

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Learning modernity: lifestyle advice television in Australia, Taiwan and Singapore

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This article examines the role of lifestyle advice television programming in Australia, Taiwan and Singapore. Lifestyle television in the Asia-Pacific region includes a range of ‘popular factual’ formats from cooking and health shows to reality-style make-over shows and consumer advice programmes. What unites these shows, from Singapore’s highly popular *Home Décor Survivor* to Taiwan’s *Lifestyle Experts* and Australia’s *Better Homes and Gardens* is their concern with instructing their audiences in everyday life skills while showcasing the latest consumer products and services. In this article we argue that, in inducting ordinary viewers into the ‘art of living’ these increasingly ubiquitous forms of advice television are playing a significant role in shaping social identities, consumer practices and personal lifestyles in the region. The lifestyle format takes on particular significance in Asia with the emergence of ‘new’ formations of consumer-oriented middle classes characterised by lifestyle aspirations that are shaped in complex ways by national, regional and global influences. Drawing upon a ‘multiple modernities’ approach, this article examines the pedagogical role of lifestyle TV in three different cultural contexts, foregrounding the way in which it negotiates varied global and local formations of lifestyle culture and consumption.

Keywords: lifestyle; multiple modernities; television

Introduction

Lifestyle advice programming, from daytime magazine and consumer advice formats to cooking, gardening and ‘DIY’ shows, has been a long-running feature of many television schedules around the world. Traditionally targeted at housewives, hobbyists and older viewers, its origins and associations lie with a broader feminine advice culture of etiquette manuals, women’s magazines and talk shows (Lewis, 2008).¹ Recently, however, TV schedules, particularly in the west, have undergone something of a lifestyle revolution on primetime television with advice television increasingly directed towards a broader primetime audience. In television studies scholarship much has been made, for instance, of the emergence of lifestyle ‘makeover’ formats (such as the home renovation show *Changing Rooms*) on primetime TV in the UK in the early 1990s, with Andy Medhurst (1999, p. 103) pronouncing we have entered ‘the era of lifestyle TV’. Emerging out of a broader rise in lifestyle-oriented modes of consumption, the west has seen an explosion of

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make-over shows over the past decade, many of which focus not only on home and garden transformations but on 'renovating' ordinary people and their lifestyles and relationships. Across Asia, a range of lifestyle shows has also emerged, some of which 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).

One important context for the rise of lifestyle television in Asia is the broader explosion of media consumption and rise of lifestyle consumer practices across the region in the past few decades. The media and entertainment sector in Asia, for instance, is one of the world's fastest-growing industries, with television being by far the sector's dominant player: television now reaches 97% of the population in China, for instance (China Media Monitor Intelligence). The growing role of television in the region has occurred hand in hand with the liberalisation of economic and, to a varied degree, state structures. One of the corollaries of these processes has been a rapid rise in social mobility and the emergence of new forms of consuming 'middle classes' (Chua, 2000; King, 2008).

In this context, far from just being cheap, disposable TV, lifestyle shows in Asia are playing a significant role in promoting certain lifestyle behaviours and, concomitantly, social identities, offering not just consumer advice but lifestyle guidance in a period of shifting cultural and social mores. 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 based on culture and identity' (1999, p. 41). For a number of Anglo-American scholars, the rise of lifestyle TV in particular speaks to broader social shifts in neo-liberal western states (Miller, 2007; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). For such commentators, the emergence of lifestyle TV on primetime schedules reflects the increasing dominance of an individualistic, consumer-driven approach to lifestyle issues in which late modern selfhood is seen as endlessly malleable; a project to be worked on and invested in. Further, in neo-liberal settings, the personal, health and relationship advice increasingly offered on lifestyle TV shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Eat* is understood by some as attempting to fill the gap left by the state as it devolves responsibility for once-public concerns like obesity onto the self-regulating consumer-citizen (Ouellette & Hay, 2008).

If the rise of lifestyle TV in the west can be linked to these broader economic, cultural and social shifts, to what extent can these developments be applied to Asian contexts? If lifestyle programming is increasingly taking on a pedagogical role in modern societies, what sorts of values and models of lifestyle, selfhood and citizenship are being offered up on Asian television sets? Does the rise of lifestyle TV in Asia suggest the growing global transmission of US-inflected late capitalist models of selfhood and lifestyle or as Toby Miller puts it, 'US subjectivity on export' (2007, p. 50)? Or does it mark the emergence of more contested and contingent, localised and/or hybridised versions of modernity, consumer and lifestyle culture?

This article presents early findings from a larger comparative study of lifestyle programming in Asia in which we seek to examine the role of lifestyle TV in both shaping and reflecting broader shifts in social and cultural identity accompanying the rise of consumer-based modes of modernity. In particular it focuses on examples

of lifestyle programming in Australia, Singapore and Taiwan. Australia here offers one culturally proximate illustration of how globalising Anglo-American forms of commercial media culture, framed by neo-liberal models of consumer-oriented, 'choice'-based citizenship, have been localised within an Asia-Pacific context and shaped by distinctive cultural concerns. Singapore, too, has embraced elements of this globalising model of consumer-based citizenship. However, lifestyle media and culture in Singapore has to be understood in the context of a strongly multicultural Asian society and a highly interventionist state regulatory system (and an essentially state-owned broadcast TV industry). In the case of Singapore, the focus of our study is primarily on Chinese-language programming, with Taiwan offering a useful comparator site to Chinese-Singaporean lifestyle media. Taiwan shares some cultural-linguistic similarities with Singapore's Chinese community and is also a key conduit to other Chinese-speaking markets for both Japanese and 'western' forms of media (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, although in Taiwan these developments are shaped by a very different relation between the state and the commercial media to that of Singapore. With these distinctive industrial and cultural contexts in mind, we present our three sites as preliminary case studies toward a snapshot of lifestyle television in the Asia-Pacific region.

