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Introduction

Television programs offering everyday life advice are not new. Daytime magazine and consumer advice formats and cooking, gardening and ‘how-to’ shows targeted at housewives, hobbyists and retirees have long been a mainstay of many television schedules around the world. This older form of life advice television originates from a broader feminine advice culture of etiquette manuals, women’s magazines and talk shows (Lewis 2008a). But over the past ten years TV schedules, particularly in the UK, USA and other Anglophone markets like Australia, have undergone something of a lifestyle revolution, with life advice television increasingly directed toward a broader primetime audience. Indeed, the huge popularity of lifestyle shows on primetime TV in the UK in the early 1990s – associated in particular with the rise of ‘makeover’ formats (such as the home renovation show *Changing Rooms*) – led media critic and academic Andy Medhurst (1999: 103) to claim that we have entered ‘the era of lifestyle TV’.

Since Medhurst’s pronouncement, there has been a proliferation of makeover shows around the world, many of which focus not only on home and garden transformations but on ‘renovating’ ordinary people and their lifestyles and relationships. Such shows have evolved from earlier magazine style formats into full-length reality-based lifestyle narratives marked by aspects of melodrama (such as facial close-ups), the confessional dimension of talk shows, and the competitive element of game shows (Brunsdon 2003). The DIY ethos of earlier lifestyle advice television is extended here to every aspect of people’s lives – but where earlier ‘how-to’ shows were primarily concerned with providing viewers with practical instruction, scholars including Brunsdon note that the new lifestyle TV is more concerned with the spectacle of personal transformation.

Despite this shift, contemporary lifestyle formats clearly retain pedagogical concerns. Often featuring a range of lifestyle ‘experts’, from celebrity chefs to fitness gurus, the new makeover shows function in many ways as 21st century etiquette manuals; but with an emphasis on entertainment and personality, spectacle and melodrama rather than

purely practical advice. Deploying the trope of the personal transformation and often featuring charming and personable lifestyle gurus, these shows are gently educational, modelling highly aestheticized ways of living, being and consuming. As John Hartley argues about television more broadly, it can be seen to use ‘oral, domestic discourses to teach [...] ‘lay’ audiences modes of ‘citizenship’ and self-knowledge’ (1999: 41). For a number of scholars, the rise of these softly pedagogical lifestyle formats at this particular cultural-historical moment is linked to a range of broader shifts in late modern and neoliberal states, particularly concerning the nature of identity (Ouellette & Hay 2008; Miller 2007; Lewis 2008a). For instance, some have argued that the rise of lifestyle TV reflects the increasing dominance of an individualistic, consumer-driven approach to everyday life, in which contemporary selfhood is seen as endlessly malleable – a project to be worked on and invested in (Redden 2007; Wood & Skeggs 2004; Lewis 2007).

If the new popularity of lifestyle TV in Anglophone markets can be linked to broader shifts in the character of late capitalism, to what extent are these developments relevant to television cultures in Asia? Indeed, does the notion of lifestyle television actually make sense as a generic category in nations with different televisual traditions and ways of living and consuming? Furthermore, given that the idea of lifestyle itself is arguably a Western concept – emerging out of a specifically European temporal mapping of modernity and industrial capitalism (Lewis 2011a) – what happens when we transplant this concept into Asia, with its plurality of different cultural and temporal trajectories of modernit(ies)?

As we will show, life advice programming of various kinds *is* present in the three East Asian sites discussed here, a development linked to a broader proliferation of media consumption and lifestyle-oriented consumer practices across the region. Some of these shows are similar to their Anglo-American counterparts while others (such as the long running live magazine format known in Japan as the ‘wide-show’ and Chinese consumer advice shows) present life advice in ways clearly shaped by distinct local and regional televisual and cultural codes and conventions (Holden & Hakan 2006; Xu 2007). If lifestyle shows are increasingly taking on a pedagogical role in modern societies, does

life advice oriented programming in Asia also operate to educate and inculcate audiences into particular ways of living and being? If so, what models of lifestyle, selfhood and citizenship are being offered on Asian television sets?

This article presents early findings from a larger comparative study of lifestyle programming at selected sites across Asia in which we examine the role of lifestyle TV in both shaping and reflecting broader shifts in social and cultural identity accompanying consumer-based modes of late modernity.¹ Our aim is to provide a preliminary mapping of our research field and to reflect on the questions the research has thrown up so far. As will be seen, the issues generated by a project like this – particularly concerning the transportability of concepts like ‘lifestyle TV’, ‘neoliberalism’, ‘selfhood’ and ‘the middle class’ – are quite significant. We do not purport to be able to solve these questions here, but rather offer this article as an opportunity for fruitful reflection.

In discussing the rise of lifestyle TV in the region, this article focuses on examples of (predominantly) Chinese-language programming in Singapore, China and Taiwan. Singapore offers an example of a city-state that actively embraces elements of globalizing Anglo-American commercial media culture, framed by what might be seen as neoliberal models of consumer-oriented, ‘choice’-based citizenship. However, lifestyle media and culture in Singapore have to be understood in the context of a highly interventionist state regulatory system and a state-owned broadcast TV industry. China provides an illustration of a television industry in transition between state and commercial domination. Here, life advice television steps in where the state retreats from the care of its citizens in areas such as housing, education and healthcare. In the context of the privatization and individualization of Chinese society, such programming fulfils the need for potentially lucrative ‘soft’ TV content while also demonstrating middle-class values and tastes to urban socio-economic elites. Taiwan acts as a major conduit to regional Sinophone markets for Sinicized versions of both Euro-American and Japanese (especially variety—discussed below—and drama) television genres (Iwabuchi 2002). Like Singapore, Taiwan also has a well-developed urban middle class marked by a growing interest in lifestyle-oriented forms of consumer culture. But in Taiwan’s

intensely competitive television culture, powered almost solely by market forces, life advice television is shaped by a very different relation between state and media market to those found in either Singapore or China. With these distinctive industrial, political and cultural contexts in mind, we present our three sites as preliminary case studies toward a snapshot of life advice television in the East Asian region.

Before we discuss the specific sites under analysis, we provide below a brief overview of some of the main theoretical and conceptual frameworks pertinent to understanding the proliferation of ‘transformational’ lifestyle programming in Anglophone markets. Our goal here is not to uncritically apply such frameworks to a range of Sinophone sites, but rather to open up a critical dialogue between Euro-American theories of lifestyle and individualization and the various ways in which modernity, lifestyle and selfhood are being played out in specific Asian sites through life-advice TV.

The lifestyle turn

One important context for the rise of forms of programming such as lifestyle (and reality) TV around the world has been a range of broad shifts in the global television industry. In particular, the growing role of relatively cheap, ‘unscripted’ television focused on ordinary people can be seen as a response to an increasingly deregulated market and a fragmented audience, where free-to-air networks and cable/ satellite TV now compete with one another for viewers’ attention and offer audiences an abundance of programming choices. The deregulation of the television industry in the 1980s and 1990s and the emergence of a multi channel environment has also produced a situation where the pressure for product has encouraged local producers to create ‘copycat’ programs that can potentially move across a range of markets (Waisbord 2004; Moran 1998; Magder 2004; Keane, Moran & Fung 2007). The rise of makeover formats such as *Extreme Makeover* that can be sold around the world as pre-packaged program blueprints is one such example of this globalisation of product. Lifestyle and makeover television fits particularly well with the economic brief of the post-broadcast environment, working as it does to seamlessly integrate advertising and commodities into its very content through ‘below the line’ advertising and various forms of branding and sponsorship.²

However, a focus solely on television industry economics is not enough to fully explain the proliferation of life advice television. What Rachel Moseley (2000) has described in relation to British television as the ‘makeover takeover’ needs also to be understood within the broader context of key socio-cultural developments, in particular the ‘lifestyling’ of contemporary social life. While the term lifestyle is used in a range of different contexts, from health to marketing, it is essentially underpinned by a conception of identity that foregrounds personal choice and the malleable nature of the self (Bell & Hollows 2005). Rather than seeing selfhood as limited or constrained by class, race or gender, an influential discourse today holds that ordinary people are able to invent (and re-invent) their own life ‘biographies’. The makeover show epitomizes this ethos of voluntaristic self-reinvention, focused as it is on transforming every aspect of individual life from home décor to selfhood (Lewis 2009).

A number of scholars see the flexible notion of the self that is assumed within ‘lifestyle culture’ as tied to a bourgeois model of selfhood. Gareth Palmer (2004), discussing the rise of lifestyle programming in the UK, contends that the tips provided by the new echelon of ‘experts’ on both home shows and fashion makeover formats like *What Not to Wear* (BBC 2001) present strongly class-inflected guidance in style, taste and social distinction. Alongside this aspirational focus on aesthetics and the art of living, lifestyle programming also involves naturalizing consumption, working ‘to alert viewers to the existence of more products and services for their utility in the endless project of the self’ (Bonner 2003: 104). As Lewis notes, increasingly ‘what lifestyle programming “sells” to the audience in the west [...] are not just products but ways of living and being’ (2008a: 10).

