

Globalizing lifestyles?

Makeover television in Singapore

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The past decade has seen an explosion of lifestyle makeover television shows with audiences being urged to “renovate” everything from their homes, bodies, and children to their pets, a process that has seen the emergence of an army of lifestyle gurus on television advising us on what not to eat and what not to wear. While critical academic attention has largely focused on blockbuster reality television formats like *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, more recently a growing body of scholarship has started to focus on the “lifestyle turn” on television and the rise of the makeover format.² To date much of the work on makeover television has focused on its role in the US and UK. However, in the past couple of years the lifestyle makeover show has become an increasingly global phenomenon with audiences around the world embracing everything from home renovation to plastic surgery makeover shows. This essay is concerned with examining the implications of the global dissemination of such modes of programming, associated as they are with ideologies of neoliberal individualism, self-surveillance and self-promotion, and with a strongly consumption-oriented aesthetic.³ It emerges out of a pilot study I have been conducting with Dr Fran Martin at the University of Melbourne as a preliminary step in a larger transnational comparative study of lifestyle programming in Asia in which we seek to examine the role of lifestyle television in both shaping and reflecting broader shifts in social and cultural identity accompanying the rise of consumer-based modes of modernity.⁴

Although some significant work has been done on Western television as a pedagogical tool for teaching modernity,⁵ extant studies explicitly discussing modernities outside “the West” have to date seldom approached television as an arena for the elaboration of hybridized forms of modern culture, citizenship and selfhood.⁶ Lifestyle television, concerned as it is with instructing audiences in modern consumer and lifestyle practices, offers a privileged vantage point from which to survey current configurations and transformations of consumer culture and modernity in the Asia-Pacific region. While it can be seen on the one hand as a carrier of global ideologies around consumerist and neoliberal modes of selfhood, the genre also offers potential insights into local modernities as it tends to be particularly marked by its ties to the “national ordinary” through its focus

on ordinary people and their lifestyles. What is of particular interest, then, is its double role as a global television genre associated with Anglo-American lifestyle-oriented consumer practices *and* as a local cultural and media form strongly shaped by national and local cultural contexts and concerns – as well as being marked by different nationally inflected industry histories and modes of reception.

While there has been little systematic research on lifestyle television 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 lifestyle and consumer advice television, pointing to the importance of localized, culturally specific research. Based on these observations, a crucial critical paradigm for the larger project that this essay emerges out of is that of multiple or comparative modernities, an influential strand of scholarship on non-Western modernities that has emerged from studies of postcoloniality and globalization in the humanities and social sciences over the past ten years (see for instance the work of Arjun Appadurai, Nestor Garcia Canclini, Marwan Kraidy, Aihwa Ong, Lisa Rofel, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Lydia Liu). Focusing variously on “alternative,” “other,” and “hybrid” modernities, such an approach leads 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.”⁷ Thus, while Holden and Scrase point to the ways in which popular media modes like television act as conduits for forms of “mediated modernity” across Asia,⁸ a comparative modernities approach usefully extends this model by foregrounding how particular geo-cultural locations frame and specify locally pertinent processes of modernity.

In the Singaporean case study that follows, the emphasis is on both the recognizably “Western” elements of lifestyle television as well as the complex interplay of both globalizing and localizing elements at work in Singaporean lifestyle programming. The aim is thus to frame the lifestyle genre as exemplary of the multiplicity of culturally hybrid televisual modernities currently being worked out across the region.

The rise of the makeover show in the UK and US

Prior to discussing the role of lifestyle makeover television in Singapore I want to first briefly outline the rise of the format in the UK and US, before outlining the industrial, ideological and socio-cultural context out of which the makeover can be seen to emerge in the West. While the makeover format is often popularly associated with American television culture, the first successful makeover show to air on primetime television was the British home renovation-game show format, *Changing Rooms*⁹ (broadcast on the BBC in 1996 and later sold into a number of international markets). Makeovers had previously featured on daytime television as segments on magazine programs and talk shows aimed at women. However, the 1990s saw the makeover expand into a full-length

format and move into primetime schedules aimed at a broad audience including male viewers. Where daytime television makeovers had often focused on issues of personal style and fashion, the first successful makeover formats in the UK were shows oriented towards investing in and improving the home rather than the self.

