother, her grandson's wife is hard-hearted." Xie's choice to leave her own children at home to make money taking care of other children is subject to further implicit criticism, or at least regret, later in the film when Chen returns to Anhui to visit Xie's home and bring gifts for her children. Chen also brings the video of Xie in Beijing, and her son watches her taking care of another child.



Figure 3 Xie's Son watches her care for another child

A picture-in-picture insert of the Beijing footage places the face of her charge in the same frame as the child she has left behind (figure 3, left). The image is reused in the *Weight of Time* update, but this time, a different contextualization both justifies her original choice to leave her children and moves beyond it by emphasizing that her sons now live with her. In a present-day 2003 interview, Xie explains when she decided to leave Anhui, her family was nearing starvation. The scene in which her grandmother begs her not to leave is excised, and a voiceover explanation that Xie now lives in a suburb of Beijing with her two sons, whom she is raising as a single mother, precedes the moment of juxtaposition between the two children noted above (figure 3, right). Thus, the past pain of leaving her children, implicitly critiqued in the original film, is

resolved by adding an explanation of the extreme poverty that motivated her original decision and by noting that she ultimately ends up caring for her children. In the present-day narrative of the update, she sacrifices a stable career so that her children can attend a better middle school. The difficulties she faces due to her rural *hukou* are alluded to when the voiceover explains that most of the students in her sons' original non-traditional school are children of migrant workers, but her willingness to move as soon as she finds a principal willing to enroll her sons in a regular, academic-focused, middle school seems to suggest this problem can be solved on an individual basis, given sufficient personal sacrifice. The updated narrative is one in which a hard-hearted woman more moved by being separated from her charge when fired as a nanny than when leaving her own sons, becomes a model mother that gives up her own future for the sake of her children and their education.

Spectators may accept or reject these narratives of progress that minimize the connections between the young women and their social context. The episode of *Documentary Talk Show* centered on the film, however, not only fully accepts these narratives, but models a further leveling of social difference. The version shown on the Shanghai television program in 2002 focuses entirely on the young women who serve as the central protagonists. It is no longer necessary to situate them within the context of a social topic, since, according to the host of the program, working conditions for household labor in the cities have greatly improved. Notably, they point to training programs that are now available and the development of better agency control, which raises the question of for whom exactly, the worker or the employer, conditions have improved. The version on *Documentary Talk Show* avoids thinking about the phenomenon from a macro perspective, provided by the experts in the 1994 version of the film.

For the viewers participating in the Shanghai talk show, the young women's stories become generalized narratives of growing up and life in post-reform China. For example, Tao Lingfen, a screenwriter of television dramas about young migrant workers and the episode's special guest seated alongside Chen and the host, asserts that "we are all Zhang Jufang." In the film, over the course of a year, Zhang works for at least three families as a *baomu*, sells vegetables, fries *youtiao* or dough sticks, works as a waitress, and finally is employed at a leather shoe factory at the end of the film. Tao explains that particularly after China's entrance into the WTO, everyone's future is uncertain and, like Zhang, must muddle through as best they can. She says:

In some sense, each one of us is Zhang Jufang. With the continual deepening of reform and opening, especially after entering the WTO, just as you here at Shanghai Television, and where I am at the Shanghai Film Association, we are all in the midst of changes due to market reform. With this increasing competition, I think that we all must leave our former nests and go looking for a new home. This process is bewildering, but like when Zhang Jufang had just left home, it's full of hope and expectation. I think this is a general feeling for all Chinese people.

In this way, the experience of aimlessness isn't tied to gender, social class, or rural *hukou* status, but instead to nationwide economic changes and international market competition.

Tao further effaces social, class, and urban/rural differences by drawing a connection between her experience as a sent-down youth at about the same age as the young migrant workers and to contemporary Shanghainese youth who go abroad for higher education. She comments:

I just suddenly thought of when I was the same age as them, I also left home and my family to travel far away, as a sent-down youth. Although, they choose to leave home, and at the time we were swept up in a red wave, but that emotion will likely continue for many years. Furthermore, I thought of the children of some of my friends. These days, lots of Shanghai parents send their children abroad to study, and you can see goodbye scenes like that at the airport. So it's [the film] is still quite moving, and that's the power of documentary.

The primary distinction she sees is that young women now choose to enter the city, while her generation did not have the same choice, given the political nature of educated youth being sent to the countryside. One might counter that the economic changes that made farming unprofitable and concentrated wealth in the cities were also beyond the control of the young women who become migrant workers, even if superficial questions of timing and destination are left open to the young women's choice. Drawing the connection to students studying abroad further levels economic difference. While all three experiences do require leaving home and going out on one's own at a relatively young age, such associations risk universalizing and relativizing an experience that demands more critical reflection. If for Tao, leaving home is a universal experience of growing up, then it is not dependent on particular historical and social circumstances and needn't raise questions of social equity. In this way, families that employ maids like Zhang are relieved of feeling responsible for taking part in a system in which they receive cheap labor without the young women receiving any of social benefits available to urban citizens. Moreover, it generalizes from the difficulties faced by a particular group, so that many viewers can relate to their experiences, which values harmony over critical consideration. Ultimately, Tao's understanding of the film and why it is moving to viewers that are not migrant workers is about sympathy, but only insofar as others relate to one's own experience and represent a nationwide emotion.

Comparison to *Out of Phoenix Bridge*

The issues of perspective, sympathy, and the viewers' relationship to social experiences different from their own, merits further consideration alongside Li Hong's film *Out of Phoenix Bridge* (1997), an independent production focused on the same population of rural Anhui women working as *baomu* in Beijing. In an academic comparison of the two films, Liu Longli contrasts

Out of Phoenix Bridge's observational style and smaller role of the director in the film with *Yuanzai Beijing de Jia*'s onscreen reporters and participatory method. Liu highlights *Out of Phoenix Bridge*'s female perspective and close relationship between filmmaker and subjects, but Liu's conclusion that both films go beyond the surface to consider the subjects' emotional experiences does not consider the implications for viewers.⁷⁸ The power of Li's film is in its ability to portray social attitudes in the countryside towards gender that contribute to the constricted life choices available to young migrant women workers. *Out of Phoenix Bridge*'s main character, Xiazi, is twenty-five during the film's production, and her family has begun to get quite anxious that she marry before she will be considered a spinster, like her thirty-something aunt. Li's film depicts Xiazi's stepfather articulating the social opinions that regulate young women both in terms of appearance and behavior. In this way, viewers come away from Li's film with a sense of why these young women might choose to work in the city, as a unique opportunity to escape the control of their parents or future husbands.⁷⁹ The film also makes obvious the difficulty of staying in the city, with few prospects for career development or marriage, motivating the women to nevertheless return home. Thus, if viewers sympathize with Xiazi, it is based on her particular situation as a rural woman, instead of as a metaphor for nationwide social change, as in Tao's discussion of *Yuanzai Beijing de Jia*. Although Ying Qian differentiates Li's work from those of male independent directors instead of CCTV's Chen

⁷⁸ Liu Longli 刘龙莉, "He er bu tong: jilupian *Yuanzai Beijing de Jia* yu *Huidao Fenghuangqiao* bijiao" 和而不同:纪录片《远在北京的家》与《回到凤凰桥》比较 [Similar but not the same: A comparison of the documentaries *A Faraway Home in Beijing* and *Out of Phoenix Bridge*], *Dongnan chuanbo* 东南传播 143 (2016): 69.

⁷⁹ Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, "Migrant workers, Women, and China's Modernization on Screen," *Jump Cut: a Review of Contemporary Media* 54 (2012): n.p.
<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc54.2012/LauMigrantWomen/text.html>.

Xiaoqing, Qian comes to a similar conclusion about the film's ability to situate the protagonists within a specific context, emphasizing that the film "attempted to reconstruct the wholeness of personal experience, and show how personal experiences were linked to bigger social, political, and economic conditions that defined collective experiences."⁸⁰ A collective experience of economic conditions is not collapsed into a generalized, nationwide development.

Longji: 1994 Television Film and 2003 *Weight of Time* Update

Longji, Chen's other updated film, is about rural students in Southwestern China. The film and its update exemplify the malleability of documentary material and the flexibility of how *diceng* subjects are presented. *Longji*, originally made in 1994, profiles a primary school in the mountains of Guangxi and emphasizes the difficulties faced by those seeking education in such conditions. In the original film, a striking scene depicts one of the young students, who is preparing to enter middle school the next year, going out to pan for gold in hopes of being able to pay the tuition at the better school in town he wishes to attend. Voiceover introduces the scene in this way:

In order to pay tuition, Pan Ji'en has come here [the gold mine] with some older children to try their luck. But after seven days, he hasn't found anything. Like the past few days, each time, Pan Ji'en just finds some quicksilver from the state-run gold mine's washed ore. They have to go home, but Pan Ji'en doesn't want to leave. So they decide to sift one more basket.

When Pan sifts that final basket, he finds a gold nugget. In this version of the film, children must strive for educational opportunities without the help of adults. Similarly, Pan studies every night on his own, so that he can get into the better county-level school, without any help or encouragement from his parents.

⁸⁰ Ying Qian, "Visionary Realities," 251.

In the 2003 updated version, rural parents, like urban parents, just want their kids to succeed and recognize that education is the path to that success. In the update, the voiceover explains that Pan Ji'en, the best student in the town has taken the test for middle school, but knows that his family cannot afford to send him to the school he wishes to attend. The voiceover then states:

Pan Ji'en goes to a nearby gold mine with a few of the village adults. After seven days, other than a bit of quicksilver, Ji'en hasn't found anything. He has talked it over with the older kids he came with, and they decide to pan for one more day and then go home.

This voiceover is paired with shots of Pan panning for gold alone, and one in which an older teenager is present. There are also extreme close-ups of the quicksilver in someone's hand, and it is unclear if it belongs to Pan or the teenager. After this scene, there is a scene in which an adult, the teenager, and Pan talk over a fire about panning for one more day. The adult also asks Pan when he will go back to school and if he has received his exam scores yet. The next day, the teenager and Pan shovel dirt together, and Pan finds a gold nugget, enabling him to pay his school fees. The intervening scene in the updated version emphasizes adult participation in the gold mining trip, in contrast to the original version in which children manage on their own. The scene is key to how the rural is portrayed differently between the two productions. The village, represented by the adult in the scene before finding the gold, also supports their best student, hoping he will be able to attend a good school. In the 1994 version, however, Pan must do it all on his own, with outside help from the government through Project Hope, which the original film was meant to promote.

Nostalgic Narratives

The updates of films about rural culture, whether about art forms, cultural activities, or craft techniques, most clearly demonstrate the series' preoccupation with the effects of economic change. While as a whole, a clear nostalgia for previous ways of life emerges, it is tempered by an understanding of market economic logic as inevitable, with supply and demand logic presented as unquestionable. Films attentive to what has been lost in the process of development and urbanization include: *Yingrener*, *Xi Ban*, *Beilou Dianyingyuan*, *Qin*, and *Yaoge Youyou*. Respectively, the films depict shadow play artists, Chinese opera puppetry, a rural film projection team and *kuaiban* performer, lacquer harvesting, and an ethnic minority singer and researcher.

In *Beilou Dianyingyuan*, the protagonist Zhang Xianling serves as a kind of metaphor for the emotional pain that accompanies technological change. Once television becomes available in the rural areas, Zhang, a *kuaiban* performer and rural projection team member, takes to drinking more in his free time, since there is less demand for film screenings. Instead of situating the practice within a longer history that might tie it to less economically motivated film projection practices, Zhang's role as a projectionist is an inheritance from his father, who also projected films and introduced them with *kuaiban* performances. Their work depends on paid invitations to surrounding areas, which have dwindled in recent years. Yet the documentary also wants to emphasize the educational and social value of film projection. Scenes of Zhang projecting *Xiyingmen* (Zhao Huanzhang, 1981) and an educational film on the use of electricity are preceded by scenes that demonstrate the interpersonal and practical lessons villagers will draw from seeing the films. A young wife learns to respect her mother-in-law, and villagers mourning

the loss of a family member to electrocution learn how to avoid such tragedies. In both cases, film projection isn't represented as mere entertainment.

Market logic also defines cultural consumption in *Xiban*, a documentary about Fujianese traditional puppeteers who also sing opera along with their marionette shows. In the original film, the puppet troupe has been losing ground to a newly formed and very popular “western band,” a marching band type group that plays pop songs. The puppet troupe loses members to the western band, formed by a former puppeteer Jian Qinye, and when the leader Wei Ganxiang tries to entice a performer to come back, he finds out how much better the pay and schedule is for the western band performances. Wei must take jobs further afield in hard to reach mountain towns and the trek into the mountains with their heavy equipment is explained as a result of market forces. At a planning meeting for the town's traditional *Yuandan* New Year's celebrations, Jian argues that there is no room for Wei's marionettes. The original film concludes with Wei sadly practicing alone, a clear symbol of the decline of Chinese traditional performing arts in the face of Western competition. The update for *Xiban* has a happy ending, however, for Wei. Because of cultural preservation efforts, Wei's puppets have become part of a newly established museum, with daily performances. Voiceover narration explains that the market for Western bands soon became saturated, and in an unmistakable parallel to the original film, Jian must make the difficult trek into the mountains with his Western band. While traditional arts may have lost local popularity, urban visitors in search of traditional culture revive these practices.

The trajectory of *Yaoge Youyou* is quite similar in terms of the importance of domestic tourism as a driver for cultural preservation. The original film depicts Pan Qin, a young Yao woman, who strives to document and preserve the traditional songs she learned from her grandfather. The update, made only a few years after the original film, shows Pan graduating

from music college and developing a class to teach Yao song and dance to young girls. In the intervening years, tourism has developed and singing traditional songs and performing traditional dances is now a marketable skill.

In all of these films, there is a clear nostalgia for traditional ways of life, depicted most strongly through art and cultural forms neglected in a rapidly developing society. The updates, however, often push back against the original films' nostalgia, by emphasizing economic development and urban tourism as drivers for the revival of traditional culture. While these narratives emphasize a national logic quite similar to that of *X-Change*, a reality television show that is the subject of the next chapter, stylistically they allow for a certain amount of observational unfolding that recalls some aspects of New Documentary's *xianchang* form. The next section will consider *xianchang* and the question of documentary voice to demonstrate how two episodes of *Weight of Time* either hold space for the subject's own voice or replace it with one of the filmmakers' creation.

***Xianchang*: Voice, Immediacy, and Sustained, Shared Experience**

Xianchang is a central concept for understanding independent Chinese documentary and the New Documentary Movement. In the introduction to an edited volume about the movement, Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel connect the term to “immediacy, spontaneity, and contact with lived experience.”⁸¹ In the same monograph, Luke Robinson further develops the concept of *xianchang*, which depends on capturing the contingency of everyday life through unplanned, on-

⁸¹ Chris Berry and Lisa Rofel, introduction to *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, Chris Berry, Lü Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel, eds. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 4.

location filming.⁸² Understanding this key concept only as about immediacy and a sort of liveness, would obscure Rofel and Berry's later point, however, about the importance of the filmmakers' extended presence in the daily lives of their subject. They explain, "this production process includes long-term relationships developed between filmmakers and subjects, in which the filmmaker might spend years living with those being filmed more in the manner of an anthropologist than of an investigative journalist."⁸³ The films updated for the CCTV series and presented on *Documentary Talk Show*, like more classic examples of the New Documentary Movement, also grapple with this dual sense of immediate, on-the-scene, documentary presence and continued attention to their subjects' lives over time.

Luke Robinson's article, "Voice, Liveness, Digital Video: The Talking Head in Contemporary Independent Chinese Documentary," suggests that forms of documentary interview have changed from the early years of independent Chinese documentary. While the talking head initially served as witness and offered direct access to historical testimony, later films focus on the contingent nature of the camera's intervention into a subject's life and the filmmaker and subject's shared creation of *xianchang*. Robinson usefully describes this second form of *xianchang* in this way:

The voice of the documentary subject in these films [*Nostalgia* and *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir*] cannot lead us to an already existing liveness, waiting "out there" to be captured by the camera. Instead, it hints at a liveness that emerges through the interaction of director and subject on location, a quality produced through the here-and-now of filming, and the inevitable incommensurability of pro-filmic reality and filmic representation.⁸⁴

⁸² Luke Robinson, "From 'Public' to 'Private,'" 177-94.

⁸³ Berry and Rofel, introduction to *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*, 10.

⁸⁴ Luke Robinson, "Voice, Liveness, Digital Video: The Talking Head in Contemporary Independent Chinese Documentary," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 22, no. 2 (2014): 505.

The careful distinctions that Robinson makes between various forms of interviews and documentary voice emphasize the complexity present in what might on first glance seem to be quite similar techniques. Not long after this distinction, Robinson mentions “the mainstreaming of *xianchang* in the 1990s,” meaning the move away from illustrated lecture style in official television production to include the voices of documentary subjects and other markers of liveness important to independent documentary.⁸⁵ Interestingly however, Robinson does not elaborate on this comment or provide examples of how television documentary makes use of the interview techniques that Robinson has delineated as central to independent documentary’s break from official productions. While specific analysis of television documentary would certainly fall beyond the scope of an article about independent documentary, Robinson nevertheless continues to bring up television as a counterpoint and foil that implicitly drives independent documentary producers to further differentiate themselves and signal their status apart from official productions.

In order to complicate this narrative and more fully develop what Robinson terms “the mainstreaming of *xianchang*,” I want to extend his discussion of voice in relation to two of the films updated for *Weight of Time* and also presented on Shanghai Television’s *Documentary Talk Show*, namely *Sanjiecao* (Liang Bibo, 1997) and *Wo de Xiaoxue* (Fang Ke/Zhu Fengming, 2000). Both films use talking head interviews to very different ends. On the one hand, *Sanjiecao* creates a form of *xianchang* quite similar to the second, consciously mediated type Robinson describes as important to later independent documentary. On the other hand, *Wo de Xiaoxue* demonstrates the extent to which documentary stylistic freedom can seemingly lead to a more direct voice for the subject through first person voiceover. This same example, however,

⁸⁵ Robinson, “Voice, Liveness, Digital Video,” 505.

ultimately exacerbates the power differential inherent to the relationship between filmmaker and subject, by using a voice actor to stand in for the subject and taking the liberty of constructing a first-person perspective they justify as an expression of his psychological reality.

Sanjiecao was made as part of the CCTV series of funding that gave free rein to producers, which Jiang Juan cites in particular as indicative of the moment of overlap between independent and official documentary.⁸⁶ The film describes the life experiences of Xiao Shuming, a Han woman who grew up in a well-off family and was educated near Chengdu, Sichuan before the establishment of the PRC. She married a chief of the Mosuo or Na people and spent the rest of her life in their village by Lugu lake. Only in the mid-1990s did she return to Chengdu to see the changes brought about by decades of political and economic change. The documentary then focuses on her quest to get her granddaughter, Lazhu, a job in Chengdu. Materials from the Cinéma du Réel Film Festival use the French title “L’épouse du dernier seigneur,” closer to the English title given on the title card: “Home-Coming of Granddaughter: The cultural complex of a headsman’s concubine.”⁸⁷ The Chinese title is rather abstract, but a quote from Xiao given on a title card at the beginning of the film makes it less opaque: “人如三节草，不知哪节好” [People are like a three-leaf clover, and it’s hard to know which part is best].

⁸⁶ Jiang, *Zhuti, shidian, biaoda*, 37.

⁸⁷ “Palmarès Cinéma du Réel 1998,” *Archives du Cinéma du Réel*, accessed May 22, 2019, http://archivescinereel.bpi.fr/media/doc_acc/0002//Palmares1998ok.pdf.

The film makes extensive use of Xiao speaking directly to the camera in close up (fig. 4).

On *Documentary Talk Show*, Liang explains that he set up the shot carefully to capture the best light within natural conditions and to create the impression of a black background. He asked Xiao to sit in her doorway and tell her story between 9:30 and 10:30 in the



Figure 4 Xiao speaks to the camera

morning, when the light was best. The room behind her was windowless and thus the backdrop appears dark. Finally, an assistant reflected light with his t-shirt to balance the contrast, resulting in an almost theatrical, planned staging.⁸⁸ This places Xiao outside of time, in a space that cannot be linked to a place or historical moment, which emphasizes the film's mediated access to reality, much like Robinson argues in relation to *Nostalgia* and *Fengming*.⁸⁹ Xiao's direct address to the camera and the amount of the film's time devoted to her first person narration also suggest a more balanced relationship between the subject and filmmaker. Liang rejected the approach most filmmakers take when presenting the Na people, which emphasizes and exoticizes the walking marriages and matriarchal social structure that distinguishes their way of life. Liang also does not raise the issue anywhere in the film, other than the English title, that Xiao was a second wife to her husband.⁹⁰ Thus, by avoiding such obvious, exotic elements, Liang allows Xiao's story to remain her own; her narration drives the film. Liang explains this choice in part through his definition of documentary. On *Documentary Talk Show*, he explains that he long considered the issue of how to relate Xiao's long life experience: "How to show the period when

⁸⁸ Liu and Mu, eds., *Jingdian chongfang*, 197.

⁸⁹ Robinson, "Voice, Liveness, Digital Video," 501.

⁹⁰ Liu and Mu, eds., *Jingdian chongfang*, 197.

Xiao first arrived at Lugu Lake, fifty-four years ago, was something that really worried me. Because documentary isn't a fiction film that can bring in actors to perform."⁹¹ Editors of the published edition of these interviews clarified in a note that followed this line that, "In 1997, reconstruction of reality wasn't yet a common technique in Chinese documentary." They suggest that he was not yet familiar with a technique that would in fact allow a documentarian to bring in actors. But I see Liang as explaining his understanding of documentary and its stylistic boundaries. The film's emphasis on Xiao's own narration demonstrates a respect for the documentary subject and for historical reality as it is currently accessible.

Fang Ke and Zhu Fengming do not share Liang's stylistic restraint and instead make use of this openness to efface the voice of their subject and reconstruct reality to suit their purposes. *Wo de Xiaoxue*, or *My Primary School*, focuses on Wang Yongping, a thirty-six-year-old Anhui man that decided to go back to school, starting in fifth grade and joining the same class as his son. The original film uses a first-person voiceover, but because Wang could not speak standard Mandarin, a voice actor speaks the text that Fang and Zhu describe as "imitating as much as possible his internal monologue."⁹² They go on to explain that the text uses a language level similar to Wang's, alluding to his low education level, and describe it as "approaching a farmer's tone." Their use of words like "imitate" and "approach" demonstrate the extent to which the text is a creation of the filmmakers instead of Wang's own words. Nevertheless, the text is read by an actor in first person, as if Wang is directly addressing the audience.

Another layer of fabrication is present in a portion of the film that recreates Wang's experience working in Shenzhen, prior to returning to school, thus also prior to the filmmakers'

⁹¹ Liu and Mu, eds., *Jingdian chongfang*, 197.

⁹² Liu and Mu, eds., *Jingdian chongfang*, 305.

arrival. The camera recreates a first-person perspective, describing how he left the train station with his parents, as the camera stands in for him, since Wang did not accompany the crew to Shenzhen for this portion of the production. Fang and Zhu go so far as to have the first person narration describe Wang's emotional experience in Shenzhen, wondering whether he will find his place, and revealing how he cried from frustration at the low salary he earned in comparison to his well-educated siblings. In *Wo de Xiaoxue*, *xianchang* in either form, whether watching the events as they unfold or attending to the subject's narration of history, is less important than a compelling narrative and a sense of emotional closeness between the viewer and subject. The filmmakers go so far as to speak for the subject through a voice actor and imitate what they surmise Wang's thoughts and emotions to be. While it is not clear how Fang and Zhu wrote the voiceover text or if Wang had any input, they clearly are operating from a different standard of documentary reality than Liang or the independent filmmakers Robinson considers. The extent to which television documentary makes use of independent documentary practices of *xianchang* is diverse, even among productions made under similar production conditions and distributed through the same channels.