The term 'lifestyle television' as we are deploying it here in relation to these different sites embraces a large range of programming airing on both daytime and evening television. This includes everything from magazine and variety shows with various lifestyle segments to cooking and health shows to home renovation and personal 'lifestyle make-over' programmes. While these shows vary considerably in terms of generic conventions and content, we argue that they all share a concern with teaching audiences how to reflexively shape and optimise their personal lifestyles. Rather than offering a systematic content analysis of all lifestyle programmes in these sites, the concern here is with reading certain key shows as exemplars of the complex mix of global, local and regional trends that are feeding into 'lifestyle culture' at these sites within the Asia-Pacific region. Amongst these shows format-based programming such as reality-based lifestyle 'make-over' shows are a particularly useful exemplar of global-local developments in TV cultures. As Waisbord comments (2004, p. 359), the rise of format television has resulted in a situation whereby 'around the world, television is filled with national variations of programmes designed by companies from numerous countries'. Reality programmes offered up as format 'shells' such as the garden make-over show *Ground Force*, which first aired in the UK, have been shown to have considerable transnational mobility and selling power, as they are amenable to being readily 'indigenized', even in the case of programmes emerging from non-English markets (such as the Dutch market), and are relatively risk-free having been previously tried out on an audience (Waisbord, 2004). At the same time, television formats represent sites marked by complex negotiations between globalising forces and domestic concerns and contexts (Moran, 1998).

While to date there has been little systematic research on lifestyle TV and make-over formats in Asia, even a cursory glimpse across the region indicates that there are clear regional and national differences in the form, content and cultural status of this mode of programming, pointing to the importance of localised, culturally specific

research. Based on these observations, a crucial critical paradigm for our project is that of multiple or comparative modernities, an influential strand of scholarship on non-western modernities that has emerged from studies of postcoloniality and globalisation in the humanities and social sciences over the past 10 years (see for instance Arjun Appadurai, Nestor Garcia Canclini, Aihwa Ong, Lisa Rofel, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Lydia Liu).² In the brief case studies that follow, then, we want to draw attention to the complex interplay of both globalising and localising elements in our selected examples from Taiwan and Singapore, with Australia standing here both as an example of a typical 'western' neo-liberal state and also, as noted above, as a national site marked by certain cultural specificities. In presenting our material this way, our aim is to frame the lifestyle genre as exemplary of the multiplicity of culturally hybrid televisual modernities currently being worked out across the region.

From magazine shows to make-overs: lifestyle programming in Australia

The lion's share of scholarship on lifestyle TV has focused on the UK and the US where reality-style make-over shows (the glamour end of the lifestyle TV spectrum) have proliferated over the past decade. However, another TV market that has a long history of lifestyle programming is Australia (Bonner, 2005). Given its regional proximity to east Asia, Australia offers a particularly useful exemplar of a western neo-liberal nation that has embraced an increasingly globalised lifestyle media and culture but that is at a distance both geographically and to a certain extent culturally from traditional centres of western media production, and is marked by its own peculiarities in terms of national lifestyle concerns.

Australian audiences have over the past two decades embraced a range of shows offering lifestyle and consumer advice. Lifestyle advice segments have featured in a variety of daytime magazine shows while full-length magazine-style lifestyle shows like the long-running shows *Burke's Backyard* and *Better Homes and Gardens* have also been successful with primetime Australian viewers. Australia, then, has had a strong pre-existing tradition of lifestyle TV and in particular home and garden-oriented shows, the latter modes of programming reflecting the centrality of home-ownership to Australian culture.

Since the late 1990s, however, these older-style forms of magazine-style programming have been boosted by a growing number of 'lifestyle make-over' formats, with Australia importing a range of make-over shows from the US and UK as well as producing its own successful shows (such as the highly successful competitive renovation format *The Block* (2003), which sold into a range of territories around the world). Whether oriented towards 'renovating' one's home or oneself, such shows are often highly consumerist in orientation, teaching audiences about new products and services. These Anglo-American modes of programming also share a concern with providing life lessons in middle-class taste and distinction, often modelling forms of consumption that are linked to particular kinds of normative, morally-inflected lifestyle practices e.g. maintaining a healthy body. Australian primetime TV today thus features a mixture of lifestyle make-over shows oriented towards (often) consumerist modes of self- and life-improvement, including international imports (*How to Look Good Naked*), locally-produced versions of international formats (*The Biggest Loser*) and home-grown formats

(*Domestic Blitz*), alongside a number of locally-produced magazine-style shows (such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, the travel show *Getaway* and the popular health and lifestyle show *What's Good for You*).

Despite the influence of US and UK make-over formats, Australia's take on the lifestyle make-over has been shaped by a range of distinctive cultural concerns (Lewis, 2009). For instance, while Australian lifestyle shows are often concerned with teaching audiences about middle-class forms of taste and style, with many Australian TV producers actually referring to these modes of programming as 'aspirational television', in contrast to US or British television, there is a reluctance to portray overly bourgeois lifestyles on Australian lifestyle TV. Older-style magazine shows like *Better Homes and Gardens* are thus directed towards a very ordinary and somewhat banal version of 'middle Australia'. On a recent episode, for instance, various domestic and lifestyle experts provided viewers with tips on 'how to make the crispiest roast potatoes', 'why the Labrador is the world's favourite dog', how to create an award-winning garden, and ideas for 'easy DIY Mother's Day gifts – bath bombs, body scrub and home-made soaps'. Offered up in a friendly, neighbourly manner, consumer advice here is seamlessly merged with a range of lifestyle tips for improving and optimising one's everyday life, with tips on the latest consumer products and fashions offered alongside the promotion of a thrifty, DIY approach to gift-giving (although one that still relies on buying various ingredients while continuing to promote Mother's Day as a consumption ritual). Rather than presenting audiences with the kind of highly bourgeois models of lifestyle offered up by US lifestyle gurus such as Martha Stewart or popular UK lifestyle shows like *Grand Design*, the forms of consumerism, style and taste promoted on this show lie at the rather middle-brow, mildly aspirational end of the lifestyle spectrum.