By contrast, US television was somewhat slower to embrace the makeover show as a primetime format, focusing instead in the 1990s on a range of early reality-style formats from the low-budget, actuality-based television of the *COPS* variety to shows like MTV's *The Real World* (1992), which can be seen as a precursor to *Big Brother*. The first breakthrough makeover show on US network television was the surgical makeover program *Extreme Makeover* shown on the ABC which first aired in 2002 (although it should be noted that the cable channel TLC had already achieved high ratings in 2000 with *Trading Spaces*, a US adaptation of the BBC's *Changing Rooms*).

Since the emergence of these early primetime makeover shows, this mode of programming has proliferated and evolved with UK and US viewers now exposed to a range of sub-genres of the makeover. Focusing primarily on ordinary people (although occasionally dealing with wayward celebrities), everything from homes (*House Invaders*) and pets (*It's Me or the Dog*) to parental skills (*Supernanny*) and bodies (*How to Look Good Naked*) are now put under the spotlight and transformed – with the guidance of various life experts – under the gaze of the watching public. While there are important distinctions between what Kavka terms “the makeover cultures” of the UK and US, with the British particularly enamoured of domestically-based makeover shows and Americans with body makeovers,¹⁰ today's makeover shows can be seen to be marked by a certain shared ethos and to emerge out of a (to a certain extent) shared political and social context. Before I go on to discuss lifestyle television in Singapore, I want to briefly focus on the ideological and socio-cultural connotations of the makeover.

The lifestyle turn

One explanation for the spread of makeover formats and reality television more broadly has been to see it as a side effect of global shifts within the television industry. In particular, the growing role of relatively cheap, “unscripted” television focused on ordinary people can be seen as an attempt to deal with an increasingly deregulated market and a fragmented audience, with free-to-air networks now competing with cable and satellite television for viewers' attention, offering audiences an abundance of programming choices.¹¹ The deregulation of the television industry around the world in the 1980s and 1990s and the emergence of a multi-channel environment has also produced a situation where the pressure for product has encouraged local producers to create programs that can potentially move across a range of markets.¹² The rise of reality and lifestyle makeover formats such as *Big Brother* and *Extreme Makeover* that can be sold

around the world as pre-packaged program blueprints can thus be seen as an example of this globalization of product.

The success of the makeover format cannot however be purely reduced to a question of industry economics. The format's cross-cultural appeal is also linked to its unique blend of domestic melodrama, personal confession and aesthetic transformation, as well as its pedagogical dimensions – the fact that it offers audiences guidance in the realm of taste, consumption and lifestyle practices whether in relation to tastefully updating one's home or “renovating” one's personal lifestyle. The rise of makeover television 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 television industry to re-label popular advice programming, the concept of lifestyle has instead become one of the dominant frameworks through which we understand and organize contemporary everyday life. As David Bell and Joanne Hollows note in their book *Ordinary Lifestyles*,¹³ while the term is used in a range of different contexts, from health to marketing, the notion of lifestyle is underpinned by a conception 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 makeover show thus rather literally extends the DIY rubric to every aspect of one's life from home décor to selfhood.

