

Making Over Culture?

Lifestyle Television and Contemporary Pedagogies of Selfhood in Singapore

Tania Lewis

RMIT UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Lifestyle television is popular, non-fictional programming that aims to instruct its viewers in everyday life practices, from home decoration and food preparation to fashion, shopping and child-rearing. In recent years, a range of lifestyle advice programs, and, in particular, reality-based makeover shows, have made their way onto primetime schedules around the world. The global currency of such formats has been interpreted as a sign of broader cultural and social shifts around the world, in particular the growing prevalence of individualised, consumer-oriented models of selfhood. 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. Focusing on Singaporean lifestyle TV, this article examines the kinds of cultural values and modes of selfhood promoted on these shows. It argues that, as etiquette manuals for the twenty-first century, these increasingly ubiquitous forms of advice television provide rich insights into the ways in which contemporary Asian media cultures are negotiating globalised models of cosmopolitan consumer-citizenship.

Keywords: Reality makeover shows, consumer-citizen, neo-liberalism, cosmopolitanism, class and taste, reflexive individualisation, governmentality.

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, 2008a). Over the past decade or so, 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. 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, p. 103) to claim we have entered 'the era of lifestyle TV'. Since then lifestyle shows and 'reality'-based makeover programming have invaded primetime schedules around the world—from the Indian version of *MasterChef* to Panama's local adaptation of *Extreme Makeover* (*Cambio Radical*).

For a number of Anglo-American scholars, the rise of these kinds of softly instructional lifestyle formats at this particular cultural-historical moment speaks to a range of broader shifts in late liberal states, particularly around the nature of identity and citizenship (Miller, 2007; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Some have argued, for instance, that 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. Others have emphasised the fact that, 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* can be seen as working hand in hand with governmental strategies bent on devolving 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 political, cultural and social shifts in the nature of late modernity, to what extent can these developments be applied to other contexts such as Asia? Given that the notion of 'lifestyle' itself is a thoroughly western concept—emerging out of an Anglo-European sociological tradition and temporal mapping of modernity and industrial capitalism, what happens when we transplant this concept into Asia, a context marked by a plurality of cultural and temporal trajectories of modernity, and often by a complex ongoing set of negotiations between modernity and tradition? If lifestyle programming is increasingly taking on a pedagogical role in modern societies, does life advice oriented programming in highly globalised Asian nations, such as Singapore, also operate to educate and inculcate audiences into particular ways of living and being? And if so, what sorts of values and models of lifestyle, selfhood and citizenship are being offered up on Singaporean television sets?

Focusing specifically on Singapore, this article presents findings from a larger comparative study of lifestyle programming in Asia, which seeks 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.¹ Singapore offers an example of a nation that has clearly embraced elements of globalising, Anglo-American forms of commercial media culture, framed by neo-liberal models of consumer-oriented, 'choice' based citizenship. However, lifestyle media and culture in Singapore has to be understood in the context of a strongly multicultural (Chinese dominated) Asian society and a highly interventionist state regulatory system. This unique combination of liberalised economic values, alongside elements of cultural traditionalism and authoritarian statehood, make it a particularly interesting site to examine questions of global media-cultural flows.

Before I go on to discuss the rise of lifestyle TV in Singapore I want to provide an overview of some of the main theoretical and conceptual frameworks and contexts relevant to understanding the rise of 'transformational' lifestyle programming in the West. My goal here is not to uncritically apply such frameworks to Singapore but rather to open a critical dialogue between western theories of lifestyle and late modern identity and the various ways in which modernity, tradition, lifestyle and selfhood might be understood as being played out in specific Asian sites such as Singapore.

THE LIFESTYLED SELF

One common explanation for the proliferation of lifestyle (and reality) TV formats around the world has been to see this trend as a product of broader shifts within the television industry. In particular, the growing role of relatively cheap, 'unscripted' television, utilising the free labour of the ordinary people who participate in these shows, has been viewed as an attempt to deal with an increasingly deregulated market, a fragmented audience, and the growing need for content in a multi-channel environment (Moran 1998; Magder, 2004). While industry economics certainly has some explanatory power for the rise of these formats, what interests me here is the way in which the proliferation of life advice television around the world (or what Rachel Moseley (2000) has described, in relation to British television, as the 'makeover takeover') can also be linked with a number of wider socio-cultural developments, in particular the 'lifestyling' of contemporary existence.

