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Urban-Rural Divided post-Mao China**

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Countryside Fantasy in the Context of Urban-Rural Divided post-Mao China¹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on an urban-rural experimental reality television show, The Exchange Programme. Within the context of the contradictions and struggles between capitalism and socialism currently faced by the Chinese government, I argue the programme's representation of the urban youth allegorically reveals the changing "hybridity" of Chinese cities, with the city becoming a battle field, a "third space" of culture and discourse, while the countryside acts as the nation's "original culture." In addition, applying Žižek's theory on ideology, I argue that the programme actually suggests the existence of a socialist "ideological fantasy," which structures the social reality and proves that the socialist ideology is an ideology in-and-for-itself. It is the force regulating the ruthless market at an unconscious level in an era of economic globalization.

Keywords: countryside, ideological fantasy, ideology in-and-for itself, original culture, The Exchange Programme

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Introduction

In Slavoj Žižek's theory, the traditional concept of ideology is expanded and now includes three continents: "ideology in-itself" as a complex of explicit, articulated ideas; "ideology for-itself" which refers to the material existence of ideology and is epitomised by ISA;² and "ideology in-and-for itself" which refers to "the elusive network of implicit, quasi-"spontaneous" presuppositions and attitudes that form an irreducible moment of the reproduction of "non-ideological" (economic, legal, political, sexual ...) practices" (1994, p. 14). By re-reading Marx from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Žižek clarifies that commodity fetishism is in fact an ideology in-and-for itself, with the unconscious illusion of commodity as its implicit, quasi-spontaneous presupposition. It is this very illusion that controls the act of commodity exchange. People, therefore, "are fetishists in practice, not in theory" (2008a, p. 28). Žižek argues that this overlooked, unconscious illusion is the "ideological fantasy" (2008a, p. 30) which structures our social reality and its subjects. Further, "the extra-ideological coercion of the market is an ideological gesture par excellence" (1994, p. 14). Therefore, we are far from being a post ideological society. On the contrary, ideology is extremely powerful in this era of global marketization. Accordingly, I ask, if there is a different ideological fantasy in urban-rural divided post-Mao China? If so, then the socialist ideology is not limited to ideology in-itself--composed of discourses, representations, narrations and ideas regarding the so-called "socialist values"--it is an ideology in-and-for itself. If so, then this socialist ideology in-and-for itself is a force resisting and balancing the downside of marketism at the same level of the unconscious in an era of economic globalization. This paper, therefore, attempts to answer this question by ideologically reading an urban-rural experimental reality television, *The Exchange Programme (TEP)*.

For better understanding the representation and intervention of *TEP*, it is important to highlight the specific nature of the urban-rural divide within this study. China is a socialist nation which is adopting and adapting to a market economic system. Although we may celebrate the great achievements of the market-oriented Open Reform over the last 38 years, we cannot neglect the most serious social problems, particularly the urban-rural divide. Scholars generally agree that China has long adopted a development strategy that is biased against the peasants' interests (Jean C. Oi, 1993). Firstly, it was through the toils of peasantry, echoing Stalinism, that China gained resources to support its industrialisation. As Chen and Wu (2006) argue, the original capital accumulation for Chinese national industrialisation came from agriculture via policies such as "state monopolisation for purchase and marketing" and "price scissors."³ Secondly, *The Household Register Regulation of PRC*, passed in 1958,

² Ideological State Apparatuses.

³ Price scissor stipulates that, in the exchange of industrial products for agricultural products, industrial products are sold to farmers with a price higher than the real value. Meanwhile, agricultural products are sold to the state with prices far lower than the market prices. It was applied under the state's obligatory administration.

indicates the formation of a Chinese internal migration system with strict restrictions on rural-urban migration at the core.⁴ Moreover, the urban-rural dichotomized system based on the Household Registered Residence System differentiates the rights of urban residents from that of rural residents in many aspects, including taxation, labor insurance and benefits, numerous subsidies, housing, grain supply, children's education, medical care, pension, employment, marriage, conscription, etc (Chen & Wu, 2006). Further, Tao Ran and Liu Mingxing (2005) argue that, at least after the 1990s, Chinese farmers have paid a significantly higher share of their income in the form of direct taxes and fees compared to their urban counterparts, which includes township and village social infrastructure apportionments, public service expenses, local government employee subsidies, schooling, medical care, and the like.⁵ As the local government relies much more on the farmers to pay the local teachers' salary and school maintenance by means of education added fees and apportionments, many rural children have to drop out of school because their family cannot afford the costs.

The resulting impoverishment, under-development and lowered productivity incentives lead the peasant-workers to seek jobs in cities. Rural-to-urban migration is regarded as a measure to alleviate poverty. By 2006, China has a population of 1.3 billion people, 730 million of whom are farmers.⁶ Since the 1990s, owing to a fast-growing urban economy and to the concurrent relaxation of restrictions, labor mobility has increased very rapidly. The figure of labor migrants from rural to urban areas stood at 127 million by the end of 2005, reached 262 million in 2012.⁷ In many rural families, both parents go out to work in the city, only the children and elders are left in the countryside. These so-called "left-behind children" have to bear the responsibility of household chores as well as taking care of siblings and their elders, whilst their parents rarely return home from their efforts to earn money. This phenomenon has become a heated social issue. In *TEP*, most of the rural youth participants come from such families.