The emphasis on an individualized, malleable self, alongside a broader focus on aesthetics and the art of living, also involves naturalizing consumption, with makeover television working “to alert viewers to the existence of more products and services for their utility in the endless project of the self.”¹⁴ What lifestyle programming “sells” to the audience here, however, are not just products but ways of living and being. Makeover television then 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.¹⁵ Within media culture this is evidenced by a privileging of discourses of individualized consumption, and in particular a lifestyle-oriented commercial culture focused on bettering the self through “ethico-aesthetic exercises.”¹⁶ Marking a broader shift away from traditional modes of organized civic culture and the rise of a personalized “lifestyle politics,”¹⁷ the ethics and practices of selfhood and citizenship have become reduced to a series of commoditized cultural practices and lifestyle choices; or as Miller puts it, “‘Good taste’ becomes a sign of, and a means toward, better citizenship.”¹⁸

An important critical approach that has sought to contextualize the rise of the lifestyle-oriented consumer-citizen can be found in Nikolas Rose's work.¹⁹ 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 neoliberal 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 conceptualize 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 neoliberal settings, the personal, health and relationship advice increasingly offered on lifestyle makeover shows like *The Biggest Loser*, for example, 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.²⁰

Overall, the makeover format can be seen to emerge out of and be marked by a complex conjuncture of social, cultural, and economic factors. If the rise of lifestyle television in the US and UK can be linked to these broader economic, cultural and social shifts, the question then is to what extent these developments can be applied to other cultural contexts? In his book, *Big Brother*, for instance, Jonathan Bignell asks whether the transnational mobility of reality and makeover television indicates the universalization of a specifically Western preoccupation with “personal confession, modification, testing and the perfectibility of the self.”²¹ Such a hypothesis is complicated by the fact that part of the reason for the global success of makeover formats (as Bignell himself notes) is precisely their ability to adapt to national contexts. Makeover programs offered up as format “shells” have been shown to have considerable transnational mobility and saleability,²² as they are amenable to being readily indigenized through the use of local presenters, lifestyle experts and members of the public and the instillation of local concerns and values. Television formats and the process of local format adaptation, then, represent sites marked by complex negotiations between globalizing forces and domestic concerns and contexts.²³ What follows is a discussion of how the lifestyle makeover format and its associated global ideological baggage is (re)articulated to and localized via the lifestyle concerns and values associated with Singapore and its distinctive mode of culturally hybridized modernity.

“Oriental vogue” and “ethnic fusion”: *lifestyling Singapore*

As noted, in recent years lifestyle makeover formats have not only “travelled” extensively within linguistically and culturally congruous television territories, they have also started to make an appearance in less culturally proximate sites such as Asia. The emergence of new forms of consumer-oriented “middle classes” in the region²⁴ has seen the local adaptation of a range of Western-style lifestyle shows. In China, for instance, the government-owned Beijing Television

Station has produced the magazine-style show *Jojo Good Living*, whose host has been compared by the *New York Times* to Martha Stewart.²⁵ Likewise in India, Sony Entertainment Television recently launched (in May 2008) *Naya Roop Nayi Zindagi*, a local version of *Extreme Makeover*; while Singapore, the object of focus for this essay, has produced a number of locally made makeover shows.

Unlike many of its Asian counterparts, Singapore – as an advanced capitalist, ex-British colony – already has a well-developed consumer and lifestyle oriented media culture. Advertising, radio, and print media in Singapore offer up a complex combination of “Western” and “Asian” lifestyle imagery and discourses while lifestyle television – often categorized as info-ed, infotainment or variety in Singapore – represents a significant proportion of programming on broadcast television. In contrast to the television industry in the Anglo-American context, where deregulation and privatization is the norm, however, broadcast television in Singapore is highly regulated, falling primarily under the jurisdiction of the state-owned collection of companies known as Mediacorp. Mediacorp thus operates all three Singaporean terrestrials – 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 television broadcasting in Singapore is dominated by Chinese programming, a review of the evening schedule indicates that lifestyle television programs feature on most television channels. In January 2008, for instance, the 8–10 p.m. slot on Mediacorp’s main Chinese channel,²⁶ Channel 8, featured Chinese-language shows like *Home Décor Survivor 3* (a home makeover show) and *Good Food Fun Cook* (a reality-style cooking show). Arts Central (which features a variety of mostly foreign, English-language programming often with Chinese subtitles) offered a regular 9–10 p.m. lifestyle slot including shows like *The Hairy Biker’s Cookbook* (a UK cooking-travel show). The channel also aired a rather glossy, locally produced but strongly Western-inflected lifestyle show, *The Food Bachelor*, in which a group of attractive, ethnically diverse young men (chosen to reflect Singapore’s multicultural community) with minimal cooking skills compete for the opportunity to host their own cooking show. The Malay channel Suria meanwhile offered two evening lifestyle shows, the D.I.Y. home décor show *ID Kreatif* and *Cari Menantu*, described as “a reality program that gives a spouse-to-be a crash marriage preparatory course.” Primetime lifestyle programming however was featured relatively rarely on Vasantham Central, the Tamil-language channel (although more recently the channel has been screening a daytime beauty makeover show).²⁷ Thus, while lifestyle shows feature on all the Mediacorp channels, the majority of Singaporean lifestyle programs are made for Chinese audiences and hence the focus in this next section is primarily on Chinese formats.