Jamie Oliver’s role as a food activist tackling obesity and the lack of fresh food in school canteens in the UK and US, however, points to the way in which lifestyle TV is not always concerned with simply encouraging consumption and aspirational lifestyles, but also increasingly works to promote particular kinds of lifestyle choices. Toby Miller (2007) argues that in the West, civic and consumer culture are increasingly intertwined,

such that we now witness the growth of a lifestyle-oriented commercial culture focused on bettering the self through ‘ethico-aesthetic exercises.’ For Miller, such a shift means that selfhood and citizenship are increasingly equated with or reduced to commoditized cultural practices and lifestyle choices.

Relatedly, Foucauldian-influenced scholarship on governmentality, particularly Nikolas Rose’s work (1989), has argued that the rise of the lifestyle-oriented consumer is linked to new technologies of selfhood and citizenship. Rose contends that the rise of neoliberal governments in many nations in the 1980s (in particular the UK and US), has seen the figure of the self-governing citizen – an individual who is constructed as ‘enterprising’ and self-directed – become a cultural dominant. On television such trends are reflected in the personal, health and relationship advice offered on lifestyle-oriented reality shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *Jamie’s School Dinners*, where lifestyle gurus fill the gap left by the neoliberal state as it passes on responsibility for once public concerns like obesity onto self-managing consumer-citizens.

Thus the proliferation of lifestyle programming in the US and UK emerges out of, and is shaped by, a complex conjuncture of social, cultural and economic factors. To what extent can such developments be applied to other cultural contexts? What follows is a critical discussion of the emergence (or not) of lifestyle programming in Singapore, China and Taiwan and the role these shows may potentially play in shaping people’s identities in the context of spreading middle-class practices of consumption and global neoliberal trends. The term lifestyle programming is employed here to embrace a range of shows airing on both daytime and evening television. This includes everything from magazine and variety shows, with various life advice segments, to cooking, health, home renovation and personal makeover programs. As noted, adopting this generic term is not without its difficulties, both in relation to different televisual conventions and the varied currency and meanings of ‘lifestyle’ across these sites. Here we adopt it as a starting point for comparison and critical reflection.

Civic cosmopolitanism: consumption, taste and lifestyle in Singapore

As an advanced capitalist nation with a per capita income on a par with that of Canada, Singapore has a highly developed consumer and lifestyle-oriented media culture. An ex-British colony, it gained independence in 1965, and shifted its focus from being a successful export economy in the 1960s and 1970s to positioning itself as both a regional and global hub for the new knowledge economy. As Aihwa Ong (2006) notes, in rapidly transforming into a new post-industrial nation, the Singaporean state has sought to 'reengineer' its citizens along the way. A central element of this ongoing project of governmentality has been to position itself as a 'global city', moving away from the 'Asian values' discourse invented to shore up Singapore's place as an economic tiger in the 1980s, to a focus on neoliberal models of risk taking and entrepreneurialism after the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s.

It is clear that this apparent neoliberal shift in Singapore has to be placed in the context of a highly regulatory, interventionist government where economic liberalization has not been accompanied by an equal degree of liberalization of media and civil society. Singapore's push to individualization is also complicated by economic and ethnic inequalities. A multicultural migrant nation, it is characterized by a multi-lingual, multi-faith population consisting of a majority ethnic Chinese with Malays and Indians representing a significant minority.³ While household incomes have increased across the board in Singapore since the 1980s, the Chinese dominate politically and economically; and there is an ongoing income disparity between the Chinese majority and Malays and Indians, who continue to be discriminated against as ethnic minorities (Lee 2004). In focusing on the models of selfhood and lifestyle promoted on Chinese-language television, which is Singapore's dominant form of programming, it should therefore be noted that we are discussing an economically and culturally privileged group.

Although broadcast television in Singapore is commercial in orientation, it is highly regulated, falling primarily under the jurisdiction of the state-owned collection of companies known as Mediacorp. The only terrestrial broadcaster in Singapore, Mediacorp's various offerings include: Channel 5 (an English-language channel

described as ‘entertainment and lifestyle’ programming); Channel 8 (the main Chinese channel and the most watched channel overall in Singapore); Channel U (a youth-oriented Chinese channel); Suria (the Malay channel); and Vasantham (a Tamil channel). Direct-to-home satellite television is currently banned though cable is now widely available. However, with nearly 80% of adults watching terrestrial TV on a daily basis, our focus here is on free-to-air TV.⁴

Lifestyle TV programs feature on most channels across daytime and evening schedules, with one of the channels most strongly focused on lifestyle being, not surprisingly, the English-language Channel 5. Alongside international lifestyle programmes like *The Martha Stewart Show* and *Jamie’s Ministry of Food*, Channel 5 airs a range of locally produced lifestyle shows, including the popular food show *Asian Eat List* (hosted by Singaporean drag queen Kumar), which introduces viewers to cuisines, cultures and lifestyles from around Asia. Channel 5 has a glossy, cosmopolitan feel, addressing audiences (expats, Singaporean white collar workers and well-heeled housewives) through its various lifestyle offerings as savvy, tasteful consumers, while positioning them as ‘Singaporean’ in a broadly multi-cultural sense, and as part of a globalized Asia.

The majority of homegrown lifestyle TV,⁵ however, is produced for the Chinese-language channel, Channel 8, which attracts a large audience. Alongside a wide range of imported and indigenous reality formats (from *China’s Got Talent* and *Big Brother* to *With You 1000 Miles*, a local variation on *The Amazing Race*), lifestyle-oriented programming has flourished in the primetime 8 to 9pm slot,⁶ with cooking shows (commonly featuring a celebrity chef) being by far the most popular ‘sub-genre’ within the broad range of lifestyle offerings.

Like their Anglo-American counterparts, Singaporean lifestyle shows in recent years have become increasingly entertainment-oriented, often borrowing from reality TV conventions. The look and feel of these shows are, nevertheless, often rather different from primetime shows coming out of the UK and US. For example, while the primary focus on the BBC’s ground-breaking home renovation show *Changing Rooms* was on the

drama, emotion and (often class-inflected) tensions involved in allowing one's friends or neighbours to renovate one's home, Singaporean shows are less melodramatic and conflict-driven. Instead they are presented in the relentlessly manic and zany style common to variety shows throughout Asia, with the (usually) young, funky hosts on the show working hard at keeping the tone light and fun, even if, as I note below, the subtext of such shows may be strongly educational. While lifestyle shows in Singapore are often very local and 'Asian' in feel, at the same time, they clearly draw on Western lifestyle TV conventions, with programmes often imitating and drawing elements from overseas formats. This is particularly the case in lifestyle makeover programming, a genre that has become popular in recent years in Singapore, and that, given its focus on transforming identities and lifestyles, can be seen as 'an especially rich site for understanding the shifting dynamics of selfhood and cultural value' (Lewis 2009: 1).

Like early forms of the makeover on UK and US television, Singapore has produced a number of beauty and fashion makeover shows, aimed at female audiences and usually sponsored by makeup or fashion companies, including *Beautiful People*, first aired in 2002. While often little more than glossy forms of advertising for the shows' various sponsors, Channel 5's locally produced English-language primetime show, *Style Doctors* offers a rather more complex example of a program specifically targeted at working women. Aired in 2004 and hosted by two young and funky 'generically Asian' celebrity consultants (MTV VJ, Nadya Hutagalong and her male counterpart, singer/actor RJ Rosales), the show aims to transform the lives, homes, wardrobes and personal grooming routines of 'style-deficient' women. Not just focussing on fashion, but also, as the show's website explains offering 'an extreme style makeover in attitude [and] self-confidence', the style gurus' 'patients', we are told, 'are women in their early 20s to late 40s who have neglected themselves because of busy work schedules'.⁷

The show owes much to Western reality makeover programmes such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*; in its playful approach and attempt to distance itself from more didactic versions of the lifestyle advice genre, like *Queer Eye*, it is 'underpinned by a strongly instructional, therapeutic and moralistic ethos' (Lewis 2007: 294). For instance, in one

episode, 36 year old Selinna Tsang, who we are told has recently become pregnant, is made-over from an (allegedly) boringly dressed, somewhat mannish business development manager into a softer, more feminine professional and mother-to-be. As host RJ informs us, 'Selinna is the only woman in a male dominated office and she insists on hiding her femininity by dressing like a man ... and guess what, she's two months pregnant!'

In the US-style intervention that follows, friends and relatives 'diagnose' Selinna's problem. Her sister, conveniently echoing the 'remedy' suggested by the show's fashion 'experts', tells her: 'We want to see a new and improved you ... still power dressing but ... colourful.' *Style Doctors* suggests some of the contradictory images of modern femininity circulating in Singaporean society, where a focus on individualization and enterprise (through 'power dressing') is seen to clash with Selinna's impending familial duties and role. While Selinna's existing all-black wardrobe, which the show tells us is drab, could be read instead as a marker of a late modern, globalized middle-class identity (in one scene, for instance, she is wearing a black Gap-branded T-shirt), the show attempts to negotiate both individualization and femininity by throwing out her dark jackets – 'This must be your husband's!' – and returning colour to her wardrobe. Despite the show's semi-playful style, *Style Doctors* has little of the edginess that made *Queer Eye* such a global success. The message here is a fairly unreflexive one involving re-traditionalizing and re-feminizing Selinna's presentation of self, reflecting a rather conservative approach to the 'problem' of femininity in the workplace.