Of the films updated for the CCTV series, Kang Jianning's work most clearly involves a *xianchang* liveness based on the sustained interactions between filmmaker and subject. Kang was instrumental in the development of the *Weight of Time* series and updated four of his films, the most of any filmmaker involved, for ten total episodes.⁹³ *Yinyang*, which Lü Xinyu considers

⁹³ Chen Xiaoqing 陈晓卿, "Xunzhao shijian de zhongliang—guanyu jiushi niandai jilupian de lingyizhong zongjie" 寻找时间的重量——关于九十年代纪录片的另一种总结 [Searching for the weight of time—a different summary of nineties documentary], *Yangshiwang jishi* 央视网纪实 October 14, 2011, <http://jishi.cntv.cn/program/gongzuofang/chenxiaoping/20111014/100427.shtml>.

a key New Documentary text, is about a feng shui master Xu Wenzhang and his family, who live in a water-starved desert in Ningxia.⁹⁴ The original, three-hour film depicts Xu and his sons digging wells in a vain search for water, as well as his daughter's marriage. Produced for Ningxia Television, *Yinyang* had never been shown domestically before its inclusion in the series. Another of Kang's films in the series, *Sha yu Hai*, was originally made in collaboration with Liaoning Television producer Gao Guodong and described the lives of a family living in the Ningxia desert and a Northeastern fishing family living on a remote island. Kang and Gao planned the film to be about people living in environments isolated from the rest of society.⁹⁵ Gao did not participate in the update, so the retitled project, *Shenghuo*, is just about the desert family, headed by father Liu Zeyuan. *Shenghuo* covers many years of the family's lives, since Kang remained in contact with them and returned to film multiple times over the years.⁹⁶ The film mostly consists of striking landscape shots of the desert and rather tortured interviews with the reticent family members, who often provide one word answers to Kang's audible questions. Kang himself also appears in the update and is an important catalyst to drawing out the subjects' responses. The films create a *xianchang* that emphasizes the location and a deep connection to place, as opposed to a narrative driven by particular events or a predictable dramatic scenario. *Yinyang*, in particular, uses long takes to emphasize the real-time pace of the situation or discussion between subjects. At the same time, some of Kang's work uses voice-of-god narration that differentiates it from independent documentary's general rejection of this technique.

Lü Xinyu praises Kang Jianning for his refusal of *jingshen guizu*, or spiritual aristocracy, and for his focus on marginalized people from the beginning of his career, a shift that she sees

⁹⁴ Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo*, 12-13.

⁹⁵ Liu and Mu, eds., *Jingdian chongfang*, 2.

⁹⁶ Liu and Mu, eds., *Jingdian chongfang*, 6.

only as happening later for other important figures of the movement, like when Wu Wenguang makes *Jiang Hu: Life on the Road* in the mid-1990s.⁹⁷ Class, rural/urban difference, and domestic/foreign contrasts, to a large extent, define how Kang chooses a topic and approaches his subject. He emphasizes that he is not interested in making films for foreigners or collaborating with foreign producers, because he finds they can't understand his ideas.⁹⁸ Interestingly, he describes his filming style through a comparison with a concept of an aristocratic or upper class indifference. He explains,

I think of it this way, whether you're a narrative director or a documentary director, you first should deal with subject matter you are assured of, and when you're filming, remain calm and keep an observational attitude. But I think that kind of detachment has to have a foundation, it's not an aristocratic detachment. I might remain as unemotional as possible, but it has a certain basis.⁹⁹

In this way, Kang describes a process that balances an emotional connection and a fundamental understanding of the subjects with a detached filming style. So even if he is not emotionally engaged at the moment of filming for the sake of the project, he remains connected in a way unavailable to those socially detached from pain and hardship. He further connects this kind of detachment not only to class markers, but also to the difference between rural and urban dwellers (although he uses the terms small and big city). He relates an anecdote about how when friends visit him, his habit is to drop and everything and spend time with them, whereas when he visits Beijing, his friends will ask to arrange a time to meet, because they cannot immediately get away from their important engagements.¹⁰⁰ He further relates this attitude to his filming style, which suggests that he understands his style as having a deep engagement with the subjects that is not

⁹⁷ Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo*, 53-54.

⁹⁸ Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo*, 62.

⁹⁹ Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo*, 60.

¹⁰⁰ Lü, *Jilu Zhongguo*, 55.

about calculating personal benefits or rationally managing time and relative importance of tasks and people.

An example from one of the *Weight of Time* “Yinyang” episodes most clearly demonstrates how the program format discloses the *xianchang* openness of Kang’s original film. *Yinyang*’s slow pace and focus on details allows metaphor and emotion to arise from the footage itself. This allows for a respect for the indeterminacy of the material. This notable sequence begins with Zhang Yaozong talking with his son, Xiao Li, about the spring onions they will sell at market. The discussion then turns to Xiao Li’s desire to treat his acne, which has been the subject of gossip as he looks for a spouse. Xiao Li then carries his bicycle down a long mountain path, and three shots of varying distance emphasize the difficulty of this journey and the time it takes to travel to town. Then, Xiao Li rides through town to the pharmacy, where he will buy the acne treatment. Dialogue and a close up shot of the bottle reveal that it is called *shaonü zhi chun*, or Young Woman’s Spring, which underlines that Xiao Li must use a product intended for young women. In the next shot, Xiao Li carefully washes his face and applies the cream. The pace of the sequence and Xiao Li’s sincere desire to find a marriage partner provokes viewer sympathy. The difficulties Xiao Li faces are obvious without a narrator’s explanation. Yet, in the version for *Weight of Time*, Chen’s commentary universalizes from Xiao Li’s experience, in a way that directs the viewer to one particular conclusion:

I don’t know if you noticed this detail. After Xiao Li used the terribly scarce water to wash his face, he earnestly rubbed the ‘Young Woman’s Spring’ on his face. When he was faced with circumstances he was helpless to change, he placed his hopes in changing his appearance. In this way, Xiao Li epitomizes all Dongpo villagers. Even if their material conditions are lacking, people’s hope for happiness is the same.

Chen directly addresses the audience and suggests that this scene shows something common

about all of the people living in these difficult conditions and offers their “hope for happiness” as a trait they implicitly also share with viewers. Xiao Li’s specific pain is less important than the fact that everyone, including the viewers, wants to be happy. The banality of this conclusion blunts the emotional power of the sequence, demonstrating how the program’s intervention can make uncomfortable material palatable for television viewers. Chen’s presentation of a fully formed reading of the sequence diminishes the film’s capacity to cultivate critical viewers engaged in drawing their own conclusions, which as Ying Qian argues, is central to the appeal of such an approach for Chinese independent documentary directors, not its purported objectivity as those familiar with direct cinema might assume.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I offer an example from one of Kang’s other films presented on *Weight of Time*. A particularly honest moment of *Dangbing*, a documentary about a young man entering military service, depicts the film’s subject talking back to the camera and challenging the producers, and implicitly the viewers, for judging him. The film follows a young man who joins the army after dropping out of high school. Much of the version shown on CCTV uses crosscutting to contrast Shao Zhenning’s life before the army and in training camp. Before joining the army, he often drank beer with friends, smoked cigarettes, and didn’t seem interested in being a useful member of society. In the third episode, Shao is framed from the shoulders up, and producer can be heard from off screen asking him about how he has changed since entering the army. The producer remarks that changes in his personality and attitude seem almost instantaneous. Shao responds in this way:

¹⁰¹ Qian, “Visionary Realities,” 248.

Well of course [I'm different.] At home, I had nothing to do. Since I didn't test into school, I was bored, all there was to do was hang out with them. You all have got it wrong. I'm not that kind of person. If we were to change places, if you hadn't gotten into school, you would be like me, just hanging out with them all day, nothing to do. Watching TV at home, smoking. If you really let me do something, I'll definitely do it better than you. You really look down on me. I really hate you all.

At this moment, our understanding of the young man as a metaphor for aimlessness is broken by Shao's critique of our assumptions and failure to sympathize with him. Shao is clearly conscious of how his previous behavior appeared to other people, but he refuses to accept the implied narrative that he needed the discipline of the army to change himself. Instead, he asks the producers, and thereby the viewers, to think about the situation from his point of view. He describes himself as only needing an opportunity to be of value. This moment reveals how damaging it can be to the subject when individual experiences are used to create documentary metaphor and made to stand in for social phenomena beyond oneself. In the next chapter, I continue my consideration of this kind of metaphor, namely young people standing in for social phenomena larger than themselves, in the context of the reality television show *X-Change*.

Table 1 Weight of Time Episodes

Original Film Title	Episode Title	Original Year Filmed	Update Year	Director(s)	Original TV Station	#	R, U, or UR
怒族一家人	怒族一家人	1991-1992	2002	高国栋	辽宁电视台	1	R
德兴坊	德兴坊	1991	2003	江宁	上海电视台	1	U
神鹿呀，我们的神鹿	神鹿	1992	2002	孙曾田	中央电视台	2	UR
家在沙漠中	家在沙漠中	1993	2002	纪林	新疆电视台	1	R
心籁	心籁	1993	2003	康健宁	宁夏电视台	1	R
杜摇摇	杜摇摇	1993	2003	卢敏	山东电视台	1	U
毛毛告状	毛毛十岁	1993	2003	王文黎	上海电视台	1	U
深山船家	百里峡船工	1993	2003	王海兵	四川电视台	2	R
茅岩河船夫	茅岩河船夫	1993	2003	宋继昌	上海电视台	1	R
远在北京的家	远在北京的家	1993	2003	陈晓卿 / 禹成明	中央电视台	2	UR
重逢的日子	在水一方	1993	2003	王蔚	上海电视台	1	U
飘逝的江船	飘逝的江船	1994	2003	沈蔚琴	浙江电视台	1	UR
龙脊	龙脊	1994	2003, 2006	陈晓卿 / 杨小肃	中央电视台 / 桂林电视台	4	R
嫁给中国	嫁给中国	1995	2003	沈蔚琴	浙江电视台	1	UR
王老汉和他儿女们	王老汉和他儿女们	1995	2003	彭辉 / 张长青	成都电视台	1	UR
影人儿	影人儿	1996	2003	孙杰	山西电视台	1	R
戏班	戏班	1996	2003	林力涵	福建电视台	1	R
扁担刘晓萧	棒棒	1996	2004	曾磊 / 徐蓓	重庆电视台	3	UR
三节草	三节草	1997	2003	梁碧波	成都经济电视台 / 中央电视台	1	UR
最后的马帮	最后的马帮	1997	2003	郝跃骏	云南电视台	3	R
尼玛喝晓敏 (小?)	尼玛和小敏	1997	2003	王云龙	云南电视台	2	U
背篓电影院	背篓电影院	1997	2003	彭辉	成都电视台	1	R
阴阳	阴阳	1997	2003	康健宁	*first time shown	3	R
漆山人家	漆	1998	2003	王影	重庆电视台	1	R
爆炸	爆炸	1998	2003	戴艺	福建电视台	1	U
一个叫做家的地方	丑丑的家	1999	2003	王小龙 / 王锋	上海电视台	1	U
今年冬天	今年冬天	2000	2006	仲华	中央电视台	2	U
远山的摇歌	摇歌悠悠	2000	2003	姚松平	湖北电视台	1	UR
旅馆	旅馆	2001	2003	曾壘 / 杨芸	重庆电视台	2	R
沙与海	生活	1989, 1995	2003	康健宁 / 高国栋	宁夏电视台	3	R
最后的山神	最后的山神	1992-3	2003	孙曾田	中央电视台	1	R
静止的河	大河	1996-8	2004	蒋樾	中央电视台	2	U
我的小学	我的小学	1998-9	2003	方可 / 祝凤鸣	安徽电视台	1	R
当兵	当兵	2000-1	2003	康健宁	宁夏电视台	3	U

* R = Rural, U = Urban, UR = Urban and Rural

Chapter 2: Change of Form, Form of Change: *X-Change*, the Swap Format, and the Rural-Urban Divide¹⁰²

“But mommy, why won’t the mother see her daughter?” came the voice of a young child, perhaps six or seven, from the back of the Beijing cinema at a sparsely attended morning screening of *I’m Sorry, Baby!* (*Baobei Duibuqi!*, Liping Pan and others, 2015) in January 2015. On the screen, a nine-year-old girl from Guizhou province begs the mother that abandoned her years before to open the door and let her in. She pleads that she just wants to see her mother and even brought clothing as a gift. I cringed as I watched this painful scene, which eventually resulted in a reluctant reunion. Similar scenes often take place on the reality television program *X-Change* (*Bianxingji*), produced by Hunan Satellite Television (2006-present), the same television network that made this cinematic version. While the film involved a celebrity mother, the basic premise remained the same. A spoiled, rich, urban child or teen learns manners and responsibility from an extended stay with destitute rural families, whose children know the value of hard work and education. In the television version, the rural young people also travel to urban areas to witness development on a scale unknown to rural communities and enjoy the privileged lifestyle of the urban middle class. Like the young viewer behind me, I wondered what was going on. By the end of the movie, the tearful reunion between rural mother and daughter was an afterthought. The happy ending emphasized how much the urban, ‘second generation celebrity’ children had learned from the experience, measured through increased maturity and newfound

¹⁰² James Walters uses the term “swap format” in his analysis of *Wife Swap* and similar shows. James Walters, “‘Emotional Blood on the Undusted Carpets’: The Citizen as Subject in *Wife Swap*.” *Critical Survey* 18, no. 3 (2006): 51-64.

physical abilities, like chopping wood.¹⁰³ How did rural and urban children experiencing each other's lives become a form of entertainment with educational aspirations?¹⁰⁴

Although the program has developed and changed over the course of its fourteen seasons to date, Hunan Television producers highlight *Wife Swap* as an inspiration for *X-Change*, and Chinese critics often characterize the show as an unofficial and heavily revised adaptation of the global format.¹⁰⁵ *Wife Swap* similarly presents a narrative of personal transformation through an experience of a home life contrary to one's own, although the subjects to be transformed through *X-Change*'s televisual journey are children and teenagers, instead of the adult mothers in *Wife Swap* and programs like it. Furthermore, while *Wife Swap* uses a fixed structure of game rules, with novel and sensational contrasts between families for each episode, *X-Change*, after a period of experimentation in early seasons, settled on a looser structure of rural-urban exchange that remains largely similar episode to episode, albeit with geographical differences. The circulation, adaptation, and development of this shared conception of televised swap and transformation invites comparisons between the Anglo-American and mainland Chinese media contexts. How did this idea of swapping households as a moral lesson arise in each media environment, despite very different historical, social, and industrial conditions? What do the forms of reality television that flourish in the People's Republic of China tell us about the genre as a whole? In what kind

¹⁰³ The term 'second generation celebrity' or *xingerdai* is a play on the terms for the privileged offspring of the new class of post-reform wealthy Chinese called *fuerdai*.

¹⁰⁴ For example, a psychological consultant from the show has published a book that offers parenting advice through discussion of his experience on the show. Hu Shenzhi 胡慎之, *Bianxingji: Shitian biancheng yige haohaizi* 变形计——十天变成一个好孩子 [X-Change: Ten days to become a good child], (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ Zhang Guannan 张冠男, "Cong Hunan weishi *Bianxinji* kan dianshi jiemu de chuangyi yu cehua" 从湖南卫视《变形计》看电视节目的创意与策划," [Creativity and planning in television programming through Hunan Satellite's *X-Change*], *Meiti Shidai* 媒体时代 11 (2012): 62-65.

of world can a televisually motivated experience purport to offer real life transformation, and from what position might this spectacle be entertaining or educational?

In this chapter, I trace the cultural and media histories that laid the groundwork for each program, which offers a different pre-history for reality television that centers on documentary performance and didactic goals, as opposed to surveillance and social experimentation. Specifically, I will outline the development of the swap structure in the Anglo-American context by considering the career of Arnold Shapiro who, for decades, has produced programs that assert the possibility of change through constructed (and filmed) situations in which individuals stand in for a collective social type or age group. The programs often focus on family life, troubled children, and intervention as preventing future misbehavior, suggesting television will serve as a vehicle to put minors back on a path to success, as defined by educational or professional success. For *X-Change*, the movement between urban and rural spaces in the People's Republic of China has a charged history, imbued with questions of ideology, education, charity, and morality. While a thorough examination of this history is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will discuss key historical moments that offer a deeper understanding of what *X-Change*'s idea of urban-rural transformation means for Chinese viewers. The ideologies expressed in *X-Change* and *Wife Swap* demonstrate their common use of an exchange structure and transformation narrative to educate citizens in nationally inflected ways: where *Wife Swap* emphasizes individual difference and compromise, *X-Change* uses the same format to suggest a unified, national trajectory towards progress.

“Real reality we can learn from” and the Origins of the Swap Format¹⁰⁶

Reality television has a checkered past. It is often maligned as cheap entertainment that is anything but real and as evidence of the end of documentary, yet various critics and scholars have provided a richer historical background for the form, connecting it to social experimentation via Allen Funt, to documentary via *cinéma vérité*, and to the observational and anthropological aims of *An American Family* (PBS, 1973).¹⁰⁷ While Mark Andrejevic’s work convincingly argues for the connection between reality television and surveillance through *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, *Wife Swap* and *X-Change* take place in real homes instead of the desert islands or high-tech, camera-laden homes of the other programs.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore in *X-Change*, the producers are often visible and engaged in the journey alongside their young participants, which is quite different from the voice of *Big Brother* or Jeff Probst’s fixed role as host and arbitrator of *Survivor*. Brian Winston argues that Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch’s *Chronicle of a Summer* can be understood as a precursor to reality television, and the role of the director or producer is key to that comparison. What *Chronicle of a Summer* and *Wife Swap* or *X-Change* have in common is the filmmaker’s “willingness to push his subjects into places they would not

¹⁰⁶ This quote is from a viewer comment about the American version of *Brat Camp*, cited in Katie Anderson Egging, “The Ritual of Dark Play in *Brat Camp*,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 37, no. 2 (2007): 63.

¹⁰⁷ John Corner, “Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions,” *Television & New Media* 3, no. 3 (2002): 255-69; Anna McCarthy, “‘Stanley Milgram, Allen Funt, and Me’: Postwar Social Science and the ‘First Wave’ of Reality TV,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, 2nd ed, eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 23-43; Brian Winston, “Rouch’s ‘Second Legacy’: *Chronique d’un Ete* as Reality TV’s Totemic Ancestor,” in *Building Bridges: The Cinema of Jean Rouch*, ed. Joram Ten Brink, (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 297-311. Susan Murray, “‘I Think We Need a New Name for It’: The Meeting of Documentary and Reality Television,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. 2nd ed., eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 65-81.

¹⁰⁸ Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*.

otherwise occupy in the name of understanding their inner selves better,” through an explicit intervention into their lives.¹⁰⁹

Putting people in uncomfortable positions for the sake of emotional or civic education could also sum up Arnold Shapiro’s career. Shapiro had a hand in bringing many kinds of swaps to American screens, both large and small, in the classroom and in the home. Shapiro has worked on many programs similar to *X-Change*, including *Brat Camp* which Shapiro adapted to American television and which offers an outward bound-like program to rehabilitate troubled teens.¹¹⁰ More importantly, Shapiro has moved between entertainment and educational productions. His most well-known work is *Scared Straight!* (1978), which won an Oscar in the documentary category and was widely considered of direct benefit to communities nationwide. It was made for television, filming in May 1978, and first broadcast on an independent station in Los Angeles, KTLA, on November 2, 1978.¹¹¹ Shapiro went onto work on popular reality shows like *Rescue 911* and *Big Brother*, in addition to producing *The Teen Files*, an Emmy-awarding winning series shown on television and in schools.¹¹² Close attention to *Scared Straight!* and Shapiro’s educational series *Teen Files* from the late 1990s and early 2000s demonstrates the

¹⁰⁹ Winston, 301.

¹¹⁰ Josef Adalian, “‘Brat’ Format in ABC’s Camp (American Broadcasting Companies Inc. Producing Television Show ‘Brat Camp’),” *Daily Variety* 286, no. 17 (2005): 1, 31. *X-Change* also made a *Brat Camp*-type episode entitled “Zou, Zou, Zou 走走走 [Walk, Walk, Walk]” in 2006.

¹¹¹ Anthony Petrosino, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, and James O. Finckenauer, “Well-meaning Programs Can Have Harmful Effects! Lessons from Experiments of Programs Such as *Scared Straight*,” *Crime and Delinquency* 46, no. 3 (2000): 356-7; “Television This Week,” *New York Times*, Mar 4, 1979, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/120926821?accountid=14784>.

¹¹² “The Truth about Hate: Hard-Hitting, Emotionally Raw Series, Confronts the Growing Tensions among Today’s Teens,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Mar 10, 1999, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/369370220?accountid=14784>.

centrality of performance to the concept of the transformative swap and these programs' serious intention to change lives and society through constructed scenarios.

Scared Straight! was extremely successful both in ratings and in sparking a national conversation about juvenile crime and methods for deterrence.¹¹³ The documentary depicted a Rahway State Prison inmate-created program called the Juvenile Awareness Program, which allowed troubled teens to experience life as a convict for a few hours. In addition to touring the prison and seeing the inside of a cell, the majority of the program is a kind of theatrical performance in which convicts, or lifers as they call themselves, describe how they ended up in prison and the dangers and violence they face each day. Inmates physically confront the seated youths in their turn "onstage," shouting at them, demanding they remove their shoes, and singling out any teenager they perceive as disrespectful or flippant. Scenes from Shapiro's follow-up films even demonstrate that later iterations of the program took place on stages in prison auditoriums, further emphasizing the theatrical nature of the experience. Thus, while the reality of prison life is partly created through the actual surroundings and contingent, unplanned interactions, the transformation in fact depends more strongly on the teens' positions as active audience members (they are chastised and punished for failing to pay attention or for any perceived disrespect). The convicts describe their lives as if acting on stage, each giving a monologue in turn, throwing into question in what sense the film is a documentary of prison life, a life-changing lesson for young people, or if it is better understood as a forerunner to reality television that plays out a more or less improvisational scenario in a closed setting with a pre-defined objective and planned before and after narrative arc.

¹¹³ "'Scared Straight' Tops Ratings in its Time Slot," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 4, 1978, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/158665550?accountid=14784>.

The theatrical nature of *Scared Straight!* is also obvious in how it was immediately available for replication in various contexts. A *Newsweek* article from 1979 describes a group of young boys playing “scared straight,” after tiring of playing house or cops and robbers.¹¹⁴ A *New York Times* article similarly mentions the show as inspiration for a high school skit in a student variety show.¹¹⁵ Such mimicry has not waned; *Saturday Night Live* has a reoccurring sketch based on the model of convicts using harsh language to convince young offenders to renounce a life of crime.¹¹⁶ Yet, participants themselves refuse the connection between performance and falsity. As Frank Bindhammer, a co-founder of the Rahway Lifers’ program explained to Dick Cavett in a televised interview, “It’s hard to be a phony twice a day,” suggesting that the intensity of the performance and its repetition requires the inmates to speak from their true experience.

Scared Straight! emphasized intervention, and filmmakers and the television networks that showed the program consciously distanced themselves from entertainment objectives. For example, the Minnesota public access station that originally aired the film combined it with a roundtable discussion among lawmakers, community members, and even a recently released felon, about how the model could be applied in their own communities to help wayward youth.¹¹⁷ The program was produced at a moment in which anxiety about youth crime was high.

¹¹⁴ Aric Press, “Does ‘Scaring’ Work?,” *Newsweek*, May 14, 1979, 131.

¹¹⁵ Robert Hanley, “‘Scared Straight!’ Film a Part of Life for Many Students in One Town,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1979, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/120862282?accountid=14784>.

¹¹⁶ For example, *Saturday Night Live* 5, performed by Taylor Swift, aired Nov 7, 2009, on NBC, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/107512>.

¹¹⁷ Dick Cavett, “‘WTCN-TV Presents ‘Scared Straight’ Includes analysis with Dick Cavett and Town Hall Meeting with Stuart A Lindman from 1979,” MP4, 104:03, posted by TC Media Now, <https://tcmmedianow.com/wtcn-tv-presents-scared-straight-includes-analysis-with-dick-cavett-and-to-wn-hall-meeting-with-stuart-a-lindman/>.

A *Time* magazine article published in 1977 cited the following statistics:

More than half of all serious crimes* in the U.S. are committed by youths aged ten to 17. Since 1960, juvenile crime has risen twice as fast as that of adults. In San Francisco, kids of 17 and under are arrested for 57% of all felonies against people (homicide, assault, etc.) and 66% of all crimes against property. Last year in Chicago, one-third of all murders were committed by people aged 20 or younger, a 29% jump over 1975. In Detroit, youths commit so much crime that city officials were forced to impose a 10 p.m. curfew last year for anyone 16 or under.¹¹⁸

In addition to these statistics, the article is riddled with stories of young people committing violent crimes and paints the juvenile court system as extremely lenient. Many who praised the program emphasized the importance of early intervention for juvenile offenders, by citing statistics that while not all juvenile offenders become adult criminals, nearly all adults in prison began their criminal activity as minors. An article evaluating the influence of popular media on public understandings of juvenile delinquency clearly sets up what opinions of children led to juvenile courts and emphasis on rehabilitation and early intervention: “This rehabilitative model was premised on very specific ideas about children. The latter were seen as more innocent and uncalculating than adults and deserving of special care. More malleable than an adult, a child’s behavior pattern could be improved by helpful intervention. The earlier the intervention, the better for the child and society.”¹¹⁹ The understanding of children as malleable is particularly important not only to *Scared Straight!* and *Brat Camp*, but also to *X-Change* and its focus on portraying youth participants as capable of change in a short period of time.

Scared Straight! described its teen participants as hardcore offenders, certainly on their way to “a life of crime,” which justified its use of graphic language to describe prison rape and

¹¹⁸ “The Youth Crime Plague,” *TIME Magazine* 110, no. 2 (July 11, 1977): 20.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=53520501&site=ehost-live>.