On Chinese-language Singaporean television, the broad genre of lifestyle advice and info-tainment programming – food programming, travel shows, budget advice shows, etc. – consists mainly of local formats made for local

audiences,²⁸ although the conventions and aesthetics of many of these shows draw from a range of international influences including US game shows, British lifestyle television, and Japanese variety shows. Makeover formats more specifically have also featured on primetime television, although like early forms of the makeover on UK and US television, these have often focused on beauty makeovers and have been aimed at female audiences (e.g., Channel 8's *Beautiful People* aired in 2003).²⁹ More recently though the makeover format has started to evolve and diversify on Singaporean television, targeting a broader audience through the emergence of Chinese-language shows like the eco-makeover program *Energy Savers* and the highly popular *Home Décor Survivor* series, which first aired in 2005 with the spin off *Junior Home Décor Survivor* coming in at number five in the top twenty television programs for the ratings period of March 2008.

One point to note here is that, aside from beauty shows, makeover shows focused on individual personal transformations have not featured so strongly in local lifestyle programming. Constrained by low budgets, an arguably more communitarian approach to lifestyle and a relative cultural reserve – amongst Chinese audience members at least – in relation to exposing oneself and one's lifestyle on television, the types of plastic surgery, behavioural and body makeover shows (such as *Extreme Makeover*, *Ladette to Lady* and *The Biggest Loser*) that have taken off more recently in the West are yet to emerge on Singaporean television.

The kinds of makeover shows that have started to become popular on primetime television are ones oriented towards renovating the home rather than the self. The *Home Décor Survivor* series for instance is a popular home show which 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 makeover the interior space of two homes while staying within a budget of \$6000. 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 name and address of stores provided to the audience), with frequent adverts in the break for the show's sponsor, a homewares store.

While educating the audience 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, presenting themselves and relating to each other in a manner that is distinctly "student-ish" as opposed

to “respectable” or “serious.” Thus the show offers a fairly soft and accessible form of 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, standardized 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 television. 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 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.³⁰ 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 hybridizing 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.”

The program thus speaks to a young domestic Chinese-Singaporean audience while adopting a hybridized mode of address that is at once recognizably local but that also speaks to broader regional and transnational concerns. Thus the show generically draws from local, regional and transnational influences while the mode of pedagogy and aesthetic aspirationalism on display illustrates Harindranath’s conception of the “transnational cosmopolitan elite” as a formation that cuts across national and East–West geo-cultural boundaries.³¹

Energy Savers, which aired in 2008 on Mediacorp 8 on Thursdays at 8.30 p.m., is another home makeover show of sorts, although one concerned with transforming the energy consumption of Singaporean households. Like *Home Décor Survivor* 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 per cent while thinking up “creative ways” for saving electricity along the way, with the best household winning \$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 emphasize 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 from competitive weight-loss shows like *The Biggest Loser* to eco-makeover formats like Australia's *Eco-house Challenge* and *Carbon Cops*. While such shows are ostensibly entertainment-oriented makeover formats they can also be seen to promote neoliberal 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 behavior and self-regulation.³²

