

Multimodal Representations of Rural-Urban Divide on Reality TV: The Case of X-Change

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Abstract

China, as the most populous developing nation globally, may exhibit the greatest urban-rural disparity compared to other developing nations. Perspectives on the rural-urban divide persist despite the significant political, economic, and social upheaval that have occurred in Mainland China over the past century. Drawing on Mackay's (2015) multimodal legitimation framework, this study examined how urban and rural were constructed and (de)legitimized by a series of multimodal resources, including visual, verbal, and audio modes. Using a critical discourse analysis perspective through a multimodal legitimation approach, this study explored how *X-Change* portrayed and influenced current Chinese perceptions of reality, with a specific focus on how these programmes depicted China's urban-rural divide. The findings revealed that both the urban and rural were multimodally constructed and (de)legitimized as a paradox. However, this study also found a reproduction of urban hegemonic discourse via the interplay of various semiotic resources and (de)legitimation strategies, suggesting that the urban very much

forms the centre of society in the context of contemporary China. These findings contribute to existing scholarship on the rural-urban divide in Chinese Reality Television (RTV).

Keywords: Multimodal Legitimation, Rural-Urban Divide, China, Chinese Reality Television

1. Introduction

An irritated boy sits beside a skinny older man in front of a crumbling brick house. The older man passes a bowl of water to the boy to quench his thirst. Suddenly, the boy stands up and angrily tosses the bowl on the ground. “Living here is suffering! Countryman and urbanites live differently. Look at the water you gave me, hairs were floating on the water. That's gross!” the boy shouts at the old man. Somewhere in the village, a teenager is madly yelling at a boy in a dirty school uniform for touching his Louis Vuitton bag. “You dirty peasant, how dare you lay your filthy hands on my bag! Do you know how much it costs? You could never afford such a thing!”. These are two scenes taken from *X-Change* from Season 8 (2014). *X-Change* is an edutainment RTV themed on swapping lives produced by China Hunan Mango TV. The show remains one of the most popular and controversial programmes today, even though two decades have passed since its initial airing in 2006. The plot of each season is very similar, in that characters from urban and rural backgrounds are positioned at opposite ends of a scale, effectively illustrating the significant wealth disparity in modern China.

The conceptual equivalence of ‘rural’ and ‘the foundation of China’s society’ was well perceived by scholars (Fei, 1992; Steinmuller, 2011) and it formed the very basis of the Communist Party of China (CCP hereafter) to establish its political legitimacy during the revolutionary era. In the Mao era, Mao considered the peasant class the backbone of the Chinese revolution, which promoted the rural virtue of ‘eating bitterness’ (*Chiku*) to govern its army (Griffiths & Zeuthen, 2014). Although the rural areas provided moral and political legitimacy to the CCP, they bore the brunt of sacrifices in the post-1949 economy, while urban industry played a pivotal role in revitalizing China’s national pride. In light of this, although the rural played a pivotal role in the CCP’s ascent to power, the urban-rural barrier was deemed essential for the self-preservation strategy of an urban-oriented state, whether in China’s centrally planned economy or the post-reform market economy (Wang, 2005).

China's Open-up Policy reshaped the urban-rural dynamic, with urban areas taking on a leading and pioneering position in both economic and cultural advancement. Rural residents were compelled to seek employment in urban areas because rural life could not offer them either a sustainable income or prospects for the future. Large-scale internal migration emerged and a special term was created to describe these people, '*nongmingong*' (migrant worker) (Davin, 1999). Without access to the benefits available to urban *hukou* residents, rural migrants were discriminated as '*mangliu*' (blind, floating people) (Florence, 2006) and "second-class" citizens in urban China (Solinger, 1999). In reaction to the escalating urban-rural divide, China is currently transitioning towards a unified urban-rural economy, where urban and rural development are seamlessly integrated into a single, cohesive economy (Chen et al., 2018).

As a RTV show, the nature of the programme is the realistic representation, and formats, technicians, manifestos and professional values have been striving to show the 'real' and reveal the 'truth' (Biressi, & Nunn, 2005). However, in the context of China, the survival of any RTV show relied on whether its contents were responding to the CCP's political propaganda. Previous research on the rural-urban divide in *X-Change* was mainly conducted from the aspect of cultural and media studies (Wan, 2014; Han, 2016; Lan, 2017; He & Luo, 2017) while a multimodal approach to the show could offer a holistic view on how China's government portrays the rural-urban divide via the interplay among various semiotic resources. Therefore, the aim of this research is to find out how *X-Change* utilizes visual, verbal, and audio semiotic resources to represent the rural-urban divide, and what ideologies *X-Change* draws on to reinforce the rural-urban divide.