Representing far more than just a convenient new way for the TV industry to re-label popular advice and info-tainment programming, in late modern societies the concept of lifestyle has become one of the dominant frameworks through which we understand and organise contemporary everyday life. Where domestic work, bodily self-management, grooming and self-presentation were once associated with the feminine realm, as Moseley argues (2000), the rise of the makeover on primetime TV has occurred partly in concert with a broader cultural re-valuing of once feminine concerns around the private and domestic, with such concerns increasingly rebadged as broader lifestyle issues for both women and men.

As David Bell and Joanne Hollows note in their book *Ordinary Lifestyles* (2005), while the term lifestyle is used in a range of different contexts, from health to marketing, it is essentially underpinned by a notion of identity that foregrounds personal choice and the malleable nature of the self. Rather than seeing selfhood as limited or constrained by one's class, race or gender, today ordinary people are held up as being able to invent (and re-invent) their own life 'biographies'. The lifestyle makeover show epitomises this ethos of reinvention focused as it is on transforming every aspect of one's life from home décor to selfhood.

There are a number of ways in which the flexible notion of the self assumed within 'lifestyle culture' has been understood. Numerous contemporary social theorists have suggested that what distinguishes identity in late modernity is a heightened sense of individualisation and 'reflexivity' (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992), with the responsibility for dealing with the complexities of everyday life increasingly lying with the 'enterprising' self and the privatised, 'informed' citizen. Ulrich Beck's work, in particular, contends that we now live in a post-traditional world where identities are increasingly made rather than ascribed, a process he terms 'reflexive individualization'. The shift towards reflexive individualisation means that 'choice' (or at least the rhetoric of choice) becomes central to people's existence as their identities are increasingly formed through lifestyle-oriented decision making.

Others have complicated this picture of post-traditional identity by arguing that the lifestyled self is a classed subject, tied to a bourgeois model of identity. Gareth Palmer (2004), discussing the rise of lifestyle programming in the UK—widely acknowledged as the birthplace of contemporary lifestyle TV—reads the tips provided by the new echelon of 'experts' that emerged on both home shows and fashion makeover formats like the BBC's *What Not to Wear*, as offering strongly class-inflected modes of guidance around questions of style, taste and social distinction. Likewise, in a recent analysis of the hugely popular cooking show *MasterChef Australia*, I argue that the show promotes middle class forms of taste and cultural capital which, via a celebration of cultural identity and ethnic cuisine, are in turn tied to globalised, cosmopolitan and enterprising models of selfhood (Lewis, forthcoming 2011).

Another central element of the model of selfhood promoted on lifestyle TV is its thorough embeddedness in consumer culture. The emphasis on a choice-based, endlessly-transforming form of identity, alongside a broader focus on aesthetics and the art of living, involves naturalising consumption as a practice of self-shaping, with lifestyle and makeover TV working 'to alert viewers to the existence of more products and services for their utility in the endless project of the self' (Bonner, 2003, p. 104), from gym equipment and personal training to home décor and fashion. Increasingly what lifestyle programming 'sells' to the audience, however, are not just products but ways of living and being. Such shifts reflect, in part, the growing focus on branded lifestyles rather than commodities, as reflected in the below-the-line or integrated, narrative-driven approach to advertising central to reality lifestyle TV,

and the use of branded celebrity experts, such as UK chef Jamie Oliver, who can be seen to model particular personal lifestyles.

Oliver's growing 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 concerned not only with questions of individual style and self-presentation but also increasingly with the ways in which lifestyle choices are linked to broader concerns around selfhood and citizenship. Discussing the rise and role of what he terms 'cultural citizenship', Toby Miller contends that there has been a growing convergence between civic culture and consumerism in neo-liberal societies (2007). Within media culture this is evidenced by a privileging of discourses of individualised consumption, and in particular a lifestyle-oriented commercial culture focused on bettering the self through 'ethico-aesthetic exercises' (Miller, 2007, p. 11). Marking a broader shift away from traditional modes of organised civic culture and the rise of a personalised lifestyle politics, the ethics and practices of selfhood and citizenship have become reduced to a series of commoditised cultural practices and lifestyle choices; or as Miller (2007, p. 11) puts it, "'Good taste" becomes a sign of, and a means toward, better citizenship'.