By contrast, lifestyle make-over shows would seem by definition to be more strongly aspirational, oriented as they are towards upward mobility through the complete and often radical transformation of bodies, homes and lifestyles. Again, though, make-over shows on Australian TV are often relentlessly ordinary, making use of friendly familiar hosts with strong Aussie accents (such as the popular TV personality and carpenter Scott Cam) while the recipients of make-overs are often working- or lower-middle-class people who are seen as in some way deserving a lifestyle transformation. Thus, while the forms of taste and consumption promoted on these shows tend to be thoroughly bourgeois, the vernacular mode of address of Australian lifestyle TV works to underplay the aspirational lifestyles on display in these shows. In contrast to many British make-over shows then, where class conflict between the experts and participants is often a central feature of the narrative, Australian programmes tend to de-emphasise class concerns through the use of more 'ordinary' hosts (in contrast to 'posh' lifestyle gurus like the UK's Trinny and Susannah).

Domestic Blitz, an Australian make-over show currently airing in a primetime slot on commercial channel Network Nine is a good example of this kind of 'feel-good', non-conflictual variety of make-over show. The format of the show is that of the classic house and garden make-over complete with a good-looking make-over team and two hosts, blonde attractive presenter Shelley Craft and carpenter Scott Cam, the epitome of the 'Aussie bloke'. In the 'before' part of the narrative, the audience is guided through the existing house and garden by the show's host-experts, with its 'problems' in terms of taste and utility diagnosed along the way, before being shown a dramatic montage of the make-over process. The owners are then taken on a

(usually highly) emotional tour of the transformed house complete with ‘before’ and ‘after’ shots to remind the audience of the radical nature of the transformation. Rather than depicting the ordinary people on the show as lacking a sense of style or taste (a common feature on UK and some US make-over shows), on *Domestic Blitz* the emotional dimension of the narrative emerges from the fact that the make-over recipients are people who are framed by the show as ‘deserving Aussies’ who have been ‘doing it tough’. For example, in one episode the house and garden of ‘a mother of three’ with ‘a passion for charity and community work’ who suffered from depression after the death of her husband is given a compassionate make-over. The make-over on this show thus teaches the audience about taste, style and consumption while giving them lifestyle tips at the same time as it emphasises the emotional needs of the make-over-ees, as this summary on the show’s website suggests:

We went for a classic ‘Hamptons’ look in the lounge room. We’ve used cool colours on the walls to create a comfy lounge area. White shutters have been added to the windows and we’ve created a photo feature wall and installed a massive floor-to-ceiling bookcase. We hope this will create the perfect retreat for Margaret.

The promotion of consumption (the show’s website has a list of suppliers and audience members regularly comment on the website and ask for details of paint colours, stockists of furniture, etc.) and teaching of taste here are seamlessly blended into the make-over recipient’s broader personal lifestyle while the show portrays itself as offering a kind of community service for those in need.

In its on focus on supporting families and community and on the potentially therapeutic aspects of the make-over process, *Domestic Blitz* draws strongly upon elements of US make-over formats such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* in which the show’s producers work with local builders to provide a home make-over for families that have faced some sort of recent or ongoing hardship. Such shows in turn draw on a long tradition in the US of beneficent television (e.g. the fifties show *Queen for a Day*) (Watts, 2006). However, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, like many US make-over shows, has a stronger focus on spectacle, heightened emotion and sentimentality (‘a dream come true’, ‘making a difference one family at a time’), while the hosts and experts are rather more polished and glamorous than the more ordinary hosts on Australian TV.

Another point of difference between Australian and US approaches to the make-over is the latter’s relative emphasis on personal make-overs (Kavka, 2006). Personal make-over shows, which include formats such as the plastic surgery show *Extreme Makeover*, weight-loss shows like *The Biggest Loser* and fashion and style-oriented make-over shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, have been particularly associated with American television where they can be seen to link to a US ethos of entrepreneurialism, personal promotion and ‘self-branding’. While Australian audiences have recently embraced personal make-over shows like *The Biggest Loser*,³ they tend to be less comfortable with the highly aggressive competitive individualism that is often central to US game-show-style make-over and reality formats. And, as noted, Australian lifestyle TV tends to be more concerned with constructing a familiar, neighbourly mode of address rather than with emphasising social differences. Reflecting these concerns, the focus on the Australian version of *The Biggest Loser* (particularly in the first series) has tended to be less on US-style individualism than on

losing weight for one's family and the community. This is not to say that there are no issues of competitive individualism at work in Australian make-over formats; aspirationalism is a key mantra in Australian lifestyle culture. But the discourse of 'getting ahead' tends to be framed in terms of aspiring to a kind of averageness, a preoccupation that speaks to a broader cultural mythos of social egalitarianism.

Australia is a good example of the way in which lifestyle advice television has become a major feature of primetime schedules in the west. The ready acceptance of the make-over ethos within the Australian market suggests a certain universality (at least within Anglo-American TV territories) of late capitalist concerns around the promotion of flexible lives and selves and the centrality of style, aesthetics and 'good' forms of consumption to optimising one's lifestyle. At the same time, Australian make-over shows have a significantly different cultural 'feel' to them compared with US and UK shows, reflecting the fact that Australia's reception and reworking of these formats has been shaped by distinctive cultural concerns and televisual traditions. The familiar ordinariness of Australian lifestyle TV, played out in programmes like *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Backyard Blitz*, points to the role of culturally-inflected values and mythologies, in particular concerns with communality, social egalitarianism and 'mateship'. While articulated within the rubric of 'lifestyle' on make-over TV, such concerns can be seen to complicate notions of a unitary, homogeneous and seamlessly global 'western' lifestyle culture.