On the other hand, most urban youth participants chosen by *TEP* come from wealthy urban families, because the material prosperity represents the achievement of urbanisation and modernisation. By representing the affluent urban families, *TEP* eulogises the urban economic achievement. However, the achievement of market-driven urbanisation comes at a cost; for instance, the increasingly enlarged economic disparity between urban and rural

⁴ The Standing Committee of the 1st National People's Congress passed in the 91st meeting, *The Household Register Regulation of PRC*, on 9th January 1958, Paragraph 2 of Article 10 puts it: Citizens who move from the rural areas to the urban areas must hold employment contracts issued by the urban labor departments or units, urban school's admission letters or relocation permission issued by the urban residence registration authorities. They are also required to report to the domicile household registration authorities and apply for relocation procedures.

⁵ According to *China Labor Watch* (18 November 2004), "rural governments get almost no support from wealthier areas. They tax local farmers and impose endless fees to finance schools, hospitals, road building, even the police" (quoted in David Harvey 2005, p. 144).

⁶ National Data. *Population*. Retrieved from goo.gl/OPdqQk.

⁷ National Bureau of Statistics of China. *Statistical Communique of China on 2012*. Retrieved from goo.gl/KZI45P.

areas.⁸ Concurrently, it presents a debate on how a socialist state should adapt to and reform the capital-driven market economy, i.e. building the socialist market economy. It is the operation of the market, as an ideology in-and-for itself, "a For-itself of ideology at work in the very In-itself of extra-ideological actuality" (Zizek, 1994, p. 14), in a socialist state which serves as a particular context for this study.

TEP, produced and premiered by Hunan TV in 2006, uses precisely this urban-rural divide, rich-poor disparity as its backdrop and juxtaposes urban and rural youth by arranging for them to experience the life of their counterpart for seven days.⁹ By means of sending a "bratty" (voiceover narration in *TEP*) urban youth (i.e., suffering from internet addiction, school dropout, rebelliousness) to the countryside, it shows an urban youth transformed into a "perfect" one. Firstly, *TEP* portrays an image of a civilised and essentially kind youth; subsequently, his/her experience in the countryside, are used to trigger a significant transformation.¹⁰ In the end, the urban youth is represented as being rich, modern, essentially kind and morally sound. The representation of the rich but dysfunctional urban youth is pregnant with allegorical suggestion when juxtaposed with the status quo of market-driven urbanisation. I argue the opening sequence and its voice-over narration indicates the connection between the damaged urban youth and the possessive competition-centered city. Within the context of those contradictions and struggles between capitalism and socialism currently facing the Chinese government, *TEP*'s representation of the urban youth's change allegorically reveals the changing "hybridity" (Homi Bhabha, 1994) of Chinese cities, with the city becoming a battle field, a "third space" of culture and discourse, while the countryside acts as the nation's "original culture" (Bhabha, 1994). In addition, "returning to the countryside" can be seen as a form of political practice, which suggests a materialised belief, or further, an implicit presupposition and attitude towards the countryside. I argue, this overlooked, unconscious illusion of the countryside is a socialist "ideological fantasy," i.e. the countryside fantasy, in the Chinese context. It structures the Chinese social reality and strikes back at the capitalist ideological fantasy rooted in the market.

For the purpose of this research, textual analysis and discourse analysis are pivotal. The close and critical textual analysis is inevitable for examining the programme's representation of the urban youth. Representation is ideological and plays a central role in securing and maintaining the ideological consent of audiences. For a discourse analysis, I use discourse in a more general sense. Discourses from the state,¹¹ television

⁸ The economic disparity also happens between different cities, as well as between different families within a city. However, the furloughed-workers urban families and the low-income urban families are all neglected in *TEP*.

⁹ It was on air from September 2006 to April 2008, through season one to season four. After a three year interval, it re-started with season five on January 2012. It has been on air since then and finished season twelve in 2015.

¹⁰ In this way, *TEP* endeavors to persuade the "bratty" urban youth to get back to urban school for receiving the necessary cultural capital and being part of modernisation.

¹¹ *TEP* has received approvals from several official institutions, such as the Publicity Department of the Central Committee, the Publicity Department of Hunan Provincial Committee, Hunan Communist Youth League committee, etc.

producers, participants, intellectuals and audiences reflect what is said and what is not, what is reaffirmed, concealed, and what is camouflaged. Discourses argued from different positions are involved in a struggle over the way a topic is expressed or reasoned about. Especially I conduct audience interviews, in the form of in-depth and focus-group interviews, as my primary material. The in-depth interview enables a probing into personal and sensitive perceptions and attitudes in connection with media texts and life experience.¹² The focus-group interview enables direct observation of the social production of the meaning, consensus and the mobilisation of common-sense assertion, as interviewees negotiate their readings of media material.¹³ I also complement my primary material by collecting data from personal and programme blogs and follow-up comments. According to Hall and O'Shea, "we have to capture discourse which is volunteered, which arises from the writer's own set of concerns, and is as spontaneous and unfettered by what others may think as possible. Online comments are rather like this, especially as everyone contributes under a pseudonym" (2013, p. 16-17). Online comments, therefore, can be seen as spontaneous and authentic, and originating from genuine emotion. Generally speaking, the audience response reflects the efficiency of the countryside ideology.

Affluence and Modern Knowledge

TEP picks affluent urban families to represent the modern city and its material achievement. Additionally, the material achievement is credited to what is seen as advanced modern knowledge. In the opening sequence of season one, episode one, *Internet Addiction (IA)*, urban youth Wei Cheng is introduced by a voiceover, "he, an urban youth, does not value the affluent life, loses interest in studying, stays out at night in internet bars." The visual shot, used to illustrate the idea that "[he] does not value the affluent life," is of a bookcase full of books in his family's reading room. From the outset, the urban affluent life exists, in the first place, as signified by the presence of books representing knowledge and culture. Accordingly, it suggests that rural poverty is caused by the lack of advanced modern knowledge. Therefore, urban youth participants are always asked to teach rural classmates computer applications and/or English, which wins the urbanites respect. For instance, Wei Cheng is asked to teach his rural classmates Microsoft Word. In season five, Yi Huchen and Li Naiyue are asked to teach English lessons to a rural class. English and the knowledge of Internet, as the symbols of modern civilisation, are presented as adored by rural youth.