2. Media Representation: The Rural-urban Divide as Binary Opposition

Historically, the urban space emerged as places for exchange and consumption, particularly in the west (Nagy, 2020). Benjamin (2004) uses the term 'dreamworlds' to characterize urban areas, a concept that encapsulates both the utopian and surreal dimensions of the experience during the age of contemporary global capitalism. The construction of 'urban dream' consists of the following elements: progressive economy, international/cosmopolitan, architectural achievement, exciting/recreational, shopping, administrative centres and 24-hour city (Schein, 2001).

One of the most famous examples comes from New York City, which has been the object of countless backdrops of movies. Hessler (2022) analysed popular American urban sitcoms in the

1990s, such as *Mad About You*, *Friends*, and *Seinfeld*, and pointed out that urban life is all about transport and sociality, one characterized by vibrancy, affluence, tidiness, and organization. Within China, urban centres represent the zenith of both economic and cultural development, as the culture of consumption, characterized by a keen desire associated with social status, has deeply penetrated every facet of Chinese society through media promotion (Wang & Feng, 2021). Xi'an, an emerging Internet-famous city, is portrayed as a modern metropolis with leisure shopping, youthfulness, and time-travel between dynasties and destinations of international events on TikTok and in local TV tourism promotion videos (ibid).

Meanwhile, under the façade of modern and highly developed cosmopolitan, lies a dystopic 'urban nightmare' (Harrison & Clifford, 2016). Such depiction is similar to Benjamin's (2004) idea of 'urban myths', that beneath the glistening armour of modernity, future progress and glamour, lies moral decline, oppression, stress and violence. In *The Wire: Moral Midgetry*, *Corner Boys* and *React Quotes*, the urban is presented with a distinctive sense of dislocation, with its attendant textures of morality decay and discomfort, where corner boys and drug runners are visible on the street (McNeilly, 2009). In the context of China, the portrayal of 'urban horror' is well echoed with Zhang's (1996) portrayal of urban as 'City of Darkness' and 'City of Disillusion'. This portrayal is clearly reflected in his critique of Shanghai as a 'modern city', where he evaluates the ways urban perception and experiences are depicted in the narratives: "*cut across a wide spectrum: from the initial fascination, intoxication, exuberance . . . through shock, repugnance, resentment ... to alienation, isolation incarceration . . . and frustration, disillusionment, and desperation* (p. 177)" in the analysis of the film *Yasui Qian*.

When compared to urban settings, rural areas are commonly seen as more 'natural' and this rural quality is generally held in high regard, serving as the moral cornerstone of rural inhabitants and frequently considered their primary asset (Bell, 2006). Bunce (1994, p. 64) examined the rural depicted in Britain's BBC radio and television programmes as both "a showcase of pleasurable lifestyles" and "a place where all social classes show mutual tolerance and live harmoniously together". Echoing the western idea of 'rural idyll', rural is considered as the soil of China's society and such idea is commonly found in films and television shows promoting the rural life. In China, the rise of rural microcelebrities (vloggers) even took the idyllicized display of rural to the public realm, showing picturesque natural surroundings, and enjoyable outdoor activities (Li, 2020; Zou, 2022).

On the flip side, there is the concept of the ‘rural dull’ (Haugen and Villa, 2005; Lægran, 2002), and in more extreme cases, the ‘rural horror’ (Bell, 1997). In ‘rural horror’, the rural represents extreme otherness, where rural citizens play the role of murderers or monsters, or both, whereas urban citizens are portrayed as victims and heroes (ibid.). Such concept is widely utilized in Hollywood horror movies, such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, where psychopathic serial killers are killing people in rural wasteland (Cartwright, 2021). In the context of China, such concept of anti-‘rural idyll’ or ‘rural horror’ is found in newspapers discussing rural migrants, who are portrayed as agriculturalists and manual labourers and are culturally behind the times (Lei, 2003). Chu et al. (2021) conducted a research study centered around a cohort of female rural migrant workers in the 10-episode drama series. Their analysis revealed that film and TV productions centered around migrant workers contributed to the perpetuation of prejudice directed towards this disadvantaged community. These programmes frequently disparaged the mindset of Chinese rural *hukou* holders and their rural lifestyle. This is achieved through the amplification of the shortcomings of the migrant workers, while depicting the rural areas as locations from which they must escape and presenting the city as their only possible source of salvation.

3. Multimodal Legitimation Analysis

The concept of multimodality, as delineated by Kress (2008), pertains to the utilization of various modes in the construction of meaning within representation and communication. Meanwhile, legitimation encompasses any discourse or argument that explains, proves, acknowledges a particular form of social conduct or behaviour (van Dijk, 1998). Van Leeuwen (2007) emphasizes the importance of adopting a multimodal approach when analysing legitimation, as it extends beyond language to encompass various non-verbal resources. In this case, RTV shows, deeply rooted in multimodality, requires analysis that extends beyond language into other modes so that the analysis could provide more holistic investigation into the underlying ideology.