Local cosmopolitanism: lifestyle TV in Taiwan

Taiwan has a large urban middle class and a well-developed consumer culture that is variously shaped by a wide array of traditional and contemporary influences: inherited Chinese ideologies of nation, family and cultural allegiance; and Japanese, American and Korean television, film, music and fashion cultures. Following the rapid industrialisation of the 1950s and 1960s and the 'economic miracle' of the 1970s, and spurred on by the lifting of martial law and concomitant cultural thaw in 1987, the early 1990s saw a sharp increase in spending on lifestyle consumables such as overseas travel (Chen, 2000). Reflecting this growth in lifestyle and leisure-based consumption, weekday programming from Taiwan's free-to-air, cable and satellite channels reveals a wealth of programmes focusing on cooking, domestic and international travel, consumer information, home decoration, health, fashion and pet care that might broadly be considered to fit the 'lifestyle' category (known in Taiwan as *shenghuo xiuxian*; literally 'life and leisure'). Some of these are dedicated programmes, such as free-to-air TTV's *Healthy Lifestyle (Jiankang Shenghuo)*, which is aired at 9 am with a repeat at 3 pm and follows a morning chat-show format where a female hostess is joined by a range of experts in everyday medicine, both traditional Chinese and western. Another example is *Bing-bing's Cuisine (Bing-bing Hao Liaoli)*, screened at 5 pm and 7 pm on the CTI cable channel, which is hosted by middle-aged celebrity Bai Bing-bing. Following a wide-show style format, the programme features multiple guests, including celebrity chefs who demonstrate complex recipes to Bing-bing and the audience, in a lively, up-beat atmosphere filled with jokes and laughter and accompanied by on screen, cartoon-like graphics that underscore the show's overall democratising, populist style; this is 'expert' knowledge translated and domesticated for an ordinary home audience. *Bing-bing's Cuisine* provides a good

example of the way in which lifestyle content is often embedded in a hybridised Japanese-style wide-show variety format in Taiwan.

In addition to an array of dedicated programmes similar to those just described, lifestyle content also appears in a more fragmented form in segments on variety programmes. For instance, one episode of the TVBS-G cable station's 9 pm variety/chat show *National Assembly (Guomin Da Hui)*, screened during January 2008, featured a section in which a French chef explained how to make French desserts, followed immediately by the hostess introducing a doctor of Chinese medicine to teach the audience about eliminating the digestive gas such desserts may create by applying traditional Chinese pressure-point techniques. Later in the same programme, the hostess and audience were instructed by a Taiwanese expert in the Japanese tea ceremony amid running jokes about how arcane and difficult to master the ceremony's stylised rituals are. In *National Assembly*, such lifestyle-related segments (instructing the audience in cookery, health, canny shopping and everyday 'culture') are interspersed with celebrity gossip, guest performers, experts chatting about soft current affairs, and so on. The whole melange provides a clear example of the ways in which everyday television can act as an instructor in locally inflected, culturally hybrid modern cultures; we are taught how traditional Chinese medicine counters the excesses of European cuisine in a Japanese-derived TV format that also verses us in the global trend toward 'lifestyling' as a promotion of individual self-realisation through consumption and self-styling. However, the extremely accessible, affable mode of address in such programmes, which interpellates the viewer as part of one big, jolly family, is very far indeed from the emphasis on competitive individualism and humiliation as spectacle typical of American and British make-over formats. Inducements to transforming one's lifestyle on Taiwanese television tend instead to be framed in softer pedagogical terms.

One further, quite different, instance of lifestyle-related content on Taiwanese television is worth mentioning: Taiwan's transnational Buddhist cable station, Da'Ai TV, offers a daily diet of soft-journalistic stories about how to accrue good karma by living a good life (for example through case-studies of model citizens who dedicate themselves to community work, environmental programmes or helping the poor and disabled) mixed with sermons on how to practice everyday virtue delivered by Buddhist nuns and tied back to the teachings of the order's primary sage, Tzu Chi. Da'Ai's programming is all subtitled in English, targeted as it is at diasporic Chinese Buddhist communities worldwide as well as domestic Taiwanese audiences. This is clearly quite a different kind of 'lifestyle' programming from the irreverent, populist, comedic, generally consumption-oriented examples from the wide-show genre described above, but all share a central focus on pedagogies of everyday living and the transmission via television of specialised skills and interpretive frameworks meant to equip audiences for daily life in the contemporary world.

Below, we turn to a different example of lifestyle programming in Taiwan: the magazine-style *Life Experts (Shenghuo Gaoshou)*, produced by the Public Television Service (PTS). PTS was launched as a non-profit, politically independent (but partially government-funded) channel in 1998, joining the three old Kuomintang Party-affiliated commercial free-to-air stations, TTV, CTS and CTV and the newer Democratic Progressive Party-affiliated station FTV, which was launched in 1997. It shares much in common with public broadcasters elsewhere in its emphasis on 'quality' local programming (especially dramas and documentaries dealing with

Taiwanese history and social life) and educational content. *Life Experts* is a 30-minute programme that instructs its audience in home decoration, hobbies and everyday environmentalism, screened in a midday time-slot during 2006. We emphasise that we have deliberately chosen a segment of the programme that, in our view, illustrates particularly clearly the transnational spread of a recognisably global form of middle-class taste and everyday life values via the pedagogies of lifestyle television. This is not necessarily a strongly representative example: other segments of the programme reveal a contrasting emphasis on rather more localised and/ or working-class kinds of life skills (for example in forms of reuse, recycling and other types of folk-thriftiness, although the emphasis on such skills as forms of environmentalism on the show can also be read as speaking to a globalised model of responsible consumer-citizenship). But our choice of this segment is a deliberate attempt to illustrate the more obviously transnational cosmopolitan end of the spectrum of lifestyle programming in Taiwan.