¹² In total, I have selected and interviewed eight people by means of the personal one-to-one interview. The interviewees born and raised in the city are coded as C1, C2, C3, and C4. The interviewees born in rural areas and have moved to the city years ago are coded as D1, D2, D3, and D4.

¹³ Four focus-group interviews were carried out in two cities in 2011, Wuhu in Anhui province and Hangzhou in Zhejiang province, with two groups in each city, in total 19 people were involved. Most of the members are people who have moved to the city from the countryside, to work or study in the city at the moment.

Possessing affluence and modern knowledge, the urban youth participant, as a representative of the city, becomes a noble figure and always receives an enthusiastic welcome. When Wei Cheng arrives in the village, a bustling scene and applause greet him. Rural youth participant Gao Zhanxi's father, wearing a new suit, joins the crowd. Gao's mother even borrows money to make a relatively presentable dinner of fried eggs and fried vegetables for Wei Cheng. In this poor family, as the voiceover says, "these dishes are typically enjoyed only on special occasions such as Spring Festival." In other episodes, (*Love in a Distant Mountain*, *Mountain Call and Sea Shout*, *Love Elsewhere*, and *Beauty Arithmetic*), the traditional courtesies of ethnic groups greeting honoured guests, such as the greeting bonfire of the Yi group, the three-time face washing of the Buyi group, the shot-firing salute of the Basha Miao group, and the musical performance of the Miao group, are genuinely performed, the head of the village welcomes for the urban youth's arrival. As the show proclaims, "almost the whole village comes out to welcome the urban youth as their honored guest." The way that the countryside treats the urban youth reinforces the perception of the superiority of the city.

Good Nature and Elegiac Secret

In *TEP*, all the urban youth participants are rebellious in one way or another, sharing some common characteristics such as internet addiction, apathy, and truancy. However, the show constantly conveys the image that these participants are good by demonstrating their previous school achievements, certificates and praising their behaviour while staying in the rural area.¹⁴

At the beginning of *IA*, there is a shot giving a close-up of the certificates of merit, grade, etc. to introduce Wei's outstanding school achievement while attending an outstanding middle school in Changsha. It seems to be taken for granted that the nature of a student can always be proved by his/her school achievement. Wei is identified as a "bratty" boy, who, nevertheless, is essentially kind. Then, the voiceover says that there is a secret that has caused Wei to unexpectedly drop out of school. It implies, once the problem is discovered and solved, that the 'bratty' boy will revert to a sensible person again, due to his good nature. This narrative strategy is repeatedly applied to other episodes. In the episode called *The Grid* (5th season), the show demonstrates two citations awarded to the urban boy Zhou Yunfeng and raises a question which rationalises the subsequent process of gradually revealing his secret, "why did this excellent student turn into a rebellious, aggressive one who is tired of school?" In the episode called *Beauty Arithmetic* (5th season), the urban girl Li Naiyue is labelled as "playing truant, being emotionally abusive and being mischievous." She strongly rejects school and teachers, because she used to be punished by

¹⁴ The first episode *IA* of season one has set up the tone and some of the basic strategies for the show's narration, such as emphasising urban affluence and modern knowledge, using school grades to prove the urban youth's nature.

kneeling at the office for a whole morning. As the voiceover says, "this extreme punishment deeply hurt her." The show wants the audiences to consider such information and understand that they all used to be well-behaved urban youths, the reason for their rebelliousness will be found in the end, and the problem will be solved.

TEP also identifies the good nature of urban youth by observing their behaviour in the countryside. On day four, Gao's nearly-blind father uses 20RMB [£2], which he had saved for a long time, in order to fulfill Wei's wish to go to the Yellow River. Wei writes in his diary, "I had tears in my eyes, but I held back. Holding that 20RMB in my hands, my heart feels like it's bleeding. They have such a difficult, poor life, but still gave me 20RMB. I feel the great love of the father." The presenter states emotionally, "it is the purity in him awakened by [the father's] selflessness and kindness."¹⁵ The next day, Wei cries in front of the camera and apologizes to his parents, "I'm sorry, dad and mum. I should have behaved. I know that you care about me. I should have talked to you more often." Wei's performance wins the audience's tears and support. Many members of the audience comment on the official blog, expressing their feelings and praising Wei's good nature. In the in-depth interview, C3¹⁶ says, "I really like Wei Cheng. In fact, he is essentially pure and innocent. There was a reason why he became apathetic and "decadent." Watching him gradually showing his kind heart and gratitude in the show, I feel very happy for him."

The revelation of the secret, hence, is pertinent for supporting the idea that he is essentially good. Day six, Wei is crushed emotionally again and reveals the secret of his dropping out of school. On a picnic, he brought some beer and argued with his PE teacher as Wei was drinking alcohol as a minor. The teacher felt disrespected in front of the students from the other school, and slapped his face. Consequently, he suddenly did not want to go to school again. The voiceover then marvels, "on the surface, Wei looks like a "bratty" gloomy boy, but he has actually suffered from pain and frustration." Likewise, in each episode, the revelation of an elegiac secret explains the urban youth participants' "bratty" behaviour: For Gao Zeye (*Love in a Distant Mountain*), it is parental discord. For Li Naiyue (*Beauty Arithmetic*), it is learning she was adopted and abandoned by her biological parents three days after birth. For Gong Weihua (*Warm Pain*), it is the jealousy of believing his younger brother gets more attention from their parents. After the reason is revealed, the urban youth is released from his/her burden and becomes simply a child who has been hurt but has a good heart.