At a larger scale, the current study adopts a qualitative discourse analytical approach that draws on from social semiotics (van Leeuwen, 2006, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2012) and legitimation study (van Leeuwen, 2007a, 2007b and Van Dijk, 2006). To be more precise, this study employs Mackay’s (2015) multimodal legitimation framework to comprehensively analyse the portrayal of the rural-urban divide within the media text. Mackay’s framework comprises six

levels, namely: multimodal resources, pragma-strategic level, justificatory schema, legitimation as a process, legitimation as a quality and discourse-historical moral evaluation (see Table 1).

Table 1. Multimodal Legitimation Framework by Mackay (2015)

First layer: Multimodal Resources	Modes, Affordances, Contextual Demands, Cultural Context, Modal Hierarchy, Temporal Feature
Second layer: Pragma-strategic Level	General Strategy, Macro-speech Acts, Topic Selection, Supporting Internal Coherence, Semiotic Lexicon, Foregrounding/Backgrounding, Rhetoric Figures, Dexis, Emotional Coercion
Third layer: Justificatory Schema (van Leeuwen, 2008)	Legitimation: Authority, Moral evaluation, Rationalization, Mythopoesis
Fourth layer: Legitimation as a Process	Soft \longleftrightarrow Hard A spectrum measuring the challenges posted to the meaning of 'legitimate'
Fifth layer: Legitimation as a Quality	Legitimate legitimation \longleftrightarrow Illegitimate legitimation A spectrum measuring the match between legitimacy possessed (by institutional actor) and the meaning of legitimation (to the public)
Six layer: Discourse-historical Moral Evaluation	Investigation into underlying moral status of what is presented (and interpreted) as natural, commonsense, and automatic

Each layer of Mackay's framework (as mentioned earlier) can independently serve as a valuable component in multimodal research because each layer directs its attention to a distinct aspect of legitimation (ibid). The framework's effectiveness lies in its capacity to encompass the various modes found in intricate text types like reality television shows (RTVs). Mackay's (ibid) six-layer analytical framework is structured in a top-to-bottom manner, designed to represent a shift from practical application to theoretical exploration, progressing from the pragmatic and hands-on aspects to the explanatory and fundamental ideologies. As the foci of current study is to only identify how *X- Change* utilizes visual, verbal and audio semiotic resources to represent the rural-urban divide, the first three layers of Mackay's (2015) analytical framework was utilized for illustrative purpose based on the instances used in the analysis part. The explanation of each item of Mackay's first three layers is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Explanations on Each Item of Mackay’s First Three Layers

<p>First Layer: Multimodal Resources</p>	<p>Modes: Any kind of resource for making meaning, such as static and/or moving images, writing, layout, music, gestures, and speech</p> <p>Affordances: How meaning-making is achieved through various modes and linked to the social purposes for a specific context</p> <p>Contextual demands: Technological limitation, such as the availability of public accession to the program or the financial constraints placed on the program campaign</p> <p>Cultural context: Sociocultural background and expectations that contribute to the creation of the program</p> <p>Modal hierarchy: The effect of hierarchy of different modes on information conveyance and emotional effect</p> <p>Temporal features: Program’s “shelf-life” or production duration, and temporal sequencing within the program that impact the plot and chronology of the story</p>
<p>Second Layer: Pragma-strategic Level</p>	<p>General strategy: The strategy employed in presenting a positive self-image while concurrently portraying a negative image of others (van Dijk, 2006)</p> <p>Macro-speech act: The examination of both positive acts, referred to as ‘good’ acts, and negative acts, referred to as ‘bad’ acts, such as accusation, defence, and mockery</p> <p>Topic selection: Topic selection identifies the undercurrents that reveal other topics hidden under the main ones.</p> <p>Supporting internal coherence: Various modes that supports macro-speech acts</p> <p>Semiotic lexicon: The strategies used for accentuating the negative actions of the others while downplaying our own, as well as diminishing the positive actions of others and highlighting our own</p> <p>Foregrounding/backgrounding: The strategic that involves utilizing different semiotic modes to either emphasize or de-emphasize agency</p> <p>Rhetorical figures: The application of rhetorical strategies such as hyperbole, oxymoron, metonymies, or metaphors to construct both positive and negative meanings</p> <p>Deixis: Deixis plays a crucial role in establishing temporal and spatial proximity or distance, serving as an effective technique to guide audiences in adopting a particular stance that aligns with the producers’ rhetorical intentions</p> <p>Emotional coercion: An emotive strategy that helps to realise (de)legitimation</p>
<p>Third Layer: Justificatory Schema (van Leeuwen, 2008)</p>	<p>Authority legitimation: Legitimation occurs through tradition, custom, law, or individuals with institutional authority</p> <p>Moral legitimation: Legitimation through indirect reference to moral frameworks</p> <p>Rationalisation legitimation: Legitimation through society's constructed knowledge and the purposes of institutionalized social action</p> <p>Mythopoesis: Legitimation through narratives that reward legitimate actions and penalize non-legitimate ones</p>

4. Methodology

In this paper, episodes 13 to 18 were selected as the data to examine the rural-urban divide in China. The synopsis of scenes and the characters involved are presented in Table 3¹.