In this 15-minute segment, featured in *Life Experts*' first series, the lively young hostess Xu Qian-yun is a courteous and admiring guest at the country home of retired female martial-arts movie star and sculptor, Long Jun'er (Zoe Long).⁴ The family home that is the subject of this segment is in Taipei County, perched amid rocky mountains dramatically overlooking the ocean. It has been decorated with immense care both inside and out to generate an aesthetic of family 'cosiness' (*wenxing*), a value that is highlighted repeatedly in the chummy yet polite conversation between guest and hostess. Indeed, the guest/host dynamics here are quite formal: we are 'invited' into the star's home and go through rituals of tea-drinking and social chit-chat before being led on a tour of the interior, in distinction to the way in which some American and British home improvement programmes simply burst into the subject's home with a critical eye (*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* springs immediately to mind as a strong contrast). This is a much more polite and subdued version of the 'home invasion' format. Amid cries of appreciation from Xu ('Oh, how cute!'; 'Oh my goodness, that is *just so pretty!*', etc.), the stylish and poised star leads us on a guided tour of the extensive, multilevel cabin-style home she shares with her husband and younger daughter. What is particularly interesting in this example is the way in which the post-production work by PTS foregrounds not only the concrete specificities of Long's home decoration choices, but more pointedly the abstract *affects* and *values* that are supposedly generated or underscored by particular design choices. Throughout the segment, graphic subtitles offer viewers a series of 'life ideas' (*shenghuo linian*). For example, as Long reveals her childhood dream to live in just such a mountainous coastal setting, a 'life idea' appears on screen: 'Follow the principles of the natural environment to realise your childhood dream of the perfect home'. As the camera lingers over Long's younger daughter's artwork, we are instructed: 'Display family members' artworks in your living space to give [their creators] an even greater sense of achievement'. When the hostess draws attention to family photos stuck to the refrigerator with magnets, we are told: 'Displaying photos of your daily life within your living space will increase the sense of cosiness and sweet intimacy in your life' (see Figures 1, 2 and 3).

Although the forms of social interaction modelled between host and guest may be, to a degree, culturally specific, the lifestyle aspirations showcased by means of Long's home in this segment are indicatively middle-class and, we would argue, part



Figure 1. Bring your interests into the home and make everyday life into a pleasure.

of a transnationally mobile imaginary of everyday practices and aspirations that together are seen to constitute ‘the good life’. The formations of taste and cultural capital being taught through those elements of Long’s home on which the programme focuses (cooking as leisure rather than work; the vinyl record collection as a ‘treasure’ recalling one’s adolescence; the dedicated art studio to enable a child’s creativity to blossom) would be, we propose, familiar to middle-class audiences in western Europe, the USA or Australia. The programme addresses a domestic audience but, notwithstanding that, the transnational familiarity of its pedagogies of everyday taste illustrates Harindranath’s (2003) conception of the ‘transnational cosmopolitan elite’ as a formation that cuts across national and East–West geo-cultural boundaries. The example is particularly useful due to the clarity with which it yokes affects, aspirations and values to everyday lifestyle practices: learning the



Figure 2. Encourage your children to develop a sense of responsibility for their own lives from a young age.



Figure 3. Making a collection of any sort might seem like hard work, but in the long run it will become a treasure.

right choices about home décor will not only produce the desired aesthetic effect but will also deliver powerful lifestyle ‘intangibles’ such as childhood dreams, a sense of achievement, family intimacy, creativity, everyday pleasures, treasured memories and responsible selfhood.

As noted above, this example from *Life Experts* is somewhat unusual in the degree to which it fits into a globalised, bourgeois framework of lifestyle consumption. As we saw earlier, many of the shows on Taiwanese lifestyle and info-ed TV offer more localised lifestyle discourses while speaking to broader popular audiences and being tied to specifically regional modes of programming such as the wide-show format and its concomitant ‘one-big-jolly-family’ mode of address.⁵ Nevertheless, even these more localised programmes can be seen in some respects as evidencing a shift towards a more individualised and calculated approach to everyday life, reflecting broader shifts in Taiwanese social and cultural mores. While *Life Experts* quite transparently teaches a hierarchical set of values in relation to what is desirable and necessary to make oneself and one’s immediate nuclear family over into members of a modern, enlightened, middle-class world citizenry, other programmes like those discussed briefly above speak to a more localised version of consumer modernity in which ‘traditional’ lifestyles are increasingly blended with cosmopolitan tastes and aspirations.

‘Oriental vogue’ and ‘ethnic fusion’: lifestyling Singapore

Like Taiwan, Singapore has a strongly consumer-oriented media culture, with advertising, radio and the print media offering up a complex combination of western and ‘Asian’ lifestyle imagery and discourses. Lifestyle television (often categorised as info-ed or variety in Singapore) represents a significant proportion of programming on broadcast TV. Broadcast television in Singapore falls primarily under the jurisdiction of the state-owned collection of companies known as Mediacorp,⁶ which operates all three Singaporean terrestrials, namely Channel 5 (English-language),

Channel 8 (Chinese) and Channel U (Chinese), as well as the TV12 specialty services: Suria for Malay audiences, Kids Central, Arts Central and the Tamil-language Vasantham Central.