¹¹⁹ John Heeren and David Shichor, “Mass Media and Delinquency Prevention: The Case of *Scared Straight!*,” *Deviant Behavior* 5, no. 1-4 (1984): 378.

violence. This certainty about the future awaiting particular young people is remarkable and suggests a desire for an active involvement in the present to prevent an otherwise inevitable future. A logic of probability is applied to individuals. Since the majority of adult prisoners began as juvenile delinquents, then intervention and harsh treatment can be justified as preventing future criminal activity. The film also followed a clear before and after structure in which teens first expressed their criminal experience and desires to continue in relaxed terms, showing their total lack of remorse for antisocial behavior. After they experience the program in interviews outside the prison, they describe their fear and newfound commitment to a law-abiding lifestyle, confirming the success of the experience. Shapiro went on to make follow-up programs one, ten, and twenty years later to demonstrate the continued impact of the program, highlighting the stable and productive lives of the now adult participants. The idea has had further life in a 2011 A&E reality series, *Beyond Scared Straight*. Laurie Ouellette and Alison Page, in their work on the prison-televisual complex, note that there are currently over two dozen prison-focused programs on American TV.¹²⁰ Despite research suggesting the inefficacy and even potential harm of experience in prison for minors, public opinion continues to support its use.¹²¹ Criminologists have suggested that its continued use stems not from its ability to deter crime, but from its connections to public opinion about crime and the desire for punishment and vengeance against even young and marginal offenders.¹²²

¹²⁰ Laurie Ouellette and Alison Page, "The Prison-Televisual-Complex," (presentation, Society of Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Chicago, IL, March 25, 2017).

¹²¹ Jeff Maahs and Travis C. Pratt, "I Hate These Little Turds!": Science, Entertainment, and the Enduring Popularity of Scared Straight Programs," *Deviant Behavior* 38, no. 1 (2017): 47-60.

¹²² Gray Cavender, "'Scared Straight': Ideology and the Media," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 9, no. 6 (1981): 431-39. Brian G. Sellers, "Community-Based Recovery and Youth Justice," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 42, no. 1 (2015): 58-69.

After *Scared Straight!*, Shapiro made a series of productions that also combine uncomfortable environments, malleable young people, and a sense of penance through a reversed experience. *Teen Files* and *Flipped* are exemplary in this context. For instance, one 2003 review of a *Teen Files* production about bullying, emphasizes how a transformation in environment and social position sparks a behavioral and ideological change:

Instead of telling students what to do if a person bullies them, this innovative video follows the lives of two bullies who unsuspectingly have their worlds flipped and find themselves in the shoes of those they bully. They must attend another school on the same day a school shooting occurs in a nearby community, and are given ‘nerdy’ clothes to wear. Teased mercilessly and unable to brush off the teasing, they commiserate with other bullied students who admit to thoughts of suicide or revenge.¹²³

The remedy for bullies is to experience bullying, which suggests a certain one-to-one equivalency between crime and punishment as well as a direct reversal of power positions. A bully takes the place of their former victims by putting on a costume. In another episode, a teen who admits to not using condoms is “made up with a rash that AIDS sufferers often have” and to complete the experience, she must “write a farewell letter to her family, make funeral arrangements, and move into a Hospice.”¹²⁴ In these examples, behavioral changes can be achieved through constructed experiences, whether they depend on a certain amount of authenticity like in the bullying example, or depend on the imagination of having a serious illness understood as a death sentence.

In addition to these constructed scenarios, the teen participants change their destructive behaviors through their experience as active viewers. On an episode entitled “The Truth about Drinking,” young people profess to enjoy alcohol and their initial interviews emphasize their

¹²³ Robert D. Wilson, “Making Social Issues Relevant with Documentaries,” *Teacher Librarian* 31, no. 1 (2003): 51.

¹²⁴ Anitra Gordon, “Sexual Responsibility,” *School Library Journal* 49, no. 1 (2003): 71.

dismissive attitudes towards the potential risks accompanied by drinking and driving. These comments include, “I like the drunkenness, like staggering around and falling down. It’s awesome,” and “If the driver’s a little buzzed, I figure, okay, he’ll get me home on time and I’ll be okay. So that’s really what I’m thinking about is getting home, really, more than who’s driving.”¹²⁵ Various segments of the program then lead them to rethink their alcohol consumption through various experiences. Some, like a visit to a doctor who shows them healthy and sick livers removed from the victims of a drunk driving accident, depend on a direct experience; they can feel and touch the livers. Other experiences emphasize the importance of spectatorship. In an extended, imagined scenario, three of the four teens have died in a drunk driving accident. They then watch on a TV/VCR mounted on a rolling cart, probably much like many of *Teen Files*’ classroom viewers, as a police officer visits their homes and tells their parents they have died. Close ups and a shot-reverse shot structure emphasizes the young people as viewers of their parents’ performance of grief (fig. 5). The program continues this simulation through their funeral, where the parents and teens read each other farewell letters. Again, viewership and participation in a scenario that everyone involved knows is false is nevertheless purported to offer a real emotional experience with consequences for the teens’ subsequent behavior.

What *Scared Straight!*, *Teen Files*, *Wife Swap*, and *Brat Camp* share, is the foundational belief in the ability to effect change through a shift in perspective and a constructed environment that emphasizes consequences of personal actions. By meeting a person from a group you claim to hate, entering a prison and suffering verbal abuse from convicts, through immersion in

¹²⁵ “The Teen Files: The Truth about Drinking, Teaching Module” (AIMS Multimedia, 1999). <http://www.socialstudies.com/pdf/AM211VTG.pdf>.

someone else's home life, or confronting a sexually abusive father, participants can change their reality and, more importantly, future. Hate becomes compassion; teenage indifference and bravado dissolve, and maturity and responsibility grow in their place; and staunchly held views cede to tolerance for different approaches. Thus, tracing Shapiro's career and various projects across commercial and educational markets demonstrates an underlying tension exploited for entertainment in reality television, namely that not only can a constructed situation reveal the



Figure 5 Teen watches parent's reaction

inner self but it can further spark a transformation, suggesting the malleability of identity and the external world.

While Shapiro was not directly connected to *Wife Swap*, the program makes similar claims to social value through constructed scenarios. The program originally premiered in the United Kingdom, and Stephen Lambert, the executive credited with launching the show, explains that it was originally inspired by a newspaper article about women with different jobs, incomes,

and spending habits. Personal finance became a reflection on larger priorities and “people’s value systems,”¹²⁶ which contributed to Lambert’s notion that the show must serve a dual purpose: “[T]he pressure to be entertaining and popular is as great as the pressure to capture something about the way the world is. So I think to some extent factual entertainment tries to still be informative and revealing about the world and to have some kind of subtext, but it also has entertainment as an equally core priority.”¹²⁷ Various scholars have examined *Wife Swap* and appraised its combination of a surface openness with an underlying normativity, particularly in terms of gender roles.¹²⁸

In *Wife Swap*, partly because the program targets the values of the parents and not the children, the reality depicted is a diverse world of various viewpoints. The participants represent individual extremes that can mutually benefit from confrontation with their opposite to bring both sides closer to a middle ground compromise. At the beginning of the show, the families’ lifestyles are displayed for audience derision which aligns the audience against the participants at the outset and provides them a place of security from which to approve of those couples that are able to accept criticism and make small changes to their lifestyle in the second half of the show. Nation making, for *Wife Swap*, is not about a unitary goal or even a coming together in agreement on one path. A generous reading would see *Wife Swap* as about diversity and tolerance; a critical one would recognize its exhibitionism, inciting audience derision for failure

¹²⁶ Quoted in Jean K. Chalaby, *The Format Age: Television's Entertainment Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 138.

¹²⁷ Chalaby, *The Format Age*, 137.

¹²⁸ Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living through Reality TV*, 196. Jim Brancato, “Domesticating Politics: The Representation of Wives and Mothers in American Reality Television,” *Film & History* 37, no. 2 (2007): 49-56.; Alison Winch, “Class and British Reality TV,” in *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 161-77.

to take personal responsibility for maintaining a clean house, disciplining children, or other implicit social values. Thus, the Anglo-American show is all about personal choice and the acceptance of superficial difference, while demanding adherence to ill-defined “common sense” expectations.

To take a concrete example, in episode three of season seven of ABC’s *Wife Swap*, originally broadcast on April 4, 2013, the lifestyles of a rural and an urban family are contrasted, and intertextual references to other reality television shows immediately signal what will be entertaining about their lifestyles. The “urban” Curry family is better described as suburban, embodying familiar middle class woes, chauffeuring children to and from a variety of afterschool experiences. Where the Curry family differs from others, is in the mother’s insistence that both her daughter and son participate in pageants, recalling for American television viewers the popular TLC program *Toddlers and Tiaras* (2008-13). The rural Cochran family, on the other hand, loves hunting and fishing and is proud that their daughter also participates. The rural setting, camouflage clothing, and family situation might remind viewers of the well-known, controversial reality show *Duck Dynasty* (A&E, 2012-7).

Over the course of the swap, the program clearly sets up binaries that map to a large extent onto gender binaries—a pageant family versus a modern redneck family—and diagnose their problems as over feminization or masculinization respectively. The rural mother listens to the pageant family son’s desire to get his hair cut, and the show makes a point of emphasizing how strangers mistake him for a girl as motivation for the haircut. The urban pageant mom placed a particular importance on haircuts and was especially upset to have missed her son’s first haircut, but the show presents it as important to the child’s gender identity. Similarly, while in the country household, the pageant mother creates opportunities for the daughter, who has been

raised to fish and spend time outdoors along with her brother, to express her femininity. The rural father, while initially resistant, is moved to tears by his daughter's beauty after the pageant mother dresses her up. This contrast is indicative of *Wife Swap*'s approach to difference more generally; each family's choices are portrayed as extreme and compromise as beneficial to the family as a whole. The exchange also encourages adherence to wider social norms, particularly the naturalized gender roles depicted in the Curry/Cochran episode. On *Wife Swap*, choices between the rural and urban are arbitrary; they seem to be a matter of taste rather than locations with specific histories and traditions.

Rural China, Peasants, Education, and Progress Before and After Mao

Wife Swap's interchangeable locations across the nation of production are narrowed and fixed to the rural and urban in *X-Change*. The differences between rural and urban China have been of central concern to intellectuals and reformers since the beginning of the twentieth century. Xiaorong Han describes the extent to which, for intellectuals in the 1920s, interpretation of rural society defined one's political identity and the nature and trajectory of the coming political struggle, whether reform or revolution.¹²⁹ Even though rural areas were understood as key to the transformation of Chinese society, and indeed successful mobilization of the peasantry was quite important to the Communist Party's eventual success,¹³⁰ peasants were not deemed capable of revolution on their own. As Han puts it, "the assumption that the peasants are innocent and pristine because they are primitive, natural, simple, and hard-working, and because

¹²⁹ Xiaorong Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant*, 17.

¹³⁰ Lucien Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), 151.

their lives had not been penetrated and contaminated by modern foreign civilization.”¹³¹

Intellectuals needed to bring revolution and a proper political ideology to the countryside and guide peasants in their own liberation.¹³²

Peasant theatre was one of the ways in which education was brought to the countryside in this period. During the Mass Education Movement during the republican era, Chinese “intellectuals viewed peasant-directed theater construction as more than just a means of offering modern theater to the rural masses, but as part of the process of turning them into new citizens.”¹³³ By creating narratives from their daily lives, under the direction of a visiting intellectual, peasants could engage with rural reconstruction and reform.

After the establishment of the People Republic of China, the rural continued to be a location for education, most notably during the Cultural Revolution, when educated young people were sent to the countryside to learn from the peasants, who were seen as the most revolutionary. In December 1968, Mao Zedong proclaimed, “Educated youths must go to the villages and receive reeducation from the poor and lower-middle peasants.”¹³⁴ While scholars still debate the relative importance of the stated ideological intentions versus the needs to redirect the energies of out-of-control red guards and deal with urban unemployment, the movement between urban and rural areas was clearly transformative for an entire generation. Firsthand

¹³¹ Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant*, 25.

¹³² Han, *Chinese Discourses on the Peasant*, 53.

¹³³ Man He, “1935, December 21: Crossing the River and Ding County Experimental Theater,” in *A New Literary History of Modern China*, ed. David Der-wei Wang (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 414-9.

¹³⁴ As quoted and translated in Chinese Communist Party Committee, “The Great Task of Cultivating Successors to the Proletarian Revolutionary Cause,” in *The Rustication of Urban Youth in China: A Social Experiment*, ed. Peter J Seybolt (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1977), 9.

experience in the countryside for many of the sent-down youth (*zhiquing*) who were from urban, educated backgrounds, was an intensive lesson in the discrepancies between “the political rhetoric of socialist revolution and the realities in rural China.”¹³⁵ Guobin Yang argues that these experiences shifted the red guard generation’s focus from ideological struggle to daily life and consequently to economic development that would support personal self-interest over the collective and class struggle that had animated their previous zealous political participation.

With this economic development came worsening social inequality that divided along urban and rural lines, an unsurprising outcome given that major urban areas were already better off due to industrialization during the Republican and Maoist periods and that the state centralized development in special economic zones in coastal regions during the reform period. The rural-urban divide is central to understandings of contemporary China and accordingly the subject of research from various disciplinary perspectives.¹³⁶ As Kam Wing Chan and Li Zhang argue, “While economic dualism (agriculture/industry) is characteristic of most developing countries, the Chinese state has also produced a much tenacious social dualism, through both economic and, more importantly, institutional means (such as the *hukou* system).”¹³⁷ In the context of *X-Change*, ideological understandings of rural-urban difference are most pertinent. Lili Lai nicely summarizes the generalizations often made:

¹³⁵ Guobin Yang, *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 105.

¹³⁶ Monograph-length studies in English include: John Knight and Lina Song, *The Rural-Urban Divide Economic Disparities and Interactions in China*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Jeremy Brown, *City versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). and the edited volume Martin King Whyte, ed, *One Country, Two Societies: Rural-urban Inequality in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹³⁷ Kam Wing W. Chan, and Li Zhang, “The Hukou System and Rural-Urban Migration in China: Processes and Changes,” *China Quarterly* 160 (1999): 830-1.

Behind the increasingly hegemonic discourse on the problem of the peasantry lies China's chronic rural-urban divide, the long-standing stereotyped ideology of which represents the vast rural population as a whole as if they were of one body—the mass of the peasants—and this one body has always been lagging behind. If China is to modernize, according to these discourses, it will have to transcend this grotesque body, which is characterized by tropes such as “backward,” “unenlightened,” “need-to-catch up,” “like sheep,” and worse.¹³⁸

Urban residents are most likely to encounter this ‘mass of peasants’ not in their rural hometowns, but in the cities, as migrant workers engaged primarily in construction or various forms of low-level service work.

The migrant populations challenge ideas of fixed urban and rural people. Once in the city, workers from far-flung, poor provinces are expected to adjust to city life, despite being barred from access to public services, like education for their children, through the residence permit or *hukou* system that serves as an internal passport.¹³⁹ Hairong Yan describes this process for the many young women in the 1990s who arrived in large cities to work as maids and nannies, which illuminates the expectation of personal development that came along with such migration, seen as improving one's personal quality or *suzhi*.¹⁴⁰ Ann Anagnost relates these developments to “a new model of citizenship which seeks to manage the newly stratified society by articulating inequality as cultural difference in a hierarchy of national belonging.”¹⁴¹ This hierarchy, and its articulation in *X-Change* in particular, naturalizes the economic and educational differences between the cities and the mountainous regions resistant to urbanization in terms of space.

¹³⁸ Lili Lai, “The Local Intimacies of China's Rural-Urban Divide,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 22, no. 3 (2014): 544.

¹³⁹ Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁴⁰ Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹⁴¹ Ann Anagnost, “From ‘Class’ to ‘Social Strata’: Grasping the Social Totality in Reform-era China,” *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2008): 497.

Instead of questioning rural and urban difference in social terms, or even as a result of individual choices like American reality television might, *X-Change* seemingly reflects the spaces as they are, as if rural and urban areas have always been this way.

Programs promoted under the term ‘hand-in-hand’ (*shoulashou*) from the early 1990s offer connections between *X-Change*, urban-rural exchange, and *suzhi* development. While the term can be traced to a charitable project at a Hebei school in 1986, the program was popularized as part of the moral education of the Young Pioneers, the Communist Youth League.¹⁴² The official process called upon young urban children to write letters, send small gifts, and eventually visit a particular poor child in the countryside, and by 1994 one million such pairs of urban and rural children had been formed.¹⁴³ Urban children were also asked to donate their new year’s money to children who could not afford to attend school.¹⁴⁴ Such programs were considered the cornerstone of the *suzhi*, or moral education, program. *Women’s Movement*, the magazine of the All-China Women’s Federation published an article in 1994 that describes a meeting between rural children and their urban adult benefactors that sounds much like the rural-to-urban half of *X-Change*:

The urban-rural family connections project has been extremely meaningful for both the children from impoverished mountain regions and for the only children

¹⁴² Ye Xueli 叶学丽, “Shoulashou huzhu huodong—xinxingshixia shaoxiandui suzhi jiaoyu de zhongyao pinpai” 手拉手互助活动——新形势下少先队素质教育的重要品牌 [Hand-in-hand mutual aid activities—an important brand of new style Young Pioneers moral education], *Zhongguo gongqingtuan* 中国共青团 4 (2017): 54-56.

¹⁴³ Ye, “Shoulashou,” 55.

¹⁴⁴ Hua Yaoguo 华耀国, “Gaige kaifang 30 nian shaoxiandui sida liangdian—yige shaoxiandui gongzuozhe qinshen jingli de ganwu” 改革开放 30 年少先队四大亮点——一个少先队工作者亲身经历的感悟 [Four highlights of the Young Pioneers in 30 years since Reform and Opening—realizations from a Young Pioneer worker’s personal experience], *Fudaoyuan* 辅导员 7-8 (2008): 44.

from urban families. The aid the poor country children received from the city families strengthened their confidence and bravery to overcome adversity, and their grades improved greatly. The urban children saved their pocket money, eagerly awaiting summer vacation when they could go to remote mountains and offer it to their little brothers and sisters there, and let them too thrive in the big family of socialism.¹⁴⁵

The care the urban parents and children show for these children is connected to “the big family of socialism,” with echoes of an earlier era in which in a model play like *The Red Lantern* creates a family out of those who share political dedication instead of blood relatives.¹⁴⁶ In this case, however, among the charity offered by urban families, there is also the hope that rural children can make up for the siblings that urban children have been denied by state family planning. Thus, while the access to education for rural children is certainly an honorable goal, it is no longer understood as the responsibility of the state, despite laws that ensure nine years of compulsory education. The rural children’s needs are also an opportunity for urban children to develop proper moral qualities and even to experience a sibling’s affection. The ‘big socialist family’ that the author describes is now about an individual, emotional connection, rather than the ideological identification of class comrades. In *X-Change*, the rural and the urban continue to be emptied of their social or political significance, and the emotional feelings generated by such charity are presumed from the beginning of the swap for the rural children who arrive in cities.¹⁴⁷ In the following section, I will elaborate *X-Change*’s articulation of social value through

¹⁴⁵ Yuan Liming 袁立明, “Chengxiang shoulashou yongyuan shi pengyou” 城乡手拉手永远是朋友 [Building a bridge of friendship between the city and the country], *Zhongguo fuyun* 中国妇运 8 (1994): 16.

¹⁴⁶ Yomi Braester, “The Purloined Lantern: Maoist Semiotics and Public Discourse in Early PRC Film and Drama,” in *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 106-27.

¹⁴⁷ While familial terms are often used between strangers or acquaintances, the rural children call the urban parents who welcome them ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ instead of ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle,’ which would be customary for adults who are close but not related.

attention to paratextual discussions of the show as well as exemplary scenes from the show's seventh season.

***X-Change*: Rural Adaptation to the Urban and Urban Rectification**

X-Change approaches the swap structure not to depict a superficially diverse nation as in *Wife Swap*, but to reassure viewers of an inevitable trajectory of social progress that does not necessitate political or social change. When watching *X-Change*, viewers can engage emotionally in a direct way, since proper behavior is not in question in the way it is in *Wife Swap*; the preferred mode of life is clear. Both the urban and rural teenagers know what kinds of lives they should be leading, namely studying hard and obeying their parents, and viewers are also expected to align themselves with that viewpoint. After a couple of early seasons of experimentation with various forms of swaps (parents and children, rural and urban teachers, among others), *X-Change* in its dominant version centers solely on young people and the rural-urban divide.

The beginning of each swap gives us a glimpse of the young participants' lives prior to their journey. Rural children know how to cook and chop wood. They often take care of their siblings and elder family members, and in addition to these caretaking roles, are model students. The urban children, on the contrary, have often quit school, are extremely materialistic, spend their parents' money freely, and are antagonistic to the authority figures in their lives. This Manichean contrast situates viewers squarely on the side of admiring the capable rural children (and often sympathizing with their tragic young life stories; these children often have lost or been abandoned by one or both parents) and being outraged by the excess of the urban youth.

Thus each episode follows a similar path. The urban youth will learn from the hardships and poverty they experience firsthand in the rural areas, and the rural youth will have their eyes opened to the possibility of a good life in the city. Some academics and viewers in China have criticized the show for the two-way nature of the swap, because they do not see the benefits of exposing the rural children to the extent of their deprivation by bringing them to wealthy cities. As one producer puts it, “many people that have seen the show will ask if the bossy city participants really change, and if the rural participants become naughty.”¹⁴⁸ Producers respond that they see the urban experience as providing motivation for rural participants to continue to study hard and improve their lives. Although paratextual, this trajectory is the underlying assumption that animates the program’s narrative drive—life is better in cities, urbanization and development are good, and everyone will eventually live in cities when national development is complete. Urbanites, for their part, have the responsibility to make their children appreciate their good fortune, since they are unfamiliar with the hardships and obstacles that had to be overcome to get China to this point of development.

Expert commentary reinforces the idea that rural children receive inspirational motivation from the swap, and the fact that life is better in the city is taken for granted. Bai Yanyi, a psychological consultant and bestselling author of self-help books, argues that it is not cruel to send rural youth to experience a lifestyle they cannot themselves achieve, because for one the children themselves want to leave their mountain communities and see the city. She goes on:

Even if he will never achieve the superior lifestyle of the city youth, then so what? Life does not end with ourselves, it is a continued process. Although it is in fact beyond me to live like you do, my father was able to bring me to the county-level town from the mountains, and through my efforts, I can move my children from

¹⁴⁸ Liu Xin 刘鑫, ed., *Bianxinji: Chengzhang zhi tong* 变形计: 成长之痛 [*X-Change: Growing Pains*], (Guilin: Lijiang chubanshe, 2014), 165.

the county town to the provincial capital...this kind of step by step advancement means having purpose, having hope, and the process is meaningful.¹⁴⁹

So, while the rural youth may not move to Beijing or Shanghai themselves and replicate the kind of lifestyle they experience through *X-Change*, perhaps they will experience improvements in their quality of life, which Bai expresses through reference to the size of the city and its official hierarchy within government. In addition to suggesting that urban environments and lifestyles are inherently superior to rural ones, the quote adds a hierarchical spatial logic to urban areas and suggests change will happen in an orderly, incremental process.

Producers also define themselves along rural and urban lines, treading in advance the path the urban participant will take in the production's preparation. *X-Change* producer A Tang describes that during the process of selecting the rural participant for the "Teenagers' Trip" episode series, villagers suspected the producers were actually human traffickers. A Tang explains:

After all, the selection process for rural participants differs from the application process for urban participants. Rural protagonists are contacted directly, and they always come from isolated, undeveloped areas. The chance for children to go and experience city life sounds wonderful, but when such a good opportunity arrives at your doorstep, it often feels like a trap.¹⁵⁰

While the city youth participants are expected to apply through a set procedure in their home city, made possible through mobility and infrastructure available to these participants as city residents, the producer explains that rural participants must be found through producers' labor, physical discomfort and interpersonal skills capable of overcoming misunderstandings.

Similarly, Xie Zhenyu, another producer of the same episode series, describes transporting all of

¹⁴⁹ Liu, *Bianxingji*, 205.

¹⁵⁰ Liu, *Bianxingji*, 177.

the equipment by boat to the isolated village.¹⁵¹ Before the city youth can climb the hills and experience the hard labor that will be the source of their transformative experience, the producers themselves must first travel these paths and make similar sacrifices. Thus, the producers stand in for the city youth and their similar sacrifices are what make their job worthwhile, which connects the value of their work to the difficulties they encounter in order to accomplish it.