A final important critical approach that has sought to contextualise the rise of the lifestyle-oriented consumer-citizen, and which is particularly relevant to Singapore given its embrace of neo-liberalism, can be found in Nikolas Rose's work (1989, 1996). Influenced by Foucault's conception of modern power and governance as being played out through the 'freedoms' associated with liberal selfhood, Rose argues that the rise of neo-liberal governments in many nations in the 1980s (in particular the UK and US), alongside the emergence of a wider 'enterprise culture', has seen a shift in the dominant paradigms through which we conceptualise modern citizenship. In particular, the figure of the self-governing citizen, an individual who is constructed as 'enterprising' and self-directed, has become a cultural dominant. This has occurred in the context of the state increasingly seeking to devolve questions of social and political responsibility to the level of the individual consumer-citizen, a situation shored up by a 'therapeutic culture' that pairs freedom and moral development with self-mastery and self-development. Thus, in neo-liberal settings, the personal, health and relationship advice increasingly offered on Anglo-American lifestyle makeover shows like *The Biggest Loser*, which, as I note below has been remade as a local format for the Singaporean market, can be seen to be attempting to fill the gap left by the state as it passes on responsibility for once public concerns like obesity onto the self regulating consumer-citizen.

Lifestyle programming—from competitive formats like *The Biggest Loser* to personal makeover shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*—can be seen to emerge out of a complex conjuncture of social, cultural and economic factors and to promote a contested notion of normative selfhood. Despite claims that the self-governing consumer-citizen now exists in a post-traditional realm marked by the growing irrelevance of social categories like class, the ideals and norms held up on lifestyle shows are often underpinned by class-based (particularly middle class and lower middle class or 'aspirational') models of taste and lifestyle, while lifestyle also has a complex ongoing relationship to feminine skills around domesticity and the presentation of self. Nevertheless, a central thematic of lifestyle media and culture is individualisation, linked to an emerging neo-liberal culture of self-governance and self-surveillance and to choice-based, consumer-oriented models of selfhood. This next section focuses on lifestyle TV in Singapore and, in particular, the degree to which such models of individualisation might be relevant to its peculiar media-cultural landscape.

'ORIENTAL VOGUE': LIFESTYLING SINGAPORE

As noted, in recent years lifestyle shows have become familiar features of primetime TV schedules around the world. Asia is no exception, although the uptake of lifestyle shows is highly variable across the region and is shaped by a range of local TV traditions. In Taiwan, for instance, the term 'lifestyle TV' doesn't have the broad currency that it has in, say, India where a range of western lifestyle and reality formats have been adapted for local primetime audiences. Like Taiwan, the Chinese TV industry doesn't use the phrase lifestyle TV to designate a particular mode of programming but rather uses the term *shenghuo* (生活, life) to describe info-ed programming with an everyday life theme.² Nevertheless, a range of recognisably westernised lifestyle and reality formats are now airing on Chinese television from Chinese Central Television (CCTV)'s competitive renovation show *Changing Spaces* (交换空间) to Beijing Television Station's *Jojo Good Living*, whose host has been compared by the *New York Times* to Martha Stewart (Xu, 2007). Likewise Singapore, the object of focus for this article, has produced a number of locally made lifestyle and makeover shows.

One important context for the rise of reality and 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 penetration reached 96 percent of the population in China in 2005, for instance (Sennitt, 2006). 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 television, reality 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 noted, the rise of reality makeover TV speaks to a range of broader social shifts in neo-liberal western states reflecting in particular 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. If the rise of lifestyle TV in the West can be linked to these broader economic, cultural and social shifts, however to what extent can these developments be applied to Asian contexts marked often by different cultural and political traditions and models of modernity? The Singaporean case study that follows explores these issues through examining the sorts of values and models of lifestyle, selfhood and citizenship being offered up on local makeover shows.