While personal makeover shows on Singaporean TV remain rather bland and formulaic, the trope of the makeover is taken up in a more sophisticated way via the *Home Décor Survivor* series, a highly popular Chinese-language home renovation format which first aired on Channel 8 in 2005, and, which produced a spin off show for children, *Junior Home Décor Survivor*. Like *Style Doctors*, the *Home Décor Survivor* series borrows heavily from Anglo-American makeover formats, offering a kind of Chinese-Singaporean version of *Changing Rooms* with a touch of *Queer Eye* (albeit with the overtly gay elements and the personal makeover taken out). In brief, the show sees two teams, each

led by a young male host (comedian Mark Lee and Bryan Wong, known as Mediacorp's 'hosting king'), compete to transform the interior space of two homes while staying within a budget of \$6000.

As on *Queer Eye*, the show has an overtly commercially driven rationale. We watch as home-owners, for instance, are taken to various stores to buy furniture, with the prices and the name and address of stores shown on screen. Rather than promoting consumption *per se*, however, the show ties savvy, thrift-oriented approaches to consumerism in with creative lessons in the art of everyday living. In the process of making over the contestants' homes, for instance, the teams are shown creating unique art works and installations. As on many Anglo-American home makeover formats, the concern here is with inducting audiences into specifically middle-class forms of consumption, taste and style. On *Home Décor Survivor* the kinds of cultural capital promoted are also self-consciously linked with a globalized set of taste and values. On one episode, English words pop up on screen (such as 'modernism', 'funky' and 'industrial looking'), speaking to local audiences with a transnational, cosmopolitan mode of address, while on another episode the focus is on a 'street art' aesthetic (Fig 1).

Figure 1: DIY ‘street art’ on *Home Décor Survivor* (Series 3, Episode 14).

But in promoting modes of taste familiar to middle-class audiences around the globe, the show by no means merely imports the cultural values of Anglo-American home makeover formats. Rather it is a thoroughly hybridized format, drawing as much upon the aesthetics of Japanese-style variety TV, Sinicized via Taiwan, as on Anglophone programming. Thus, the show strives for a rather manic feel, with slapstick humour accompanied by incessant post-production comic sound effects, constant banter between team members, and a very busy screen aesthetic—all of which contributes to an overall feel of *renao*, a Mandarin term meaning literally ‘hot and noisy’; that is: lively, busy and fun.

Likewise, the content of the show blends European design tips with ‘local’ aesthetics and concerns. The focus for the *Home Décor* team is not on the large suburban houses common in US and Australian makeover shows but on the kind of housing typical of ordinary Singaporeans, that is, small Housing Development Board flats. Meanwhile, in a highly reflexive fashion, the design focus of the show often marries cosmopolitan taste with distinctly local aesthetics. In one episode the designers blend ‘Euro’ and ‘Asian style’ (Fig 2) while other episodes are themed ‘ethnic fusion’ and ‘oriental vogue’.

Figure 2: An after shot of a lounge/dining space transformed on *Home Décor Survivor* by blending ‘Euro’ and ‘Asian style’, complete with framed Chinese characters surrounding the dining table (Series 4, Episode 7).

Shows like *Style Doctors* and *Home Décor Survivor* are clearly not simply about passing on practical advice to audiences; in the contemporary Singaporean setting, they can also be seen as negotiating both older-style values and forms of identity, and flexible cosmopolitan models of taste and selfhood. *Home Décor Survivor* in particular positions audiences as at once local and global citizens able to articulate a reflexively local and regional Asian identity to a cosmopolitan world view through adopting particular regimes of consumption and taste. Such trends within Singaporean popular culture clearly dovetail with the state’s drive to endorse a new form of entrepreneurial, neoliberal citizenship. While reality-based makeover shows might seem an unlikely vehicle for the promotion of state concerns around self-managing citizenship, as noted in our introduction, a growing Anglo-American literature has documented the way in which these ostensibly entertainment-oriented formats can be seen to shore up neoliberal models

of consumer-citizenship in which community concerns such as obesity and the global oil crisis are treated as issues that can be dealt with at the level of individual consumer behaviour and self-regulation (Ouellette & Hay 2008; Lewis 2008b).

In the Singaporean context, while our interviews with TV producers confirmed that commercial concerns often play a central role in lifestyle programming, with shows commonly sponsored directly by products or companies, the public educational elements of the programmes are often equally important and tend to be foregrounded in a much more overt fashion than on US or British TV. Thus, many of Mediacorp's lifestyle and magazine-advice shows are packaged in terms of their benefit to the community, with TV producers overtly linking programmes to current government concerns and campaigns around lifestyle issues, such as health and fitness, saving and budgeting, and community-mindedness.

A good example of this is *Energy Savers*, a reality-based programme that aired on Channel 8 in a primetime slot in 2008. Focusing on twelve households who compete to reduce their energy consumption while thinking up 'creative ways' for saving electricity along the way, like *Home Décor Survivor*, the show's tone is comedic and playful. While the show aims for a light, variety-style feel, however, its agenda is more overtly educational; the young, attractive hosts guide the viewer through a systematic audit of the households, offering suggestions for reducing energy consumption. The programme's focus on regulating consumption thus aligns it with a range of recent lifestyle makeover shows coming out of Anglo-American contexts, such as *The Biggest Loser*, and eco-makeover formats like Australia's *Eco-house Challenge*. Indeed, more recently Mediacorp has also made its own version of *The Biggest Loser* called *Lose To Win*, sponsored by the Health Promotion Board (HPB).

From *Style Doctors* to *Lose To Win*, the recent rise of lifestyle programs on primetime TV in Singapore can be seen as marking the growing cultural legitimacy of flexible, though perhaps not quite post-traditional, modes of identity. Personal makeover shows like *Style Doctors* apparently speak to a malleable notion of identity where individuals

are exhorted to see themselves not so much in terms social stratifiers, such as class and ethnicity, but rather in terms of performed public personas – where the public self is recognized through the savvy use of an array of consumer markers, with such performances often oriented towards optimizing one's opportunities in the job or marriage market. This notion of optimizing one's self and lifestyle is extended to domestic space in popular home renovation shows such as *Home Décor Survivor*. Though, where on Anglo-American shows, the domestic makeover is often a highly emotional experience, tied as it is to therapeutic culture and an ethos of authenticity and self-development, on Singaporean TV the makeover seems a rather more pragmatic exercise, attuned to shaping participants into good consumer-citizens.

What Singaporean lifestyle shows do share with their Anglo-American counterparts is a focus on taste and cultural capital, though again with little of the class tensions evident on say British makeover shows. The kind of middle-class advice often offered on British television is instead framed here for a Singaporean audience through a distinctly cosmopolitan, aspirational lens. The style makeovers on *Home Décor Survivor* are thus characterized by a playful, cross-cultural aesthetic that blends European and Asian tastes, speaking to Singapore's broader ambitions as a leading globalised Asian city-state with a highly entrepreneurial and creative workforce. Shows like *Energy Savers* are likewise marked by an enterprising, DIY ethos; although here the mode of address is again more overtly pedagogical and instrumentalist, the logic of flexible individualism tied to governmental concerns with promoting thrift, responsible consumption and self-regulating modes of citizenship.

While Singaporean lifestyle programming can clearly be seen as promoting certain globalized models of identity, taste and consumption, at the same time, our analysis suggests that these trends need to be understood within the specific socio-cultural, economic and political context of Singaporean modernity, while also taking into account the peculiar set of constraints and imperatives under which the Singaporean TV industry operates. While the show *Style Doctors*, for instance, on the surface promotes the goals of self-realization and consumer empowerment for women, such messages vie with older-

style, essentialist depictions of women's roles as carers in the home, as the 'soft' counterpart to the 'hard' masculinity of the male business world. These constraints reflect a society negotiating competing global, neoliberal, regional and older-style Chinese patriarchal influences, and a government that has provided Singaporean women with very mixed messages about their roles in an entrepreneurial, post-industrial economy (Martin & Lewis forthcoming). Likewise, while more recent shows such as *Lose To Win* might be read as importing an American-style spirit of enterprise and neoliberal self-management into an Asian context, such shows have to be understood in the context of Singapore's own, very distinctive, brand of authoritarian and regulated late capitalism. Singaporean neoliberalism (if we can call it that) is clearly very different from its Western counterparts, blending, as Harvey (2005: 86) notes, authoritarian capitalism with neo-Confucianism, nationalism and a 'cosmopolitan ethic suited to its current position in the world of international trade'. While many lifestyle shows in Singapore may mimic, adopt and adapt discourses of flexible selfhood, enterprise and cosmopolitanism—discourses that fit well with government concerns—our sense is there may be, as yet, less of a fit between emergent state rhetorics around enterprising neoliberalism, and residual social and cultural conceptions of selfhood, particularly in relation to gender.