As for the content of the program itself, discussions about money and spending are central to how the program comments on social class and proper values. For example, in “Faraway, Faraway” (*Yuanfang, yuanfang*), the rural girl, Yang Jie, attends a birthday party for a classmate. The scene occurs in the second episode of the three-part series, just after city participant, Liu Jiachen, shares a cake with Yang’s family, their first experience of such a celebration. Yang’s classmate’s party consists of lunch at a restaurant, a private 3-D movie screening, and a tower of cakes. The children seem to enjoy themselves and express envy at the birthday girl’s presents. In an interview later, the narrator explains that Yang was not envious or excited when she asked about the party’s expense. The image cuts to Yang, dumbfounded, repeating the cost, 8,000 RMB, or approximately

\$1200 (fig. 6). She reasons that such an expenditure was unnecessary considering the number of attendees, highlighting a level of waste inconceivable to a girl who saves two yuan by walking to market instead of taking the bus and is worried about paying her family’s yearly 120-



Figure 6 8,000

yuan water bill, as introduced in the previous episode. Furthermore, by juxtaposing Yang’s

¹⁵¹ Liu, *Bianxingji*, 173.

family's excited confusion about the idea of a birthday party and cake with urban extravagance, *X-Change* emphasizes Yang's rationality, leaving viewers to wonder, indeed why did they need so many cakes for less than twenty guests? Thus, Yang is the ideal foil for the urban participant Liu, whose excessive spending is one of her worst habits. She brags about spending over 10,000 RMB (\$1450) per month and collects name brand sneakers. Thus, economic behavior is particularly indicative of personal character. Yang's thrift is inextricable from her loyalty to her family, her competence, and responsible nature. Likewise, Liu's spending is a strong example of her lack of respect for her parents and has clearly led her to believe money will take care of any problem. For example, in the same breath that she declares she will no longer participate in the program and orders the crew to stop filming, she also says she will compensate them for the expenses, thus money is a way out of any obligation or inconvenience.

The parallel between economic behavior and character is further extended to an assumption about future opportunities. In "Windy Mountain Paths," the rural participants¹⁵² meet a migrant worker in Chongqing and experience her life. They carry boxes of shoes attached to a bamboo pole as she does, and their experience of both hard, manual labor and the woman's meager salary motivate them to return the money she has given them. The younger sister recognizes the hardship the worker endures. The narrator explains that "Time can withstand trials; perhaps life itself is the greatest possession." This declaration, paired with moving non-diegetic music and a collage of images of the day's work edited with cross-dissolves, suggest a contemplative mood and diffuse any further action on the part of the viewer. The migrant worker's low wages and hard, physical labor become a heroic struggle for survival in a city

¹⁵² This series of episodes had two rural participants because the boy chosen to participate felt guilty about leaving his sister, so she was allowed to take part in the show as well.

otherwise characterized by the prosperous enjoyment that the children experienced with their urban family. The summary of the episode in the tie-in book for the seventh season emphasizes this as a kind of discovery, whether for the young participants or for the viewers: “It turns out that behind the bustling city, there is unseen misery. Beyond the city’s bright and beautiful lights and dazzling fireworks, there is also sweat and hard work. Whether in the mountains or elsewhere, this point is still the same.”¹⁵³ To a certain extent, the rural children experience their future if they come to the city as migrant laborers. While the program and related materials do provide any analysis beyond the idea that life is always a struggle, there is an implicit comparison between the rural children and city migrant workers. The children don’t need to learn about hard work, in fact the narrator emphasizes that as rural kids adept at chores and physical labor, they can keep up with the worker better than most. So, this experience is about understanding parallels between what their life is like in the mountains and what it would be if they came to the city as a worker instead of a university student.

Beyond frivolous spending, money is also to blame for the urban teen’s recklessness; they have become accustomed to getting out of trouble through their family’s resources. For example, in “Faraway, Faraway” the urban teenage girl is shown using her father’s connections to get out of trouble with the police. Thus an important lesson for these teenagers is that paying for their mistakes is costly. One of the tropes of the seventh season is the city teenagers causing damage through carelessness that their rural hosts must compensate for by selling off pigs or other precious assets. For example, in seventh season episode “Teenagers’ Trip” (*Shaonian you*), a boat catches on fire while the city kid is barbecuing with a group of rural classmates by the riverside. Similarly, in “Soaring Against the Wind” (*Nifeng feixiang*), a mule tramples a

¹⁵³ Liu, *Bianxingji*, 19.

neighbor's cornfield while the urban youth was in charge of watching it. The rural families still take responsibility for the teen, like their parents have previously. Thus the source of the teen's recklessness isn't the parents' behavior, but the financial consequences in paying for their mistakes. While their own parents don't suffer any hardship, the rural poverty serves to heighten the sacrifice and allow it to take on a new meaning for the youth, and producers take advantage of the situation for its emotional weight, even as they know the family will ultimately be compensated.

X-Change's shift of responsibility away from parents, or even to the individual 'bad' urban teens (they are all redeemed by the end of the program), and onto larger, naturalized conditions of development allows, at least occasionally, for a remarkable display of social problems. At the beginning of the episode series, "Calling Out for Maternal Love" (*Mu'ai de huhuan*), a short interview and montage sequence introduces the lives of rural children other than the week's chosen protagonists. The scene acknowledges in strikingly blunt terms the danger of poorly regulated coal mining and the pain accompanying uneven development and the reliance on migrant labor. Yet, it also refuses to suggest any larger causes for this problems, instead suggesting they are inevitable consequences of necessary development. Voiceover introduces the

children of Baxian, left behind by their migrant worker parents (fig. 7).



Figure 7 Left Behind Children

A producer's voice can then be heard taking an informal survey of all the kids in the classroom, asking whose parents are migrant workers and whose parents have been injured or killed in the mines. Most of the students raise their hands. Stock images of mining workers then accompany voiceover about mining accidents, along with sentimental music. A series of children in close up describe how their parents or relatives have been hurt or killed. The children's stories are edited together to coalesce around one narrative and speak in one voice, that of children left behind while their parents take on risky labor that it seems to almost uniformly result in injury or death. Thus, while the editing suggests this problem plagues the entire town, the narration also claims that "the children are naturally left behind," and that "nobody knows when this practice started." While economic and social causes could certainly be found for this phenomenon, such possibilities are dismissed. This scene suggests that a quite different form of visibility is possible in this version of the swap format. Such an emotionally charged depiction of preventable tragedy is only possible if viewers are already assured that this is merely the inevitable collateral damage of a policy of economic development that will eventually benefit everyone. These children will

struggle, but perhaps their children will be able to grow up in an urban environment, free from this form of trauma.

Conclusion

Chinese reality television is most often studied for its possibilities to open up space for a democratic public sphere in a highly regulated media environment, quite a different perspective from what is most often concluded about American and British versions of the same programming.¹⁵⁴ While *X-Change* and *Wife Swap* are quite different, the Hunan television producers that bring spoiled children to remote villages, where they will face the physical and emotional discomfort of an unknown place and lifestyle, certainly share something with producers like Shapiro and his successors who bring young ‘criminals’ to spend an afternoon in a state prison. Whether through surface compromise within normative bounds or an unquestioned reinforcement of development narratives, *Wife Swap* and *X-Change* share in their drive to construct a nationally inflected version of moral citizenry through performative, constructed scenarios.

¹⁵⁴ Kong, “Are You the One?”; Meng, “Who Needs Democracy,”; Jim Yardley, “The Chinese Get the Vote, if Only for 'Super Girl',” *New York Times* Sept 4, 2005.

Chapter 3: The Fantasy of Rational Space: Chinese Dating Shows and Layered Reality

Dating shows (*xiangqin jiemu*) in Mainland China are extremely popular, but they aren't about dating. Unlike shows like *The Dating Game*, *Blind Date*, or *The Bachelor* in the US, no one goes on dates in most Chinese 'dating' shows. One exception is *Be There or Be Square* (*Bujian Busan*) (Jiangsu Satellite Television, 2011), a short-lived spin-off of *If You are the One* (*Feichengwura*, hereafter *FCWR*, JSTV, 2010-present), in which contestants who failed to find a date on *FCWR* receive a second chance to meet a series of potential matches. On one episode, a couple's initial speed date focuses on the issue of discussing one's material wealth on *FCWR*. In response to the woman's criticism that the young man overemphasized his possession of a house and car when he appeared on *FCWR*, the bachelor responded by reiterating the importance of material wealth in contemporary society. He says,



Figure 8: This society is too realistic

“*Yinwei zhe shehui tai xianshi le*,” which could be literally translated as, “This society is too realistic” (fig. 1). In this context, *xianshi* would be better translated as something like ‘practical,’ since he is suggesting that economic security takes precedence over other aspects of life. But what is realistic about society for him are precisely the economic and social conditions that dictate that marriage can only occur once a financial foundation has been laid for the couple, by purchasing a house and car. Thus, his understanding that money determines the functioning of society is also what constitutes its reality or actuality. Following this logic, what is realistic about dating shows is not the authenticity of what particular contestants say or the faithful representation of their lives, but rather the extent to which they reflect, replay, and reconstruct

rationalized economic relations that naturalize a weighing between men and women of material wealth, physical beauty, and a certain kind of on-camera poise or wit to create balanced pairs. Thus, the reality of the world of the dating show is one that through its staging, game structure, and discussion-based expression, makes visible the economic, social, and cultural dynamics of contemporary urban society in China.

Rather than merely apply other scholars' insights about how Western reality television enacts neoliberal economic dynamics to the Mainland Chinese context, I want to emphasize the specificity of Chinese dating space as mediated and performative.¹⁵⁵ This chapter argues that studio-based dating shows in this register are fundamentally about how to thrive in an age of hyper-mediation, how to define oneself and one's ideal partner among various possibilities, and how to interpret surface appearances in the context of the growing visibility of a (carefully circumscribed) diversity of lifestyles, worldviews, and taste in post-reform Mainland China. While *FCWR* and other shows like it are undeniably entertainment programs, these shows are also more serious than the equivalent Anglo-American versions of the format, which rely on flirty banter to attract audiences.¹⁵⁶

I begin by analyzing the distinctive spatial characteristics of *FCWR* and other studio-produced dating shows, progressing from the physical space of the studio and the structured interactions that take place within it, to the omnipresent screens that provide background information on the male contestant and present many of the social questions that drive the studio discussion. A carefully managed play of visibility between male and female contestants imbues

¹⁵⁵ Ouellette "Enterprising Selves," 90-109.

¹⁵⁶ I have compared the British *Take Me Out* and *FCWR* at length elsewhere. See Katherine Morrow, "Fei Cheng Wu Rao (非诚勿扰): Staging Global China through International Format Television and Overseas Special Episodes," *New Global Studies* 8.3 (2014): 259-77.

the gaze with a dual function that defines the tension between rationality and romance, social education and entertainment, that run throughout these shows. The moment when a contestant lays eyes on potential marriage partners can be the spark of instant attraction or one method of gathering evidence for or against the contestant's viability as a romantic partner. Regulating this world are data visualizations and psychological experts, who provide proper guidance and correct what the show defines as ill-advised viewpoints. Even when the dating show leaves the studio, as in the two examples I consider in the last section of this chapter, the greater apparent degree of authenticity is in fact tempered by a highly delimited idea of how urban and rural space—and urban and rural society—should function.

A Line of Women: Studio Space, Gender Imbalance, Evaluation and Display

The defining characteristic of *FCWR*'s studio space is the line of women along the back studio wall, each of whom is provided with a podium and light used to communicate their interest or lack thereof in the male contestant. *FCWR*, and this spatial arrangement in particular,



Figure 9 FCWR event at Wuhan University

has been influential enough to move beyond televisual bounds into real life. *FCWR*-style events have been held on university campuses both domestically in Mainland China and overseas (figs. 2 and 3).¹⁵⁷ What makes these

¹⁵⁷ Image sources: Hu Yating 胡雅婷, “Woyuan dijiuji ‘pengran xindong-feichengwura’ huore shangyan (tuwen)” 我院第九季“怦然心动·非诚勿扰”火热上演(图文) [The ninth edition of ‘rush of excitement-if you are the one’ passionately took place (photos)], *School of Political Science and Public Administration, Wuhan University*, Dec 14, 2015, <http://www.pspa.whu.edu.cn/xsgz/yjsxgw/yjsh/2014-12-15/3733.html>; Wen Zhang 文璋, “Shang Feichengwura’o neng zhengjiu liuxue danshengou ma? 上《非诚勿扰》能拯救留学单身狗吗?”

events recognizable as mimicking *FCWR* is precisely this line of women who will consider one male contestant at a time.

To summarize *FCWR*'s structure, twenty-four women stand at these lit podiums. A single male contestant enters the studio space across from them, introduces himself, and through a series of short videos and interactions with the host, experts and female contestants, the women decide if they would like to match with the male contestant. If they like the man, they will leave their light on. Turning their light off at any point during the three rounds signals their lack of interest and refusal to leave the stage with the male contestant. If at the end of three rounds women still have their lights on, the bachelor can turn off all but two lights. These two women, along with his favorite woman (secretly selected when he first entered the stage) even if she already turned off her light, leave their podiums to come to the other end of the stage.



Figure 10 *FCWR* Event in Southern California

The bachelor can find out a bit more information about them and ask them one question. He may then select one of the two women who left their lights on to leave together, deemed “successfully joining hands” (*qianshou chenggong*) or he may persist in choosing his favorite woman. In that case, he will have a bit more time to convince her to agree to leave with him. If all the women reject the man, he will leave alone. One hour-and-a-half long episode will feature four or five male contestants, so this process is repeated many times. Women that leave with male contestants are replaced so that each podium

[Can going on *Feichengwura* save exchange students from being single?], *Beimei liuxuesheng ribao* 北美留学生日报 Feb 14, 2016, http://www.sohu.com/a/58747614_170104.

is always occupied. Women who do not match with a man by the end of the episode return week after week until they do.¹⁵⁸

For western viewers familiar with programs like *The Bachelor* (ABC, 2000-present) that make use of similar kinds of gender imbalance, sometimes likened to a harem, this might not be particularly remarkable.¹⁵⁹ When Fremantle Media developed *Take Me Out*, the original format that served as inspiration for *FCWR*, what was remarkable instead was the women's role in approving or rejecting the male contestant. As one viewer commented on the American version of *Take Me Out*'s Hulu page, "I've loved game shows for 45 years and I like this one. Dating game, with women in control!"¹⁶⁰ However, when Jiangsu Satellite Television adapted the format for Chinese viewers, the structure had an entirely different resonance in the context of a PRC television dating show history.

Dating shows first became popular in Mainland China in the late 1990s, when several clones of *Special Man and Woman* (*Feichangnannv*), a collectively minded dating show first produced in Taiwan, appeared. Michael Keane highlights the specificity of these programs:

What is distinctive in *Romantic Meeting* is a carefully orchestrated group format culminating in a match-off that often brings together several couples. Audience participation also features with family members, friends and workmates barracking and influencing the judging. This program is a prime example of format migration. The collectivist match-off format had originated in Japan in December 1975 on NET (now ANB) on a program called *Propose Dai-Sakusen*.

¹⁵⁸ A former contestant I interviewed noted that actually women do not return to the show for many reasons, but viewers will not notice unless the woman is particularly popular. The interviewee explained that producers expect the women who are the subjects of promotional videos, which I will discuss later, to continue filming the program until they match with a male contestant to provide an ending for viewers following their story. Interview with former contestant, May 5, 2015.

¹⁵⁹ Rachel E. Dubrofsky, "The Bachelor: Whiteness in the Harem," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 1 (2006): 46. 23.1, 46. 39-56.

¹⁶⁰ Debbie Ghostley, July 24, 2012 (6:17 pm) comment on "Take Me Out," *Hulu*, <http://www.hulu.com/take-me-out>.

The Taiwanese show brought together an equal number of men and women, seated opposite each other on the studio stage, and gave each contestant time to introduce themselves and talk to the other contestants. Shanghai Television's *Xiangyue Xiqingliu* (1998-present) and Hunan Satellite Television's *Meigui zhi Yue* (1998-2005) followed similar structures and were both quite popular, with viewership as high as 18%.¹⁶¹ In fact, a Chinese reviewer understands *FCWR*'s innovations in contrast to this earlier format in which, "there were equal numbers of men and women who were matched up round after round, and the rhythm and speed was slow and obstructive."¹⁶² Instead of encountering multiple contestants and multiple potential matches over the course of the show, contestants on *FCWR* must make relatively rapid decisions about potential dating or marriage partners. This form of decision making places greater emphasis on how contestants present themselves, because the contestants must make a favorable impression upon each other in a short period of time.

This gender imbalance and visualization of female interest through the lit podiums respond perhaps to social anxieties about the availability of marriage partners and dynamics of control. On the reality television stage, an abundance of eligible women awaits the male contestants. The line of women, thirty in *Take Me Out* and twenty-four for *FCWR*, offers part of the program's appeal. The diversity of young, eligible bachelorettes recalls a Busby Berkeley chorus line, with similar pans across their faces that communicate the availability of an endless choice of smiling, beautiful women, particularly as they parade in, hand in hand at the beginning

¹⁶¹ Ji Ping 际平, "'Tanhun Lunjia' Xin Guannian" '谈婚论家'新观念 [New Notions of Discussing Marriage], *Zhongguo guoqing guoli* 中国国情国力 3 (1999): 37.

¹⁶² Chen Yan 陈岩, "Feichengwurao raoluan le shei de xin—lun dianshi chuanbo de meili" 《非诚勿扰》扰乱了谁的心——论电视传播的魅力 [Whose heart did *If You Are the One* disturb?—Considering the fascination of broadcast television] *Dianying pinglun* 电影评论 5, no 2 (2012): 97.

of each episode of both shows.¹⁶³ Considering the statistical imbalance between men and women in Mainland China for the first generation after the implementation of the one-child policy that are now of or beyond marriageable age, the emphasis on an abundance of women seems pointed. As Leta Hong Fincher documents, the official campaign to single out women over age twenty-seven as “leftover” contains a certain irony considering the simultaneous identification of the abundance of low-income, often rural, single men as a threat to social stability.¹⁶⁴ Thus, in this context, the abundance of beautiful women on the show is not only about pleasure, as it would be in a classical Hollywood musical, but also about addressing the manufactured anxiety surrounding a purported abundance of high-quality, well-educated urban women who have failed to find mates and produce the “high quality” offspring the state desires.¹⁶⁵ In fact, producers referenced the leftover women phenomenon as one of their inspirations to create the show in the first place, and after the censorship bureau demanded changes in the show’s form and content in June 2010, an increase in the average age of the participants was one of the ways the program could justify its social value.¹⁶⁶

In addition to assuaging fears about the lack of eligible women, the large number of contestants often present on the dating show stage is also important to creating a collective capable of standing in for broader social judgement. This is particularly obvious on other programs that do not offer the judgment of merely twenty-four potential partners, but extend that

¹⁶³ Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” *Movie*, no. 24 (1977): 2-13.; Luzhou Li, “If You Are the One: Dating Shows and Feminist Politics in Contemporary China,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 5 (2015): 527.

¹⁶⁴ Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 4-5.

¹⁶⁵ Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women*, 30.

¹⁶⁶ Wang Wenxin 王闻昕, “Feichengwurao zhipianren Wang Gang: zai tantezhong dengshang dianfeng” 《非诚勿扰》制片人王刚：在忐忑中登上巅峰 [If You Are the One producer Wang Gang: Uneasily reaching the top], *Chuanyi chuanbo* 创意传播 3 (2011): 62.

group to fifty (*AQLLK*) or shift the burden of initial judgement and permitting access to the panel of potential mates to a panel of 100 audience members of the same gender as the potential partners (*FCWM*, *BLTY*, and *SNBLTY*) (figs. 4-5). In this way, a prerequisite for successfully matching with a potential partner on



Figure 4 Meter on BLTY

any of these programs is not only appealing to one individual, but attaining approval from a larger group that implicitly stands in for society at large. Anyone who expresses unconventional ideas about marriage or lifestyle choices, or doesn't seem prepared economically or emotionally for a partner, will be rejected and refused an opportunity to spend longer in the spotlight.



Figure 5 Collective online judgement

The expansive studio space, lit with flashing lights reminiscent of a dance club, and filled with beautiful women, professionally styled and made up for the occasion, suggests a world apart from daily life, an opportunity to show off to the cameras but also to express dating preferences and

pass judgement on potential partners. In this extraordinary environment, women are understood as having an exceptional level of control, since their collective decisions dictate whether a man may remain on stage.¹⁶⁷ In a sense, the women are the true stars of the show, with the

¹⁶⁷ While on UK and US versions of *Take Me Out*, a round will end abruptly if all the women turn out their lights, this does not happen on the post-censorship version of *FCWR*. There are almost always lights remaining until the third video, and even if all the lights go out during that video, he may remain onstage and finish the discussion.

opportunity to slowly build rapport with the hosts and garner popularity with viewers over many weeks. According to a *FCWR* producer, in response to a question about how much power women have given that the final decision is up to the male contestant, the duration of their presence on the program ensured that



Figure 6: Digitally-added screen in studio space

women have the opportunity to reject a larger quantity of men than any single bachelor who may at most reject all twenty-four women. This producer even considered the act of turning out one's light "feminist" and a kind of emotional comfort. Maybe the male contestant is very handsome or rich, but the women can still reject him.¹⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the male contestant dominates the space and discussion for the duration of his short appearance on the program. Subject topics revolve around his interests, and his image visually dwarfs the female contestants below him when attention shifts to the pre-recorded videos that are played during each round of the show (fig. 6). Women are confined behind their podiums for most of the program, with the exception of their initial entrance into the space, in which they show off their outfits and smile directly into the camera as they pass. While some academics have argued that the program's wide-ranging social discussions could offer a path to the establishment of a democratically inclined public sphere, the rigidity of gender roles dictated by the program's format forecloses such possibilities.¹⁶⁹ Game rules and the layout of studio space ultimately create a universe in which women question and

¹⁶⁸ *FCWR* producer interview, March 23, 2016.

¹⁶⁹ *FCWR* did try out a version with the genders reversed in November and December 2016 for four episodes. http://ent.ifeng.com/a/20161115/42753179_0.shtml. For the democracy argument, see Kong, "Are You the One?"

evaluate the male contestant along with the audience, yet the fundamental focus remains centered on the male contestants.

First Sight: Entrances into Studio Space and Narratives of Visibility

The moment in which male and female contestants first lay eyes on each other unites both rational evaluation and romantic possibility, because it may be either the spark of “love at first sight” or the beginning of the rational evaluation of the contestant. These plays of visibility throw into question the legibility of surface appearance. Can female contestants recognize a male contestant’s economic strengths, and thereby correctly evaluate his value as a mate, from his appearance alone?



Figure 7 Series of shots from entrance sequence, August 12, 2012

On *FCWR*, male contestants are slowly lowered onto the stage through an elevator, making their body appear slowly from the feet up, building the women’s, and audience’s,

anticipation (fig. 7)¹⁷⁰. Each time, up to five times per episode, this entrance is accompanied by shot reverse shots and eyeline matches of the women waiting on stage and looking in anticipation at the slowly descending elevator, which connects the viewer to the women's point of view and suggests that the viewer will also take part in this judgment process. A copycat show, *Quanchengrelian* [QCRL] that “displays the cultural specificity of the northeast,” creates the same effect in an explicitly low-tech manner, by having someone manually raise a screen in front of the male contestant.¹⁷¹ Dressed in suspenders, a bowtie, and thick-rimmed glasses, the curtain raiser becomes a character on the show and offers a bit of comic relief and a down to earth element to a program that takes a specifically regional and often rural slant on a flashy, urban-centric format. Yet, the same effect of drawing out the moment of first sight remains.

A *FCWR* producer likened the first round of judgement to a guessing game for viewers, who based on a contestant's appearance, ask themselves and each other how many women will leave their lights on.¹⁷² This producer further emphasized that many of the celebrity guests invited to serve as commentators wanted to experience the first round of judging by the panel of women for themselves. One celebrity even dressed as a street cleaner, to see how many women would turn out their lights, signaling their lack of interest, before his true identity was revealed. In this anecdote, the celebrity intentionally alters his appearance to underscore the illegibility of appearance as a basis for economic judgement. In this way, subjective choices about someone's attractiveness as a mate become a quantifiable basis for comparison between people. The

¹⁷⁰ In May 2017, in its eighth year of production, *FCWR* revised its format substantially. What I discuss here is the version that aired prior to that time. Later in the chapter, I elaborate more on the new format's structure.

¹⁷¹ “Quanchengrelian: Jianjie” 全城热恋简介[QCRL: Introduction], *Jishiwang* 吉视网 <http://www.jintv.cn/vod/folder174/folder195/>, accessed July 6, 2018.

¹⁷² *FCWR* producer interview, March 23, 2016.

celebrity guests curious about how many women will leave their lights on are not invested in the rest of the matching process. The first round takes on a value in and of itself as judgment of an individual's immediate appeal. The emphasis on the moment a participant enters the studio stage also demonstrates the separateness and closed nature of the dating program space. On many programs, the same song plays each time, which creates a ritualized experience, with each participant clearly understanding the role they must play.