Unlike many of its Asian counterparts, Singapore—as an advanced capitalist nation with a per capita income that matches that of Canada—already has a well developed consumer and lifestyle oriented media culture, with advertising, radio and print media in Singapore offering up a complex combination of 'western' and 'Asian' lifestyle imagery. A former British colony, it gained independence in 1965, moving from a successful export economy in the 1960s and 1970s to a growing focus on positioning itself as both a regional and global hub for the new knowledge economy. As Aiwa Ong (2006) notes, in rapidly transforming into a new post-industrial nation, this ambitious 'global city' has sought to 'reengineer' its citizens along the way. One element of this has been a drive to move away from the Asian values that shored up Singapore's place as an economic tiger in the 1980s to a focus,

post the Asian financial crisis of the late 90s, on western neo-liberal models of risk taking and entrepreneurialism, moving from family based businesses and networks to more individualised models of enterprise. The new push to neo-liberalism means that Singaporean 'citizens are now expected to develop new mindsets' (Ong, 2006, p. 194) and to embrace enterprising individualism, albeit an individualism that is manufactured and engineered by the state. The question, then, is how and whether such shifts are being played out and negotiated in the realm of popular lifestyle media and in particular broadcast television, a media form which continues to play a major role in Singapore.

In contrast to the TV industry in the Anglo-American context where deregulation and privatisation is the norm, broadcast television in Singapore is highly regulated, falling primarily under the jurisdiction of the state owned collection of companies known as Mediacorp. Mediacorp's broadcast offerings include the Chinese channels 8 and U (the latter aimed at a youth market), an English-language channel (channel 5), Okto (the children's channel), Channel News Asia, Suria channel aimed at the Malay community, and Vasantham, a Tamil-language channel. Direct-to-home satellite television is currently banned though cable is now widely available, with providers such as Starhub, which has an audience of half a million viewers, offering over 100 channels (including a range of western channels airing lifestyle shows); tech-savvy viewers also, of course, have access to shows from around the region and globally via Internet downloading. However, with nearly 80 percent of adults watching terrestrial TV on a daily basis (Nielsen, 2009), my focus here is on free-to-air TV, and in particular the Chinese-language channel, channel 8, which attracts 49 percent of the audience.

As in the rest of Asia, drama dominates the TV schedule however, in contrast to Taiwan and China, lifestyle TV is a more recognised 'genre' within the industry—though it is often labelled on schedules as variety or info-ed programming—and has increasingly found itself moving from traditional daytime slots to primetime. While lifestyle shows feature on all of the Mediacorp channels, the majority of Singaporean lifestyle programming is made for Chinese audiences and hence the focus of this section is primarily on Chinese shows. Channel 8 features a wide range of popular factual programming on its primetime schedule. Over the past couple of years, programming airing in the 8 to 9 pm slot (traditionally primetime in the West), for instance, has included a range of lifestyle and variety shows from cooking (*Celeb's a Cook*) and consumer advice (*King of Thrift*), to popular factual/human interest shows (*Life Transformers*) and pop doc-reality shows (*With You 1000 Miles*, a local variation on *The Amazing Race*). The most popular lifestyle sub-genre in Singapore is the cooking show, which is often discussed as a genre unto itself. Travel shows are also a popular lifestyle sub-genre on primetime TV, often combining cooking and education about the lifestyles of other cultures (*I Cook for You*, *Love on a Plate*). It should be noted here that 'primetime' is a somewhat elastic concept in Singapore and can include programming scheduled anywhere from 6 pm to midnight. As in many parts of Asia, the standard working day is a long one with workers often not returning home until 9 or 9.30 pm. Reflecting this, television in this later slot is often more oriented towards genres traditionally associated with male viewers such as news and current affairs though some lifestyle shows are also aired in this slot (for example, the fashion advice show *Her Sense* was scheduled at 10.30 pm in 2008), as well as later at night, perhaps reflecting recognition of a growing professional female audience. Most of the lifestyle programming found in the primetime schedule, however, is located in the 8–9 pm slot.