Such a show however also needs to be understood in the context of Singapore's rather distinctive mode of authoritarian capitalism. Possessing a neoliberal market alongside a strongly regulatory state, Singapore is marked by a form of neoliberalism rather different from its Western counterparts, one that as David Harvey notes blends capitalism with Confucianism, nationalism and a "cosmopolitan ethic suited to its current position in the world of international trade."³³ Singaporean entertainment-based television, while addressing consumers as self-governing citizens and consumers, is also strongly shaped by state dictates around cultural values (such as ensuring for example that hosts speak standardized Mandarin). While there has been a distinct pedagogical "turn" on Anglo-American lifestyle 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 lifestyle television producers, the public educational elements of Singaporean shows are more overt; shows are often packaged in terms of their benefit to the community while lifestyle television producers often take into account government concerns and campaigns around lifestyle issues when they are creating lifestyle shows aimed at promoting good citizenship. A good example of this would be the 2007 infotainment-variety show, *The ABCs of Water*, an eight-part series aired on Wednesdays at 8.30 p.m. on Channel 8 hosted by two popular television personalities and sponsored by Singapore's Public Utilities Board in which "Television viewers learnt along with the celebrity contestants about how Singapore's reservoirs and waterways can be kept beautiful and clean, and what activities they can enjoy."

Another very popular form of lifestyle programming in Singapore which again speaks to the question of television's articulation to hybridizing formations of cultural modernity in Singapore is food television. Food programming has been a longstanding genre in a range of Asian television markets with the Japanese format *Iron Chef* even being exported to the US and remade as *Iron Chef America*. Alongside Japan, Anglo-American trends in lifestyle television have also arguably had an influence on the more recent rise in the region of the celebrity chef and entertainment-oriented cooking shows more generally, shows which, while not

strictly speaking makeover shows, are marked by a “transformational aesthetic” and by a concern with teaching ordinary people about middle-class forms of taste and distinction.³⁴

Typical of the kind of everyday lifestyle programming popular with Chinese-Singaporeans are cheap, down-home formats like *Good Food Fun Cook (GFFC)*, aired in 2008 on Friday at 8 p.m. on Mediacorp 8. Targeted at housewives and showcasing the talents of celebrity chef Sam Leong, “the idol in the cooking world,”³⁵ and Quan Yi Feng, one of Singapore’s top television 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 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 programs, *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 Feng – but at the same time, he is there to teach the audience about practical recipes, quality food, and style and aesthetics.³⁶ 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 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* 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.

In varied ways the three Chinese-Singaporean productions discussed can all be seen to position local audiences as reflexive cosmopolitan consumer-citizens negotiating Western, regionalist Chinese and local models of lifestyle consumption and social identity.³⁷ Through transforming the home *Home Décor Survivor* performs a complex hybridized cultural aesthetics tied to both global and Asian taste cultures but framed largely in consumerist terms. *Energy Savers* likewise speaks to both global and national-governmental concerns around thrift, responsible consumption and self-regulating modes of citizenship. *GFFC*,

meanwhile, is a particularly localized 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. But here also we see a degree of cosmopolitan aspirationalism on display (again framed in highly localized 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, neoliberal agenda of enterprising selfhood. But as I’ve 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 are an important focus of the show). Likewise the healthy, responsible model of selfhood promoted on such formats is articulated to a rather localized form of neoliberalism, 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. While makeover shows like *Home Décor Survivor* and *Energy Savers* and lifestyle programs like *GFFC* all speak to a certain extent to the globalizing rubric of neoliberal “lifestyled” forms of identity, they nevertheless do so in ways that complicate universalistic models of lifestyle and modernity.