In fact, the discourse about urban youth's nature is in accordance with two traditional Chinese proverbs, which function as common-sense assertions, "Man's nature at birth is good" and "Material pleasure breeds

¹⁵ The rural father is surprisingly depicted as selfless and kind in the show. This discourse contradicts the stock one, which depicts the migrant peasant worker as ignorant, uncivilised and a potential criminal (Li Hongtao & Qiao Tongzhou, 2005). It seems the farmers could be the "nicer" other only if they stay in the remote rural area, living their impoverished life and accepting their preordained "fate."

¹⁶ Female, 27 year-old, media company employee, British MA degree, Shaoxing city, Zhejiang province.

corruption, a life of easy makes one lazy." One typical online comment is, "the nature of every child is good ... the urban youth doesn't show their goodness just because they have been living an easy life." Therefore, country life, as the site of rediscovered poverty and hardship, is taken as a source of fortitude and spiritual strength with an expectation to touch the "bratty" urban youth who has been living an easy life for too long and finally trigger their transformations.

Country Life as Pathos and Spiritual Strength

The voiceover makes comments, "how would we miss the misery? But suffering can really help us" (in *Warm Pain*), "suffering always plays the best teacher" (in *The Grid*). Psychologist Dr. Zhang Yiyun, as the guest host, confirms and rationalises this sentiment in her prologue of season two, "in a sense, the opportunity to experience the different life, offered by this programme, is more profound to touch the youth emotionally and trigger the change" (5th March 2007). Thus, the strenuous farm labour, miserable living conditions and hard-won opportunity of going to school, are shown as embodying misery and suffering, and are used as a form of pathos and spiritual strength. As Gao Zeyu (*Love in a Distant Mountain*) says, "seven days living in the countryside ... I've prepared for the worst, I am preparing to die."

It is not strictly required for the urban youth to participate in strenuous farm labour, *TEP* places more focus on unfolding the hardship of rural life and rendering its pathos. In *Love in a Distant Mountain*, Gao Zeyu throws away a piece of an expired snack brought with him from the city. Siyin, a five-year-old rural girl, bursts into tears. The voiceover says, "seeing Siyin crying, our heart gets more grief. Gao threw away the desert that the rural girl can only dream about ... at this very moment, Gao, a boy spoiled by the prosperous urban life, seems to start to understand the hardship of life." Siyin, only five years old, has already gone to cut firewood on the mountain. The voiceover states, "from the day they are born, rural children have to learn to bear the weight of life on their tender shoulders ... this little rural girl has already started to fight a sufferable life with her limited strength." Gao writes in his diary, "I surf on the internet every day, Siyin goes to the mountain every day, such a little girl has to bear such a hardship. I feel ashamed." After visiting the rural school, Gao says, "it is totally different than my school. My school is like heaven, this is like hell. It is so difficult for them to have what I have in the city, my parents work hard to give me the good life."

In *The Grid*, Chen Yulin, a 13-year-old Guizhou rural boy, decides to sacrifice his own university dream, bear farm labour and chores, and look after his brothers, to let his older brother, who has better grades, to achieve the dream of progressing to high school, and university. As the voiceover says, "accomplishing this dream requires the parents to relocate for work in a city far away. They haven't returned home for two years. To earn more money, they collect paint barrels, which exposes them to heavy pollution." The older brother Changgui, therefore, does not want to continue his schooling, he says, "I have two brothers, this family can't afford it if I go to university, I want to quit school, help my family, so that my brother can go

to school." This cruel and yet warm story makes Zhou Yunfeng, a 14-year-old urban "bratty" youth feel "ashamed, touched, and guilty" (voiceover). He is shocked to learn, "in order to go to university, everyone in this warm family is making a sacrifice" (voiceover). Zhou decides to try his best to help this family by going to carry briquettes. Visiting the briquette site, he meets two poor brothers who do the same job. The two cannot even afford to eat meat once a year and their parents work a long way away all year long. Zhou says, "comparing their life with mine, it seems that there is nothing difficult that I can't handle." By the end of the show, Zhou, who once hated school so much, tries to persuade the older brother not to quit school, and the show praises him, "we hear the melting of the ice in his heart, as well as the power of his kindness."

In *Mountain Call and Sea Shout*, Chen Junwei, as the voiceover states, is "a dissipated urban youth, takes home as a hotel, treats his parents as strangers, views school as a prison, and pays no attention to life goals." During his stay in the village, he sees Jingxiang, a five-year-old boy, working in the field with a special-made hoe. As the voiceover puts it, "Basha children must learn to earn their living with their hands, overcome suffering with their own strength, from the day they know how to walk." Chen also meets Wushuai, a teenage girl, who is asked by her father to quit school. Chen realises that she might just repeat her mother's fate and stay in this remote mountain forever. He argues aggressively with the father to allow her to resume her education, "you are ruining her life! She will end up as a poor farmer like you if she doesn't go to school!" Additionally, Chen discovers that the father's brother is ill, and takes him to the hospital. They are asked for 2000RMB [£200] for the hospital fee for treatment and accommodation, however, the father falls apart and runs away because he cannot afford it. By the end, the voiceover concludes,

Chen finds his self-worth by helping the little sister to get back to school. He now can distinguish between wrong and right, knows that he must accept his duty ... after witnessing the family's helplessness in the hospital. He finally reflects on his own rebellious past, it is a successful journey of soul cleaning. The apathy, confusion and rebelliousness have gone. Instead, there is a restored love, care and responsibility.