Table 3. Synopsis of Scenes Selected for Analysis

Scene	Focus of the Scene
1 (00:02:03-00:04:26)	Overview on the urban space in the nighttime
2 (00:00:00-00:04:47)	Introduction to the rural character- Tao. The camera gave an overview on the scenery of the rural. Tao was born in a poor family. Nevertheless, Tao still held an upbeat attitude towards the poverty life and wished to realize self-improvement in the urban
3 (00:00:00-00:04:42)	Introduction to the second urban character- Sun. Sun returned China from Canada during summer vacation. He has contradictory opinions with his parents about whether staying in China for future development. Their different opinions finally escalated into a heated argument.
4 (00:00:00-00:01:13)	Three of the urban characters started to participate in some labor-related work to help Tao's family. Qi, as the last one to arrive in the rural, complained a lot to the camera about the living conditions.
5 (00:02:19-00:02:40)	Tao's father returned home and reunited with his family.

In conducting this research, the focus was on examining the rural-urban divide phenomenon in China. The selection of the dataset was guided by specific criteria that served as the rationale for its inclusion. Firstly, the chosen dataset needed to accurately represent the rural-urban divide in China. Secondly, it had to encompass content featuring a two-way exchange, meaning instances where rural protagonists visited the city and urban protagonists ventured into rural areas. Notably, episodes of *X-Change* that featured other types of exchange, such as one-way exchange or parent-child exchange were excluded from the dataset to align with the research objectives. Lastly, the dataset needed to be recent, containing content from the latest five years to ensure its relevance and currency. Consequently, episodes 13 to 18 from season 18 (2019) emerged as the primary data sources due to their status as the most up-to-date episodes during the data collection period. In the chosen dataset, each episode lasted approximately 40 minutes.

In addressing ethics, the media data employed in the study fall within the scope of fair use since Hunan Mango TV allows the reproduction of any films or sound recordings for non-profit research purposes. The data set was downloaded and extracted from Season 18 of *X-Change* of

Hunan Mango TV (<https://www.mgtv.com>). The voice-over, subtitles and verbal conversations between the urban and rural characters were translated and transcribed by the first author and validated by another Chinese translator. In light of the qualitative research questions in this study, purposive sampling was employed to select units of analysis based on the researcher's judgement, ensuring that they were representative of the study's focus and objectives (Babbie, 2010). Five scenes spanning episodes 13 through 18 were meticulously selected for their capacity to serve as representations of the rural-urban divide through verbal, visual, and audio semiotic resources.

4. Results

The representation of the urban and rural will be discussed separately as these two settings are often presented as separate entities on *X-Change*. This section examines the verbal, visual and audio semiotic resources that construed and (de)legitimised the fluid and complex duality of the urban as two binary oppositions: a place epitomises a 'dreamland' and 'nightmare', while the rural is presented as 'rural idyll' and 'rural anti-idyll'.

4.1 Urban: A Paradox Where 'Urban Dream' and 'Urban Nightmare' Meets

The depiction of the urban as a dichotomy between the 'urban dream' and the 'urban nightmare' within *X-Change* is established through the introduction of the main characters and their surroundings in Scenes 1 and 3. The concept of 'urban dream' is legitimized via the depiction of skyscrapers, office buildings and shopping malls (Figure 1), a sign of consumerism as a central feature of urbanism and capitalist globalization (Lim & Angers, 2024). In Scene 1, the camera depicted the commercial areas of Changsha City in long shot, where fancy shopping mall is surrounded by several tall office buildings from a low angle. Such portrayal visually makes the viewers 'look up to' the bustling and enchanting modern world only exists in the 'urban dream'. Foregrounded is a shot of multiple vehicles captured in long exposure, leaving a stunning tail-light trails. By applying this photography technique, the camera intentionally highlights the brightness of the shopping malls in the background and thus making the shopping malls the most salient object in the dark scene. Altogether, the visual interplay between the light and the shadow, accompanied with the sounds from the transportation thus rendering a first impression of the urban area: A modern metropolitan with intense life rhythms.