***Shenghuo*: Lifestyle Television in China**

In contrast to Singapore, 'lifestyle television' does not function as a popularly recognized genre in China, though the closely related term *shenghuo* (life) is used to designate programs across a range of genres covering a wide array of topics such as cooking, shopping, home decoration, renovation, body care, travel and healthy living. The *shenghuo* theme therefore encompasses what in Anglo-American contexts might be called lifestyle programs, but also much more besides. Many of the life advice programs on Chinese television do, however, carry the stock ingredients of lifestyle TV in Anglo-American contexts, including makeover motifs – especially in shows about cosmetics, body care, and home renovation – and competitive elements. In addition, choices made by participants in these programs reflect a trend towards individualization and reflexivity, in terms of a focus on personal creativity, adaptability and environmental awareness. Exemplifying all these characteristics is Chinese Central Television (CCTV) Channel 2's

Changing Spaces, featuring team A and team B competing to finish renovating an apartment according to specified criteria (thrifty use of space, aesthetic design, ‘green’ credentials) within a designated number of hours.

While bearing some traits in common with Anglo-American lifestyle television, the evolution of *shenghuo* programs in China needs to be understood in its own historical and industrial context. Television did not become a common household item in Chinese homes until the late 1970s and early 1980s. Prior to that, the primary goal of Chinese television, which was mostly viewed in communal settings, was the mobilization of its citizens in nation-building and promoting desirable values for the construction of a socialist modernity. For that reason, news and current affairs – the ‘hard’ stuff of television content – were the staple fare on Chinese television. It was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that new ‘soft’ television formats started to proliferate. This was in response to the new mandate to provide ‘life information’ (*shenghuo xinxi*) – information useful for everyday life – and entertainment as well as news and current affairs. Thus in the early 1990s, Jiangsu TV came up with a ‘metropolitan channel’ and Beijing TV created a ‘life channel’.⁸ In 2002, Shanghai TV produced a ‘vogue living’ channel, which was renamed Channel Young in 2010. The naming of these programs and channels was motivated by a desire to carve out a distinctive brand for purposes of product differentiation in an increasingly competitive television market. They were not necessarily the outcome of a conscious strategy to transplant or indigenize Western style lifestyle programs onto Chinese television.⁹

In this section, we argue that any attempt to understand the role of *shenghuo* television in the everyday lives of Chinese viewers must understand two closely related contexts: on the one hand, the development and transformation of the Chinese television industry, and on the other hand, the gradual but steady process by which Chinese society is being privatized and individualized, resulting in a ‘novel mix of neoliberal and socialist elements, of individual choices and state objectives’ (Ong & Zhang 2008).

Reforms in China’s TV industry and the rise of shenghuo TV

Perhaps more than anywhere else, the television industry in China needs to negotiate the dual mandate of making profit and delivering politically safe content. The ubiquitous presence of *shenghuo* programs on TV is partly motivated by the need for entertainment programs that are not overtly political. Furthermore, since lifestyle programs offer the most direct space for product placement, the imperative of generating profits means that the more lifestyle TV programs, the more sponsorship and advertising revenue.

An important measure of industry reforms involves channel specialization, aiming at ensuring accurate market targeting, high ratings, and hence economic returns. For instance, while CCTV 1 (CCTV refers to China Central Television: the central state broadcaster) is a general channel, specializing in news and current affairs, CCTV 2 calls itself an economics channel, specializing in covering economic activities in all walks of life. CCTV 4 targets Mandarin-speaking international audiences. As in other fragmenting television markets, the proliferation of channels has driven an increased need for content, which in China translates into a need for politically safe and potentially profitable forms of programming. This goes some way to explaining the most noteworthy thing that can be said about lifestyle television programs on Chinese television – that many of what we normally classify as ‘lifestyle’ programs are used as ‘filler’ programming in China and found outside the designated ‘Life’ channels.¹⁰

Today Chinese viewers are faced with a bewildering array of choices in channels and programming, including free-to-air CCTV channels, provincial satellite channels and additional digital channels delivered with a set box. Furthermore, since 1998, all provinces now send their main television channels through satellite-cable to a national audience. The availability of nearly 30 provincial satellite stations, plus a whole range of local channels in urban cable households across the country, has dramatically changed the Chinese television scene, putting an end to the monopoly of, as well as enormous pressure on, CCTV (Zhao 2008a; Zhu & Berry 2009). The result is that provincial and local stations as well as national television have all felt the acute need to target the same *national* viewership by identifying market niches and creating new brands. For instance, Hunan Satellite TV is now associated with high-rating entertainment and variety shows,

while viewers are likely to tune to Shanghai TV for guidance for trends and products in the realm of fashion and lifestyle. Hainan TV, for another instance, recognized tourism and travel as a fast growing form of consumption and lifestyle in China. In 2002, it launched its 24-hour-a-day Travel Satellite TV.

Another factor complicating attempts to generalize about lifestyle TV in China is the role of local television. Over the past couple of decades, a ‘four-level’ television policy has been in force in China, resulting in the co-existence of national, provincial, city and county stations (Sun in press). There are now around 1000 county and city level television stations, which, in addition to serving as a mouthpiece for the local Party committee, also broadcast local news programs, relay central and provincial television programs, and facilitate the development of television coverage in rural areas. Together, they constitute a major part of China’s television industry. Limited to local areas, these channels have received little scholarly attention since they operate at a low administrative level and have a narrow range of influence. For the purposes of economic survival and maintaining local relevance, however, local television channels are enthusiastic producers of life advice programs. Such programs may not be as slick and influential as CCTV or Shanghai TV, but they enjoy a steady and loyal viewership due to a strong local relevance. This case of simultaneous up-scaling (provincial TV going national, and by extension, international) and down-scaling (provincial and local TV having to focus on local needs in order to maintain a hold on local audience) within the Chinese television industry is a crucial element to factor in our exploration of life advice content.

Faced with this complexity in China’s television landscape resulting from the multiply ‘nested’ levels of TV programming available nationally and in local areas, in July-August 2011, we conducted a schedule mapping exercise on six of the highest-rating nationwide channels: Hunan Satellite, CCTV1, CCTV2, Liaoning Satellite, Shanghai Oriental, and Jiangsu Satellite.¹¹ The exercise revealed that on these popular channels, the commonest genres in the evening slots are (in descending order): drama, news and ‘soft’ news (the latter encompassing current affairs, life-advice and talk shows: these genres are especially

prevalent on CCTV2), plus entertainment genres including reality, game shows, variety, talent quests and other competitions.

Aside from specialist lifestyle-oriented channels, then, in China lifestyle themes are also often embedded in other genres such as the soft news genres noted above, and reality TV. For example, on May 27, 2010, CCTV 1's program *Common Interests* ran a story on the potentially negative effects of health-related and healthy living books on the market. According to the host, some books inform elderly consumers that eating bananas can prevent heart and artery diseases, while other books give the opposite message. Another CCTV 1 show that targets senior viewers, *Red Sunset* offers segments in a variety of formats including talk shows, quiz shows, features, profiles, addressing a wide range of social, economic, cultural and practical issues facing a vast ageing population. One of its segments, *Household Tips*, provides practical advice on trivial but annoying household problems, such as how to secure a photo in the frame or peel onions without shedding tears.

The scattering of life advice content in a great variety of television channels and programs has at least two implications. First, it is difficult to generalize a pattern of scheduling; for example, life-advice programs targeting senior viewers may be scheduled at any time of day, since their intended viewers are mostly retired, while the Travel Channel, with its tips on desirable tourism destinations, broadcasts 24 hours a day. Second, the widely dispersed nature of life advice content makes it difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain its target audience.

Production of the private self

The reform measures in the television industry described above are part and parcel of the broader social transformation that China has been undergoing over the last 30 years, which includes the rise of the individual in both public and private spheres. This trend towards individualization has gone hand in hand with a process of privatization, which has taken place on a number of levels. At the level of society in general, China has witnessed the retreat of state patronage from a wide range of social services, including

housing, education and health care. Workplace-provided housing, the norm during the socialist era, has given way to ownership of private property, which has profoundly reshaped people's sense of belonging and social identity. Home-making has quickly become a staple of everyday conversations among urban residents (Croll 2006). Similarly, the withdrawal of state responsibility in the provision of public health care cover, again the norm in the socialist era, also means that, more than ever before, consumers find themselves in need of free or affordable information, knowledge and expert advice about how to ward off disease and stay healthy—hence the popularity of television programs on cultivating health.