Overall, in the show, the countryside suggests a terrible situation. Living in the countryside, witnessing the rural people's fortitude, stoicism and altruism, it seems to stimulate the urban "brat" to reflect on their own easy life and cherish the opportunity to do what many rural youth yearn for: to study. As Zhang Yuhan (*Love Elsewhere*) writes in his diary,

I have thought about it for a long time and finally decided to go back to school, to live a normal life. The road of life is not flat, what I have been traveling was more like a craggy mountain road. Fortunately, I have already walked out of the mountain fog, I have learned a lot, and I might have just got back on the right track during these days.

(HunanTV *TEP* blog 2008)¹⁷

¹⁷ HunanTV *TEP* Blog (2008) *Zhang Yuhan's Sentiment after the Show*. Retrieved from

The once "bratty" urban youth has changed, and is represented as being rich, modern and noble, essentially kind and morally sound as the end result. By sending the urban youth to the countryside to receive the spiritual education of the arduous struggle, *TEP* seems to have successfully intervened in youth education, and fulfilled its required "media responsibility" as a state-owned media. In the *Recap* episode of season five on 28th March 2012, interviewed by the editor, Cheng Manli, associate dean of the News and Communication School, Beijing University, comments, "it is a good model we could use for student education, including family education, school education and other deeper levels." So, the question is: what are actually the "deeper levels" of education on display here? I argue, the representation of the rich-but-dysfunctional urban youth is pregnant with allegorical suggestion when juxtaposed with the status quo of the market-driven urbanisation. Precisely, the opening sequence and its voiceover narration indicate the connection between the damaged urban youth and the possessive competition-centred city.

Youth and City

In the opening sequence, the narrator puts it,

One day, if my dream were drenched by rain, would you like to give me a hand? If one day, I had no stamina to move ahead, would you like to accompany me for a warm afternoon? ... if there were a home you are not familiar with, would you find it by listening to your good heart as signpost? ... if he were the future of a nation, would you make him sleep tight without feeling lost? The Exchange Programme, a source of strength from the depths of distant mountains.

As Fredric Jameson said, "allegory" refers to the "symbolic narrative" in which the major features of the narrative are held to refer symbolically to some action or situation (1986, p. 65-88). Allegorically, "I", as "the future of a nation," is the "bratty" urban youth and also signifies the damaged city. "I+You" suggests the "dream" of being modern, civilised, kind-hearted, stoical and responsible, possessing both material prosperity and socialist values, as manifested by the transformed urban youth. When "I" has no stamina to move ahead, "You" can give me a hand. "You" signifies the distant countryside and its socialist, communist culture. Because the countryside was once the old revolutionary base for the Communist Party of China (CPC). The city might get lost and forget its socialist origin in the whirl of "a ruthlessly advancing market economy and the incursion of global capitalism" (Zhang Zhen 2007, p. 3). However, if it listens to its "good heart," it can find its way back "home," the rural cradle of socialist, communist culture. Therefore, *TEP* says that city in the Chinese context has a socialist origin in the countryside. While the countryside is sutured by the master signifier socialism, the city is experiencing the struggle of quilting

between marketism and socialism. In this sense, it suggests the hegemonic struggle between individual-oriented, competition-centered marketism and collective-oriented, egalitarianism-centered socialism. The city is expected to regulate the possessive individualism materialism with the socialist culture originated in the countryside, and finally alleviate the disorder of marketism. The ability is indicated through presenting the transformed urban youth after sending them back to the countryside. In a sense, the dysfunctional urban youth who indulges in a dissipated life signifies the damaged city that gets lost in the illusion of commodity, money and capital. When the maladaptive urban youth is depicted as having the courage to change and to learn from the countryside life to be stoic, altruistic, and responsible, this states that the city wants its people to change in that way. On the other hand, the social issues once concealed by the myth of "development and transition" are brought to the surface by the programme.

As Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley argue, the social Darwinist context triggers the feeling of uncertainty and insecurity, which "create fertile ground for a sentimental longing for the past, or for a past fondly reconstructed out of selectively idealised features" (2006, p. 925). This longing for the past suggests Chinese people's longing for the balance of benefit distribution. The countryside, as the old revolutionary base where Land Reform and planned economy were advanced, epitomises this "past" as there was no polarised disparity between rich and poor.¹⁸ Especially, during the Chinese civil war, the Red Army built a harmonious, solidly united relationship with the farmers by living an impoverished life together, struggling hard and supporting each other. This shared experience is engraved into the socialist discourses. As Hu jingtao, ex-General Secretary of CPC, asserts in the Eight Honors and Eight Shames:¹⁹ "Honor to those who uphold hard struggle, and shame on those who indulge in a dissipated life; Honor to those who unite and help people, and shame on those who gain at the expense of others." The strenuous agricultural labour is a symbol of hard work. CPC and the peasants living at subsistence level supporting each other is a symbol of collectivism, altruism, and solidarity. Frugality is also taken as a traditional virtue. The countryside, as a signifier, has long been sutured by master signifier socialism. This perception of the countryside explains why *TEP* particularly chooses the old revolutionary base areas as the shooting locations, and therefore, sends out certain

¹⁸ By that time, CPC enacted sweeping Land Reform during which the lands of landlords and aristocrats were confiscated and equally redistributed to the peasants. The landlord class and the feudal aristocracy were overthrown. The farmers were liberated from heavy exploitation. It was a period without the economic disparity, and individual/market competition of the present day.