Figure 1. Shopping-mall in the Urban

The construction of ‘urban dream’ or simply a place where dreams are realized heavily depend both on the visual and verbal semiotic resources, especially through the usage of rhetorical figures. Figure 2 from Scene 2 shows Tao’s home town in bird’s eye view, where the lush forest and crystal river meet under the sunset. However, such picturesque scenery is instantly disrupted and de-legitimized by the comic super text floating on the top right side of the screen: ‘*Hope is outside the mountain*’ highlighted in bold Chinese characters. Metonymy is utilized here to associate the urban area with the notion of ‘hope’, where Tao’s dream of finding her self-worth and self-actualization could come true. Echoing van Dijk’s (2006) notion of positive self-presentation and negative ‘other-presentation’, the idea of ‘urban’ is pushed to the foreground by highlighting positive words ‘hope’ for signifying the urban. Meanwhile, the term ‘mountain’ is de-legitimized as a negative term for the ‘other’ rural visually and verbally, and a place lack of ‘hope’. In this regard, the show purposefully legitimizes the rural-urban divide via the usage of rhetorical figures.



Figure 2. Tao's Hometown in Bird Eye View

The notion of the 'urban nightmare' is significantly bolstered by visual elements, exemplified by the frequent depiction of darkness as a backdrop in the introduction of urban characters. In stark contrast to light, darkness frequently embodies oppression, death or settings tinged with sadness and melancholy (Greimas, 1987; Chartier et al., 2021). Scene 4 introduces the third urban character Qi, where he is presented verbally, visually, and audibly as a stressed teenager. The unfolding scene is accompanied by sombre background music as the camera captures Qi running along an empty pedestrian bridge at night, juxtaposed with a voice-over narration:

The expectation that Qi's parents place on Zhenyuan has become an invisible shackle, which makes him overwhelmed by pressure all the time, and unable to breathe.

Here, a verbal metaphor is again utilised, describing the expectations that Qi's parents placed on him as an 'invisible shackle' that stops him from moving forward. The background image is a pedestrian bridge made of steel in muted and darker shades; such a setting is usually associated with negative feelings of heavy weights and the cold (Abousnougá & Machin, 2013). Accordingly, the ideology behind the meaning-making via the background material and colour choices reinforces the 'pressure' that Qi wants to escape from (Qi running on the pedestrian bridge implies that he wants to escape from the pressure his parents placed on him). To further illustrate how stressful Qi is, the camera then shows him sitting on a bench with his face in his hands. His body language, manifested through this action, implying that he is dealing with great anxiety and pressure. Here, Qi is captured from across a long distance, which acts as an invisible barrier

between the viewer and object (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In addition, his face is covered by his hands so that he makes no (direct) eye contact with the viewers. Even though his body language reveals his feelings of depression and anxiety, the viewers are visually pulled away and prevented from engaging with his mental state. In Qi's introduction, the voice-over is the most salient verbal semiotic resources in terms of information-giving—that Qi is under great pressure. Such a depressing and oppressive mood was legitimised via the frequent utilisation of rhetoric figures. In Qi's case, his parents' expectations are metaphorically referred to as an invisible shackle, causing him to be surrounded by pressure and 'unable to breathe' all the time. The solemn and melancholic background music helps further enhance the effect of the 'urban nightmare'. The visual mode here, such as Qi's body gestures (lowering his face into his hands), represents the emotional evocation of stress and oppression.

The construction of the 'urban nightmare' is additionally depicted as the moral decline of urban characters due to their disobedience of Chinese traditional culture. This representation is further legitimized through the conflicts between the urban characters and their parents. Taking the second urban character, Sun as an example: In Scene 3, Sun undergoes de-legitimization through accusations, manifested as a macro-speech act from his parents, portraying him as an irresponsible and spoiled teenager unable to endure hardship. Sun's conflict with his parents stems from his decision to drop out of secondary high school in Canada and return to China, which his parents perceive as irresponsible, believing he cannot endure the hardships of studying abroad. Such perception is legitimized through in an individual interview where Sun's mother further legitimized her accusation towards Sun that:

.....In fact, it is necessary for kids to endure hardship. I'm not being cruel; I just think it is really necessary. I want to know whether my son is suffering from psychological problems, or he is too spoiled at home, which makes him not being able to stand even just a little setback.

Similar macro-speech acts are also employed by Sun's father, who delegitimizes Sun as a 'bad kid'. Confronted with his parents' negative evaluation, intense music is played in the background as Sun retorts to his father's comment, saying, 'You are not a good man neither.' In this instance, the term 'good man' (*Hao dong xi*), a colloquial term carrying a degrading connotation, is employed by Sun as a deixis to refer to his father. In this case, Sun's personality is de-legitimized not only by Sun's mother's personal authority but also by the authority of tradition and conformity, though this is not explicitly implied in statements from the urban characters'

parents. These include the obligation to follow the ‘tradition’ of Chinese Confucianism of filial piety (respecting the parents) and the ‘value’ of socialism with Chinese characteristics of experiencing hardship. In the case of *X-Change*, by de-legitimizing Sun’s behaviours via referring to van Leeuwen’s (2008) legitimation of authority, the show suggests that urban characters mirror another aspect of the ‘urban nightmare’, highlighting the moral decline faced by contemporary China as a result of rapid urbanization and globalization.