While many lifestyle shows are highly localised, a number of shows draw recognisably from western lifestyle traditions and in particular makeover programming. 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. Examples include Channel 8's fashion and beauty makeover show *Beautiful People*, first aired in 2002, and *Be Somebody* (2005), which sought to transform 'wallflowers', who had been 'nominated by their thoughtful friends or family', into 'stunning babes'. More recently, though, the makeover format has started to evolve and diversify on Singaporean TV, targeting a broader audience through the emergence of Chinese-language shows like the eco-makeover program *Energy Savers* and the reality weight loss series *Lose To Win* (modelled on *The Biggest Loser*). As the show's description indicates, sponsored by the Health Promotion Board and now into its second series, *Lose To Win* blends a competitive reality format with lifestyle advice: 'Our two energetic hosts will follow 10 participants, to witness their weight loss process in this competition and also get a glimpse of their lifestyle and diet, to see if they'd gained valuable knowledge from this program'. Another type of makeover programming that has become popular on primetime television are home renovation shows, such as the high rating *Home Décor Survivor* series, which first aired in 2005, and which I want to discuss in some detail here.³

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 for the Straight Guy* (albeit with the overtly gay elements and the personal makeover taken out). Featuring a competitive game show element, two teams each led by a young male host (comedian Mark Lee and Bryan Wong, known as Mediacorp's 'hosting king') vie to make over the interior space of two homes while staying within a budget of S\$6,000. Like many western home makeover formats, the show combines a class-inflected education in modernist taste, style and aesthetics (in one show there is a particular emphasis—highlighted by English words popping up on screen—on 'modernism' and on creating spaces that are 'funky' and 'industrial looking'), with a focus both on DIY and thriftiness, and 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 furniture, with prices and the names and addresses of stores provided to the audience. While educating viewers in design and aesthetics, the overall tone of the program is one of youthful informality, with the young hosts and makeover team engaging throughout in cheeky banter and comic hi-jinks. Thus the show offers a fairly soft and accessible form of lifestyle pedagogy, modelling forms of middle-class cosmopolitan taste in ways that are clearly targeted toward 'ordinary Singaporean youth': students and young families living in small, standardised government flats.

While the show borrows heavily from Anglo-American home makeover formats, it also draws upon the aesthetics and conventions of hybrid Japanese-Chinese variety TV. In particular, the show has a comic, zany feel, with pop-up coloured images and words exploding onto the screen accompanied by comic sound effects. The group presentation, slapstick humour, incessant cheeky cross-talk, 'busy' screen aesthetic and dense sound-scape 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.⁴ Likewise, the content of the show blends European design tips and global cosmopolitan 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 while another focuses on 'oriental vogue'.

Energy Savers, which aired in 2008 on Channel 8 on Thursdays at 8.30 pm, is another home makeover show of sorts, although one concerned with transforming the energy consumption of Singaporean households. Like *Home Décor Survivor* and *Lose to Win*, it adopts a reality-based, competitive game show format with the show's central 'challenge' being for the twelve participating households to reduce their energy consumption by at least 10 percent while thinking up 'creative ways' for saving electricity along the way, with the best household winning S\$5,000. The show's male and female hosts are young attractive Singaporean personalities and, like *Home Décor Survivor*, the show's tone is highly comedic and playful with rapid comic voice-overs and the liberal use of pop-up images and words (complete with 'zany' sound effects) to emphasise particular household tips or energy consumption issues.

However, while the show aims for a light variety-style feel, its agenda is rather more educational than *Home Décor Survivor*; the hosts guide the audience through an audit of the households, noting the range of appliances they own and their current energy use and then offering suggestions for reducing energy consumption. The households on display here range from a young couple with a baby living in a Housing Development Board flat to larger, more affluent families living in freestanding houses, suggesting the show is aimed at a rather larger cross-section of the Singaporean public than the more youthful audience of *Home Décor Survivor*.

While *Energy Savers* is similar in feel to other info-ed/variety shows on Singaporean television, the format's focus on reducing energy consumption aligns it with a range of recent lifestyle makeover shows coming out of the Anglo-American context, such as *The Biggest Loser*, and eco-makeover formats like Australia's *Eco-house Challenge*. While such shows are ostensibly entertainment-oriented makeover formats, they can also be seen to promote neo-liberal models of good 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 (Lewis, 2008b).