¹⁹ Proposed by Hu Jintao on 4th March 2006: Honor to those who love the motherland, and shame on those who do harm to her; Honor to those who serve the people, and shame on those who are divorced from them; Honor to those who quest for science, and shame on those who prefer to be ignorant; Honor to those who are hard-working, and shame on those who detest having to work; Honor to those who unite and help people, and shame on those who gain at the expense of others; Honor to those who are honest and trustworthy, and shame on those who forsake good for the sake of gold; Honor to those who are disciplined and law-abiding, and shame on those who violate laws and disciplines; and Honor to those who uphold hard struggle, and shame on those who indulge in a dissipated life.

political messages. For instance, the Wan Quan River of Hainan province is famous for being the homeland of *The Red Detachment of Women*. As the narrator says, "the place indicates Hainan people's support to the Red Army." Jia county, located in Shanxi province, is the birthplace of a famous song *The East is Red*, which gives praise to Chairman Mao and CPC. Huining county of Gansu province is the location where the Red Army joined forces in October 1936, which symbolises the victory of the Long March of the Red Army in exile, "it has a magnificent superb beauty." In *TEP* the countryside is the "root" of the nation's "original culture." *TEP* is thusly the journey of seeking socialist original culture in an idealised rural setting.

According to Zizek, for the ideology in-itself, the first step of fixing the meaning of "floating signifiers" is the suture conducted by the master signifier. "The multitude of "floating signifiers," of proto-ideological elements, is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain "nodal point" (the Lacanian *point de capiton*) which "quilts" them, stops their sliding and fixes their meaning (2008a, p. 95). Secondly, which discourse will succeed in "appropriating" one concept (signifier) depends on the fight of discursive hegemony. In the Chinese context, it is the discourse of Chinese characteristic socialism struggling against the discourse of the global liberal market, intending to "appropriate" the signifier city. The ideological figure of the city, therefore, is continually transforming and hybridising in the process of endless negotiation. The city, in this sense, becomes a "third space" of culture and discourse. The third space transforms "the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and also" (Soja 2009, p. 52). It "is not a space, or a location. It is a field domain" (Young 2009, p. 81). The dynamics of this "third space" and its openness force the cultural factors involved to improvise, to fight each other at any time. The city, therefore, is in a process of continuous transformation and constant reorientation. There is always change and the possibility of change. This situation annotates the advancing, exploratory path of Chinese reform.

The City as a "Third Space"

Introducing the market economy in a socialist country can be traced back to Lenin's "New Economic Policy." In February 1922, after winning the civil war, the Bolsheviks announced the New Economic Policy, which allowed a much wider scope to the market economy and private property. As Zizek points out, "Lenin uses the analogy of a climber who must backtrack from his first attempt to reach a new mountain peak to describe what retreat means in a revolutionary process, and how it can be done without opportunistically betraying the cause" (2009, p. 43). Advocating the market economy reform is to conquer poverty, finish building the foundations of a socialist economy, and to avoid the hostile powers of capitalism to subvert the Communist Party's authority. Credited to the market economy, urbanisation and city construction in China have gained splendid success. As said earlier, *TEP* picks only affluent families to

represent the modern city and its material achievement. However, competitive, possessive individualism inevitably triggers a mercenary attitude, the alienation and the degeneration of human nature.

Meanwhile, with the West as its standard for modernisation, the Chinese city is practicing mimicry. Further, the West relies on modernisation to confirm their "advance and superiority" (Said, 1999, p. 2); similarly, the Chinese city intends to deny its historical connection with the underdeveloped countryside and identifies with the West as if belonging to the same modern group. Here, the attitude of certain Hong Kong Chinese towards the mainlanders is a parallel case. As Martin Jacques says, "they preferred--up to a point--to identify with westerners rather than mainlanders ... primarily because of money and the status that went with it" (Jacques, 2014). As the beneficiary of the market economy, the urban dwellers come to enjoy a much higher standard of living than that of the peasants. It is not surprising that they identify with Westerners to some extent. However, a city in a socialist state, as a socialist entity, cannot identify with the capitalist system.

Therefore, the Chinese city needs to construct itself as a reformed, recognisable, but modern other, "a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). In other words, the city is allowed to mimic the modern look, to participate in the global market, but it must reaffirm and demonstrate its socialist "root." Mimicry here has a more profound meaning, "mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Thus, the city in the Chinese context also aims to weaken the disorder of the ruthless market, and its challenge to the state's sovereignty. As Lacan argued, mimicry is used as a technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare, "it is not a question of harmonising with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled" (1977, p. 99), to protect itself and to threaten the enemy. Additionally, as Bhabha states, "the mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (1994, p. 86). It precisely suggests the dynamic relation between the incursion of the global market and the state's regulation. Here, the countryside, with its revolutionary strength and communist culture, becomes the force that the city relies on to fight against, hybridise with, and melt down the downside of the market. Similarly, country life, as a form of pathos and spiritual strength, is mobilised to make the urban youth to reflect and correct their behaviour of squandering money and time. *TEP*, in this sense, allegorically reveals the continuing changing and rewriting of the "hybridity" of the city, with the city becoming a battle field for hegemony, a "third space" for the hybridisation of culture and discourse, while the countryside acts as the nation's "original culture."

However, it needs to be noted that legitimising mimicry in this way risks the formulation of an inner subjective attitude, which would offer people an inner subjective belief to hold on to and an excuse to advance the market even more boldly. As Fisher comments,

Capitalist ideology in general, Zizek maintains, consists precisely in the overvaluing of belief--in the sense of inner subjective attitude--at the

expense of the beliefs we exhibit and externalise in our behavior. So long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange (2009, p. 13).