4.2 Rural: A Paradox Where ‘Rural Idyll’ and ‘Rural- Anti Idyll’ Meet

In contrast to the rapid pace and oppressive atmosphere of the urban setting, the first impression of the rural settings to the audiences is filled with tranquillity and relaxation. The introduction to Tao’s story begins with an aerial filming of Tao’s hometown, a tiny village surrounded by limitless mountains in Scene 2. As the camera travels through the cloud, a crystal-clear river appears where a bamboo raft floats on the centre. The bamboo raft is rowing across the river in slow motion (Figure 3). Although lacking in dialogue, the accompanied traditional Chinese folk song serves as the most prominent semiotic resource, secondary to the visual image for conveying information. According to van Leeuwen (1999), sound and music hold significant importance alongside language and visual images in digital texts. They are increasingly used as a means of representation rather than interaction. For instance, they can symbolize the fundamental characteristics of characters, settings, and so on. In this instance, the traditional Chinese folk song, performed with flute and drum, featuring a lively tempo and a joyfully ascending melody, carries the potential to symbolize the values of untouched rural life, considered foundational to Chinese society. This melody immediately prompts viewers to conjure a nostalgic emotion towards an idealized rural lifestyle marked by rustic serenity.



Figure 3. Introduction to Tao's Hometown

In the next scene, a turning point in the peaceful atmosphere occurs as the joyful atmospheric music is suddenly interrupted by Tao's younger brother speaking to the camera about their mother's abandonment of him and his sister at an early age, while their father has to work far away from home to support the family. Contrary to harbouring resentment, neither Tao nor Tao's younger brother ever hold disdain for their father due to his lack of parental presence. When questioned about their feelings towards their father as a migrant worker, a close-up shot focuses on Tao's younger brother (Figure 4) with his tears streaming down his face: *"I feel very sad because my father is living a hard life. He has to pay both the debt and our school fees. He shoulders all the responsibilities by himself. It breaks my heart."* By employing a close-up shot of Tao's younger brother's facial expression, the show aims to establish an interpersonal connection between him and the viewers, engaging them in his heartbroken moment. Facing the viewers from a frontal angle, though with a lack of contact with the viewers, the tears streaming down from Tao's younger brother's face have formed a powerful emotional trigger. In this context, the visual depiction of the social distance between Tao's younger brother and the viewers serves as a tool for emotional coercion. Its aim is to elicit sympathy towards Tao's family and endorse the portrayal of a harmonious parent-child relationship within Tao's family, highlighting the traditional Confucian concept of filial piety, which emphasizes empathy and gratitude towards parents for their sacrifices for the children and the family. This portrayal contrasted with the more intricate and multifaceted urban landscape, positions it as an alternative to urban aspirations, something to be sought after (Bell, 2006).



Figure 4. Close Shot on Tao's Younger Brother

Despite the idyllic portrayal of rural settings and the positive depiction of rural characters as conservators of traditional Chinese values, an anti-idyllic view of the rural emerges, showcasing poverty, dullness, and culturally lagging. This view is represented and legitimized through the *salience* of the urban and rural characters respectively.



Figure 5. Comparisons on the Visual Salience between the Urban and Rural Characters

In Scene 5 (Figure 5), the camera shows three urban characters and Tao's father walking on the country road, accompanied with joyful electronic dance music playing in the background, as if they are walking for a runway show. The three urban characters - Zhang, Sun, and Qi - are observed walking in the centre of the road, with Tao's father walking on the rightmost side. According to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), the central composition normally plays a more

important role in an image. As a result, the positioning of three urban characters-Zhang, Sun, and Qi-in the middle of this photograph implies that they are portrayed as the core of the information, to which all other parts are submissive in some way. Meanwhile, Tao's father, positioned on the rightmost side of the image, is considered as the 'Margins' - an ancillary and dependent element, visually portrayed as the 'Otherness' compared to the urban characters, his position in the frame making him less salient in terms of informational value as he is placed on the scene's margin. The camera constantly switches between the close shot on Zhang, Sun, and Qi, who directly address viewers with their look, while gesticulating and posing like supermodels confidently. On the very contrary, when the camera switches to Tao's father's side, he smiles awkwardly and avoids making eye contact with the viewers. This portrayal relegates him to a mere subject to the viewer's gaze, becoming as a spectacle for viewers' dispassionate scrutiny (van Leeuwen, 2008). The colours assigned to the attributes of both urban and rural characters not only contribute to the visual composition but also serve to reinforce the hierarchies of salience within the narrative. Three urban characters prefer using colour contrast in their choice of clothing to express their sense of fashion and aesthetic. For example, Sun and Qi prefer striking and rich saturated colours such as bright orange and neon pink. Such high saturation gives off a positive, exuberant, and adventurous feeling (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Instead, Tao's father's clothing colour scheme leans more towards muted, monotone, and low-saturation colours. The low-saturation colours represented by Tao's father's clothing semiotics give out a sense of dullness and moodiness (ibid).