However, despite the devolution of state responsibilities to the individual, it is the Chinese state that instigated and continues to be actively involved in the project of *suzhi* (quality) education and improvement in order to elevate the level of 'civility' of the population. According to the *suzhi* discourse, a citizen with good *suzhi* is one who is both patriotic to the Party and useful to the market. Viewed in this way, the emergence of *shenghuo* programs further extends the discursive space of *suzhi* education. As Xu's study of lifestyle programs in China demonstrates, another kind of *suzhi* education is taking place on Chinese television, teaching viewers modern skills of home-making, child-rearing and wise consumption (Xu 2007). As in Singapore, these programs are not simply about teaching viewers practical knowledge. Equally importantly, they teach viewers a new suite of values, and function to transform viewers into modern, flexible, cosmopolitan persons who are willing to open up to new experiences and new ways of relating to people and the world. Travel programs, in particular, encourage viewers to go out there, experience the world, and in the process discover their 'true self'. Hainan TV's flagship program is a travel show urging its viewers to, as its title suggests, 'Go As Far As You Can'. It also encourages viewers, through one of its promotional tag lines, to develop a trans-local subjectivity, urging 'the heart to go afar, even though the body has not moved'.

Often, lifestyle motifs can be found in the form of reality TV, mixing the tropes of adventure and discovery. On 1 June 2010, CCTV 2's show, *Ideas for Consumers*,

featured a story entitled ‘Looking for Treasures in the Desert’. The host (a young woman) and her friends pile into a four-wheel drive and head for Alashan, in the desert of Inner Mongolia, in search for amber. The show takes the viewers on a journey to the market, shops, collectors and business people dealing in gemstones. It also tells viewers how to prepare for the trip (vehicle, equipment, planning etc.) should they decide to try it themselves. Participants, and by implication, viewers, reach the end of the journey knowledgeable not only about themselves but also about the world. They have found gemstones, the object of their search; they have also, metaphorically speaking, discovered clues to success in the market economy: having a clear goal, the importance of capacity building, and the importance of never giving up.

Whereas socialist-era propaganda tended to indoctrinate patriotism, altruism and collectivist values in a top-down, didactic fashion, neoliberal forms of governance depend on ‘market knowledge and calculations for a politics of subjection and subject-making’ (Ong 2006: 3), giving the impression that the recipients have the choice to accept or reject the values promoted, such as economic independence, individual responsibility, creativity, or ‘green’ consciousness. A good example is a rather ‘cute’ community advertisement aired between programs on the life channels on Bengbu TV (a local channel we are examining in our project, which is based in the relatively less developed province of Anhui in Eastern China). Featuring an endearing-looking cartoon child, the advertisement urges its viewer to live a ‘low-carbon life’, rattling off a list of energy-saving tips within less than one minute: instructing people to turn out the lights when leaving the room, climb the stairs instead of using the lift, turn off power-points and drive less. The impish little cartoon figure finishes the advertisement by asking the viewer in a cute, girly voice: ‘Are you low on carbon today?’, forming a sharp contrast to the imposing paternalistic tone often associated with old-style state propaganda.

This apparent depoliticization, however, does not mean that the state is completely hands-off in relation to the content of ‘soft’ television. Early this year, some popular dating shows from provincial television such as *Only If You Are the One* from Jiangsu Satellite TV and *Take Me Out* from Hunan Satellite TV, raised the ire of the central government.

The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television became so concerned about the ‘morally ambiguous content’ of these shows that they issued two documents, banning ‘fake participants, morally provoking hosts and hostesses, and sexual innuendoes’ in reality shows, and requiring that participants in matchmaking shows on television undergo stricter screening procedures. That the central government should be moved to intervene for moral rather than overtly political reasons and regulate the content of entertainment-oriented programs on provincial channels came as a surprise to many, serving as a reminder that if the state has ushered in neoliberal cultural practices and values, it also has the power to rein them in.

While a conception of identity that foregrounds personal choice and a malleable self is clearly at work in some of these programs, there is a danger of lumping under this conceptual umbrella a lot of other aspects that may or may not be directly related to neoliberalism. For instance, since its arrival in China, television has been teaching people how to negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity, and the current lifestyle programs constitute a certain kind of continuity with this older project. Many *shenghuo* programs teach viewers a more modern and scientific way of cultivating health; however, they also encourage viewers to reflect and rediscover the enduring strength of traditional Chinese ways of life in modern times. On 20 May 2010, CCTV 4’s show *Chinese Medicine* treated viewers to an extended narrative of how a patient, a long-time sufferer of constipation, is eventually cured after agreeing to experiment with an age-old traditional remedy. Through a combination of individual biographies, interviews with doctors and experts, and patients’ testimonials, the show demonstrates how certain medical practices work and while doing so, offers knowledge about health, body care and treatment options. The show touches on an enduring debate around Chinese versus Western models of medicine and healthcare, one in which the Chinese have been engaged for a long time, prior to television’s arrival and before the onset of neoliberalism as an economic and political doctrine.

A Western class-based framework similarly cannot necessarily be applied in a wholesale fashion to China. Lifestyle television originated in Euro-American societies characterized

by large, established middle classes. In contrast, while China is an increasingly stratified society, a middle class has only just begun to emerge (Goodman 2008). As social mobility is central to understanding peoples' aspirations, and since lifestyle TV plays a central role in teaching, sometimes literally showing, how people of another class live, in China these programs may be designed more with the purpose of teaching viewers what they need to do in order to achieve *status*, and less about how to construct a social *identity*. It is precisely due to this need to showcase superior taste and status that Chinese television actively promotes lifestyles, which are often beyond ordinary peoples' wildest dreams. In other words, while lifestyle TV in Anglo-American contexts has the function of *naturalising* middle-class lifestyles, *shenghuo* programs in China have the role of *introducing and establishing* middle-class values and tastes. This explains why some of the lifestyle shows are so much more blatant in introducing – by demonstration and cataloguing – middle-class home-making practices.

An example of such aspirational television is Shanghai TV's show *Home-Making*, aired on their Life channel in 2010. Hosted by a young, 'zany' couple, the show introduces, one by one, various styles of interior decoration: Mediterranean, Southeast Asian, American country, Japanese and French provincial, complete with details of furniture, fittings, and aesthetics compatible with the style. Unlike home renovation shows such as *Changing Spaces*, discussed above, these various interior designs are catalogued in the manner of a display home, not as the actual lived environment of individuals. The show seems to be less about giving practical advice and more about imparting a subliminal message: superior social status comes with a new suite of markers signifying taste and distinction. And although you may never become wealthy enough to afford these furnishings, it pays to acquire literacy in bourgeois living.

If neoliberalism is defined as a series of strategies which 'recast governing activities as technical rather than political and ideological' (Ong 2006: 3), *shenghuo* programs on Chinese television, like their counterparts in Anglo-American contexts, present telling examples of how to cultivate 'self-governing' and 'self-engineering' subjects. Life programs on healthy diet, body care, home economics, consumer tips, how to invest

one's savings wisely, how to dress, where to travel, and how to decorate one's place of dwelling, provide the quotidian advice and knowledge necessary to survive in a deregulated society, and in doing so, fill the gap left by the retreat of the Reform Era state from the care of its citizens.

At the same time, China is 'not an openly committed neoliberal capitalist social formation' (Zhao 2008b), and the question as to whether China's economic development can be indeed described as neoliberal in nature is still open to debate. While David Harvey (2005) describes China's economic reform measures as 'neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics', others like Arrighi (2007) argue that China, despite the capitalist nature of its economy, has not in fact followed neoliberal prescriptions, and instead has adopted a series of approaches which are best suited to China's own conditions. Despite the unresolved debate, it is beyond doubt that China has experienced a most profound social transformation in the past three decades, resulting in growing inequality in terms of gender, class and rural-urban divide. Against this backdrop, Chinese television viewers, both urban elites and rural poor, participate in the process of becoming modern, as desiring subjects as well as objects of development (Rofel 2007). Understanding the role of lifestyle television means exploring the ways in which the outlook, consciousness and life strategies of different individuals are changed and affected by this grand narrative of modernization.

Genre, content, or thematic: Desperately seeking lifestyle TV in Taiwan

Like Singapore, Taiwan numbered among the four 'Asian Tiger' economies that underwent rapid industrialization and economic growth post-1960, producing well-developed post-industrial capitalist economies. Today, like Singapore, Taiwan is home to a relatively wealthy consumer society; and a range of lifestyle media, from magazines to niche cable channels to Internet sites, target the urban middle classes with a focus on the aesthetics of living.

While free-to-air networks still play a major role in China and Singapore, the television market in Taiwan is dominated by cable TV. The terrestrials in Taiwan comprise the

three old channels TTV, CTS and CTV, founded in the early sixties (originally controlled by various arms of the old Kuomintang party-state but now running as commercial operations), plus the newer FTV and PTS, established in the late nineties. Based on rating and share figures per channel, the terrestrials have historically been the most popular channels, but this dominance is now fading, with San Lih, a cable channel, ranking second overall since 2007, and San Lih News sitting at fifth place as at mid-2011, while the lowest-rating free-to-air, CTS, had dropped to ninth place.¹² Indeed, Taiwan has one of the most highly developed commercial cable television systems in East Asia (Oba & Chan-Olmstead 2005). Servicing a population of just 23 million, at the time of writing, there are over one hundred and fifty local commercial cable channels in operation. With low subscription prices and cable packages offering a comprehensive bundle of the available channels, cable TV, considered as a block, was the primary choice of a large majority of viewers in 2009 (GIO 2009). Meanwhile, the Public Television Service Foundation launched Taiwan's first public channel in 1998 (PTS), and in 2007 became an umbrella organization for a suite of publicly funded TV enterprises including PTS, Hakka TV, TITV (Taiwan Indigenous Television) plus a recently (semi)nationalized CTS. However, as a block the commercial channels (both free-to-air and cable) outrank this handful of public channels in market share by a very wide margin.