This is the disavowal upon which the behavior relies--we are able to fetishize the liberal market in our actions only because we have already taken an ironic distance towards it in our heads. Accordingly, the construction of an idealised urban youth in the discourse might lead to a potential cynicism, as Fisher and Gilbert describes, "we could have left-wing convictions, and a left-wing self-image, provided these didn't impinge on work in any significant way" (2013, p. 91). This structure of disavowal might become an ideological trap of capitalism that we would feel happy to fall into, as "the very privileging of "inner" subjective states over the public was itself an ideological move" (Fisher & Gilbert, 2013, p. 91).²⁰

In conclusion, the socialist original culture articulated and represented by *TEP* might not be an efficient resistance to the market ideology in-and-for itself. The resistance at the level of discourse is more likely to deepen cynicism. However, I argue, in *TEP*, returning to the countryside and experiencing rural life can be seen as a piece of political practice, which manifests the materialisation of a belief. According to Žižek, "belief, far from being an "intimate," purely mental state, is always materialised in our effective social activity" (2008a, p. 33). In addition, the materialised belief supports the fantasy, which regulates social reality, "the external custom is always a material support for the subject's unconscious" (Žižek, 2008a, p. 39). In other words, the practice of returning to the countryside and tracing the original culture is a form of materialised belief. This very belief suggests the implicit, quasi-spontaneous, presupposition of the countryside, the overlooked, unconscious illusion of the countryside, i.e. an ideological fantasy.

Countryside as "Ideological Fantasy"

The stake of social-ideological fantasy, as Žižek states, "is to construct a vision of society which does exist, a society which is not split by an antagonistic division, a society in which the relation between its parts is organic, complementary" (2008a, p. 142). In anti-Semitism, the Jew becomes "an external element, a foreign body introducing corruption into the sound social Fabric" (Žižek, 2008a). The social crisis becomes the result of the interference of an external factor. The social structural antagonism of the Nazi German society at that time was transformed into racial difference. It implicates that the internal structural limit is symbolised and transformed into an external restraint or obstacle. "Jew," as Žižek says, "is a fetish which simultaneously denies and embodies the structural impossibility of "Society:" it is as if in the figure of the Jew this impossibility had acquired a

²⁰ In addition, the role of capitalist ideology is precisely "to conceal the fact that the operations of capital do not depend on any sort of subjectively assumed belief" (Fisher 2009, p. 12-13).

positive, palpable existence" (2008a).²¹ Therefore, the notion of social fantasy is a necessary counterpart to the concept of antagonism. Antagonism, explained with the logic of the Real, "is precisely such an impossible kernel, a certain limit which is in itself nothing; it is only to be constructed retroactively, from a series of its effects, as the traumatic point which escapes them; it prevents the closure of a social field" (Zizek, 2008a, p. 184). And fantasy "is precisely the way the antagonistic fissure is masked. In other words, fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance" (Zizek, 2008a, p. 142).

At present day China, this antagonistic fissure manifests itself through the form of rich-poor disparity, urban-rural divide. Antagonism is not any disparity within a society, but it can only manifest its existence through the social disparity and conflicts. However, rural people cannot be refused or ejected like the Jew in anti-Semitism, neither can they be ironically taken as a weight on the economy. In fact, it is agricultural products that support the original capital accumulation of urban industrialisation and grain supply. The peasants are actually producers of state wealth. Therefore, at the level of consciousness and reason, we see two approaches applied to suture the urban-rural divide. Firstly, the material prosperity of the city is credited to the cultural capital, which reaffirms the common-sense assertion of the "modern knowledge changes fate." As discussed earlier, *TEP* renders and reaffirms exactly this common sense. Furthermore, it is an intervention into social reality, as the political, economic reasons responsible for the urban-rural divide is neglected. Secondly, the countryside culture is mobilised as the original culture to resist the obverse consequences of ruthless competition.

Additionally, beneath the practice of "returning to the countryside" and "mobilising the original culture" is the countryside fantasy, i.e. the implicit, unconscious presupposition of the countryside. Though the countryside fantasy shares the same goal with the Jew fantasy, the practices based on each are very different. Without a thorough knowledge of the Chinese context, Zizek cannot explain it correctly. In fact, political, economic practices such as "Down to the Countryside Movement" during the Mao era, philanthropic volunteer efforts conducted by urbanites, the practice of constructing a new socialist countryside, are all a materialising of a collective, unconscious, presupposition of the countryside in the Chinese context. The countryside fantasy manifests itself through a series of practical actions. It not only functions as a protective screen to prevent the invasion of antagonism, but also a force to regulate the ruthless market and obverse its consequences. For the public, the inconsistency between competition and solidarity, the contradiction between individualism and collectivism are now balanced. The countryside becomes a positive, palpable existence to mask the impossibility. The spectre of the Real is reflected in the countryside fantasy. In summary, the countryside fantasy transforms the social divide into a new level of equilibrium, a sutured totality.

²¹ It clarifies that the ideological fantasy operates as "giving "body" to and symbolising the impossible limit, the abyss into something forbidden" (Zizek, 2004, p. 62-64).

The Efficiency of the Countryside Ideology

Ideology, as Zizek argues, "in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our "reality" itself: an "illusion" which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel" (2008a, p. 45). In the Chinese context, credited to the countryside fantasy, the countryside ideology offers us the social reality as an escape from the traumatic kernel, a vision of a society in which the relation between its parts is organic and complementary. Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality: it offers the social reality itself. Additionally, the audience's "savvy stance" towards the staying power of the experience gained in the countryside further shows how the countryside ideology operates. As a netizen puts it, "I wonder, how much a seven-day-long experience impacts their behaviour in the future? Would seven days really be able to change this urban youth and the way they have been living for the past dozen years?"²² In my focus group interview, the group members raise the same concern about the durability of the "bratty" urban youth's transformation after the show.