While our primary focus here is on Chinese-language programming, lifestyle TV programmes feature on most TV channels in Singapore. The Tamil-language channel Vasantham Central, for instance, airs a range of lifestyle/info-ed programmes on travel, food and beauty including a daytime 'make-over programme' that aims to 'help people from all walks of life to be able to carry themselves confidently' and an evening lifestyle magazine show *Naam* that offers the latest updates on fashion, hobbies, travel tips and interior design. Suria, the Malay channel, offers a range of daytime and primetime lifestyle shows from a travel-food show that finds halal eateries for Muslims intending to travel overseas to a DIY home décor show called *ID Kreatif*.⁷

Alongside these 'specialty' channels, the main Chinese channels 8 and U offer a range of lifestyle shows (although Channel U's programmes tend to cater for more of a youth-oriented niche audience, addressing in particular university students and high school students with shows like *Campus Yummy Hunt* where the hosts head to different campuses to find the best and cheapest food outlets). The more mainstream Mandarin-language channel, Channel 8, which has been on air in Singapore since 1963, is the highest-rating channel in Singapore airing local and regionally-made Chinese dramas, variety shows, info-ed, news and current-affairs programmes, with its productions often being exported to other parts of Asia, including Taiwan. While Channel 8 is state-owned and free-to-air it also relies on advertising and sponsorship deals to fund programming, combining a commercial focus with elements of a public service focus.

Channel 8 offers a wide range of programmes oriented towards teaching audiences about various lifestyle issues from how to shop wisely and save money (*The King of Thrift*) to food and cookery shows like *Kraft Singles Supermum Kitchen*, described as a 'light hearted reality programme [that] strives to convey the nutritional values of cheese to the audience'. As on Taiwan's variety/chat show *National Assembly*, lifestyle issues also regularly appear in segments on magazine shows such as the very popular show *Good Morning Singapore*. Aired for three hours in the morning during weekdays, *Good Morning Singapore* is a magazine-style info-ed programme focusing on everything from news and finance to health issues, food and entertainment news.

While the majority of the lifestyle programming in Singapore consists of local formats made for local audiences,⁸ the conventions and aesthetics of many of these shows draw from a range of international influences including US game shows, British lifestyle television and (as in the Taiwanese case) Japanese variety shows. In relation to western-influenced programming, Singaporean TV airs a number of shows that draw strongly on Anglo-American lifestyle make-over and reality formats. A show that is useful to compare with the home décor segment of the Taiwanese show *Life Experts* discussed above, for instance, is the highly popular Mandarin-language show aired on Channel 8 entitled *Home Décor Survivor*. While *Life Experts*' focus on lifestyle issues through home décor often speaks in an overtly pedagogical way to transnational middle-class values around good taste, aesthetics and family relations, *Home Décor Survivor* draws on the more recent shift in western lifestyle TV towards more entertainment-oriented, game show formats.

Home Décor Survivor is a home renovation show where two teams led by a different host compete to make over the interior space of two homes while staying within a budget of S\$6000. Like many western home make-over formats, the show is fast-paced and highly entertaining. Eschewing the conventions of the traditional didactic DIY format, the show is centrally focused around TV personalities rather than ‘experts’ (although expert judges do feature at the end of each show). Nevertheless, the show smuggles in various educational messages, although these are often less about pure ‘information’ than about cultural pedagogy; for instance the show can be seen to include a class-inflected education in modernist taste, style and aesthetics (in one show there was a particular emphasis, highlighted by English words popping up on screen, on ‘modernism’ and on creating spaces that are ‘funky’ and ‘industrial looking’). These lessons in taste are also combined with a focus on DIY and thriftiness, and on savvy forms of consumerism. Thus, the teams are seen creating one-off art works and wall stencils for the home interiors of the show’s participants while home owners are also taken to various stores to buy homewares (with prices and the name and address of stores provided to the audience), with frequent adverts in the break for the show’s sponsor, Australia-based homewares store Harvey Norman. While educating the audience in some of the norms of middle-class taste, in distinction to the Australian programmes discussed above, the overall tone of the programme is one of youthful informality, with the young hosts and make-over team engaging throughout in cheeky banter and comic hi-jinks, presenting themselves and relating to each other in a manner distinctly ‘student-ish’ as opposed to ‘respectable’ or ‘serious’. Thus the show offers a pedagogy of middle-class cosmopolitan taste that is clearly targeted toward ‘ordinary Singaporean youth’: students and young families living in small, standardised government flats.

While the show borrows heavily from western home make-over formats, it also draws upon the aesthetics and conventions of hybrid Japanese–Chinese variety TV. Where western make-over shows often focus on the dramatic elements of the transformation and the emotional responses of the ordinary people featured in the programme (as on the aforementioned Australian show *Domestic Blitz*), Chinese–Singaporean shows are rather more light-hearted, focusing more on the TV personalities involved in the show than members of the public. *Home Décor Survivor*, for instance, has a comic, zany feel with pop-up coloured images and words exploding onto the screen accompanied by comic sound effects. As in some of the Taiwanese examples discussed above, the group presentation, slapstick humour, incessant cheeky cross-talk, ‘busy’ screen aesthetic and dense soundscape contribute to an overall feel of *renao*, a positive term meaning ‘lively, busy, noisy, fun’ that encapsulates the feel aspired to by much Chinese-language variety-style television.

Just as the show hybridises elements of the western make-over programme with conventions from Chinese and Japanese television, likewise the content of the show blends European design tips and western style with local concerns. The focus is mainly on renovating the small Housing Development Board flats in which most Singaporeans live with an emphasis on hybridising modern design with traditional aesthetics; one episode is themed ‘Ethnic Fusion’ with the team’s goals being to blend ethnic Peranakan style with modern design (see Figures 4 and 5) while another focuses on ‘oriental vogue’.



Figure 4. A 'before' shot of a dining room made over on *Home Décor Survivor 3* (on episode two, entitled 'Ethnic fusion').