Such a show, however, also needs to be understood in the context of Singapore's rather distinctive mode of authoritarian capitalism. Possessing a neo-liberal market alongside a strongly regulatory state, Singapore is marked by a form of neo-liberalism rather different from its western counterparts, one that as Harvey (2005, p. 86) notes blends capitalism with Confucianism, nationalism and a 'cosmopolitan ethic suited to its current position in the world of international trade'. Singaporean entertainment-based television then, while addressing consumers as self-governing citizens and consumers, is also strongly shaped by state dictates around cultural values (such as ensuring that hosts speak standardised Mandarin). While there has been a distinct pedagogical 'turn' on Anglo-American reality television, the bottom line for programmers in these settings (the BBC being somewhat of an exception) tends to be commercial and ratings driven. While such concerns are also important for Singaporean TV producers, the public educational elements of Singaporean shows are more overt; shows are often packaged in terms of their benefit to the community while reality TV producers often take into account government concerns and campaigns around lifestyle issues when they are creating shows aimed at promoting good citizenship.

As noted, another very popular form of programming in Singapore, which again speaks to the question of television's complex articulation to transnational, regional and local lifestyle cultures and values, is food TV. Food programming has been a longstanding genre in a range of Asian TV markets, with the Japanese game show format *Iron Chef* being exported to the

US and remade as *Iron Chef America*. Alongside Japan, Anglo-American trends in lifestyle TV have also had an influence on the more recent rise in the region of the celebrity chef, and of reality-style, entertainment-oriented cooking shows more generally. The show I want to discuss here is a rather less glossy and less westernised program than makeover shows like *Home Décor Survivor*; nevertheless it is also suggestive of broad shifts in Singaporean lifestyle culture, particularly in relation to taste and cultural capital.

Typical of the kind of more ordinary lifestyle programming popular with Chinese-Singaporeans *Good Food Fun Cook* (GFFC) is a cheap, 'down-home' show aired in 2008 on Friday at 8 pm on Channel 8. Targeted at housewives and showcasing the talents of celebrity chef Sam Leong, 'the idol in the cooking world',⁵ 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* and *Energy Savers*, the mode of address on the show is informal and zany again aiming for a feeling of *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 shows, GFFC combines an entertainment-oriented approach to lifestyle with an educational agenda. Sam on the one hand 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 Feng⁶—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 (in interview, 2008) 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 thirteen 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'. GFFC then combines a focus on taste and aesthetics (similar to *Home Décor Survivor*) with the kind of public educational focus apparent in shows like *Energy Savers*. The show initiates ordinary citizens into cosmopolitan forms of taste while at the same time addressing them as good healthy Chinese-Singaporean citizens.

CONCLUSION

Lifestyle programming is an increasingly prominent feature of Asian primetime TV schedules, playing a growing role in TV markets such as Singapore and across the region. Although not yet as prevalent as in the US, UK and Australia, where a range of advice-based shows and reality-style lifestyle makeover formats have flourished, the growth of home renovation and travel shows, personal makeover 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 in the West can be seen to offer various kinds of normative pedagogies around taste, identity and cultural value, how might we understand the growing currency

of such formats in Asian settings? Does the rise of lifestyle TV in Asia suggest the triumph of global consumerism and westernised taste cultures? Or does it, as Ong's work on 'neoliberalism as exception' in Asia suggests (Ong, 2006), reflect the emergence of highly contested and contingent, localised reworkings of modernity, market-based governance, and cultural citizenship—as played out at a popular, everyday level through lifestyle media and culture?

The Singapore case study presented here suggests that the notion of 'lifestyle' needs to be understood not only in relation to global shifts in identity around consumer culture and late modernity but also articulated to specific geo-cultural contexts and local/regional modernities. Lifestyle and makeover programming, while on the one hand clearly 'selling' global models of lifestyle, taste and consumption, tends to be also tied to the familiar, the domestic and the ordinary. In varied ways, the three Chinese-Singaporean lifestyle shows discussed can all be seen to position local audiences both as reflexive cosmopolitan consumer-citizens while, at the same time, negotiating western, regionalist Chinese and thoroughly localised models of lifestyle consumption and social identity. Transforming the décor of Housing Development Board flats, *Home Décor Survivor* brings together a consumerist ethos with a performative cosmopolitan sensibility,⁷ self-consciously blending both western and reflexively 'Asian' taste cultures. *Energy Savers* likewise speaks to both global and national-governmental concerns around thrift, responsible consumption and self-regulating modes of citizenship. *Good Food Fun Cook* (GFFC), meanwhile, is a particularly localised 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. But here also we see a degree of cosmopolitan aspirationalism on display (again framed in highly localised ways)—played out in this instance through its concern with teaching audiences how to appreciate 'five star cuisine' and the show's healthy agenda.