Firstly, it suggests the distance between the ideological fantasy and the ideological symbolic texture. As Zizek argues, "in order to be operative, fantasy has to remain "implicit," it has to maintain a distance towards the explicit symbolic texture sustained by it, and to function as its inherent transgression" (2008b, p. 24). That is to say, for the efficient operation of ideology, an attitude of active misidentification is needed. Alternatively, "an ideological edifice can be undermined by a too literal-identification" (Zizek, 2008b, p. 29). Thus, we could say that it is precisely the doubts, the misidentification expressed by the audience that supports the efficiency of the countryside ideology, "an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it, that there is a rich human person beneath it: "not all is ideology, beneath the ideological mask, I am also a human person" is the very form of ideology, of its' practical efficiency" (Zizek, 2008b, p. 27). As a result, though the audience has those doubts, it believes that these urban youth are going to change, more or less. Many parents still vie with each other to register their child for participating in the show. As AY3, a member of group A(Y),²³ says, "I really want to send my son to the countryside for a month or so, it must have good influence on him sooner or later."

Secondly, Zizek would argue that it is not the audience who believes in the transformation, it is the "countryside," on behalf of the audiences, believing in "returning to the countryside would make everything right." As he says, in capitalism, the subjects are emancipated from the ideological superstitions. They no longer believe the mystified master-servant relations in feudalism, but consider themselves rational utilitarians in the act of commodity exchange. However, in fact, these mystified relations between

²² Bingtanghulu Blog. (2006). *The Poor Gao Zhanxi, the Odious Hunan TV*. Retrieved from goo.gl/MD7UhG.

²³ Wuhu city: the group boxed in 20-35 year-old is coded as group A(Y: young).

people are now embodied in the social relations between things, "they no longer believe, but the things themselves believe for them" (2008a, p. 31). Therefore, what Sloterdijk said "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" should be interpreted as "they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still, they are doing it" (Zizek, 2008a, p. 30). Zizek's discussion about commodity/things is correct, however, it cannot be mechanically applied to analyse the Chinese countryside. The question lying here is that if the countryside fantasy is simply a result of a structural "misrecognition" (Zizek, 2008a, p. 19)²⁴ or substitution? Zizek argues, Jews were contingently picked up to play the role of being the "Jew" in the system of anti-Semitism. However, in the Chinese context, the countryside is not contingently picked up to play the role of being the "countryside."

Historically, the status of the countryside in the period of the Chinese civil war and the series of reforms it experienced are crucial for the formation of the countryside fantasy. Economically, agricultural production has long been run by the socialist planned economy. The Collective Land Ownership is also an outcome of the planned economy era. Besides, the nature of agricultural production at this stage, the countryside, requires strenuous labour, communal dependence and economic frugality. This very nature of the countryside determines the activities the urban youth engages in, the experiences, and the impact. Therefore, I argue, the implicit, presupposition of the countryside suggests its existence used to be an achievement of the proletarian revolution, but now it is their legacy. The perception of the countryside, the nature of the countryside, is formulated in the course of the proletarian revolution and the practice of the planned economy. Thus, the countryside fantasy is not just a result of a structural misrecognition or substitution.

Conclusion

By sending the "bratty" urban youth to the countryside, *TEP* depicts a transformed "perfect" urban youth, and expresses a desire for an affluent, modern, and morally sound society. It simultaneously represents a critique of the ruthless market being developed in China. As an ideology in-and-for itself, the market not only challenges the socialist concept of redistribution, egalitarianism, collective provision, but also functions at the level of "doing," rather than "knowing." However, China is still committed to being a socialist state. Its history, the communist struggles of the past, is still a very powerful ideological presence in contemporary debate, policy and media production, as manifested in *TEP*. Most importantly, "returning to the countryside" reveals the countryside fantasy and proves that socialist ideology is also "the "spontaneous" ideology at work at the heart of social

²⁴ Misrecognition, as Zizek says, "concerns the relation between a structured network and one of its elements: what is really a structural effect, an effect of the network of relations between elements, appears as an immediate property of one of the elements, as if this property also belongs to it outside its relation with other elements" (2008a, p. 19). The misrecognition of commodity results in the fetishism.

"reality" itself" (Zizek, 1994, p. 8), i.e. an ideology in-and-for itself. Therefore, it is not any more the socialist values (ideology in-itself) fighting the market (ideology in-and-for itself). It is socialist ideology in-and-for itself fighting the market at the same level of the unconscious. Its resisting, regulating, hybridising the cruelty and immorality of the market is supported by a series of practices that are part of the materialised belief. In a word, fighting the market is not going to be in vain.

Hence, my argument denies what Zizek argues that "China is today the ideal capital state: freedom for the capital, ... everything subordinated to the ruthless drive to develop and become the new superpower" (2002, p. 146-147). Though cynicism is an undeniable fact and a perfect noble market is just a dream, the countryside fantasy and the practices premised on it are the dynamic to confront the market, continues the struggle between socialism and the late capitalism. Finally, for Zizek, ideological fantasy not only constructs social reality, but also its subject. Therefore, based on the arguments in this paper, the next pertinent question to explore is how the countryside fantasy constructs the subject, represented by the audiences with different urban and rural experiences, in present day China. The discussion focuses on how the countryside fantasy captures the audience's desire and stages "the loss and recovery of enjoyment" (Zizek & Daly, 2004, p. 110).

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