While home make-over shows have proved popular with Singapore's Chinese audiences, as in Taiwan, lifestyle make-over shows focused on individualised personal transformations have not featured so strongly in local lifestyle programming.⁹ Constrained by low budgets and a relative cultural reserve (amongst Chinese audience members at least) in relation to exposing oneself and one's lifestyle on television,¹⁰ the spate of parenting, fashion and body make-over shows that have taken off in the west have not been a feature of Singaporean TV. An element of the western lifestyling of TV that has had an influence, though, is the rise of the celebrity chef and entertainment-oriented cooking shows more generally. Recently, shows like *The Food Bachelor* and *Good Food Fun Cook* have found their way on to the primetime schedule. Typical of the kind of everyday lifestyle programming popular



Figure 5. An 'after' shot of the same dining room, blending a modern updated style with traditional elements of Peranakan culture including the image of the phoenix painted on the wall.

with Chinese-Singaporeans are cheap, down-home formats like *Good Food Fun Cook* (GFFC), aired in 2008 on Friday at 8pm on Mediacorp 8. Targeted at housewives¹¹ and showcasing the talents of celebrity chef Sam Leong, ‘the idol in the cooking world’,¹² and Quan Yi Feng, one of Singapore’s top TV hosts, GFFC brings ‘the kitchen out to the public’, with episodes featuring Sam cooking in an open-air kitchen, haggling with vendors and mingling with locals at street markets. As in *Home Décor Survivor*, the mode of address here is informal and zany and the feel aims for *renao*. The show has a highly populist agenda reflected in the way in which Sam and Quan Yi Feng interact with the ordinary members of the public who gather to watch and learn as they cook; people whose very ordinariness is framed to reflect the ‘aunties’ that are the show’s target audience. At the same time, like many Singaporean lifestyle shows, GFFC combines an entertainment-oriented approach to lifestyle with an educational agenda. On the one hand, Sam is positioned as a man of the people (struggling with a very stilted Cantonese-inflected Mandarin, in distinction to the fluency of the Taiwan-born Quan Yi Feng) but at the same time, he is there to teach the audience about practical recipes, quality food and style and aesthetics. As the show’s Senior Executive Producer, Tay Lay Tin notes: ‘on GFFC, it’s the first time we are educating the audience to say you can do this five star cuisine at home. The food is very simple but the presentation is upper class. Sam Leong is famous for this’. The show also teaches the audience about healthy food, with each episode focusing on one of 13 themes, such as how to manage hair loss, how to look youthful, how to keep fit, etc. The show’s research team thus includes a Chinese physician who helps choose healthy ingredients for the show’s dishes and a research writer who, as Tay Lay Tin notes, makes ‘these issues simple, lighter . . . more approachable for a general audience’.

Singaporean lifestyle programming is marked by a particular diversity of offerings given Mediacorp’s charter to provide content for Malay, Indian, Chinese and English-speaking audiences. At the same time, many of these shows can be seen to draw upon regional and international influences. Chinese-Singaporean productions like *Home Décor Survivor* offer a complex hybridisation of global and local influences and can be seen, like the episode of the Taiwanese show *Life Experts* discussed above (albeit through quite a different mode of address), to position local audiences as global cosmopolitans.¹³ GFFC, meanwhile, is a far more localised and ordinary mode of lifestyle television; tied to local people and places, overtly addressed to ‘ordinary’ (middle-aged, working-class, female) audience members, and offering practical how-to advice on simple, everyday home cooking. And yet, even here we see a mode of cosmopolitan aspirationalism on display; played out in this instance through its concern with teaching audiences how to appreciate ‘five star cuisine’ and the show’s relentlessly healthy message, a message that can be seen to tie in to a global, neo-liberal agenda of enterprising selfhood (as well as also reflecting the close relationship between media and the Singapore government, which has been pushing a healthy lifestyle campaign through media sites such as television). While GFFC thus ties in to the globalising rubric of a carefully managed ‘lifestyle’ as entrée to specifically late-modern, neo-liberal forms of identity, it nevertheless provides a far more localised example than the episode of Taiwan’s *Life Experts* selected for discussion above.

Conclusion

As our discussion of Taiwan and Singapore suggests, lifestyle programming is increasingly prominent in Asian primetime TV schedules. Although not as prevalent as in the US, UK and Australia where a range of advice-based shows and reality-style lifestyle make-over formats have flourished, the growth of home renovation shows, variety shows featuring various lifestyle segments and experts, and the celebrity chef phenomenon, for instance, mark the growing place of lifestyle-oriented modes of advice and consumption within Asian media culture. Given that lifestyle formats can be seen to offer various kinds of normative pedagogies around taste, identity and cultural value how might we understand the growing global currency of such formats? In his book, *Big Brother* (2005, p. 40), Jonathan Bignell asks whether the transnational mobility of reality and lifestyle make-over TV indicates the universalisation of a specifically western preoccupation with 'personal confession, modification, testing and the perfectibility of the self'. Does the growing role of lifestyle and consumer-oriented programming in Asia then simply reflect the increasing influence of US-inflected late capitalist models of enterprising individualism and self-improvement as Bignell's comment suggests?

Our preliminary case studies suggest that in moving forward with more detailed investigations of lifestyle and make-over programming in the Asia Pacific region, the 'lifestyle' element in lifestyle media and culture needs not only to be understood in relation to global shifts in identity around consumer culture and late modernity but also to be articulated to specific geocultural contexts, as notions of the 'global' itself and related assumptions around Anglo-American hegemony become increasingly complicated in today's polycentric media world. At the level of genre and programme style, lifestyle shows in Singapore and Taiwan represent a thoroughly hybridised mixture of local, global and regional influences. Thus while Singapore has perhaps the most Americanised forms of lifestyle programming, shows like the local make-over format *Home Décor Survivor* still show a Japanese/Chinese hybrid form in their style of presentation and mode of address.

Culturally and ideologically, the picture is equally complex. In Australia, Taiwan and Singapore we can see some common themes across lifestyle programming in relation to the promotion of cosmopolitan, middle-class modes of consumer-based lifestyles and aesthetics. Yet at the same time, much of the local programming in these countries is marked by a complex oscillation between speaking to local cultural values and offering up more transnationally-inflected, aspirational images of idealised lifestyles. As we have shown, even in the case of ostensibly 'western' sites such as Australia, lifestyle advice culture displays rather different sets of concerns from its UK and US counterparts, with its focus on neighbourly hosts and 'Aussie' averageness framed as a virtue. Lifestyle programming in Australia, while on the one hand seemingly 'selling' global models of lifestyles, taste and consumption, tends to be relentlessly tied to the familiar and the ordinary.