The pejorative discourse of 'rural anti-idyll' is also reproduced and legitimized in urban characters' initial reaction to the rural during the exchange phase. As requested by the production team, each urban characters are required to assist the rural characters with agricultural-related works. As three urban characters begin with the first task, Sun and Qi are terrified by how dirty the rural environment is. The constant shocking sound effect occurs each time Sun or Qi is spooked by the insects, though providing an entertainment effect to some extent, still presents the notion of 'rural anti-idyll' where the primal living condition becomes intolerable for the urban characters. In Scene 4, Qi is found gesticulating dramatically as he is scared by an insect flying around him. Here, a comic super text written in bold: "*Qi is losing his nerve*" is attached next to Qi's image, serving as an information-giving element to legitimize the notion of 'rural-anti-idyll'. Verbal semiotic resources- Qi's spoken words further legitimizes his fear towards such 'rural anti-idyll' as he says: "*All of a sudden there appeared something, like spider. I don't know what it is, but it is*

very sticky and disgusting. That makes me very terrified". In this context, two negative evaluative adjectives - 'sticky' and 'disgusting' - are applied to Qi's situation alongside visual images, further reinforcing the negative depiction of the 'rural anti-idyll'.

X-Change employs semiotic modes in differing prominence (modal hierarchy) and (de)legitimation strategies to present the urban and the rural settings as binary opposition (Lin et al, in press). Furthermore, the pragma-strategic resources in the selected scenes also contribute to the evaluative framing of *X-Change*'s underlying ideology, which will be discussed in the next section.

5. Discussion

X-Change effectively establishes the contrasting dichotomy between the urban and rural settings through the characterization of the four main protagonists. The urban landscape, symbolizing wealth and prosperity, is visually depicted as a dark and oppressive environment. This representation is personified by urban characters, portraying as stressful teenagers who are disobeyers of Chinese traditional virtues. On the contrary, through cinematography showcasing the rural landscape and Tao's family, despite its poverty, the portrayal is one of harmony, with the rural characters depicted as a preserver of Chinese traditional virtues such as filial piety.

The multimodal semiotic resources in Section 4.1 discussed, provide a contradictory image of both urban and rural images throughout the six episodes of *X-Change*: On one hand, the modern metropolitan displays a network of opportunities, a window onto the world and eventually, a place where one's dream could be realized (Benjamin, 2004; Hessler, 2022). It is mainly achieved through the visual portrayal of consumerism (skyscrapers, office building, and shopping mall) as a sign of 'urban dream' and further legitimized through the pragma strategic elements (rhetorical figures). On the other hand, the urban space is seen as imposing oppression. The use of darkness (colour) establishes a connection with the theme of the 'urban nightmare' and it is visually represented by the introduction to urban character- Sun and Qi. The third layer of Mackay's (2015) framework (van Leeuwen's (de)legitimation strategies) is utilized as verbal semiotic resources to negatively evaluate his undesirable personality and legitimized him as problem teenagers who disrupt the harmony of family. The interplay between various semiotic components delineates the fact that the urban is presented as a paradox in that the urban is the very embodiment of the contradictory experiences of modernity, of 'dream world' and 'nightmare'.

The depiction of the ‘urban nightmare’ is grounded in the moral dilemma that arose from the sudden shift in values within Chinese society that began in the 1980s. This transition occurred from the Maoist-communist ethos of complete selflessness and self-sacrifice to a morality with a stronger emphasis on individualism, rights, and personal development. (Kleiman et al, 2011). Similar results are yielded in current analysis that the urban settings epitomize a sense of anonymity, oppression and decay in traditional Chinese values, such as respecting the elders and obeying the instructions of parents are lost under the backdrop of fast urbanization in China.