Figure 8 AQLLK Silhouettes

On other programs, the entrance and moment of visual encounter between the male and female contestants is drawn out and developed for dramatic effect. The play of revealing a participant's appearance on other programs takes the form of silhouetted figures or individual contestants wearing masks (figs. 8-9). On *Aqing Lianliankan* (AQLLK), after a convoluted selection process, dependent on the male contestant's selection between multiple choice options and female contestants' simultaneous approval or disapproval of the male contestant, the group of fifty eligible women is narrowed to ten. The male contestant then selects one woman's silhouette as his favorite, delaying the moment when the contestants will face each other directly and extending it through an intermediate stage of silhouettes, which metaphorically stands in for the entire process—looking at the women's outlines, the participant hopes to accurately interpret what's behind it. On the 2012 version of *Feichang*

On other programs, the entrance and moment of visual encounter between the male and female contestants is drawn out and developed for dramatic effect. The play of revealing a participant's appearance on other programs takes the form of silhouetted figures or individual



Figure 9 Masks on SNBLTY

Wanmei (FCWM) and *Sheineng Bailitiaoyi (SNBLTY)*, an individual female contestant faces a group of male contestants, a gender reversal of *FCWR* and many other shows' structures. The women enter the stage wearing masks and can decide when they would like to remove their disguise, allowing them a certain amount of control over the impact of their appearance on male contestants' desire to continue considering them as a potential mate. Thus, the program exploits the tension between a desire to remain masked and thus judged on what she says and does and the need to acknowledge the importance of appearances. For example, on a December 2012 episode of *SNBLTY*, when one female contestant chose to keep her mask on for most of her time onstage, the hosts warned her that it might negatively influence the male contestants' decisions. Thus, in this play of visibility the desire to move beyond surface level appearances must be reconciled to what these programs implicitly offer as an unassailable certainty, that looks matter to how other people engage with someone and the moment of first sight is charged with significance.

Other programs, like *Zhongguoshi Xiangqin (ZGSXQ)* and *Ganghao Yujianni (GHYJN)* as well as *FCWR*'s 2017 updated format, also distribute visibility unequally between the male and female contestants to heighten the importance of how other people interpret someone's appearance and emphasize the issue of visual legibility. These programs divide the studio space into rooms, to allow one side, either the female or male participants, to see the other contestants while remaining out of sight themselves. Most interesting is *FCWR*'s new format. In the first round, the male contestant can see all the women, who parade in individually, and he makes a split second decision about whether to place them in his preferred section (*xindong qu*) indicating his initial interest or to wait and see by putting them in the observation area (*guan cha qu*). The process is like watching someone use a dating application like Tinder, making split second

decisions based solely on appearance and sorting potential mates to the left or right.¹⁷³ Furthermore, the male contestant is in a privileged viewing position, facing four screens that allow him to surveil the female contestants (fig. 10). After the selection process, the host Meng Fei, who along with the viewers has been privy to the bachelor's



Figure 10 Surveillance on the new FCWR

commentary as he made his selections, as well as the experts and the female contestants themselves who have not, discuss what patterns emerge from the contestant's selections. Does he have a specific type? Did he pick women in similar outfits? Thus, an intuitive and not necessarily meaningful process is scoured for significance. Instead of the more direct process of the original *FCWR* format in which each the women judged the man as he came out and would explain why they had turned their light off or left it on, the revised format emphasizes distance between potential dating partners, separated by a screen that places the male contestant in a surveillance-type position. The randomness of the sorting process then potentially imparts meaning to a woman's chosen outfit, the way she walks, or her expression as she faces an unseen judge. In this way, looking and judgement are intertwined, and surveillance becomes part of *FCWR*'s well-established play of display and evaluation. Mediated judgment is further emphasized through the use of pre-recorded video segments.

¹⁷³ Because Tinder depends on a connection to Facebook, it is not accessible without a VPN in Mainland China. Other domestic dating applications like Momo and Tantan, however, offer similar functions.

Expert Guidance: Psychology and Analytical Access to the Invisible

In addition to feedback from the potential dating partners, most programs incorporate “relationship experts” or other psychological consultants to supplement the host’s role. The addition of Le Jia, a bestselling author of personality-focused self-help books, was one of the important ways that *FCWR* differentiated itself from the international format program, *Take Me Out*. While comedians serve as hosts for both the UK and US versions of the format, Meng Fei, a former Nanjing news anchor hosts *FCWR*. Le Jia is positioned to the side, as Meng greets the incoming male contestants and stands with them as they interact with the female contestants. On early episodes of *FCWR*, prior to SARFT’s intervention and the program’s subsequent



Figure 11 Le Jia offers his assessment “[The contestant] cares a lot about other people’s opinions and is a bit fake.”

revision, Le would appraise contestants’ personalities, and his pronouncements were offered as on-screen text (fig. 11). One of the adjustments producers made to the program to appease government censors was to add a second commentator, Huang Han, a female psychology professor from a party school. As critics described it, her feminine energy brought balance to the show’s commentary and she could be depended upon for proper advice.¹⁷⁴ Both Le and Huang have since left the program, but their roles continue to be filled by other celebrities.

¹⁷⁴ Chen, “*Feichengwurao*,” 97.

As in the example about *FCWR*'s post-2017 version in which random choices are parsed for deeper meaning, psychologists or other expert figures often offer interpretations based on relatively superficial interactions with participants. For example, on *AQLLK*, contestants are asked a seemingly benign question, as on the February 8, 2011 episode about what decoration they would prefer to have in their home (fig. 12) and after they respond, the show's psychologist discusses how their response indicates what kind of partner they would be. Similarly, on a recent episode of *Xiangyue Xingqiliu* (*XYXQL*), commentators watch as a pair of contestants meet for



Figure 12 Psychological quiz on *AQLLK*

the first time in a closed room on the stage. Cameras allow them to offer real time commentary about what a contestant's tone, gaze, and other small details mean about their interest or lack thereof in the other person.¹⁷⁵ Both of

these examples suggest that what people say cannot be trusted as a true indication of their feelings. Instead, various tools are needed to interpret what someone actually wants and how they will treat a partner in the future.

Another recent format, *Aiqing Zhaoduimen* (*AQZDM*), brings together many elements of prior dating shows with an explicitly data and cellphone focused reality. The premise of the show brings together one exemplary candidate with three potential dates, one chosen by a parent, one by a friend, and one by a compatibility expert aided by 'big data.' Like other programs, visibility is distributed unevenly. While the primary contestant, who can be of either gender depending on the episode, cannot see his or her three potential dates, the three can see him or her and each

¹⁷⁵ *Xiangyue xingqiliu* 相约星期六, aired May 12, 2018, on Dongfangweishi 东方卫视, <https://www.13.mk/play/4354-1-21.html>.



Figure 13 Cellphone visualization, reacting to online purchasing history

other. Most interestingly, one segment of the decision-process between the three candidates allows access to their cellphone data. For example, on a January 2018 episode, the female contestant could decide whether to see the male contestants' online purchasing history, what they

had ordered from a delivery food service, or their posts on their WeChat moments. She selected online purchasing history and together with the host, she analyzes what these purchases say about each man (fig. 13). Is he selfish, spending too much on himself, or is he buying presents for his younger sister, who has come up in previous rounds? Again, the program seems to contend with a reality structured with certain barriers to knowledge, in order to suggest the importance of interpreting information from various sources, and participation in online buying and photo sharing is not only taken for granted but moreover mined for its reflection of aspects of one's personality not otherwise visible.

Screens-within-Screens and “VCRs”

Watching videos and evaluating male contestants based on their content is the primary activity on *FCWR*. *FCWR* plays three videos per male contestant: the first is a general introduction, the second describes his relationship history, and the third interviews friends and family members about him. Thus, watching videos and discussing them, essentially acts of media consumption, are central to the evaluative process. On *FCWR*, the importance of these videos is clear spatially; the digital screen dwarfs the contestants while they watch the pre-recorded introductory videos along with the at-home viewers. The pre-recorded videos, or ‘VCRs’, are the

only respite from the monotony of the studio space.¹⁷⁶ The videos are made before the contestant's appearance on the show, and contestants I interviewed described the process as exciting in certain ways, because a team of television producers visit their homes and ask about their lives, but also tiring and disorganized.¹⁷⁷ Contestants complained about producers' lack of planning and poor time management. More interestingly perhaps, contestants also emphasized that they did not see the videos before they were onstage, and so while they had control over what they showed producers and what they said, they had little control over the editing and actual content of the video. For example, one contestant found their emphasis on his multicultural upbringing boring, and others were frustrated by the fact that they were not allowed to see the videos and give feedback before being confronted with them onstage and described being as surprised by the video's content as the female participants and studio viewers.

Although the videos are shot in the contestant's home and around his city of residence, they are not necessarily primarily documentary in nature. With the exception of the third round videos that feature interviews with the contestants' friends and family members, the videos pair the bachelor's voiceover, narrating his basic information in the first video and his relationship history in the second, with staged reenactments of his past or abstracted romantic images that suggest a hopeful future. Former participants I talked to described producers asking them to invite friends to play the role of their ex-girlfriends and to act out various parts of their life, filming them in their offices and homes. The information and narratives they communicate are also subject to shaping by particular teams of producers to create the best story. The videos also often explicitly express the bachelor's worldview, particularly in terms of requirements of a

¹⁷⁶ "VCR" spoken in English is the term most often used to describe these videos. They are also called short videos, *duanpian*, from time to time.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with former contestant, May 3, 2015.



Figure 14 Requirements of a future wife

future partner, gender or family norms. For example, on a special episode focused on Canada, a Canadian-Chinese man explains that he expects his wife to stay at home and raise the five children he hopes to have (fig. 14). Each demand is reinforced with onscreen text. After the video, female contestants reacted to his ideas and responded that they wanted their own careers and balking at the idea of having five children. Thus, there is space for a reaction to his ideas, but he is free to express them.

For male participants with less explicitly chauvinistic (*dananzi zhuyi*) ideas, VCRs offer a chance to create an idealized narrative of their life and an abstracted representation of their past. For the fourth contestant on November 11, 2013, the videos retell his life story and how he returned to his hometown after college to run a furniture business. While his experiences are hardly remarkable, the black and white nostalgic images and a parallel shot made to emphasize

his return home nevertheless seem romantic (fig. 15).



Figure 15 A return home

The same abstracted and romanticized imagery that depicted his past in the first video is used for his future in the second. His second video follows a similar style and narrates a painful experience with an ex-girlfriend. A woman stands in for this former girlfriend and part of the video shows shots of them at a table while he narrates the experience in voiceover. The images become like postcard-style illustrations or internet memes (fig. 16, top three images). In particular, the third image in figure sixteen shows backlit hands forming a heart and the text from his voiceover emphasizes that that relationship was the first time he thought of marriage. The tendency to use backlit or abstracted images allows the voiceover to take precedence over the images and presents the story in a generalized way. After describing his prior heartbreak, the video ends on a more optimistic note, and uses images of someone else's wedding to highlight his hopes for his own romantic future (fig. 16, bottom three images). Since he dreams of making

films, he concludes the video by asking the female contestants if they would be the female lead in his life.



Figure 16 Past and Future

As for the female contestants, *FCWR*'s promotional videos are their primary opportunity to present an image-driven, edited version of their lifestyle and thoughts. While all the women express themselves on the program, only a select few receive the privilege of starring in one of these videos in which they appear as the male contestants do, an image outside studio space (fig. 17). In one example aired in the spring and summer of 2012, contestant number four, Liu Jiani talks about her successful career in fashion and her passion for life. She then talks about her viewpoint on love. The short segment doubles as an expression of her ideas and a suggestion to viewers to seek love for itself rather than as a means to other ends, in direct contrast to Ma Nuo's famous comment about crying in a BMW being better than being happy on a bicycle. Jia instructs viewers, "Don't be scared of investing your love; don't fear being hurt. Go and love

bravely. Finding someone to love isn't easy. Loving intensely isn't for someone else or for a result; it is only for yourself."¹⁷⁸ This understanding of love as beyond practical concerns mirrors the video's romantic, soft-focus style.



Figure 17 Liu Jiani's promo, from Spring/Summer 2012

Despite her lack of romantic success, the segment is nevertheless interested in creating a fantasy for the average viewer, but one of wealth and privilege. Prior to the comments about loving bravely, the setting is established as her thirtieth birthday party, labeled as a moment of transition from being a girl to being a woman. Added text on the images describes her as “a blooming flower embracing the light” as she arranges white roses. In quick cuts, a Veuve Cliquot champagne label is visible and she receives a gift from a foreign friend, markers of her social status and affluence. The whole video is shot in soft focus, with stylized, slightly washed-out colors that make it seem like the entire video was been put through an Instagram filter. Liu represents a particular kind of single woman, whose pursuit of a career and wealth has delayed marriage and child-bearing. Thus, while the short segment ostensibly serves as background on the contestant or even a plea for any single men who may be watching at home, it also serves as social guidance for others like Liu, who according to various government and social pressures, need to turn their attention to marriage. The focus on status and wealth, however, undermines these goals. Might the true pleasure for the viewer lie in identification with a glamorous life

¹⁷⁸ Feichengwuraio 《非诚勿扰》 [If You Are the One] “Xinlang weibo 520 zhuanhang dianxing gaofushuai jingyan quanchang” 新浪微博“520 专场” 典型“高富帅”惊艳全场 [Sina Blog 520 special episode, a classic tall, rich, and handsome man stuns the whole stage] aired May 20, 2012, on Jiangsu Satellite TV, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGxa8De4CG8>.

inaccessible to the majority of the population? Additionally, these segments contribute to the celebrity status of the female contestants. After one of these segments has been aired a few times, a particularly eligible bachelor will sometimes participate in the show specifically to meet the woman depicted. The fame and notoriety they garner as contestants on the show is then made acceptable within the show's structure as a path to true love, and thereby entry into a stable, productive social structure.

The complementary tendency of such rational evaluation is the romantic gesture that leaves aside the program's otherwise fixed structure to express particular feelings for one female contestant. From time to time, a male contestant will participate in the program specifically to woo a certain woman. Promotional videos are often key to a woman amassing sufficient visibility among the sea of twenty-four contestants to attract such particular attention. Liu Jiani, for example, left FCWR on an episode aired on August 12, 2012, agreeing to leave with a man who offered her a hand-painted portrait, that he claimed to have made over the course of three days, without taking breaks to eat or sleep. This sacrifice, paired with his heart-wrenching story of loss and resiliently optimistic worldview, moved Liu to get to know him better. While fans online speculated that Liu was forced to leave the show by producers, because she had already appeared on over forty episodes, she received a warm farewell from the hosts and experts, with Le Jia declaring her the wisest contestant they had ever had on the show.¹⁷⁹ Many other female contestants and Huang Han were overwhelmed by emotion at her departure. Liu's choice clearly created a particular narrative, and her decision to leave with that particular contestant, whether influenced by producers or not, fit with the personal values she expressed in her video. The male

¹⁷⁹ “Feichengwuraio Liu Jiani” 非诚勿扰刘佳妮 [If You Are the One: Liu Jiani], <http://www.fcwr8.com/intro/%E5%88%98%E4%BD%B3%E5%A6%AE> (accessed May 23, 2019).

contestant was not particularly wealthy, but professed an appreciation for traditional culture and a selfless spirit that complements Liu's professed commitment to love for its own sake.

Rationality or Romance: Declarations of Devotion

This tension between rational evaluation of potential matches against a predetermined standard and the romantic narrative that offers an emotional appeal capable of overcoming such calculations is most clearly laid out in a fictional television series, *Dating Hunter* (*Yuehui Zhuanjia*), that depicts a program much like *FCWR*. In this fictional narrative, viewers are given a glimpse behind the reality television curtain, which suggests an anxiety about the truth of appearances and the pleasure in being smarter than the show that Mark Andrejevic describes as the “savvy attitude,” an essential position for viewers of reality television that ultimately contributes to the continuation of the artifice.¹⁸⁰ In *Dating Hunter*, the *FCWR* style program has great expository use as the context in which the main characters meet, and the episode offers an extended display of various factors at work behind the scenes of the dating show. The rest of the series, however, does not in fact condemn the inauthentic performances from the first episode. Instead playing a role becomes central to successful matchmaking, as the protagonists establish a business aimed at helping men win over women through various forms of romantic deception.

The woman at the center of the first episode's *FCWR* intrigue, Liu Lin, who becomes the series' main female protagonist and strongly objects to being the subject of research and preparation meant to manipulate her feelings and her



Figure 18 Business-like dating show preparation

¹⁸⁰ Andrejevic, *Reality TV*, 16.



Figure 19 Pu calculates Jiang's chances

decision-making process on the diegetic dating show. But the other women portrayed are either unaware of the intervention or basically happy that the experts have intervened to bring them together with a suitable mate.

The reality dating show stage, in this fictional setting, becomes a theatre not for romance, but for business intrigue. Two advertising executives compete for a lucrative contract through the dating show, with one character taking the side of calculation and odds and the other a romantic narrative. On the first episode, Pu Bian needs to convince a company president, Jiang Dacheng, to let him take over their advertising account to save his business. Ding Yu had nearly won the account from a lower level, middle-aged female manager, implicitly because of his skill at manipulating women's favor, and tries to save the contract by preventing Pu from succeeding. Pu's plan to convince Jiang relies on the fact the Jiang is about to appear on a dating show (given the same name as the drama, *Yuehui Zhuanjia*) and Pu figures out that he is most interested in Liu Lin, a well-known contestant on the show. Pu presents Jiang with a business-like analysis of his potential to match with her and succeed in taking her hand (fig. 18). Jiang is convinced he needs Pu's help and promises him the contract if he matches with Liu. Thus, Liu's selection of a potential date on the show takes on a significance beyond itself. The drama is actually about a business transaction and who will acquire a profitable account.

Calculation is particularly important, both to how Pu convinces Jiang he needs his help and to how Liu makes her selections on the *FCWR*-style stage. After presenting Jiang with the iPad "feasibility analysis" filled with graphs, as if it were a business report, Pu further lays out

statistics based on Liu's history on the program, noting how many times she has turned out her light for the various categories of men that Jiang himself also belongs to (fig. 19). Pu is not the only one applying rational measures to dating choices, however. Liu herself has assigned a point value to each aspect of the man's appearance and judges him out of 100 silently in her head as he enters the stage. Thus, even though Liu is supposedly genuinely looking for love, her decisions are also rational, measured, and systematic.

After various moments of intrigue in the competition between Pu and Ding, who figures out Pu is behind his loss of the contract and hopes to win it back by thwarting Jiang and Liu's pairing, *Dating Hunter* plays out the pivotal production of the reality television show as a conflict between calculation and romance, reason and emotion (fig. 20). According to his VCRs, Jiang is an ideal mate in terms of income and personality. His American Express black card

(which onscreen text explains has no credit limit for unfamiliar viewers, whether Liu Lin diegetically or viewers of the fictional program) demonstrates an ability to spend, but his reuse of shopping bags shows his morally virtuous thriftiness (*jiejian*), one of the key socialist values promoted in various official forms of public education. Since Jiang cannot be beat in terms of basic conditions—ie income,

compatibility, etc—Ding must offer a romantic narrative that can compete with objective superiority through its emotional power. Ding creates a story about having served Liu Lin a drink while she was a model in Spain, which satisfies a desire for a rags to riches conversion whereby his subsequent success has made him her equal on the dating show stage, despite their previous relation of inferiority when he served her. Now, onstage, he offers her another glass of the same



Figure 20 Fictional version of FCWR on *Dating Hunter*

drink and with it his love. Ding's story, of course, is a total fabrication, which he later reveals was based on no more than a selfie Liu posted to her social media accounts, holding a green drink which Ding identified. Jiang nevertheless wins the dating show and leaves with Liu. Liu, Pu and Ding eventually come together to start a new company, and they start helping rich men meet and woo the objects of their affection, through similar tactics of 'research' into the women (Pu broke into Liu's house to understand her judging process, as well as her personality) and coaching for the men. Unlike Liu who is upset by what Pu has done to influence her selection on the reality show, other women are happy to benefit from the company's intervention. They don't mind that the men they start dating have lied to them. Instead it is a reflection of their devotion, since they have gone to so much trouble to woo them. Thus, while *Dating Hunter* confirms viewer suspicion that participants on reality dating shows have ulterior motives, the series ultimately supports the rational calculation of compatibility and the use of deception, as long as it is in service of true love, defined as relationships between sufficiently wealthy people preparing for marriage and reproduction.

Reality Constructed On-Location

Chinese reality television producers often distinguish shows made in a studio (*pengnei*) and those that are made on location, in already existing locations (*huwai*). Location-shooting, while seemingly more open to contingency and chance actually offers a different form of producer control. A *FCWR* producer explained the difference between studio and location shooting in terms of influencing the choice of a mate, suggesting a desire to overturn social standards that reflect the values of contemporary, economically developed society:

[On-location] There is a more open space. There are more unbounded possibilities, so I think that kind of program would be very popular in China, because in one sense it is the further introduction of foreign elements. But from

another perspective, it's a shift in Chinese people's viewing habits. Because for decades, not just ten years, but for decades, what have we been watching? You're in a theatre performing, I'm a spectator. You do magic tricks, perform acrobatics, sing and dance. I'm just simply watching a show. After that, entertainment television programs appeared, but they didn't shed the fixed sense of a theatre-style performance. And what can happen in a theatre is very limited. But if you go on location, into some sort of extreme environment, then the possibilities are endless. For example, in the production of *FCWR*, there are some muscle men, if it was just in terms of looks, I might choose him or I might not. But if you're in an outdoors environment, maybe things would be different. For instance, maybe at first I don't like muscle men, and I think they look too muscular and I'm not into it. But if there's a sudden change in surroundings, like if now we need to build a hut and we've gotten the card with our task, and we have to build a wooden hut. Well, my physical capabilities can't compare with that muscle man. So in those extreme circumstances, maybe you own a house and a car, but you're chubby, so sorry, you won't be popular. Under those conditions, maybe someone else doesn't own a house or a car, but his muscular body can protect the female contestants, so things will be quite different.¹⁸¹

I have quoted this producers' thoughts at length, because it demonstrates the paradoxical relationship between reality and the differences between studio and on-location space. For this producer, what's exciting about the possibilities of moving beyond the studio is to both overturn the long-fixed relationship between performer and viewer, while also distancing participants from considerations of daily life. In the example about building a wooden hut, which in his example originates from a mission card (*renwuka*) signaling the role of the producers and the constructed nature of the program, women would shift their desire from a bachelor with material wealth to one with physical capabilities. Thus, even though this producer is talking about distancing reality programming from the theater, which he sees as constricting possibilities, he suggests constructing an environment that will artificially alter men's relative worth and thus ultimately lead the contestants away from choices based on the world outside the studio to those based on the environment of the television show under producer control. Thus, on-location

¹⁸¹ Interview with *FCWR* producer, March 23, 2016.

shooting has a complicated relationship to authenticity. Examples from two dating shows, one rural and one urban, will further elaborate this tension.

Xiangyue and the Rural Stage

Shot on location in various rural locations, *Xiangyue* differentiates itself from other dating shows through an emphasis on locality and thereby a purported authenticity. In 2014, CCTV-7, the agricultural channel of the state broadcasting system, repackaged a rural talk show into a localized dating show. Each episode focuses on a different rural area, puts up a stage in a picturesque location, and helps one bachelor or bachelorette decide between three potential dates. The dating structure offers opportunities to promote local attractions and agricultural products, in addition to debating with members of the audience about which potential mate is most suitable for the single man or woman. Planned in collaboration with local cultural promotion bureaus, the program blends light-hearted joking and games with advertising of the local rural area. Many articles describe the show's host, Xiao Dongpo, as a matchmaker, bringing to mind a traditional role in rural communities to broker marriages. In this way, pairing up two singles connects to traditional culture, as well as to economic development.

For producers, authenticity and location are explicitly linked. Xiao also serves as one of the program's producers and in a 2015 article about the show, he distinguishes *Xiangyue* from other dating shows that are produced inside a studio by emphasizing that when they make the show, contestants are physically close to their homes, and their friends, family, and colleagues are in the audience watching. Xiao sees this as a guarantor of authenticity, because however a contestant describes him or herself, Xiao can immediately ask a friend or family member in the audience for confirmation. He explains:

The structure of this reality show, combining “on-location” and “audience,” creates the conditions for the contestants' authentic expression. The contestants

are all from a particular region, so it isn't like studio-produced reality shows where contestants come together from all over the nation and then after making the show go their separate ways, and thus they aren't so worried about what they say or how they say it.¹⁸²

Xiao argues that the shooting location as well as the people present in the audience force contestants to tell the truth, which he differentiates from shows like *FCWR*, where contestants arrive from various locations nationwide or even worldwide. He doesn't address the fact that many contestants on programs like *FCWR* are accompanied by family or friends, though those familiar with the contestant do regularly participate in *Xiangyue*, giving their opinion during audience participation rounds, which does not occur in most other programs (fig. 21).