Conclusion

Despite claims about its impending demise, broadcast television is arguably playing an increasing role in shaping culture, identity and citizenship around the world. 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. The rise of television in the region has occurred hand in hand with the liberalization of economic and, to a varied degree, state structures. One of the consequences of these processes has been the emergence of new forms of consumer-oriented middle classes with lifestyle aspirations that are shaped by national, regional and global influences.

Against this backdrop we have seen the emergence of a range of types of advice programming aimed at instructing audiences in consumption, taste and lifestyle. On lifestyle television, in particular, the homes and lives of ordinary people and celebrities are paraded as examples of ideal (or in the case of makeover shows, not-so-ideal) models of selfhood while lifestyle experts provide us with rules and guidelines for managing increasingly complex lives. Although not as prevalent as in the US and UK where a range of reality-style lifestyle makeover formats have flourished, the growth of home renovation shows and the celebrity chef phenomenon in sites like Singapore, for instance, marks the growing place of lifestyle-oriented modes of advice and consumption within Asian media culture. What does this global embrace of lifestyle formats tell us

about local television markets and cultures? Does the transnational mobility of the makeover show mean that Anglo-American models of enterprising individualism and self-improvement are becoming hegemonic?

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. As I’ve argued elsewhere, even in the case of ostensibly “Western” sites such as Australia, lifestyle advice culture and media is somewhat distinct from its UK and US counterparts.³⁸ Lifestyle programming, 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 nature of these forms of programming is evident in Singaporean lifestyle shows, where the examples discussed display a complex and varied blending of local embeddedness and nostalgia for local and regional Chinese traditions with a global sensibility. On these shows, an emphasis on Chinese medicine and the health-giving properties of food sits cheek by jowl with the modelling of cosmopolitan middle-class taste and “five star cuisine”; advice on adapting Peranakan traditions next to a focus on modernist aesthetics.

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” – brings into focus the necessity of employing a multiple or alternative modernities model when discussing developments in transnational media culture. It also emphasizes the locally varied nature of modernity and lifestyle culture *within* specific sites, with contemporary culture in Singapore clearly internally differentiated along the axes of local/regional/global as well as traditional/modern. Along with these internally differentiated 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 essay, and awaits detailed audience studies. But it would certainly be a mistake to assume 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 programs – are themselves likely to be significantly indigenized and “made-over” in their uptake in these specific cultural contexts.

Notes

- 1 I’d like to thank my co-researcher on the Asian lifestyle TV project Fran Martin for her valuable critical insights, many of which were drawn upon in this chapter.
- 2 David Bell and Joanne Hollows, eds, *Ordinary Lifestyles: Popular Media, Consumption and Taste* (Maidenhead, England: Open University Press, 2005); Charlotte Brunson, “Lifestyling Britain: The 8–9 Slot on British Television,” *International Journal of Cultural*