Television in Taiwan is an industry governed almost wholly by market forces. At the same time, TV content today is highly politicized. During the military dictatorship of the Chiang family in the martial law period of 1947-1987, media culture in Taiwan was subject to an extreme level of political regulation under the Kuomintang (KMT) party's anti-communist ideology. But along with the lifting of martial law, the late 1980s saw the legalization of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the beginning of a broad cultural and political thaw. In contrast to both the strict political regulation of media content in Taiwan's recent past, and the contemporary television industries in PRC China and Singapore, there is now no remaining government censorship whatsoever of political content on Taiwan television. But, despite a 2005 law prohibiting direct investment in mass media by political parties, the political affiliations of the major commercial stations (whether pro-KMT or pro-DPP) are extremely clear and relate

closely to each channel's target audience demographic. Another key characteristic of Taiwan's commercial TV landscape is the fragmentation of the audience: in 2007 the highest rating channel, FTV, secured an average share of just 7.29%.¹³ Related to this market fragmentation is an extremely intense competition for advertising revenue, the effects of which are discussed further below.

Turning to questions of content and scheduling, our 2011 schedule-mapping exercise of six of Taiwan's top-rating channels (FTV, San Lih, TTV, CTV, CTS and TVBS News) revealed that drama remains the clearly dominant prime-time genre on Taiwan television, followed by news and 'Taiwanized' Japanese-style variety shows. Cable news channels are the most popular group of cable channels by genre, and at the time of writing, a very common genre on these channels' evening schedules was the political talk show.

Daytime television, targeted at non-working married women, the elderly and children, offers a mix of cartoons (before and after school), drama reruns, midday news, and magazine-style infotainment – for example, cooking, health and travel shows, which, as in China, often incorporate either product placement or thinly disguised infomercials to help recoup profits for ratings-poor morning television. Evening scheduling is remarkably homogeneous across the major generalist commercial channels. 6pm marks the beginning of the evening news slot, which is often followed by a current affairs chat show or variety-style 'soft' news program. 8 to 10 or 11 pm sees the primetime hours – or 'golden' slot, as it is called in Chinese – filled with Chinese-language drama serials. On weekends, this slot is typically given over to variety shows, plus, at the time of writing, a rash of talent quests and a sprinkling of life-advice programs (cooking and travel). As in Singapore, 10 pm – 2 am was recognized by several of the TV industry personnel we spoke with as a slot that could be effectively targeted at the younger generation of professional workers, who typically return late to the multi-generational family apartment after working long hours into the evening, and are only at this hour able to wrest the TV remote away from the elder generation and their beloved dramas. Hence, it is in this slot that we tend to find programs whose content (if not generic format) may appear most comparable with Anglo-American lifestyle shows, directed as they are at instructing

younger, middle-class, cosmopolitan viewers in the fashions and mores of leading a modern, stylish life in consumer culture.

But whereas in Singapore, the phrase ‘lifestyle television’ functions fairly well to designate a recognized genre, in Taiwan the concept of lifestyle television is far less entrenched, despite the scattered use (as in PRC China) of descriptors including the term *shenghuo* (life), to designate info-ed programming with an everyday life theme. Among ten television professionals we interviewed, for instance, not all recognized the concept of lifestyle television, and some – including one senior executive – initially misunderstood the genre to which we were referring, thinking we had in mind either community-service programs directly sponsored by government, or old-style hobbyist television (traditional cooking or gardening shows).

In Taiwan, ‘lifestyle TV’ functions *as a genre* mainly on the specialized cable channels Discovery Taiwan, National Geographic and the Discovery daughter channel, TLC (Travel and Living Channel). These channels mainly air imported content, often in English and not always subtitled in Chinese. They function as niche channels, narrowcasting to a specific market segment (younger, highly educated, English-competent, professional city-dwellers). As these transnational cable networks have a much wider, international market for their product than Taiwan-based networks, such channels thrive on a far smaller domestic audience: in mid 2011, for example, TLC’s market share was a mere 0.2% (compared with market leader FTV at 9.3%).¹⁴ The programs on these specialist ‘lifestyle’ channels assume a certain cosmopolitan orientation in their viewer, not just through the largely overseas focus of their programs and the dominance of the English language, but also in other ways.

One fascinating example is the program *Fun Taiwan*, a popular Taiwan-based travelogue that screens on TLC on Sundays at 8pm and Tuesdays at 7pm, with repeats dotted throughout the week. One might assume that the local subject-matter would make for a localized mode of address, but the program is in fact presented mainly in English, subtitled in Chinese, by an American-born Taiwanese hostess known as Janet. Janet

travels around the scenic and cultural hotspots of Taiwan, discovering local colour, meeting local people and as she puts it the program's opening credits, 'rediscovering her heritage'. Janet speaks English to the viewer in direct address and voiceover, reserving her use of Minnan and Mandarin for the local people she meets along the way. The program thus establishes a very particular mode of address: although both hostess and target audience are (ethnically) Taiwan-Chinese, and the place being introduced is the island of Taiwan, where the audience itself lives, nevertheless the viewer is effectively addressed as an (English-speaking) tourist in her or his own country. The program, conceived by its producers as 'a view of Taiwan through a foreigner's eyes', effectively asks the viewer to re-imagine her or himself as a leisured, middle-class foreigner looking at Taiwan, as though for the first time.¹⁵ As with programming on these niche-market 'lifestyle' cable channels more generally, *Fun Taiwan* thus constructs its viewer as part of the 'transnational cosmopolitan elite' analyzed by Harindranath (2003), constructing a certain remove between Taiwan as familiar life-environment and 'Taiwan' as tourist spectacle.

If in Taiwan 'lifestyle TV' as a *genre* is clustered in this handful of specialist cable channels, our next question becomes: where on the major channels can we find locally produced *content* comparable to what is elsewhere classified as 'lifestyle TV'? Searching for non-fictional programming instructing its viewer in stylized consumption and related skills pertaining to living in a late capitalist, consumption-oriented society, then as in PRC China, we find such content scattered throughout a wide array of other genres. These include documentary, variety, reality, hobbyist, religious, chat, investment guides and guides to *fengshui*, fortune-telling and other forms of traditional folk belief as well as cultural-educational and sponsored program-length spots advertising particular products or services.

On high-rating cable channel FTV News, for example, we find *Luxury Living*, airing at 10am Saturday and repeated at other times on other FTV channels. Hosted by anchorwoman Xia Hui-lin, the programme introduces new high-end residential developments, framing them primarily as investments. The script highlights the extent to

which each featured apartment is likely to appreciate in value, and apartments are pictured in a pristine, pre-lived-in state and introduced by representatives of the companies that design, build and market them. CTS's *Gorgeous Spaces* is also focussed on home design. Screened at 11:30pm – 12:30am on a Friday night, the program is conceived as targeting the 'average middle-class homeowner' rather than the super-rich targeted by *Luxury Living*.¹⁶ *Gorgeous Spaces* is a commercially sponsored program in which each episode showcases the work of a particular interior designer, who is interviewed *in situ* as we are led on a tour of the redesigned apartment. Like *Luxury Living* and comparably to Shanghai TV's *Home-Making*, discussed above, but in contrast to Anglo-American lifestyle home-renovation formats, the apartments appear in a pristine state, fresh from their makeover, without a pictorial before-and-after comparison and in the absence of any inhabitants. The designer explains design choices and the presenter nods and smiles while the camera pans over lush expanses of glass splashback, customized decorator artwork, and ingenious storage units. Both *Luxury Living* and *Gorgeous Spaces* incorporate certain aspects of Anglo-American lifestyle home-renovation formats while remaining different in key respects. They certainly include instruction in the aesthetics of middle-class taste that may be interpreted as an element of a broader program of interpellating modern, urban, cosmopolitan consuming subjects. But any emotive spectacle of transformation or visualisation of the everyday life and individual identities of the people who inhabit the spaces is notably missing. Instead of modelling the everyday inhabitation of the 'tasteful' spaces they picture, these shows present the apartments almost catalogue-style, and the key discourse is one of canny investment rather than self-making. Comparably to Shanghai TV's *Home-Making*, in the absence of either a melodramatic mode of address or a visualization of their inhabitants' lives, these apartments are framed as rather generalized, tasteful, desirable, and status-enhancing *products* more than as living environments with the power to reflect or shape the type of individuals who own them.