Interestingly, Xiao also acknowledges that this authenticity must be actively created in production preparation choices and left intact through the editing process. He relates an anecdote about focus group testing of the program early on in the development process. Spectators noted that audience members immediately had a clear, well-spoken answer to the host's questions and thereby suspected the program of being fabricated in advance. Xiao explains that the production team was surprised by this response, since the effect of immediate and smooth conversation was in fact created through editing out awkward moments of silence or clumsy responses. The audience response helped them fix this



Figure 21 Viewer commentary "He needs a northern girl"

error and refrain from editing out the moments that offered a sense of authenticity for the audience and to further protect the possibility of these authentic moments by limiting contact

¹⁸² Xiao Dongpo 肖东坡, "Zhenrenxiu zhenxiangqin—Zhongyang *Xiangyue* jiemu gaiban sikao" 真人秀真相亲——央视《乡约》节目改版思考 [Reality TV, real dates—Reflections on the revised edition of CCTV's *Xiangyue*], *Dianshi yanjiu* 电视研究 12 (2015): 66.

between the contestants before they enter the stage, so they will naturally be surprised and faced with a new situation.

Despite Xiao's repeated emphasis on the show's authenticity and its genuine desire to help young people find marriage partners, he nevertheless acknowledges simultaneous goals of entertaining audiences and promoting the rural locations. He describes how local officials first suggest possible contestants and make that decision based on their own promotional needs, upon which he doesn't elaborate, but attracting visitors is an obvious goal. Tourism and its connection to history are particularly apparent in an example from an episode centered on an economic development area in Wansheng, Chongqing. A short video, introduced by a local government official, describes the locale as an important mining area during the World War II and after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. In 2009, however, it was declared city of "resource depletion" by the national government, signaling the need to shift economic focus from natural resources to the service industry and tourism. The promotional video becomes part of that episode and boasts about the region's healthy environment and opportunities for adventures in nature, including rafting.

Television matchmaking, in this context, becomes an opportunity to promote an image of rural health, alongside contestants' encouraging stories about overcoming personal and professional obstacles. One woman reveals how her mother killed herself and the psychological effect it had on her. On a different episode, the bachelor describes business failures that required him to start over from scratch after having achieved early success in the restaurant business. Xiao describes this aspect of the show in terms of what he calls television's essentially emotional nature. In contrast to shows that focus on contestants' ideas and thoughts, which he deems a

rational approach, *Xiangyue* starts from the contestants' own stories and specific requirements for a future marriage partner and then builds out to common discussion points from there.

In addition to beautiful local scenery, amusing rural personalities also attract viewers. As previously mentioned, contestants' families are usually in the audience and called upon to comment on their child or relative's character and appraise the suitability of the three other contestants. This portion of the program is particularly humorous, as audience members readily critique various contestants in order to persuade the primary contestant to select or eliminate a particular potential mate. In this way, the attraction for television viewers and potential tourist visitors is not only the picturesque filming locations, displayed in aerial drone shots throughout the program, but also the local color expressed by audience participation.

Urban Performance as Productive Construction

Shengnv, Wei'ai Zuozhan, also produced in 2014, differs from *Xiangyue* in its focus on urban Shanghai and its serial structure, yet it also offers a challenge to studio-produced dating shows by asserting the importance of a stage created from the space of daily life and its connection to documentary authenticity. For Xu Yingying, a producer for Shanghai Television, the production blends documentary and reality television strategies to pursue social objectives while still attracting audience attention.¹⁸³ Xu connects documentary and actuality to evidence of prior relationships and events that would have taken place without the program's intervention, though with no consideration of how the camera's presence might have altered such contexts.

¹⁸³ Xu Yingying 许盈盈, "Jishi zhenrenxiu, jilupian yulehua de tuwei—yi *Shengnv, Wei'ai Zuozhan* weili" 纪实真人秀, 纪录片娱乐化的突围——以《盛女为爱作战》为例 [Realistic reality TV a breakthrough in entertainment documentary—a case study of *Shengnv, Wei'ai Zuozhan*], *Xinwen Daxue* 新闻大学 3 (2015): 73-76.

Shengnv, Wei'ai Zuozhan follows six single Shanghainese women considered “leftover women” over a series of weeks as their personalities and dating techniques are analyzed and they receive expert advice and beauty treatments (in obvious product placement for one of the show’s sponsors) to improve their position in the dating market. Xu describes the program’s combination of documentary and reality television elements primarily through a discussion of two contestants, Wenjie and Lulu.¹⁸⁴ Wenjie willingly changes her behavior and appearance according to the program’s expert advice, while Lulu remains unconvinced by the show’s ideology of needing to alter oneself physically and emotionally in order to find a match. They are about the same age and at the beginning of the ten-episode series, the pair attends a speed dating event together. While this attendance is clearly part of the program’s preparations, the event itself would have taken place without their intervention. Wenjie remarks on having been to many similar events and seeing people she has already encountered, which clearly situates the event within Shanghai’s actually existing dating scene, much like an earlier scene at People’s Park, the location of an often documented marriage market.¹⁸⁵ There, Wenjie runs into matchmakers she knows and people with whom she has already interacted, and Xu describes these moments as unpredictable and unplanned, thus evidence of the show’s documentary qualities. Like in *Xiangyue*, authenticity is connected to a space in which other people already know you.

Towards the end of the series, after various interactions with dating coaches, whom Xu compares to talking head experts in a documentary, Wenjie and Lulu again participate in a dating event.¹⁸⁶ This time, however, it is prepared by the show’s producers, complete with a hidden dial

¹⁸⁴ Xu Yingying, 75.

¹⁸⁵ Scott Kraft, “Shanghai in a day? A custom tour proves a special way to see the city,” *LA Times*, Feb. 12, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/travel/asia/la-tr-shanghai-20150208-story.html>.

¹⁸⁶ Xu Yingying, 74.

under the table where each dater can rate their counterpart throughout their conversations. Xu remarks on how these interventions, although going against documentary ideals, both create conflict between the characters, necessary for audience interest and develop the story. In fact, the two scenes create a stark contrast between how each woman receives the show's coaching. Wenjie seems indifferent and disengaged at the first event, and she explains that she has already been to such events before and seems defeated from the outset. After coaching and beauty treatments, however, Wenjie has more confidence and makes a good impression on the men. Lulu, who at the first event was more popular and outgoing, has rejected the coaches' advice and persists in her dating style and habits. At this second event, Wenjie "wins," receiving higher scores from the men and even choosing one of them to continue dating. Thus, not only does this intervention serve to create comparisons and conflict between the two women and develop the story, it also justifies the program's efforts and validates their individually focused approach.

Throughout the show, various experts, in particular a life coach and inspirational speaker from Hong Kong, emphasize that what has kept these women from finding a proper mate is not about social conditions or anything beyond their individual personalities and attitudes towards life. Thus, if the women are willing to take their advice and change their outlook, they will easily find marriage partners. By contrasting Wenjie who cooperates with these experts and Lulu, who overall rejects their ideas, the show lays bare its own ideology and guides spectators to agree with the Hong Kong expert that these women are in full control of finding a suitable husband. Thus, in both the documentary and reality television moments according to Xu's classification, what matters is the revelation, communication, and adaptation to a reality in which a woman must conform to specific standards of beauty and conduct and also adjust herself emotionally in order to be prepared to find and accept a mate.



Figure 22 Baoni, "chubby girl"

The access to this level of reality often depends on construction and performance. For example, Baoni, given the nickname 'chubby girl' (*pang guniang*, fig. 22), is diagnosed as needing more confidence to express herself and her attraction to a potential partner, so one of the

experts brings her to a dance studio and asks her to tell a male assistant that she likes him.¹⁸⁷

When she does, he responds that he cannot hear her and she must say it repeatedly, louder and louder each time. This kind of supposedly therapeutic role play is supposed to contribute to emotional growth by facing a real life challenge in an artificial environment, and the show implicitly suggests that actions within this fictional space can alter someone's emotional reality. Thus, even in this program that emphasizes its documentary qualities, fictional spaces are central to the intervention into reality.

Conclusion

PRC dating shows are not about dating; instead, they are about the anxiety that surrounds the legibility of the visible in a highly mediated time, when everyone's life is ready to be made into an idealized video clip and in fact, social success depends on such mediated self-presentation. I have presented an analysis of various elements of the studio space and game play structure to lay out how such programs navigate tension between romance and rationality. The closed environment of the studio contributes to the construction of a space primed for such hypotheticals. Beyond all of these elements however, the credit sequence animation offers

¹⁸⁷ All six women are given nicknames that also serve as a diagnosis for why they have not yet married.

perhaps the best metaphor for how these programs enact a dissolution of the self into data points and transform the complicated process of finding a suitable partner into a highly structured game (fig. 23). These anonymized outlines of men and women, floating in pixelated space

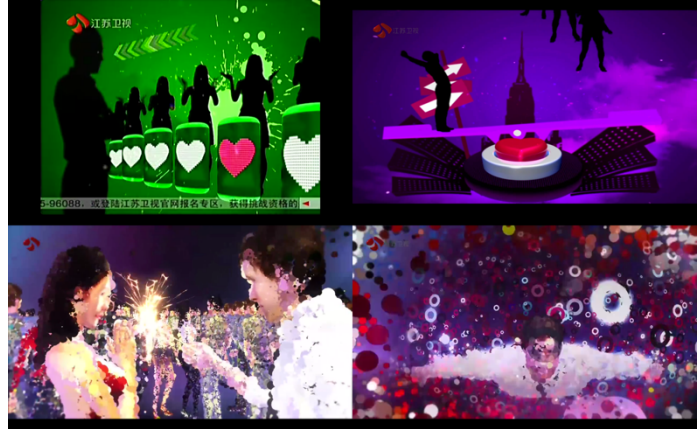


Figure 23 FCWR credit sequences from 2010-2, 2013

suggest romantic gestures-- hearts and flowers figure prominently--but also measurement and evaluation with imagery of a scale and button. These programs suggest calculation plays an important role in the dating process and express an anxiety about what such outlined or abstracted figures hide behind the opaque surface they present to the world.

Table 1: Mainland Chinese Studio-Produced Dating Shows with Non-Celebrity Participants

Shortened Title	Chinese Title and English Title if applicable	Broadcast Network	Years Shown
AQLLK	爱情连连看 Dream Love Link	浙江卫视 Zhejiang Satellite Television	2011-2014
AQZDM	爱情找对门 Mum, Mate, Computer Date	深圳卫视 Shenzhen Satellite Television	2017-present
BLTY	百里挑一 One out of 100	东方卫视 Dragon Television	2010-2015
FCWM	非常完美	贵州卫视 Guizhou Satellite Television	2011-present
FCWR	非诚勿扰 If You Are the One	江苏卫视 Jiangsu Satellite Television	2010-present
GHYJN	刚好遇见你 Just Meeting You	黑龙江网络广播频道 Heilongjiang Internet Channel	2017-present
MGZY	玫瑰之约	湖南卫视 Hunan Satellite Television	
QCRL	全城热恋	吉林电视台生活频道 Jilin Lifestyle Channel	2010-present
SNBLTY	谁能百里挑一	东方卫视 Dragon Television	2011-2014
WAXQC	为爱向前冲	福建东南卫视 Fujian Southeast Satellite Television	2006-?
WMYHB	我们约会吧 Take Me Out	湖南卫视 Hunan Satellite Television	2009-2015
XY	乡约	CCTV 军事农业频道 CCTV Military and Agriculture Channel	2014-present
XYXQL	相约星期六	上海东方电视台新娱乐频道 Shanghai Entertainment Channel	1998-present
YHWRM	约会万人迷 Hear the One	福建东南卫视 Fujian Southeast Satellite Television	2012-present
ZGSXQ	中国式相亲 Chinese Dating	东方卫视 Dragon Television	2016-present
ZSYDT	转身遇到 TA The Choice	浙江卫视 Zhejiang Satellite Television	2013



Figure 11 Kwai Morality (translation added)

Chapter 4: Commodification, Rurality, and New Media Platformivity on Kwai

Three young people sit in a high rise housing complex courtyard and compare notes on what their fathers gave them for their birthdays (fig. 1). The first young man shows off his cellphone and watch. Then, the young woman next to him dangles the keys to her new car to show how much her father loves her. She then turns to the woman next to her and makes fun of her when she replies that she didn't ask for a present from her father who works in construction. The second woman stands up and scolds the two others for wasting their parents' money. She emphasizes that "my dad is poor, but he always gave me warm clothes" (*Wo ba shi mei qian, dan mei rang wo dongzhe*). At the end of the fifty-second video, she speaks directly to the viewers and asks them to like the video if they agree that there's nothing shameful about having poor parents. The moral message of not boasting about wealth seems in direct conflict, however, with the video's cover image of the righteous woman sitting on a Maserati. If Kwai users click on the video because they are interested in the car, an ostentatious symbol of wealth, and the title that promises a story about "the world's richest daddy," they might be sorely disappointed. As of

May 2019, the video, posted by a user named *Nixinvshen Lijie* (Counterattack Goddess Li) (ID: CCTV1688) on November 30, 2018, has accumulated almost 600,000 views, over 50,000 likes and 6,000 comments, which are overwhelmingly positive and supportive of Li's message. This grassroots morality makes claims against the pride of consumption while simultaneously visually engaging in just that. This contradiction encapsulates many of the compelling aspects of user-generated content on Kwai.

The Chinese video-sharing app *Kuaishou* (English name: Kwai) has been, by some measures, the fourth most used online platform in the People's Republic of China, surpassed only by WeChat, QQ, and Weibo, and yet, until an article on the app went viral on WeChat in 2016, many educated, urban Chinese had never heard of it. 70% of the app's users are outside the "first-tier cities" (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen), and its content and users are generally linked to regular people's daily life and rural space.¹⁸⁸ The rural association that has accrued to the platform offers a unique window into how rural people make and share their own images, often declaring and labeling themselves "rural," which carries weighty cultural baggage and connotations of being underdeveloped, poor, less educated, and generally "behind" those that live an urban lifestyle. The alterity of the platform, even within Mainland China, drives media narratives in English and Chinese. The popular press either chastises the platform for its exploitative and obscene content, or identifies it as a way out of poverty, as rural users can turn their grassroots fame into increased income.

¹⁸⁸ Fan Feifei, "China's rural folk ride the \$3bn app," *China Daily*, June 5, 2017 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-06/05/content_29612879.htm.; "Women fexile 16 wan tiao shuju, gaosuni douyin he kuaishou shei shi duanshipin laoda? 我们分析了16万条数据, 告诉你抖音和快手谁是短视频老大? [We analyzed 160,000 pieces of data to tell you: who is top in short videos, Douyin or Kuaishou?], *Video Clips Atelier* 短视频工场, July 4, 2018. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/39045494>. Accessed Oct. 17, 2018.

In this chapter, I attempt to avoid exoticizing the platform the way the popular press has, by instead placing the forms found on Kwai in the context of documentary studies and Chinese media history I have explored throughout this dissertation. I begin this chapter by reviewing how Kwai is read from the outside—namely, narratives which often make assumptions on how social media is supposed to work based on models like those of YouTube and Instagram, and therefore focus on problems of self-commodification. However, the ways in which users profit from creating videos and livestreaming on Kwai differ significantly from YouTube and Instagram, and those differences contribute to stark differences in video content, relationships between creators and followers, and the general atmosphere of the platforms. Kwai is structured as a social space that allows users to engage in alternative forms of class visibility.

At the same time, I am not interested in Kwai merely for its social and communicative facets, but also as an aesthetic object whose formal properties, style, and feeling also merit close attention. Stephen Groening has called for this kind of aesthetic attention to online video and underlines how an attention to the everyday commonality of such videos need not only be subsumed into conversations about the extraordinary or subversive potential of particular examples.¹⁸⁹ To understand the appeal of Kwai videos, I will closely examine a small subset of videos on the platform to demonstrate how the platform not only offers visibility to rural users often left out of mainstream media narratives, but also engages with that same mainstream media world by imitating film genres, parodying reality television, and documenting rural reality's haptic and sensorial dimensions.

¹⁸⁹ Stephen Groening, "Banality and Online Videos," *Film Criticism* 40, no. 2 (2016), DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0040.207>.

An Urban Moral Panic: Kwai on Mainstream and Social Media

The “discovery” of Kwai by urban Chinese has provoked many of those unfamiliar with the platform to question their understanding of a rural society that seems far removed from their daily life. The widely shared WeChat article, “The Epic Narrative of the Cruel Underclass: Rural China on a Video Sharing Application,” (*Canku diceng wuyu: yige shipin ruanjian de Zhongguo nongcun*) which introduced many to Kwai, emphasizes some of the more extreme examples of how users attract viewers, particularly through various forms of self-cruelty, like eating inedible objects, drinking excessively, or harming oneself.¹⁹⁰ The author of the article, Huo Qiming (writing under the pen name Dr. X), engages in a kind of domestic exoticization, describing urban and rural space as two pieces of the “true China (*zhenshi de Zhongguo*), as different as black and white.”¹⁹¹ Huo attributes great importance to Kwai as a way for urban Chinese to understand the rural, while at the same time marking rural users and their videos as very different from their urban counterparts. Unfortunately, instead of leading to greater engagement with rural people, the article touched off a kind of moral panic over Kwai. While sociologists have extensively debated the term “moral panic,” my use of the term here highlights a couple of salient aspects of Kwai’s visibility for Huo’s urban, educated readers. First, the reaction was disproportionate to the threat and emphasizes the extent to which Kwai represents the social fault lines between rural and urban.¹⁹² Furthermore, given that moral panics around technology are

¹⁹⁰ I thank Can Zhao in particular for sharing her work on the connection between this article and the consumption of rural pain. Dr. X X 博士, “*Canku diceng wuyu: yige shipin ruanjian de Zhongguo nongcun*” 残酷底层物语: 一个视频软件的中国农村[The Epic Narrative of the Cruel Underclass: Rural China on a Video Sharing Application], <https://xw.qq.com/news/20160609003283/NEW2016060900328301>.

¹⁹¹ Dr. X, “The Epic Narrative.”

¹⁹² Erich Goode and Nachman, Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 30.

often connected to youth, the urban horror at how rural people are harming themselves contains an aspect of infantilization.¹⁹³ Similarly, when a young person asked one of the app's founders Zeng Guangming, "Why don't I enjoy Kwai? Why do I find it so vulgar?" Zeng replied, "Because you don't understand Chinese society"—a response that forecloses the possibility of diverse articulations of Chinese society in favor of a debate over authenticity.¹⁹⁴ Many urban netizens remained unconvinced that the app offered a chance to better understand their nation and instead called for censorship or closing the platform.¹⁹⁵ The PRC government has in fact asked Kwai's owners to better control the content on the platform, as in April 2018 around generally indecent or violent content and in particular in the case of teen mothers.¹⁹⁶

The inverse of these narratives is the other dominant understanding of Kwai, that of a rural idyll for urban viewers that also contributes to larger government discourses of poverty relief through entrepreneurship. The focus on poverty relief through entrepreneurship was also promoted in the main-melody film *Hold Your Hands* (*Shiba Dongcun*, Miao Yue, 2017) and

¹⁹³ Marcella Szablewicz cites James Springhill's work in her article about a more long-standing moral panic in the PRC about internet addiction. Marcella Szablewicz, "The ill effects of "opium for the spirit": a critical cultural analysis of China's Internet addiction moral panic," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 3, no. 4 (2010): 454.

¹⁹⁴Xie Peng 谢鹏, "Kuaishou zhibo de caogen jianghu: 20% jingying, 80% chenmo" 快手直播的草根江湖: 20%精英, 80%沉默 [Kwai's grassroots underworld livestreamers: 20% elite, 80% silent], *Nanfang Zhoumo* 南方周末, Apr. 27, 2017, <http://www.infzm.com/content/124326>.

¹⁹⁵ "Yuanzui lun: Kuaishou gaibugai bei fengsha?" 原罪论: 快手该不该被封杀? [A discussion of original sin: should Kwai be blocked?], *Zhibo quanzi* 直播圈子, April 10, 2018, http://www.sohu.com/a/227816062_100118989?spm=smc.content.content.1.1558651912034Nukt769.

¹⁹⁶ "China to Purge Online Video Services," *China Media Project*, Apr 6, 2018, <http://chinamediaproject.org/2018/04/06/china-to-purge-online-video-services/>; Raymond Zhong, "China Isn't Happy About Its Latest Internet Stars: Teen Mothers," *New York Times* Apr 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/technology/china-censor-teen-moms.html>.

connects directly to Xi Jinping's career, as he visited this village in 2013.¹⁹⁷ A *China Daily* article relates the story of one Kwai user who was able to parlay her online celebrity into a business selling local agricultural products.¹⁹⁸ The article describes her fans' curiosity about the dishes she made in her videos and how happy her customers were with the "natural and pollution-free" goods. Both the exotic sense of local flavors and the "naturalness" of the products' source implies that she is serving urban customers who can afford to pay for quality products and who are also consuming a way of life apart from their own urban hassles. Beyond Kwai offering an escape into an idealized rural space, the platform works explicitly to continue and develop this orientation towards poverty relief, perhaps to defend against the criticisms noted above and emphasize the platform's social value. In the same article, Yang explains that the young Kwai user "was selected as one of 20 internet celebrities to attend the Happy Rural Entrepreneurs Program launched by Kuaishou at Tsinghua University in Beijing. The program provided courses in rural entrepreneurship and business management. Zhang Fan, the program's trainer, said Kuaishou [Kwai] will continue to support for [sic] Yuan's entrepreneurship."¹⁹⁹ Thus, the platform is also a path to Tsinghua and wider recognition.

Even when scholars recognize that Kwai cannot be reduced to either grotesque cruelty or poverty relief, they still want to understand it in relationship to mainstream culture. Liu Tao, in an insightful article that considers how Kwai remakes rural visibility, ultimately argues that Kwai offers only the illusion of upward social mobility, because their fame will not translate beyond Kwai. Liu assumes they are implicitly striving for forms of wider visibility. Liu begins

¹⁹⁷ Hou Lulu, "Movie pays tribute to targeted poverty alleviation," *China Daily*, Oct 25, 2017.

¹⁹⁸ Yang Jun, "Livestream a New Way to Help the Poor," *China Daily*, Dec 14, 2018.

¹⁹⁹ Yang, "Livestream."

by establishing Kwai as an opportunity for an unprecedented access to self-representation for rural people previously subject to all sorts of urban fantasies about the rural and imbrication into mainstream, read government, narratives of social problems. Like Paola Voci's characterization of "light" online video forms that escape categorization, Liu emphasizes that videos on Kwai, through their "fragmented, guerrilla-style and illogical" forms, evade being subsumed into mainstream discourse.²⁰⁰ Yet, precisely because of their location within a social media community largely ignored by mainstream, i.e. urban, media, Liu concludes that popularity on Kwai will not lead to any real form of social mobility. While an important retort to mainstream narratives about Kwai popularity as a method of poverty alleviation, Liu nevertheless falls into the same valorization of visibility only when it means attracting the attention of rich, educated, urban people. I understand Kwai as the end in and of itself for its users, who may only be interested in the small-scale popularity and profit available within its own community, instead of necessarily seeking social status on par with that enjoyed by traditional media.

The popular press outside China echoes much of what publications like *China Daily* say about the platform, focusing on how the app has provided a new source of income for rural users. CNN reported on a Chinese-African couple popular on the platform who make a modest supplementary income.²⁰¹ In a *New Yorker* article published last October, Yi-Ling Liu explains that Kwai "operates within a growing attention economy, in which the most unpalatable and provocative feeds often attract the most eyeballs and bring in the most cash. One woman, who

²⁰⁰ Liu Tao 刘涛, "Duan shipin, xiangcun kongjian shengchan yu jiannan de jiecheng liudong" 短视频、乡村空间生产与艰难的阶层流动 [Short Video, Production of Rural Space, and Arduous Social Mobility], *Jiaoyu Chuanmei Yanjiu* 教育传媒研究 6 (2018): 15. Voci, Paola. *China on Video: Smaller-Screen Realities*. Taylor and Francis, 2010.

²⁰¹ Damilola Odufuwa, Serenitie Wang, and Jenni Marsh, "Cameroon Bride and Chinese Husband Find Fame Online in China," *CNN Wire*, Sept 18, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/17/africa/china-africa-mixed-marriage/index.html>.

calls herself Gourmet Sister Feng, has earned a hefty sum live streaming herself gulping down light bulbs, feasting on live goldfish, and swallowing cigarettes.”²⁰² Thus, in the over two years since Dr. X’s article was published, the popular perception of the platform has changed little. In the rest of the article, Liu focuses on a middle-aged rural woman who has gained fans through her witty remarks, primarily highlighting the app as a new media form reaching an unexpected public. In the *Wall Street Journal*, the app’s place outside social norms of the growing, urban middle class Chinese is likened to coastal, liberal Americans’ recognition of a white, rural, and conservative populace after Trump’s election. Journalist Yuan Li explains that

Kwai provides a medium for those in that less-developed part of the country to share what they find relevant and amusing. Many other user-generated video apps frequently showcase attractive women and the lifestyles of the new middle class. Kwai users, by contrast, often show themselves roaming farm fields or standing in front of shabby-looking buildings.²⁰³

The notion that a group of people could be interested in something other than rich, attractive, young women holds novelty for those that equate social media with Instagram’s focus on aspirational wealth, which I will explore in more depth in the next section.