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- 3 Alison Hearn, "Insecure: Narratives and Economies of the Branded Self in Transformation Television," in *TV Transformations*; Toby Miller, *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism and Television in a Neoliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007); Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).
 - 4 As part of the pilot study for a larger project on lifestyle TV in the Asia-Pacific region, Dr Martin and I have been conducting research on lifestyle TV in Singapore and Taiwan. The aim for the larger study is to utilize a three-fold methodology involving industry, audience and program-based research. 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 and Dr Martin).
 - 5 John Hartley, *Uses of Television* (London: Routledge, 1999).
 - 6 For exceptions to this see R. Ganguly-Scrase & T. J. Scrase, "Constructing Middle-class Culture: Globalization, Modernity and Indian Media" in T. J. M. Holden & T. Scrase, eds, *Medi@sia: Global media/ tion in and out of context* (London: Routledge, 2006); M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); R. Harindranath, *Audience-Citizens: The Media, Public Knowledge, and Interpretive Practice* (New Delhi: Sage, 2009).
 - 7 Aihwa Ong, "Anthropology, China, and Modernities: The Geopolitics of Cultural Knowledge," in *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, ed. H. Moore (London: Routledge, 1995), 64.
 - 8 Todd Joseph Miles Holden and Timothy J. Scrase, eds, *Medi@sia: Global Media/ Tion in and out of Context* (London: Routledge, 2006).
 - 9 *Changing Rooms* was the brain child of British lifestyle TV guru Peter Bazalgette, who also created groundbreaking lifestyle formats such as *Ready Steady Cook* and *Ground Force*. Bazalgette's TV production company eventually became part of Endemol UK, and as chairman of the company he introduced *Big Brother* to British television audiences.
 - 10 Tania Lewis, "Changing Rooms, Biggest Losers and Backyard Blitzes: A History of Makeover Television in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia," in *TV Transformations: Revealing the Makeover Show*, ed. Tania Lewis (London: Routledge, 2009) 7–18; Misha Kavka, "Changing Properties: The Makeover Show Crosses the Atlantic," in *The Great American Makeover: Television, History, Nation*, ed. Dana Heller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 211–30.
 - 11 Frances Bonner, *Ordinary Television: Analyzing Popular TV* (London: Sage, 2003); John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000).
 - 12 Albert Moran, *Copypat Television: Globalisation, Program Formats and Cultural Identity* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1998); Silvio Waisbord, "McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats," *Television & New Media* 5, no. 4 (2004): 359–83.
 - 13 Bell and Hollows, *Ordinary Lifestyles*.
 - 14 Bonner, *Ordinary Television*, 104.
 - 15 Miller, *Makeover Nation*.

- 16 Ibid., 11.
- 17 L. Bennett, "The Uncivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31, no. 4 (1998): 745.
- 18 Miller, *Makeover Nation*, 11.
- 19 Nikolas S. Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London: Routledge, 1989); Nikolas S. Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, *Cambridge Studies in the History of Psychology* (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 20 Ouellette and Hay, *Better Living through Television*.
- 21 Jonathan Bignell, *Big Brother: Reality TV in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 40.
- 22 Waisbord, "McTV."
- 23 Moran, *Copycat Television*.
- 24 V.T. King, "The Middle Class in Southeast Asia: Diversities, Identities, Comparisons and the Vietnamese Case," *IJAPS* 4, no. 2 (2008): 73–109.
- 25 Janice Hua Xu, "Brand-New Lifestyle: Consumer-Oriented Programmes on Chinese Television," *Media Culture & Society* 29, no. 3 (2007): 363–76.
- 26 Mediacorp's other Chinese channel, Channel U, also has some lifestyle shows but these cater for more of a 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.
- 27 Vasantham Central also aired a primetime info-tainment style magazine show called *Naam* that included a short lifestyle feature providing the latest updates on fashion, hobbies, travel tips and interior design.
- 28 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 programs in the 8–10 p.m. slot instead watching after 10 p.m. (a time slot dominated by news and documentaries). Interview with Tay Lay Tin, Senior Executive Producer, Chinese Entertainment Productions, Singapore, January 2008.
- 29 At the time of writing, a new full-length beauty show was being aired on Mediacorp 8 at 8.30 p.m. on Friday. *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.
- 30 Thanks to Fran Martin for this observation.
- 31 R. Harindranath, "Reviving 'Cultural Imperialism,'" in *Planet TV: A Global Television Reader*, eds Lisa Parks and Shanti Kumar (New York: New York University Press, 2003).
- 32 Tania Lewis, "Transforming Citizens: Green Politics and Ethical Consumption on Lifestyle Television," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 227–40.
- 33 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 86.
- 34 Isabelle de Solier, "TV Dinners: Culinary Television, Education and Distinction," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2005): 465–81.
- 35 Interview with Tay Lay Tin, Senior Executive Producer, Chinese Entertainment Productions, Singapore, January 2008.
- 36 Again, thanks to Fran Martin for these observations.
- 37 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 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/

38 Tania Lewis, "Changing Rooms, Biggest Losers and Backyard Blitzes: A History of Makeover Television in the UK, US and Australia," in *TV Transformations*.

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