GFFC's consumer message—which ties aspirational taste to healthy lifestyles—can easily be read as affirming the simple spread of a global, neo-liberal agenda of enterprising selfhood. But, as I have suggested, such modes of lifestyle consumption need to also be understood in relation to local and regional Chinese cultural values (for instance, on GFFC Chinese traditions of medicinal food is an important focus of the show). Likewise the healthy, responsible model of selfhood promoted on such formats is articulated to a rather localised form of neo-liberalism, here paradoxically reflecting the close regulatory relationship between the media and the Singapore government, which has been actively pushing a healthy lifestyle campaign through media sites such as television. The promotion of entrepreneurial, self-governing forms of consumer-citizenship takes on a very particular set of cultural and political meanings in a context where, as Birch and Phillips (2003) point out, civic rather than civil society continues to dominate.

While makeover shows like *Home Décor Survivor* and *Energy Savers* and lifestyle programs like GFFC all speak, to a certain extent, to the globalising rubric of 'lifestyled' forms of identity, they nevertheless do so in ways that complicate universalistic models of lifestyle and modernity. Far from representing an unfettered embrace of 'western' individualised models of selfhood, lifestyle culture in Singapore involves a negotiation of new and old ways of life and cultural values, of trans-national and local concerns that suggests 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. As Ong (2006) notes in relation to the uptake of neo-liberalism in Asia, such developments are challenging existing conceptions of identity and belonging, speaking back to and transforming conventional understandings of, for in-

stance, consumer-citizenship. This brief case study, while limited in focus, points to the limits of assumptions that the forms of selfhood emerging through lifestyle TV can be read as merely 'western' or even 'westernised' in any simple sense. Instead, these forms of subjectivity and identification—like the French cuisine or the pop art design taught by the programs—are themselves likely to be significantly indigenised and 'made-over' in their uptake in these specific cultural contexts.

NOTES

- 1 I am a chief investigator on an Australian Research Council funded grant (DP1094355) entitled, 'The role of lifestyle television in transforming culture, citizenship and selfhood: China, Taiwan, Singapore and India'. The project is funded for four years 2010–2013; the other chief investigators are Fran Martin, Wanning Sun, John Sinclair and Ramaswami Harindranath. The aim for the larger study is to utilise a three-fold methodology involving industry, audience and program-based research. This article emerges out of early research Fran Martin and I have been conducting on Singapore. To date we have conducted an analysis of scheduling patterns, content-textual analysis of selected Chinese-language programs (which were translated from Mandarin to English by Dr Martin) and some in-country industry interviews (conducted in English by myself).
- 2 Thanks to Wanning Sun for this insight.
- 3 The spin off show *Junior Home Décor Survivor* was also popular, coming in at number five in the top twenty TV programs for the ratings period of March 2008.
- 4 Thanks to Fran Martin for this observation.
- 5 Interview with Tay Lay Tin, Senior Executive Producer, Chinese Entertainment Productions, Singapore, January 2008.
- 6 Thanks to Fran Martin for this observation.
- 7 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 lifestyle shows often feature camp hosts who are clearly 'read' by the audience as gay) as evidenced by the recent case of a home makeover 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 government fines TV station for gay show' http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/04/24/singapore_fines_tv_station_for_gay_show/.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tania Lewis is a Vice Chancellor's Research Fellow in the School of Media & Communications at RMIT University, Melbourne. She is the author of *Smart Living: Lifestyle Media and Popular Expertise* (Peter Lang, New York, 2008), editor of *TV Transformations: Revealing the Makeover Show* (Routledge, London, 2009), and co-editor of *Ethical Consumption: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge: London, 2011). Her current research is on lifestyle media and consumption with a particular focus on lifestyle and sustainability and green citizenship. She is a chief investigator on a four-year (2010–2013) comparative study of lifestyle advice television in Asia funded by the Australian Research Council.

Dr Tania Lewis
School of Media and Communication
RMIT University
GPO Box 2476
Melbourne
Victoria 3001
Australia
Tel: 61 3 9925 2406
Email: Tania.lewis@rmit.edu.au