Western press narratives around Kwai also speak to a larger problem of how Western media, and even academic narratives, read internet spaces—they tend to treat Western and particularly US uses of technology as the norm, and everything else as aberrant, or worse, not worth mentioning. As Alice Marwick warns, “the United States has been centered and *unmarked* in internet research. [...] It means that many phenomena are considered universal that may

²⁰² Yi-Ling Liu, “The Chinese Farmer Who Live-Streamed Her Life and Made a Fortune,” *The New Yorker*, Oct 29, 2018.

²⁰³ Li Yuan, “China Circuit: Video App Highlights Widening Social Gap,” *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, Feb 9, 2017.

actually be local to the US (or the UK or Australia, to a lesser extent).”²⁰⁴ The distinction between US practices and how new media is taken up outside the western context also depends on closely considering the technological history of different contexts.

Some scholars do not take for granted the idea that Western media cultures are natural or inevitable, particularly in disciplines related to Anthropology. Cara Wallis’s work on Chinese female migrant workers’ use of cell phones introduces the notion of “necessary convergence” and calls for research into the material conditions of technological adoption. While “convergence” brings to mind commonality across an array of devices and platforms through relatively a long process of accumulation, “necessary convergence” means that technology adoption and conditions of technology use for economically marginalized groups may be more abrupt and constrained. For example, in a framework dominated by a middle-class, Western perspective, a camera phone merely adds one more device to someone’s collection. Such understandings cannot explain what a camera phone means when it is the first camera someone has used or is the only available method of communication.²⁰⁵

Many Kwai users operate under similar conditions of necessary convergence, where the conditions in which they use technology challenge widely held assumptions about their use. Ji Guangxu’s ethnographic research into how rural young people use Kwai in Qinghai describes a collective gathering in the central village square, where free Wi-Fi is available, to watch and

²⁰⁴ Alice E. Marwick, “Epilogue: The Algorithmic Celebrity: The Future of Internet Fame and Microcelebrity Studies,” in *Microcelebrity Around the Globe: Approaches to Cultures of Internet Fame*, eds. Crystal Abidin and Megan Lindsay Brown (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2019), 165. Emphasis original.

²⁰⁵ Cara Wallis, *Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones* (New York University, 2013), 7-8.

discuss short videos on the platform.²⁰⁶ Thus, instead of an isolated, individual cellphone user absorbed into their phone with little consideration for their physical environment, the Kwai users that Ji describes consume the videos together, in a collective, social manner. While such ethnographic research is beyond the scope of this chapter, the importance of considering the particular affordances of a given platform motivates my focus on Kwai in particular. Video sharing and livestreaming applications abound in the PRC, but an analysis of Kwai and considering why it has drawn an explicitly rural user base emphasizes the particularity and contingency of what are sometimes assumed to be universal digital tools and platforms. Kwai is only meaningful when considered in not only its technological basis, but also in how it is taken up by a specific community, under specific conditions.

Noting the similarities between the problems of media specificity and area studies, Thomas Lamarre proposes the notion of “platformativity” to describe an approach to media that would heed postcolonial critiques of area studies:

a way of addressing these different registers or dimensions of media without resorting to methodological individualism vis-à-vis countries or cultures, human individuals, and technical individuals – platformativity. The notion of platformativity is intended to address the infra-individual intra-actions between platform and human, and individual and collective – a kind of performativity via platforms.²⁰⁷

Thus, instead of thinking about “new media in Asia,” which depends on an assumption of stable categories of media forms and on “Asia” as a location of fixed cultural values, this form of

²⁰⁶ Ji Guangxu 姬广绪, “Chengxiang wenhua pinjie shiyuxia de ‘Kuaishou’: Jiyu Qinghai tuzu qingnian yidong hulianwang shijian de kaocha” “城乡文化拼接视域下的“快手”——基于青海土族青年移动互联网实践的考察” [Kwai considered through the urban and rural cultural mosaic: Fieldwork on the mobile internet practice of the young villagers of Tu ethnicity in Qinghai], *Minzu Yanjiu* 民族研究 4 (2018): 82-83.

²⁰⁷ Thomas Lamarre, “Platformativity: Media Studies, Area Studies,” *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4 (2017): 301.

analysis instead thinks about how each of the categories intersect and are remade over and over through infra-actions, in Karen Barad's terms. Thus, the examples I analyze in the subsequent sections enact this form of "platformativity" where various circulating cultural scripts, genres, and attitudes emerge repeatedly to form an experience of various social roles, identities, and orientations. The explicit citation of various forms of the term *nongcun*, or the countryside, in video text and user comments, as well as video imagery of fields, agricultural produce and livestock, and architectural styles that signal the user and their surroundings as rural, all contribute to a potential rethinking or play with the complex categories of social identity contained in rural and urban labels. There is nothing fixed about the boundaries between these categories, nor can they even be said to necessarily correspond to actually existing social categories. Instead, what is "rural" about Kwai is the product of a constantly changing enactment of the practices of its video creators and users.

I therefore want to consider the videos on Kwai for themselves, without arguing over Kwai's relationship to a narrative of upward social mobility. Kwai offers an opportunity to understand how rural users themselves contend with the social scripts and aesthetic forms used to depict the rural-urban divide that have been the subject of the previous chapters of this dissertation. Through imitation, parody, and an emphasis on sensorial experience, the Kwai videos considered in depth in the second half of this chapter suggests that rural video producers both alternately recognize, employ, and challenge these formal and social structures.

Aspirational Intimacy versus Rural Public Display: Kwai's Platformativity in Comparison to Instagram and YouTube

In the sociality it creates and the opportunities it offers for monetization, Kwai is markedly different from both domestic competitors such as TikTok (*Douyin*) and international

analogues such as Instagram and YouTube. While the Dr. X article defined Kwai for urban outsiders as a place for the exhibition of the spectacular and grotesque, Kwai's founders instead emphasize the natural evolution of user culture and their own non-intervention. According to Kwai's own narratives about itself, what is most crucial is the specific sociality of the platform shared by its users and producers. An article in *China Entrepreneur*, entitled "Why Could Kwai Capture the Silent Majority?," asserts that "if you let an internet product develop naturally in China, then in the end it would likely turn out like Kwai."²⁰⁸ Whether or not Kwai's development was natural is a separate debate. What matter about what the article's author Zhai means by natural development is how it distinguishes Kwai from other popular platforms, like Weibo and TikTok. In a 2019 article in the same magazine, the evolution of the platform and its difference from TikTok is connected to the platform's evolution into a social interface from its original form as a GIF creation tool. While TikTok's main page is more exciting, it is also more complicated.²⁰⁹ When asked about TikTok's rapid accrual of users, Cheng Yixiao explains that, "For us, Kwai is a place for recording and sharing your life, so creators are most important. We didn't expect that a company that did so well with consumers would also succeed." Here, the focus on creators for Cheng is about focusing on regular users also being creators, while TikTok has focused on providing high quality content, which suggests a focus instead on what the consumer or viewer wants to see on the platform. Cheng sees user creation as a means to the end of encouraging participation, not the production professional-quality content, and despite his claims to the contrary, he has engineered the platform to produce that kind of participation. A

²⁰⁸ Zhai Wenting 翟文婷, "Kuaishou weishenme neng zhuazhu chenmo dashu?" 快手为什么能抓住沉默多数? [Why can Kwai capture the silent majority?], *Zhongguo qiyejia* 中国企业家 3/4 (2017): 59.

²⁰⁹ Ma Yue 马钺. "Kuaishou chaopin" 快手超频 [The overclocking Kuaishou], *Zhongguo qiyejia* 中国企业家 1 (2019): 22.

longtime user explains that a shift came in 2016, when one of the three main tabs on the main page, “Discover” (*faxian*) which used to be dominated by people performing songs or comedy sketches, instead displayed many “down to earth” (*jiedi qi*) videos.²¹⁰ Kwai’s developers originally used an algorithm that placed the videos with the most likes over the past three days on the discover page. But this resulted in a relatively static page, with the same users and content reappearing time and again. So they adjusted the algorithm and added elements of chance to allow a greater variety of users and content to appear on that page. Thus, TikTok’s focus on quality is related to Weibo’s use of the V label to differentiate users and direct traffic to established figures and brands, and Kwai, in contrast, wants to offer more the potential for exposure to a greater number of users, further contributing to the grassroots orientation of the platform. This difference in strategy has been summarized as centralization in the case of TikTok and decentralization on Kwai.²¹¹

While websites and platforms popular outside China, like Instagram and YouTube, allow popular creators to benefit from the platform’s advertising revenue or commercial sponsorship, Kwai does not have any advertising and no longer allows users to be sponsored by online merchants.²¹² Thus, a grassroots-oriented, intimate form of commodification reigns on Kwai; users support livestreamers and video creators for a variety of reasons. Some

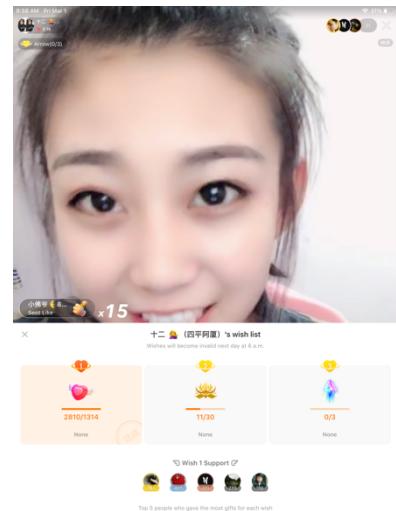


Figure 12 Sespas12's wish list

²¹⁰ Ma, 23.

²¹¹ Kevin W., “Douyin vs Kuaishou: Zhongxinhua or quzhongxinhua?” 抖音 vs 快手：中心化 or 去中心化？ [TikTok vs Kwai: Centralization or decentralization?], *Renren dou shi chanpin jingli* 人人都是产品经理, Apr 3, 2018, <http://www.woshipm.com/pmd/981829.html>.

²¹² Zhai, 65.

users do sell products through videos (though transactions take place through other apps, such as WeChat), and virtual gifting often dominates much of the conversation during live broadcasts, through creator's virtual gift wish lists and PK competitions between two live streamers (see figs. 2 and 3).²¹³ "PK" is a term commonly used on the Internet in China that originates from online gaming and originally stood for "player killing." It entered common vocabulary through its use in Hunan Satellite Television's reality singing competition *Super Girl* in 2005.²¹⁴ During a PK, two livestreamers compete to see who will receive the most gifts from their viewers in a four-minute period, after which the losing streamer will accept a punishment, like having to write something on their face (fig. 3). Kwai's monetization strategy allows for the emergence of user personas and cultures which are very different from those that dominate other social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, where profiting from Internet celebrity means attracting advertising revenue and product sponsorship and thereby adhering to norms of appearance and behavior palatable to corporate advertisers. Where YouTube and Instagram are oriented toward consumer culture, Kwai creates a gift economy which appeals to a rural user base alienated by mainstream Chinese consumer culture. I am not arguing that Kwai is the first or the only app to use virtual gifting, it is quite common, but instead that virtual gifting is important to how Kwai creates a community outside other forms of social value.

²¹³ These images are both from a user named 十二 🧑 (四平阿厦), Kwai ID: Sespas12. As of March 2019, she has 50,000 followers and is a member of the Siping Afu *duanzi* team. <https://live.kuaishou.com/profile/sespas12>.

²¹⁴ Fu Shanchao 傅善超, "PK," in *Pobishu: Wangluo wenhua guanjianci* 破壁书: 网络文化关键词 [Keywords in Chinese Internet Subcultures], ed. Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 (Beijing: Sanlian Publishing, 2018), 373-4.

Curiously, YouTube began with stated objectives very similar to those that Kwai's creators currently profess. Patrick Vonderau, in an article that analyzes how multi-channel networks have changed YouTube, notes that "As [YouTube co-founder Steven] Chen summed up on 26 April 2005, 'We want to create a community around connections made by users viewing one another's videos'."²¹⁵ Vonderau also emphasizes that YouTube initially thought of those connections in terms of romance and imagined the video sharing site would function as a form of online dating. It would be a platform on which users would reciprocally watch videos and form non-hierarchical relationships with other users, who would also be creators. Vonderau traces how YouTube's page structure, algorithms and monetization configuration altered this relationship and resulted instead in "a channel- and genre-oriented interaction design that centers on recommendation, [...] evoking television's programmed flow rather than, say, the interaction on a dating website."²¹⁶ If at the origin, YouTube conceived of viewers on equal footing, now it replicates a broadcasting relationship and caters to a passive experience of viewing. If statistics that YouTube has fifty million content creators and 1.9 billion monthly active users are correct, then creators only make less than 3% of

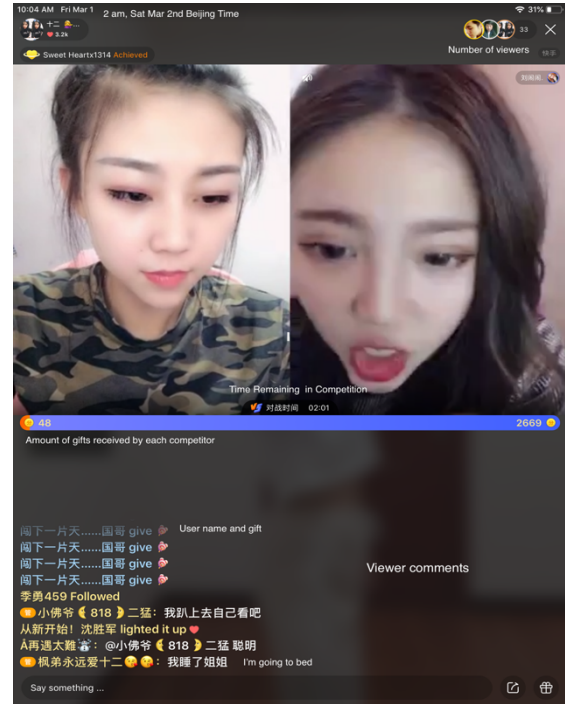


Figure 13 Live streaming competition

²¹⁵ Patrick Vonderau, "The Video Bubble: Multichannel Networks and the Transformation of YouTube," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 22, no. 4 (2016): 364.

²¹⁶ Vonderau, 365. See also José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: a Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 114.

the user base.²¹⁷ Kwai, by way of contrast, is designed around realizing YouTube's original concept. The platform claims that 60% of users upload their own content.²¹⁸ The platform's support for a livestreaming interface which allows creators to respond to viewer comments in real time, as well as a function that allows viewers to produce a video with the same filters and soundtracks as a video they like by clicking on a button labeled "imitate," both suggest greater opportunities for interaction, beyond a broadcasting model.

If YouTube's mixture of user-generated content and professionally-generated content are both subsumed under a televisual structural logic, then successful content creators who want to earn money will depend upon replicating conventional branding techniques as they market themselves to viewers. Tobias Raun investigates this issue in the context of a popular transgender vlogger, Julie Van Vu, who is able to combine an activist objective of raising transgender visibility with more conventional and marketable beauty and makeup content that attracts sponsors. Raun argues that, "YouTube as a platform plays a crucial role by persistently encouraging users to compete for attention and status and rewarding them economically for promoting themselves." For Raun, Vu is relatively unique in her ability to "reach a broader audience and hence disseminate the transgender cause and obviously to earn or supplement an income."²¹⁹ Similarly, Instagram fame also depends on wealth and beauty as in more conventional celebrity culture. Alice Marwick argues that:

Instafame demonstrates that while micro-celebrity is widely practiced, those successful at gaining attention often reproduce conventional status hierarchies of luxury, celebrity, and popularity that depend on the ability to emulate the visual

²¹⁷ "YouTube by the Numbers: Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts," *Omnicores*, Jan 6, 2019, accessed 1 Mar 1, 2019, <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/youtube-statistics/>.

²¹⁸ Zhai, 65.

²¹⁹ Tobias Raun, "Capitalizing Intimacy: New Subcultural Forms of Microcelebrity Strategies and Affective Labour on YouTube," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 100.

iconography of mainstream celebrity culture. This emulation calls into question the idea that social media are an egalitarian, or even just a more accessible, way for individuals to access the currency of the attention economy.²²⁰

Viewed cynically, Instagram and YouTube fail to significantly challenge conventional hierarchies of visibility and instead merely offer another avenue for the charming, attractive, and wealthy to promote themselves and gain from those performances financially. Kwai is then even more remarkable as a tool of visibility for the socially disadvantaged rural users that have become its primary reference point.

Kwai encourages this interaction with a gift-centered monetization structure through which video creators and live streamers earn money, which differs significantly from both Instagram and YouTube. As mentioned above, anyone on the Kwai app can send a virtual gift to another user (fig. 4). The standard exchange rate in the PRC is ten cents RMB to one Kwai coin. Gifts range from a thumbs up, watermelon, lollipop or heart for one Kwai coin, a beer or wave for ten coins, a stack of money for fifty-eight, to a rocket for 328 coins or a 666 themed character for 666 coins. The number 666 refers to a common comment left on videos, which comes from a similar sounding character, 溜 liū, which began in video game streaming and expressed

²²⁰ Alice E. Marwick, “Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy,” *Public Culture* 27, no 1 (2015): 139.

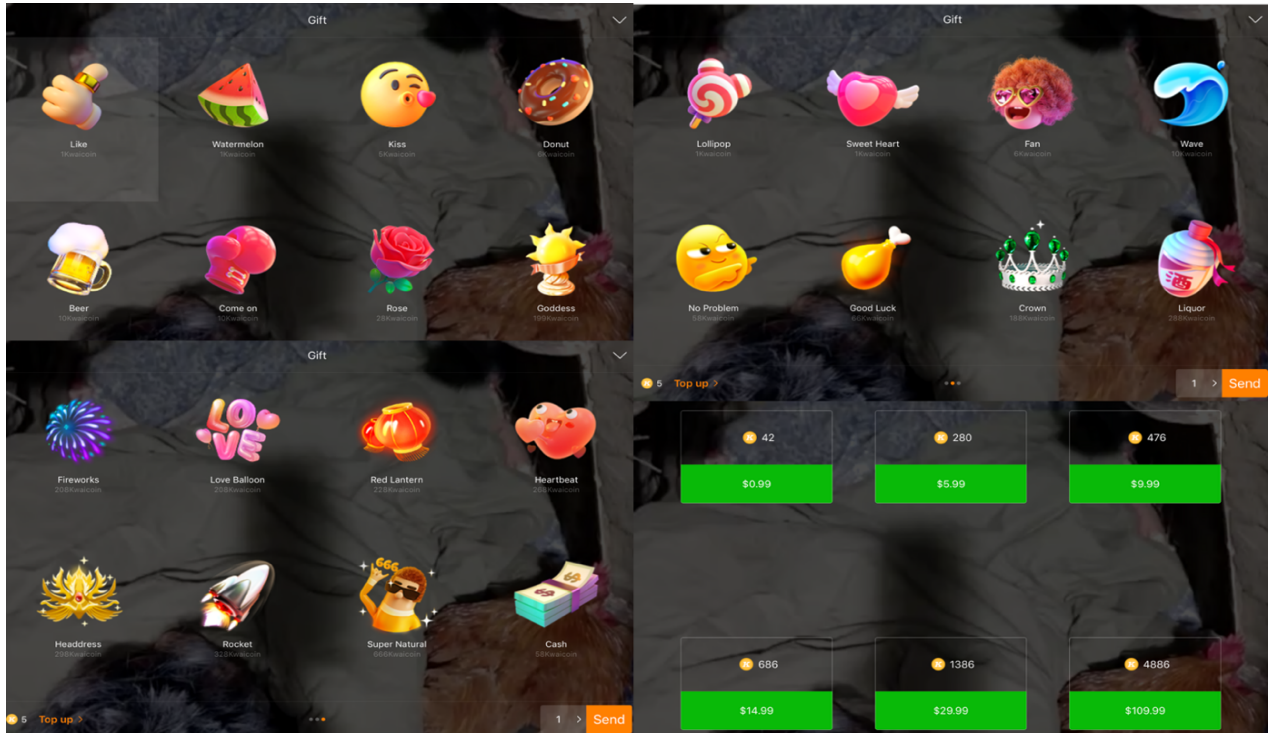


Figure 14 Virtual Gifts on Kwai

admiration at someone’s abilities.²²¹ The number has none of the demonic connotations it does in English, and instead is most similar to YouTuber’s exhortation to “like and click subscribe,” as video text often requests that users double tap (to like the video) and comment with 666 (双击666). All gifting is registered in the comment section of the live video, as in figure 3 where a user named “闯下一片天...国哥” has offered a series of lollipops to the live streamer. Higher priced gifts, like the love balloons that cost 208 coins, cause effects visible to the live streamer and everyone currently watching, like balloons floating across the screen or fireworks appearing

²²¹ Fu Shanchao 傅善超, “666,” in *Pobishu: Wangluo wenhua guanjianci* 破壁书: 网络文化关键词 [Keywords in Chinese Internet Subcultures], ed. Shao Yanjun 邵燕君 (Beijing: Sanlian Publishing, 2018), 472.

around the streamer's face. Thus, gifting is not a private transaction and much of the enjoyment of watching a live stream is seeing other viewers offer extravagant gifts.²²²

In the rest of this chapter, I examine the specific genres which have arisen in this particular environment. Kwai sometimes offers pleasures similar to those of Instagram's aspirational wealth, but it also provides an alternative form of visibility for rural users, which ultimately opens up a space in which to critique mainstream, urban-based media in the PRC.

Generic Imitation and Selling an Image of Wealth on Kwai

One of the particularly compelling short-form video genres on Kwai are sketches referred to as *duanzi* or “short jokes or anecdotes in Chinese standup comedy that described a social phenomenon or attitude in a humorous way.”²²³ On Kwai, the term is used more generally for narrative sketches, whether comedic or dramatic, which are often serialized, given that the conventional running time of fifty seconds to a minute for an individual video leaves little time for narrative development. *Duanzi* tend to be produced by groups of users, who each manage their own account. The narrative serials that are the focus of this section contribute to the feeling of “positive energy” encouraged by government censors through the platform's management and model versions of popular morality that equate the accumulation of wealth with highly gendered forms of virtue.²²⁴ The subsequent section will consider comedy *duanzi* that use narrative and situational parody.

²²² Viewers describe these feelings in the documentary *People's Republic of Desire* (Hao Wu, 2018).

²²³ Min Ding, and Jie Xu, “Duanzi,” in *The Chinese Way* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 193.

²²⁴ For an analysis of Kwai's “positive energy” account, see Gao Yu 高宇 and Hu Shuxiang 胡树祥, “Weishipin APP: Wangluo sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu de xin changyu—Jiyu ‘Kuaishou Zhengnengliang’ de dashuju fensi yu sikao” 微视频APP:网络思想政治教育的新场

To take one example of a short-form narrative, videos entitled “My Woman, My King” (*Wo de nvren, wo de wang*) exist all over video sharing apps and streaming platforms like iQiyi and YouTube, with watermarks that indicate their provenance from other video-sharing platforms like Xigua Video and the now-closed Neihan Duanzi.²²⁵ What many of the videos have in common is the use of one of two setups with slight variation. In the first, a young woman accidentally causes damage to another young woman’s purse as she walks by. The boyfriend of the purse’s owner then threatens the young woman and demands exorbitant compensation for the damage. The young woman calls her own boyfriend to help her deal with the situation. The arriving boyfriend is the hero of the sketch: he has the financial ability to pay the excessive demand on behalf of his girlfriend and then reasserts his dominance by punishing the other man for threatening his girlfriend.²²⁶ In the second setup, a group of men and one woman are having a meal in a large banquet room. The boss of the group complains about the lack of female companionship, and the sole young woman present calls a friend and tells her there is a class reunion going on and to come join them. When the friend arrives, the boss forces her to drink,

域——基于“快手正能量”的大数据分析与思考 [Videosharing Apps, the new field of internet ideological education: Analysis and consideration of big data from Kwai’s positive energy], *Sixiang jiaoyu yanjiu* 思想教育研究 12 (2017): 100-105.

²²⁵ For more on the closure of Neihan Duanzi, see Pang-Chieh Ho, “Jokes App Neihan Duanzi Shuttered by China’s Media Regulator for ‘Vulgarity,’” *SupChina* Apr 12, 2018, <https://supchina.com/2018/04/12/jokes-app-neihan-duanzi-shuttered-by-chinas-media-regulator-for-vulgarity/>. For an introduction of a large number of the video-sharing apps in China, see Masha Borak, “I wasted a week staring at 19 short video apps from China,” *Abacus*, Jan 7, 2019, <https://www.abacusnews.com/digital-life/i-wasted-week-staring-19-short-video-apps-china/article/3000365>.