As the opposition to the urban, the rural is represented according to ‘rural idyll’ as simple, steady, and all about family harmony. Such idea of ‘rural idyll’ is legitimized mainly relies on visual and audio semiotic resources, where there is frequent depiction of rural landscape with vast blue sky in the daytime, land covered by immense mountains and lush forest as well as crystal river. Despite the fact that Tao’s family is steep in poverty, each of the individual relies on each other for mutual support, such representations of familial relationship not only echoes well with desirable traditional Confucianism values, but also legitimizes the notion of ‘rural idyll’ of the rural society as a closely knit community (Woods, 2011). On the other hand, the rural is represented as ‘rural anti-idyll’ with the plague of poverty and lack of excitement. Such representation can be noticed in the comparisons of clothing semiotics between urban and rural characters. The integration of different semiotic modes also reflect the prejudicial discourse of Chinese peasant: poor taste, outdated clothes, and the opposition of urbanities (Lei, 2003). Moreover, the notion of ‘rural anti-idyll’ is further legitimized by urban characters’ reaction to the rural living condition, with negative verbal evaluation and supertexts such as ‘disgusting’, ‘losing one’s nerve’, and ‘terrifying’.

Media representation is viewed as a key discursive site where hegemonic power relations and social orders are contested, reproduced, and naturalised (Fairclough, 1992, Hall, 1997). The media representation of the rural-urban divide in *X-Change* mirrors the ongoing favouritism towards urban areas over rural ones in the context of China. On the one hand, the rural represents the socialist ideal of strong and communal communities where desirable traditional Chinese values are upheld. On the other hand, it is associated with the stark truth of destitution and underdevelopment (Steinbecka, 2011). Considering these conflicting media depictions, we assert that the ‘rural idyll’ is employed to accrue symbolic power (Lin et al, in press). The perceived ‘rural idyll’ has long been connected to the guardian of tradition national identity (Shucksmith et

al, 2012). It contrasts with the more dynamic and intricate urban landscape, serving as an alternative ‘*Other*’ to the urban, representing something desirable and worth aspiring to (Bell, 2006).

Following China’s transition from a planned to a market-oriented economy, and under the impact of capitalism globalization and cosmopolitanism, urban and the associated lifestyle which is heavily relied on material wealth has become the new hegemony in modern China. However, following the economic transition is the severe moral decline in the urban areas, represented by radical institutional changes that promote individualistic action instead of collectivist action, utilitarian (pragmatic) action instead of ethical action, in contradiction with the previously shared understanding of an individual’s responsibility to their society and social justice (Döring, 2003). In this instance, the promotion and media representation of rural nostalgia (*Xiangchou*), showcasing peaceful scenery and characters as custodians of Chinese traditional values, have been employed to mitigate the rural-urban divide.

However, the six selected episodes are embedded in similar storyline like many of the previous episodes, in that the urban characters experience the hardships and poverty from the rural counterparts while the rural character broadens their horizon and peek at the potential good life in the urban. As many of the previous Chinese researchers pointed out, the exchange experiences seem to benefit the urban characters instead of the rural ones (Wan, 2014; Han, 2016; Lan, 2017; He & Luo, 2017). Similarly, the results gained from the abovementioned research are in line with current analysis in that the underlying assumption of the swapping experience is that the urban spaces and the urbanization signify a better life.

6. Conclusion

Through the application of multimodal legitimation analysis, this study identifies the phenomenon of rural-urban divide via the interplay among verbal, visual and audio semiotic resources and a series of (de)legitimation strategies within the context of popular contemporary China RTV show *X-Change*.

The analysis reveals that both the urban and the rural are constructed multimodally and (de)legitimized as a paradox. On one hand, the urban is represented as economically and culturally advanced places and therefore legitimized as a place encouraging individuals to chase their dreams. On the other hand, such advancement in terms of economic and culture also leads to the

moral crisis, represented by the multimodal construction of urban characters as problem and spoiled teenagers who lack traditional Chinese values. However, discourse of urban-rural hierarchy is also reproduced and legitimized in the multimodal representation of the notion of ‘rural anti-idyll’ where the rural is represented as culturally and economically backward. In this case, the rural-urban divide is rather reduced, but further widened by the media.

The current study adds on to the existing literature on the multimodal representations of China’s rural-urban divide in the RTV programmes by means of a series of (de)legitimation strategies. As the largest developing country in the world, the phenomenon of rural-urban divide is hindering the future development of the country and yet its momentum is unstoppable. It is noteworthy that many Chinese still view the rural-urban divide in the same manner, despite the profound political, economic, and social upheaval that has occurred in Mainland China over the past century. As mentioned before, the rural-urban divide in *X-Change* has received a wide range of academic interest from a variety of fields in media, sociology, economy and cultural studies (Wan, 2014; Han, 2016; Lan, 2017; He & Luo, 2017), but the presence of linguistics studies remains scarce. The results gained from current study add on to how Chinese entertainment media (in this study, RTV) directs and shapes the audiences’ perceptions towards the representations of urban and rural characters and spaces.

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(2) Hunan Mango Television is a video streaming platform under Hunan Television, a state-owned company. Season 18 of X-Change is aired online, making it subject to the aforementioned regulations.

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