The double-edged character of these forms of programming was also evident in our studies of examples from Taiwan and Singapore, where the case studies discussed display a complex and varied blending of local embeddedness and nostalgia for local traditions with a global sensibility. In this group of programmes, instruction in the techniques of Chinese medicine sits cheek by jowl with the modelling of the liberal nuclear family; Buddhist scriptures alongside a lesson in pop art design; advice on

adapting Peranakan aesthetics for an ‘oriental vogue’ effect next to shows that spruik the idea of healthy, ‘five-star’ cooking as a creative leisure pursuit. Far from representing an unfettered embrace of western consumerism, lifestyle culture in Taiwan and Singapore involves a negotiation of new and old ways of life and cultural values, of transnational and local concerns that suggest that care must be taken with assuming that the term ‘lifestyle’ is stable or easily translatable in some universal sense across cultural and national borders.

To return to the conceptual rubric of plural modernities introduced at the beginning of this article, perhaps this spectrum of variously hybrid cultures and taste formations (incorporating different mixes of the local, the national and the transnational; different elements of that which is framed as ‘traditional’ and that which is framed as ‘contemporary’) could be described as formations of ‘variegated modernity’: contemporary cultures internally differentiated along the axes of local/global as well as those of old/new; traditional/modern. Along with these ‘variegated’ forms of syncretic modern culture come, too, transforming notions of selfhood as reflected, (re)constructed and disseminated via lifestyle television. A comprehensive consideration of the identities taught by this mode of programming is beyond the scope of this article, and awaits detailed audience studies. But it would certainly be a mistake to assume in advance that the forms of selfhood emerging through such media and their consumption will be merely ‘western’ or even ‘westernized’ in any simple sense. Instead, these forms of subjectivity and identification (like the French cuisine or the pop art design taught by the programmes) are themselves likely to be significantly indigenised and ‘made-over’ in their uptake in these specific cultural contexts.

Notes

1. Contemporary lifestyle programming also has links to DIY culture and forms of domestic masculinity. See Lewis’ (2008) discussion of masculinity and the development of modern lifestyle advice.
2. Focusing variously on ‘alternative’, ‘other’ and ‘hybrid’ modernities, such an approach leads away from the once presumed opposition between a modern west and a non- or pre-modern non-west, and toward renewed attempts, in Ong’s words, ‘to consider how non-western societies themselves make modernities after their own fashion, in the remaking of rationality, capitalism and the nation in ways that borrow from but also transform western universalizing forms’ (1995, p. 64). Thus, while Holden and Scrase (2006) point to the ways in which popular media modes like television act as conduits for forms of ‘mediated modernity’ across Asia, a comparative modernities approach usefully extends this model by foregrounding how particular geocultural locations frame and specify locally pertinent processes of modernity.
3. *The Biggest Loser* is a weight loss ‘make-over’ show that combines a ‘warts and all’ reality-lifestyle format together with a competitive, boot camp approach in order to both transform and reform ‘aberrant’ overweight citizens into slimmer, go-getting versions of their former selves.
4. Since the segment was filmed, Long Jun’er and her family have transformed the house into an upscale bed-and-breakfast cum gallery; they also run an organic restaurant. Both feature the painstakingly ‘cosy’ interior decoration style featured in the house discussed here.
5. The ‘collective *uchi*’ (interior) in Holden and Hakan’s terms.
6. MediaCorp is owned by Temasek Holdings, an investment arm of the Singapore government.

7. Arts Central (which features a variety of mostly foreign English-language programming often with Chinese subtitles) also offers a regular 9–10 pm lifestyle slot including imported shows like *The Hairy Biker's Cookbook* (a UK cooking-travel show) and *Outback Café*, an Australian travel food show hosted by indigenous presenter Mark Olive.
8. According to Tay Lay Tin, a Senior Executive Producer with Chinese Entertainment Productions, lifestyle TV audiences are primarily housewives supplemented by students at primetime. She argues that, given long work hours in Singapore, workers tend not catch programmes in the 8–10 pm slot instead watching after 10 pm (a time slot dominated by news and documentaries). Interview with Tay Lay Tin, Senior Executive Producer, Chinese Entertainment Productions, Singapore, January 2008.
9. In Singapore as in Taiwan, make-over segments have featured on beauty shows but these shows have tended to be oriented towards niche audiences. At the time of writing, a new full-length beauty show was being aired on Mediacorp 8 at 8.30 pm on Friday. Featuring the same host as *Good Food Fun Cook*, *Follow Me to Glamour* is a reality-style 'outdoor game show' based around the search for suitable candidates to undergo beauty make-over sessions in public.
10. While western lifestyle make-over shows often involve lifestyle experts invading people's private domestic space, this occurs less on Singaporean lifestyle shows where much of the action tends to be set in public or studio space.
11. Thanks to Tay Lay Tin for bringing these points to our attention.
12. Interview with Tay Lay Tin, Senior Executive Producer, Chinese Entertainment Productions, Singapore, January 2008.
13. While Singaporean TV might be seen to legitimate global middle-class lifestyles there are limits to the kinds of cosmopolitan lifestyles it will portray. For instance, featuring queer-identified actors or hosts is a no-go zone for Singapore TV (although it can feature camp hosts who are 'read' by the audience as gay) as evidenced by the recent case of a home make-over show that was fined for featuring a gay couple who wanted to transform their game room into a new nursery for their adopted baby. 'Singapore TV station fined S\$15,000 for showing a "normal" gay family' (retrieved from <http://www.fridae.com/newsfeatures/2008/04/25/2047.singapore-tv-station-fined-s-15000-for-showing-a-normal-gay-family>).

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