²²⁶ This describes a video, watermarked as from Neihan Duanzi, posted on a Baidu Tieba discussion board. It is also one of the earliest “My Woman” videos, dating to at least October 2017. sorry 余温, “Wo de nüren wo de wang, wo de nüren wo lai teng, shixiang de ni bie peng! Zhe jiu shi yige nanren” 我的女人我的王，我的女人我来疼，识相的你别碰！这就是一个男人 [My woman, my king. I’m the one who loves my woman. If you know what’s good for you, hands off! This is a real man.], Oct 9, 2017, *Baidu Tieba*. https://tieba.baidu.com/p/5363576743?red_tag=2690616811&traceid=

until her boyfriend or husband arrives to save her. Again, the arriving man is the hero, saving his girlfriend from the predatory boss at the banquet and asserting his own masculinity and ability to protect his partner who naively accepted the class reunion invitation.

While many of the videos are freestanding and run around two minutes, one *duanzi* production team that also livestreams nightly on Kwai made multiple series of videos with this title, that extend up to thirty-six installments of approximately minute-long videos. The video series emphasize particular users as heroes and suggest that proper forms of masculinity depend on material wealth and physical strength. The team of creators that makes these videos call themselves *Tianqi hongsheng* 天启宏盛 [Great Flourishing Daybreak]. Their style visually and thematically imitates Japanese yakuza and Hong Kong triad films, like the *Young and Dangerous* series, but without any of the violence or much explicit crime. Instead, they pound their fists on tables and verbally threaten each other in defense of their women, or rather woman. In two different versions of the “My Woman” narrative, the same group of actors, predominantly men, act out slightly different stories that incorporate the basic setups described previously. The two main actors, called Qianlong and Yifeng or Brother Feng, each play the hero on the videos posted to their own channel. This hero is always married to Wawa, played by the same actress, so in one series, she is married to Yifeng and Qianlong is trying to sleep with her, while in Qianlong’s series with the same title, the reverse occurs. Each series includes versions of the class reunion con described above and Wawa is always in danger, but Qianlong and Yifeng alternately play hero and villain with the primary user of the account that posts the video as the one who takes the hero’s position.

These dual versions of a similar story point to the pleasure of these videos lying not in their narrative complexity, but in specific kinds of shots—where the lead actor walks in slow

motion, dressed completely in black and surrounded by his mafia disciples, also head to toe in black. In Yifeng's version of "My Woman," Street Beats' "I Wanna Change" begins to play as they enter the hotel. The song was part of the soundtrack for the Japanese film *Crows Zero* (Takashi Miike, 2007), adapted from a manga entitled *Crows*, and the film includes a diegetic performance of the song by the Street Beats. Arrivals like these in a fancy hotel present a structurally similar pleasure of driving up slowly in a luxury vehicle while the camera lingers on hood ornaments or hubcaps—trappings of wealth and power—accompanied by triumphant music to create an image and atmosphere. These moments, along with displays of dominance over the other man, often shouting, pointing, and threatening violence, serve the same function of creating an idealized image of masculinity with very little beyond the surface feeling.

Initially, these clearly urban-based video series might seem out of place on Kwai, considering their setting and propensity to valorize extreme wealth. Long aerial shots of cars driving in formation reoccur frequently, and a particular Rolls Royce features prominently. Yet, as moral parables about proper male behavior, they resonate with larger constructions of Kwai as a place for positive energy or *zhengnengliang* that is central to its positioning as a source of vernacular creativity that does not challenge government objectives for media and its role in normal people's lives. Some of the videos are even posted on YouTube under the username *Zhengnengliang TV* or positive energy TV.²²⁷ Interestingly, "positive energy" in this case is highly gendered. Wawa exists in both series as the primary source of conflict; she repeatedly blunders into dangerous situations. Even when she could hardly be blamed for failing to anticipate that an acquaintance would trick her into a predatory situation, after Qianlong rescues

²²⁷ "Zhengnengliang TV" 真能量 TV [positive energy TV], accessed May 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjroOcT2hHfh4Kg2GwrwGsA>.

her, he urges her to avoid such situations in the future, which would mean not going anywhere without her husband or one of his subordinates. In a version of the purse setup introduced previously which is also incorporated into Qianlong's lengthy serialized version of "My Woman," Qianlong's son is responsible for damaging a car. Even then, Qianlong holds Wawa responsible when the man tries to exhort an excessive sum as compensation and propositions her to repay the debt sexually. In this world, women are always vulnerable, and men must intervene to protect them financially and physically.

Beyond the obviously problematic gender relations, these series offer greater value to an understanding of Kwai as a platform in terms of their involvement with iterative, circulatory web culture. Patrick Davison discusses internet memes in terms of the unrestricted internet, meaning sites and platforms that do not valorize security, which is connected to intellectual property for Davison, over creative expression.²²⁸ He argues that "[t]he prioritization of creative freedom over security is epitomized by the nonattribution meme."²²⁹ Creative freedom on Kwai, of course, is restricted by forces unconcerned with copyright law, but still intensely invested in content control. In the context of Kwai videos, it is sometimes difficult to establish authorship of a particular video and even more difficult to trace any coherent genealogy of a specific script. While these serialized videos exhibit aesthetics that might signal connections to film texts, their content and circulation are embedded in new media culture, almost as if when the video opens on a banquet table, a scripted and acted version of a meme will follow, with common lines of dialogue, shots, narrative structure, and themes. If film genres are about the contradictory goals of relatively fixed viewer expectations of the style and narrative, yet novel elements for each

²²⁸ Patrick Davison, "The Language of Internet Memes," in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 120-34.

²²⁹ Davison, 132.

installment in the genre, then meme-influenced texts need even less variation at the level of setup and dialogue.

The specific instances of serialized narratives that I have selected demonstrate qualities of expansion and exaggeration among fixed forms. In figure 5 below, the left two images are from the Tianhonqisheng team's videos, on the far left is Qianlong's version of the series, so Yifeng is seated at the center of the table and the image to its right is the opposite. The other two videos come from Tengxun Video and YouTube and demonstrate the close replication of the setup. Lines of dialogue that follow each shot are also identical.



Figure 15 Banquet tables in "My Woman" videos²³⁰

Yifeng's shorter version of the "My Woman" series includes only eleven installments and an outtakes video. But it builds upon shorter "My Woman" sketches, which take place totally in the restaurant's banquet room. Yifeng challenges Qianlong and a long lead up to their fight takes up the later installments in the series. Users complained about the long lead-up and lack of physical

²³⁰ From left, the video sources are: Kwai user Long283423939, Kwai user Lige_0108, Tengxun video: <http://v.qq.com/x/page/k08213orzeh.html>, and YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jwh5wK0gaxQ> but seems to be from Kwai user 黑家阔哥, whose largest account currently is ID62370902.

violence at the end. Users were so dissatisfied with the ways the story had been extended that Yifeng apologized at the end of the outtakes video, explaining that the platform only allowed them to show so much. So even when this original setup is expanded, all that is added to the narrative is further emphasis on the trappings of wealth and building anticipation for an ultimately anti-climactic conclusion. Expansion thus does not afford narrative depth but merely extended focus on surface elements.

Qianlong's "My Woman" sketch series expands this narrative even further, by first incorporating the damage compensation setup introduced earlier, along with the banquet scene. The damage compensation setup, which in other videos has the male partner requesting 3,000 yuan (~\$450) for a broken purse as in the Neihan Duanzi example, is even further exaggerated. Wawa and Qianlong's son scratches a car and the car's owner demands 500,000 RMB (~\$75,000). Thus, when Qianlong arrives to pay the man off in a demonstration of financial dominance, the car's owner is presented with a suitcase full of cash. A complicated narrative trajectory ensues, in which Qianlong must manage the conflict with Yifeng (that essentially mirrors the entire narrative from Yifeng's version), as well as the car's owner when he returns with the suitcase of money to bribe one of Qianlong's disciples to allow him to kidnap Wawa, which occurs because Qianlong is mediating a dispute between Wawa and his mother. Beyond the exaggeration of wealth, it is already pushing the limits of believability that someone would willing spend 3,000 yuan to pay off a stranger and show off their wealth, but the scene becomes practically nonsensical in this exaggeration.

In addition to this financial excess, the narrative also stretches time. The car owner villain, after incapacitating Wawa to kidnap her, takes compromising photos of her and uses them to blackmail her into signing over Qianlong's entire business, which was all in her name.

Qianlong returns from the countryside, where his mother wanted to attend a wedding, but Qianlong instead take it as an opportunity to demonstrate the insincerity and profiteering of their rural relatives, to find he has lost all rights to his company. An intertitle tells us three years have passed, and Qianlong is now a hardworking car mechanic. Previously unIntroduced characters then arrive with a lawyer to help him get back the company that was unfairly taken from him. In this way, various meme-like scripts are knitted together and stretched to contain a full riches-to-rags and back to riches cycle. The convoluted nature of the plot demonstrates that what really matters about



Figure 16 Subtitle commentary

these sketches is their signaling of already familiar structures of feeling: protecting a helpless woman, using money to demonstrate dominance, and brotherhood that overcomes adversity. The memetic quality of these videos makes these affects and moral values stand out as the only thread connecting repeated, fixed narrative setups and punchlines.

Women also participate in the moral parable serial form, and the example “Jia jin dashan de nüren” [Married into the Mountains] similarly makes use of narrative expansion and condensation. The Kwai user mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Counterattack Goddess Li, posted the eighteen-part serial at the beginning of 2019, and it tells the story of a young bride being tested by her new husband and sister-in-law. After the wedding, the groom drives her out to the countryside and tells her that they need to spend some time in his hometown while their city apartment is being renovated. The first four segments take place before the bride even agrees to get out of the car that has gotten them as close as possible to his home, before road conditions

require them to walk the rest of the way. Walking to his home takes another five videos, and arguments with the sister-in-law once they arrive extend this first day to fourteen out of the eighteen segments. At certain points during the long walk through the woods to the house, explanations of the visual content appear as subtitles (fig. 6).



Figure 17 Domestic labor

Further adding to the video series' status as a moral parable is the use of subtitles and montage sequences to explain the plot and its proper analysis at the end of the series. After the lengthy set-up of the arrival at the rural home, a montage sequence, introduced as "remembering" or *huiyi zhong*, tells the rest of the story in which the bride proves herself worthy of the marriage by taking good care of her husband's grandfather and completing housework in the poor conditions of the rural home without complaining. Only then do the husband and sister reveal their deception and return in a Maserati to the city, where they live happily ever after. Perhaps the videomakers worried some viewers would not understand the parable, so the final video in the sequence replays prior scenes in desaturated color and explains the storyline in subtitles (fig. 7). Counterattack Goddess takes a clearly instructive attitude towards her viewers; she explains the story and what it means in such detail that no ambiguity is possible. She stops just short of outright articulating the moral value of hard work and affective valorization of sacrifice for one's in-laws. Popular songs make her point in hardly subtle ways; as the whole family thanks the woman who lent them her house as the setting for the deception (and the video series itself, of course) and departs to return to the

city, the chorus of the song “A Grateful Heart” (“Gan’ en de xin”) abruptly changes to “A Loving Family” (“Xiangqin xiang’ai yi jia ren”) and affirms the group’s familial status.

In sum, each series draws on popular media forms—genre film and pop music—to offer moral guidance to their viewers, whether emphasizing the brotherly devotion among men and saving helpless women or depicting those who selflessly accomplish domestic labor as worthy of marrying rich. While this would seem to suggest that creators take a moral high ground and talk down to their viewers, their responsibility to explain the narratives and apologize for viewers’ disappointment suggests a greater parity between users and viewers than the moral tone of the serials might indicate. Instead of merely recreating government scripts of “core socialist values,” they offer pleasure within known scripts and setups that do not require deep engagement with actual moral dilemmas.

A Media World of Their Own: Parody of Urban Media on Kwai

In addition to these morally-driven narrative serials, Kwai is filled with comedy sketches which critique the sociality proposed by mainstream urban Chinese media and instead propose an independent rural media ecology. These sketches do not necessarily match the vision Kwai’s creators have for the platform. In November of 2017, a collaboration between Kwai and the second season of the television reality competition program *Xiju Zongdongyuan* 喜剧总动员 (*Comedy General Mobilization*) (Zhejiang Television, 2016-8) formally promoted comedy sketches on the platform.²³¹ The TV program is similar to *The Voice*, but without the participation of regular people. It focuses on celebrity film actors being trained by professional comedians to perform live comedic sketches and the difficulties of moving between performance

²³¹ The English name I have given here is the program’s own translation of their title.

genres, from film acting to live, on-stage performance. As a program sponsor, Kwai ran a complimentary campaign that asked users to include the hashtag “Kwai Comedian” (#*Kuaishou xijuren*) on their videos throughout the month of November 2017. At the end of the month, between one and three users or teams would be selected by professional judges from among the videos that received the most likes and comments to win a million-yuan investment deal to make “vertical movies” and a potential contract with a top comedy team. The six teams that received the most likes and comments would receive tickets to attend the TV show’s finale.²³² This collaboration and the articles written about it emphasize Kwai as a source of material for professional comedians, reinforcing the idea of the platform as a grassroots base through which the most talented will receive mainstream recognition. One article explains that, “With 85 million daily active users, Kwai is a gold mine of regular people, with a large amount of untapped, star-quality IP resources.”²³³ In this example, Kwai users are likened to primary, natural resources, ready to be excavated and shaped into something of value by those with the professional expertise to recognize comedic potential in its raw form. This hierarchical formation places Kwai users solidly at the lowest rung of the entertainment ladder. Elsewhere, the article further suggests that what these users offer the professional industry is their hard work and connection to the details of everyday life. While comedy sketches on Kwai take a multitude of forms and present a range of content, this section will focus on comedy sketches that explicitly

²³² “Gandao kuaile jiu pai kuaishou 4 yi laotie zhengdang ‘Xijuren’” 感到快乐就拍快手 4 亿老铁争当“喜剧人” [When you’re happy, make a Kwai video: 400 million users compete to be the ‘comedian’] *Qianlongwang yule* 千龙网娱乐 Dec 4, 2017, <http://ent.qianlong.com/2017/1204/2223297.shtml>.

²³³ “Kuaishou bian ‘kuaile jilu guan’ Xiju Zongdongyuan kaiqi babang moshi” 快手变“快乐记录官” 《喜剧总动员》开启霸榜模式 [Kwai Becomes the ‘Official Happiness Record’: *Comedy General Mobilization* Initiates a Record-Dominating Style], *Zhongguo xinwen* 中国新闻 Oct 31, 2017, <http://www.chinanews.com/yl/2017/10-31/8364623.shtml>.

engage with wider media culture to counter the sense of Kwai users as subordinate to the professional mainstream system. Instead, in these videos, Kwai users both expose the hypocrisy of mainstream media formats and poke fun at their own position as rural people left out of mainstream media culture. Paola Voci's work on online video, mentioned briefly previously, offers particular insights into Kwai's parodic forms. Voci's analysis of *egao* videos, a parodic form often linked to Japanese *kuso* culture which thrived in early Internet culture, emphasizes how such videos "open up the packaged uniformity of a mass-circulated product."²³⁴ While these videos do not rise to the level of serious political critique, they do push against the structures of life that the parodied reality television programs project, analyzed at length in the previous chapter.

A team in Guizhou that call themselves the Niu Family Village (*niujiazhuang*) makes videos that exemplify this attitude towards mainstream, urban culture, particularly reality TV. Since mid-2018, one user from the team, Niu Nine *Niu Jiu*, has posted half a dozen serialized comedy sketches that parody reality TV shows, mostly dating shows like *If You Are the One (FCWR)*, but also a series entitled "Rural Voice" that resembles *The Voice of China (Zhongguo Haoshengyin)*, now called *Sing! China*, the PRC's version of the global format *The Voice*. In all of these series, recognizable elements from the program's flashy design are recreated in low-tech forms. The lights that serve to indicate a woman's interest in a male contestant on *FCWR* become plain, white candles. A special, electronic device used to indicate a male contestant's favorite woman becomes a hastily drawn sign on reused cardboard (fig. 8). Instead of being

²³⁴ Voci, 107.

sponsored by a cell phone or beauty product company as *FCWR* has been, Niu Nine's version is sponsored by a stalk of sugar cane.

In addition to the joke of remaking this flashy, urban-centric format into a sloppy, worn, rural version, Niu Jiu's videos also poke fun at their own rural status. When the parody version reaches the point at which *FCWR* would show a video about the contestant's prior romantic experience, an error sound effect plays and the host explains that being from the countryside, the



Figure 18 *FCWR* and Niu Nine's Video

contestant has no romantic experience. The contestant wonders in an internal monologue about which woman to pick, since his family pressured him to participate in the show to find a wife, and in any case, they need the help during the harvest season, overturning the original program's romantic narrative and replacing it with a thoroughly pragmatic understanding of marriage. Niu Nine's parody also skewers the materialistic female contestants, which originally motivated much of the controversy around *FCWR*. In the parody version, the women blatantly blow out their candle because the contestant appears poor, and when they find out his father is the village

chief, the women complain that he should have made that clear earlier and whine for a second chance.

The strongest critiques of the original reality programs arise from added background



Figure 19 "What are the rules of our show?"

information, as opposed to the prior examples that recreate portions of the original programs. For example, towards the end of one of the parodies of *FCWR*, the contestant's failure to make a match is explained through a "backstage video" in black and white that shows the host reminding the women that they cannot leave with any of the men, because the rules of the show (and also the slogan they repeat at a few points during the video) are that "even if you want to make a match, you won't" (fig. 9). The difference between the surface objective of the program and the host's backstage exhortation suggests that these programs lie to their viewers about the show's

fundamental purpose. Similarly, at the end of the "Rural Voice" series, one contestant is expected to win and does, but as soon as the result is announced, the other finalist is angry. Backed up by a group of thugs, he threatens the host with violence to change the result. In this case, talent is much less important than power and connections, again exposing the lie within the structures of the original reality shows.

View Aesthetics and Haptic Rurality

After considering narrative and comedic serials, I turn now to videos that make use of a more direct, view aesthetic, and how these videos and their circulation further emphasize Kwai's

imbrication with rural identity. In many explicitly rural users' videos, overlapping contradictions arise between rural space and self-presentation, between text and image, and between pride and shame. In this section, I focus on young women's videos as examples of this direct address to viewers. *Anyang Xiaoyemao* (Anyang Wild Kitty)'s videos look like many videos on Kwai. As of March 2019, Wild Kitty has 238,000 followers. Most of her videos have views in the low ten thousands, but one of her cooking has been viewed almost five million times and received 4,467 comments. Videos generally last about ten seconds, begin with a phrase that describes and comments on the content of the video, and are accompanied by snippets of popular songs that further signal an emotional response, layer meaning, or appeal to viewers. Text bubbles appear later to request likes and follows. Wild Kitty's videos, like many of their genre on Kwai, are primarily about female display.²³⁵ Women in these videos usually face the camera directly and dance or simply gaze into the lens. Most comments ask if she has a boyfriend, tell her she is beautiful, or propose marriage. Thus, the primary structure of this networked communication remains fixed in extremely gendered ways. But, Wild Kitty adds an explicitly rural element to the pattern. She poses in front of clearly rural scenes: in a pig pen, in a gourd field, with her elderly relative preparing food in front of a stone house, and under a fruit tree. She frames her requests for likes in terms of her rural identity, and one video titles ask viewers, "Is it shameful to be born in the countryside?" The rhetorical question is perhaps better translated as "what's shameful about being rural?" because it anticipates a response that affirms that there's nothing shameful about her identity as a rural person, and viewers leave comments to this effect that emphasize their collective identity as rural people. One comment also mentions how fashionable

²³⁵ As of May 2019, she has since changed her user name to 小野猫 (🌸村花🌸) and deleted some of the videos discussed.

rural people are these days, and then follows up with the sense of security that comes from growing and consuming one's own food. Thus, the question of shame is brought up as an opportunity to affirm the pride of being from the countryside, in the face of larger social emphasis on urbanization.

In one video in which she dances in a pig pen, the text replicates the same function, but in reference to the self as opposed to general rural identity (fig. 10). She dances in a pig



Figure 20 Dancing with Pigs

pen and the video is titled, “I’m very ugly, but I’m happy.” Viewer responses to this statement that implicitly asks them to affirm her beauty are more mixed. Some respond that she’s beautiful or cute, but others focus on details of the shot—joking about how she has scared the pigs behind her or complaining that she is cocky or smug. While collective affirmation of rurality didn’t tend to elicit any negative responses, the emphasis on self did. Wild Kitty doesn’t respond to the comments on her videos, so the conversation that the video starts continues only amongst viewers who very occasionally reply to each other. This individual example may suggest the affordances and limitations offered by a social network that is labeled by media accounts and users themselves as “rural.” The willingness to affirm their collective rural identity seems stronger and more appealing than assertions of individual happiness.

While Valentina Palladino talks about the eating video and live broadcast genre “mukbang” in terms of “realistic escapism,”²³⁶ on Kwai, a user named *Wei mengxiang chufa*—Xiao

²³⁶ Valentina Palladino, “Mukbang and Hauls: The Rise of Super-Indulgent Eating and Shopping Videos,” *Ars Technica*, Apr 29 2016, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2016/04/mukbang-and-hauls-the-rise-of-super-indulgent-eating-and-shopping-videos/>.



Figure 21 Little Fan

Fan (Setting off for dreams-Little Fan) often labels her videos “the poorest muk-bang in the countryside” (*nongcun zuiqiong de chibo*). She asks in video labels, “Is it shameful to eat this?” or references the issue of marriage, labeling some videos “I want to marry a Chinese person,” or “If we get married, you just have to make sure I’m fed.” Little Fan currently has over 600,000 followers and her highest-viewed video has been played almost two million times, though most of her over 200 posts receive between 50,000 and 200,000 views.²³⁷ An article about her videos expresses bewilderment at her food choices; Little Fan often eats large, whole vegetables.²³⁸ Thus, the pleasure of watching Little Fan eat doesn’t seem connected to a positive vicarious experience of overeating, but instead the videos create romanticized images of poverty. Pop songs accompany every video, and Little Fan always takes a bite and looks directly into the camera’s lens with sad eyes, prompting perhaps sympathy or empathy at the difficulties rural people experience (fig. 11). Furthermore, by asking whether what she eats is shameful, she invites viewers to negate the possibility of shame and instead affirm her and what they may share in common.

Another female user’s videos display another variety of view aesthetics. A user who calls herself *Shuangjiang Wazu Ye Nian* (Ye Nian, Shuangjiang Wa Ethnicity), has posted over 350

²³⁷ Setting off for dreams-Little Fan [为梦想出发—小凡]
<https://live.kuaishou.com/u/3x46728a4fvu8pm/3xtet9zhgw8hytu>.

²³⁸“Guniang zicheng shi ‘nongcun zuiqiong chibo,’ ta zheyang chi wanfan, wangyou: kanbudong” 姑娘自称是“农村最穷吃播”，她这样吃晚餐，网友：看不懂 [A young woman calls herself ‘the poorest eater online, internet users can’t understand why she eats dinner like that], *Meiri toutiao* 每日头条, Jan 9, 2019, <https://kknews.cc/zh-cn/news/mjn8j26.html>.

videos, has about 60,000 followers, and most videos have been seen in the low ten thousands, but some near half a million. While most of the videos falls into the muk-bang genre or directly present life in her village, about six months ago, she posted some videos in which she directly gazed at the camera, winked and smiled. While there is nothing overtly sexual about this behavior, some users commented that the video made them uncomfortable. Various forms of visibility are available to Kwai users, and play between the various modes is not uncommon. While Ye Nian has posted various kinds of videos, the dominance of the videos in which she emphasizes rural life and a down-to-earth persona over those that might seem more provocative suggests that, at least in certain contexts, Kwai may valorize different kinds of visibility than most social media platforms.

To more fully describe the sensation of this aesthetic, I turn now to another female rural user, Little Xin 小鑫 (ID: kxjh0321) and a recent video she posted displaying her dirty hands. As of April 2019, Little Xin has posted thirty-one videos, has almost 300,000 followers and most of her videos have been viewed between 50,000 and 200,000 times, though two of her videos have well over a million views. The video I focus is ten seconds long and entitled “Do you want to be friends with this rural girl?” It consists of four shots: it begins on her face, then shifts to a panorama of the mountainous rural area where she is located and presumably resides. From this expansive shot of the land, two close ups of her hands follow, racking in focus as the camera autofocuses from the background to the details of her callused palms and dirt-clogged fingernails. She shows each hand in succession and comments on the video’s subtitle that some people say her hands look like those of a boy. This video, while very short, effectively creates a haptic and sensual connection between her face, the straightforward locus of identity on the platform, to her rural environment, and finally to her hands as evidence of her hard labor, but

even more, as a way to reach out to the viewer through the texture and sense of touch associated with this close-up shot. Viewers connect her face to her environment, and her hands provide evidence of her own intimate connection to the land. Little Xin challenges ideas of delicate femininity through her rural identification and appeals to the viewer through a haptic sense of space, which points to another potential of Kwai's rurality, as outside the strict gendered nature of most social media and able to defy those values through rural alterity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Kwai's rural orientation is less about actually existing rural spaces than about offering a different position within domestic social hierarchies and global new media conventions. Kwai producers and viewers can reject the consumer culture usually enmeshed with achieving and profiting from microcelebrity online and take an irreverent attitude towards the dominant urban media culture of the PRC.

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