Why, then, does Taiwan TV largely lack locally made lifestyle programming in a more global, generic style? Professed discontent with the homogeneity of commercial programming in Taiwan has been ubiquitous among the television professionals we have

interviewed so far. Those working in the commercial sector expressed the collective view that they while would like to experiment with new genres like lifestyle, with the massive number of cable channels now competing for limited advertising revenue, they are working in an extremely risk-averse environment, with executives unwilling to gamble on departing from the scheduling formula or the tried and true genres. In those scattered instances where local channels have attempted to create copies of overseas lifestyle programs, the programs have failed the ratings test and promptly been cancelled. Interviewees suggested this has been due to inadequate budgets and the consequent feebleness of the productions.¹⁷ To the notion of lifestyle programs airing at primetime on major generalist channels, as has happened in Britain, Australia, the USA and Singapore, the collective response of interviewees was a firm assertion that this is unthinkable in Taiwan under present conditions.

As noted above, lifestyle TV in Anglo-American contexts is a genre in which product placement, instructional life advice and entertaining narratives are seamlessly combined. In discussing the (non-)appearance of 'lifestyle' as a clearly defined genre on Taiwan TV, several industry professionals noted that there may be a specific problem in this context with the attempt to combine instructional and entertainment values. In Taiwan's generic TV taxonomies, they noted, the 'educational' is marked off in specific ways. This is most clearly seen in dedicated channels like CTS Culture and Education, which airs programs teaching English, art and poetry appreciation, calligraphy, and so on. Mr Wang, a stylist at CTS Culture and Education, noted candidly about this channel:

It has the educational aspect, but frankly it lacks any entertainment value. It's very informational: a teacher standing there, telling you this and that. [...] [We] just don't seem to be able to get it to the level of, say, the National Geographic channel or Discovery. Everything we do seems to lack that little something. [...] Here, the educational is separated very strictly from the entertaining. [...] But that makes the [educational] shows feel very dead. So *lifestyle* as a genre is divided up between programs – a bit of it here, a bit of it there. No single show qualifies as pure *lifestyle*.¹⁸

Ms Chen, a program buyer at PTS, concurred: 'I don't know why, but Taiwan audiences seem to feel that if something is "educational" then it must be boring. [...] Entertainment programs are made purely for entertainment value. And once you call a program 'educational' well, you basically lose half of your audience.'¹⁹ But, despite these claims, we do find certain elements of life advice embedded within some entertainment formats.

Consider the program *WQueen*, from cable station TVBS Entertainment, screened weeknights at 9–10pm and repeated at midnight and in afternoon and evening slots (Still 2). *W Queen* targets women between 25–44 years of age, offering tips on feminine-coded topics like fashion, beauty, and body-shaping.²⁰ The show features a panel of female hostesses interacting with guest 'experts' on a bright, pink-themed set, exemplifying the proliferation of post-production effects and *renao*, comedic mode of address associated with Taiwanized Japanese style variety formats. In look and overall feel, it has little in common with current primetime Euro-American lifestyle programs, yet in its project of developing forms of self-regulating (gendered) selfhood equipped with the skills to negotiate the perils of life in late capitalist consumer culture, optimising opportunities and minimizing risk, *WQueen* does share something in common with Western forms of lifestyle TV. A similar example is *Fashion in House*, which screens at 1–2pm Saturdays with a repeat on Sunday afternoon on Murdoch's Channel [V] Taiwan. In an episode aired on July 4, 2009, *Fashion in House* focussed on a discussion of what a young woman should wear to a job interview, with the panel members picking out several contrasting outfits, which were then judged by the guest 'experts' – too showy; too childish; too casual; too revealing, et cetera – providing an opportunity for advice to the viewer on how a young woman can most effectively go about packaging herself for prospective employers on today's tight domestic job market following the 'financial tsunami' (Fig 3). As with *W Queen*'s episode on eliminating markers of stress from the face via make up and massage techniques (Fig 4), this episode of *Fashion In House* invites analysis through a 'lifestyle' rubric emphasizing the teaching of techniques of entrepreneurial self-management within a 'risk society'. Along with the personal risk-management aspect, a rich and complex set of broader cultural anxieties around young

modern femininity is also indexed in this simple segment. These include concerns around defining and directing the public display of young women's sexuality (the directive to avoid a 'cheap' or 'sluttish' look); the policing of class through taste (the inappropriateness of 'showy' outfits that appear immodest in the different sense of overtly displaying the young female body as a site of 'vulgar' over-consumption); and the concern to demarcate age- and style-appropriate female bodies for office work and corporate life (adult and formal-conservative rather than cute-childish or student-style casual). In taking as their subject the young woman, programs like these reveal how the lifestyling project becomes instrumentalized through a range of gender-specific anxieties. These anxieties are about managing femininity in a social-historical context where, as a result of young women's increased participation in both wage labour and consumer culture, new opportunities exist for them to redefine the meaning, use and display of their bodies in ways that challenge older, more conservative notions of proper feminine comportment.²¹

Figure 3: *Fashion In House*, 4 July 2009. 'Experts' (left) correct the wardrobe choice for an interview for a receptionist job.

Figure 4: *WQueen*, 21 June 2010. The topic, noted on the right of the screen, is how to avoid ‘letting the stress show on your face’ – that is, disguising wrinkles, dark circles under the eyes, et cetera.

Searching elsewhere across the generic spectrum for traces of a lifestyling project, we might consider a wide variety of other examples, including programs like PTS’s *Guess Who?* (誰來晚餐), a middlebrow reality show airing at 2–3pm weekdays where families experiencing various internal conflicts choose a celebrity to come to dinner with them and talk through their problems; daytime magazine shows, similar in format to pre-1990s British fare, like CTS’s *Life Magazine* (生活雜誌), which screens at 12:30–1:00 weekdays and covers local travel, cookery and general everyday tips for the housewife; and the rash of *fengshui* and fortune-telling shows that appears annually around Chinese New Year advising viewers on the most auspicious arrangement of specific objects in their house for the lunar new year.²²

The extreme heterogeneity of the genres in which approximations of life advice appear in Taiwan does not point simply toward the logistical difficulty of selecting suitable programs for analysis. Despite an undeniable fixation with aestheticized, middle-class, cosmopolitan living practices elsewhere in Taiwan’s media landscape (notably magazines

and book-form style guides), the difficulty of defining lifestyle television here may indicate a broadening, fragmentation and qualitative transformation – perhaps even disintegration – of the very topic of ‘lifestyle television’ in this context. As in PRC China, defining ‘lifestyle TV’ as a discrete *genre* does not work very well in Taiwan either (except with reference to the mainly imported programming on the ‘lifestyle’ cable channels like TLC). Defining it in terms of *content*, as non-fictional programming that instruct its viewer in stylized consumption and related skills pertaining to living in a late capitalist, consumption-oriented society, we come up with a wide range of programs – each of which appears to address *part of* this broad lifestyling project, yet from wildly differing perspectives, from Buddhist teachings on love for the earth to real estate investment advice. And looking at the issue from an even broader perspective – that of the core *thematic* of Western lifestyle TV, defined as a neoliberal conception of DIY selfhood and self-regulating consumer-citizenship – we become aware of the old danger, in cross-cultural scholarship, of the lens through which we look colouring the picture that we see. Seeking the familiar, we run the risk of finding only what we expect to find, or at best, seeing difference solely in terms of its divergence from the familiar model. These considerations open out onto a broader set of theoretical and methodological questions, which we will raise by way of conclusion.

Conclusion: the limitations of lifestyle

While the countries discussed here all have distinct TV traditions, life advice programming in various guises is a prominent feature of East Asian TV schedules, playing a particularly prominent role in Singapore and China. As we have shown, lifestyle formats in Anglo-American contexts can be seen to promote normative pedagogies around taste, identity and cultural value that we have summarized under the broad rubric of ‘lifestyle’. Does the rise of life advice TV in East Asia indicate then the growing global currency of lifestyle-oriented modes of identity; that is, individualized, consumer-based models of neoliberal citizenship tied in turn to middle-class, globalized taste cultures? Or does it, as Ong’s work on ‘neoliberalism as exception’ in Asia suggests (Ong 2006), reflect instead a more complex picture, marked by the emergence of highly localized articulations of modernity, market-based governance and cultural citizenship?

Of our three sites, it is Singapore that, at first glance, seems most like a TV culture increasingly permeated by Anglo-American-style lifestyle advice. As we have seen, the soft pedagogical form of the lifestyle genre functions well in translating government policy directives into info-ed television. However, the form of neoliberal selfhood taught here – if it can be interpreted as ‘neoliberal’ at least in its self-managing capacity – is clearly a neoliberal selfhood with markedly ‘Singaporean characteristics’: it has arisen *in conjunction with* the ongoing role of the state in regulating the lives and health of its citizens, rather than with the withdrawal of the state from this role. The subject being constructed in programs like *Home Décor Survivor*, *Energy Savers*, *Style Doctors* and *Man Enough* is indeed ‘self-made’ through her/ his calculative choices in diet, eco-living, clothing, décor et cetera. However, this ‘individualized’ self is modelled around a form of civic rather than civil agency (Birch & Phillips 2003), tied more to duty to the state and nation than to a fully neoliberal conception of selfhood.

PRC China reveals many instances of programs with similarities to lifestyle TV as defined in Anglo-American contexts – makeover narratives, competitive elements, interpellation of the viewer as a consumer, general life advice given by expert commentators, pedagogies of taste on a class-aspirational model – although lifestyle television does not function as a widely recognized or clearly demarcated genre. Nevertheless, Rose’s theory of the rise of lifestyle and self-improvement culture in Anglo-American contexts answering to the state’s desire to devolve questions of social and political responsibility to the level of the individual consumer-citizen resonates quite interestingly here, as the Reform Era state is engaged in a broadly comparable project to the European post-welfare states. Vis-à-vis the construction of selfhood, in the process of translating neoliberalism into a specific set of moral-economic values targeting the individual, the role of television, as the most wide-reaching medium in China, cannot be overstated. As a way to defuse social discontent with the growing stratification of the society, these programs seem to aim at producing a sense of contentedness, if not happiness among viewers, by empowering them with myriad tips, ranging from how to scrub clean your frying pan to how to plan your personal finance, which assist them to

get through their everyday life. In other words, rather than asking questions about the increasingly unequal distribution of goods and services across the social spectrum, these programs instead produce quotidian knowledge that helps citizen-subjects to survive market turbulence and cope with the gradual withdrawal of state resources (Sun & Zhao 2009).

In Taiwan, TV content diverges the most sharply of the three sites studied from internationally comparable models of lifestyle TV. Paradoxically, this appears to be partly a result of the near-total domination of the industry by market forces, so that the kind of generic innovations possible in places with a stronger government role in media are possible here only on public television or networks with independent funding. While some locally produced lifestyle-related programs do appear to promote forms of enterprising, DIY selfhood that resonate with the neoliberal models theorized in Anglo-American contexts, there are also other models simultaneously present. For example, if on the one hand *WQueen*, discussed above, is notable for the ways in which it teaches young women to negotiate the risks of Taiwan's white-collar labour market, it may be equally concerned with preparing them for class mobility through advantageous marriage (reference to 'marrying up', is frequent, albeit sometimes tongue-in-cheek). And with its panel of young women addressed as 'classmates' being instructed by experts whom they call 'class head' and 'teacher', its school-ish scenario – a timeworn feature of Taiwanese variety TV – instantiates an ideology of hierarchical collectivism alongside, and uneasily interweaving with, the neoliberal-style consumerist individualism that it also teaches.

As is the case in each of our sites, even where there do appear to be parallels with globalizing neoliberal subjectivity, the models of self promoted on these shows need to be contextualized with reference to specific local histories of subject-formation. For example, in the case of Taiwan we need to consider that entrepreneurial models of self-advancement have been socially embedded since the 1970s, long before the global onset of neoliberal ideology, as a key part of the developmental state under the Kuomintang and its support for small and medium sized enterprises as the engine of economic development (Hsiung 1996; Yu, Yan & Chen 2007). In emphasizing the ways in which

programs like *WQueen* and *Fashion In House* speak to women's identity as enterprising workers, we need also to keep in mind the ongoing links between work and family in an economy that has developed since the 1970s on the back of family-run SMEs and home-based satellite factories (Hsiung 1996; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Here, ascribed familial identities are not necessarily always in conflict with acquired labour-market identities, and may act to constrain them rather than being simply superseded by them, as we also saw in different ways in some of our Singapore examples.

Our preliminary investigations as introduced in this article suggest that the model of localization – in relation both to lifestyle television and to neoliberal individualisation as a broad social project – is not only inadequate when it comes to cross-cultural comparisons of media cultures, but also ideologically suspect (Rofel 2007). Localization and its attendant conceptual privileging of hybridization, assumes that the global form is the dominant one, being adapted to and applied in local context. It is true that in the very broad sense of couching contemporary life and selfhood as, at least to a degree, a matter of individual choice and everyday calculative decision-making, many of the programs we have discussed in this paper do resonate, to varying degrees, with a Westernized neoliberal-style project. But the more important lessons of the research so far are that, first, we should not necessarily assume that this entails a vision of neoliberal ideology as a global tide originating in the West and washing across the rest of the world via the imported medium of lifestyle television. As we have seen, comparable imperatives also arise in a process of something like 'parallel evolution' from particular national contexts, as the state and the market interact in specific ways to determine the vocabulary and techniques made available for citizens' self-making. Second, we need to remain alive to the fact that the malleable, neoliberal consumer-citizen is by no means the *only* available model of selfhood in either the programs we are analysing or the national-level social contexts that give rise to them. It may be that the very range and diversity of life-advice programs in these sites should prompt us to alter our basic assumptions. 'Lifestyle TV' in Asia, to the extent that it exists, may turn out to speak to a qualitatively different sets of core thematics than the malleable selves and consumer-citizens that Anglo-American lifestyle culture has led us to seek; such models may be present (both socially and

textually) without being genuinely central. Such potentially radical divergences challenge assumptions that the lifestyled neoliberal self has become globally hegemonic, thus speaking back to conventional Euro-American understandings of consumer-citizenship under conditions of late capitalism. The complex imbrications of these multiple models of modernity and selfhood as they are performed and presented in life advice programming will be material for future critical discussions emerging from our project.

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¹ The project examines life advice TV in India, China, Taiwan, and Singapore. In this article we restrict discussion to the latter three sites, where our research is more advanced at this stage.

² See, for instance, Lewis' discussion of the commercial logics of the cookery-game show *MasterChef* (2011b).

³ Singapore's population is further boosted by a floating, foreign working population of around 0.9 million (out of a total population of 4.84 million).

⁴ See Nielsen (2009) 'Mass Media Continues to Perform in Times of Downturn', <http://sg.nielsen.com/site/20091022.htm> (accessed 20 January 2010).

⁵ While it is often labeled on schedules as 'variety' or sometimes 'info-ed', lifestyle TV is a widely recognized genre within the Singaporean TV industry.

⁶ According to Tay Lay Tin, a Senior Executive Producer with Chinese Entertainment Productions (Mediacorp), lifestyle TV audiences are primarily housewives supplemented by students at primetime. She argues that, given long work hours in Singapore, 'workers' tend not catch programs in the 8-10pm slot instead watching after 10pm (a time slot dominated by news and documentaries). Television in this later slot is thus often oriented towards masculine-inflected genres, such as news and current affairs; though some lifestyle shows are also aired in this slot, perhaps reflecting recognition by schedulers of a growing professional female audience (Interview, January 2008, Singapore).

⁷ See Mediacorp (2011) 'Style Doctors', http://www4.mediacorp.sg/contentdistribution/programme/detail.php?prog_id=147 (accessed 2 March 2011)

⁸ We are indebted to Professor Lu Ye, Fudan University, for her insights on this point.

⁹ However, it is also true that the last two decades has seen a steady and growing evidence of convergence in the realm of cultural and media forms and consumption habits between China and the West. And many television formats, from talk shows and reality TV, are indeed now modelled on their Western counterparts.

¹⁰ For instance, CCTV Channel 2 (Economics), features advice shows such as *Happy Housewife* and *Ideas for Consumers*.

¹¹ In 2009, these ranked second, third, fifth, seventh, eighth and ninth in nationwide ratings (Wu 2010: 119).

¹² The ten top-rating channels in descending order, as at 27 June – 4 July 2011, were FTV (f.t.a.), San Lih, TTV (f.t.a.), CTV (f.t.a.), San Lih News, TVBS News, ETTV News, CTi News, CTS (f.t.a.), and FTV News (data courtesy of AC Nielsen Taiwan).

¹³ See Taipei Media Agencies Association (2008: 14).

¹⁴ Data courtesy of AC Nielsen Taiwan, as at 27 June – 4 July 2011.

¹⁵ Mr A. (pseudonym) interview, March 6 2011, Taipei. Mr. A is a program planner at Dongneng Yixiang, the local production house that makes *Fun Taiwan* for TLC Asia. We are grateful to Yufen Ko for first drawing this program to our attention and noting its peculiar mode of address.

¹⁶ Mme Bai (pseudonym) interview, June 2010, Taipei. Mme Bai is a long-time senior employee at CTS, currently working as a researcher for the network.

¹⁷ For example, a local copy of the Japanese show *Before and After* (see above) was unsuccessfully trailed at one stage. Locally produced content in Taiwan is frequently marked by direct copying from overseas formats like the ubiquitous Japanese-style variety programs – this fact was frankly acknowledged by interviewees.

¹⁸ Mr Wang (pseudonym) interview, June 2010, Taipei. Wang used the English word ‘lifestyle’.

¹⁹ Ms Chen (pseudonym) interview, June 2010, Taipei.

²⁰ Mimi Wang interview, March 2011, Taipei. Mimi Wang is a former Assistant Director of Programming at TVBS.

²¹ For a fuller analysis of *W Queen* and related shows, see (Martin & Lewis forthcoming).

²² Thanks to Yufen Ko for this suggestion.