

The Dilemma of Non-western Countries in Global TV Format Trade

Tang Miao, Communication University of China

Abstract: Ever since television entertainment formats became a global business, western countries are in the leading position of this industry. Even though the globalization is not a one-way dissemination of westernization, undoubtedly westernization is the widest-spread ideology. Western cultural products disseminate western value system around the world with a western discourse system and widely considered as a 'universal value'. Any format will not travel globally unless it adapted in a UK or US market first. This order puts non-western countries in a dilemma position. If they follow the western value to create formats, then their format lose novelty because the meaning to buy a format is to introduce a new idea. Also it would undermine the originality of their own TV industry in the long term. If they produce formats based on their own value system and reflect their own culture, it may fail to be understood and accepted by western producers and audience. The study conducts case studies of three formats from non-western country, Israeli *Rising Star*, Japanese *Takeshi Castle* and China's *Sing My Song*, from a cultural globalization perspective. All of these three make some progress in western countries but never achieved and unlikely to achieve a global success like western formats. Followed comparative study aims to find out the common points leads to the unpopularity of the three formats. The finding indicates that the asymmetrical world order generate an asymmetrical model in global format trade.

Key words: dilemma, TV format, world order

Introduction: Since late 1990s, reality format shows have become the most popular programs in prime time around the world, America and Britain were the mainly exporting countries in the world. Today, format trade is a thriving global industry, and many non-western countries are working hard to become a player in the Anglo-American lead market. Even though this market seems a 'free-market', and there are no regulations to limit content flow into the United State, ironically non-western formats can hardly make progress in western market. Which bring us to the question: why non-western formats cannot achieve a global success like western formats yet? Is that because of their formats lack of creativity or a high level of professional?

In fact, even amongst the western countries, the format trade also followed the world order. Regardless most global success formats, such as *Big Brother*, *The Voice* are originally created in small countries like Sweden and Holland, they have to be adapted in UK or US market before they can go global. The global success of British and American formats has established a standard, which not only include the technical requirements but also imply western ideology, and one format has to reach those requirements to travel around the world. This order puts non-western countries in a dilemma position. If they follow the western value to create formats, then their format lose novelty. If they produce formats based on their own value system it may fail to be understood and accepted by western producers and audience. The study carry out case studies of three formats from non-western countries, Israeli *Rising Star*, Japanese *Takeshi's Castle* and China's *Sing My Song*, from a cultural globalization perspective. This study consider Japan as a non-western country based on its geography and cultural background. *Rising Star* is a singing competition show first aired in 2013, in which the audience at home is able to decide in real time

whether or not eliminate a contestant. It has sold to many western countries. However, The UK ITV channel bought the rights, but cancelled its scheduled launch due to the lower-than-expected viewership in USA and Germany. *Takeshi's Castle* was a game show, in which the castle owner sets up different physical challenges (often involve falling into water or mud on failure) for players. It has become a cult television hit in many western countries in 1980s. However what behind the obsession and contemplation of human body expressed through the format were rarely understood by western audience. *Sing My Song* is also a singing competition show, original release in 2014, the only difference is the competitors perform their original composition rather than covering version. It was bought by ITV studio and presented in MIPCOM last year, but it seems has not appeal the western market yet. All of these three make some progress in western countries but seems hardly to go further.

Literature Review

Internationalization is an inborn attribute of formats. There is no doubt that scholars have paid close attention on the relationship between format trade and globalization. They believe format have re-mould global culture by impacting 'platforms, markets, labour, audiences, and distribution of TV content' (M Keane, 2008). Most of them concern about the adaption of international formats in Western countries such as Canada, Australia, Denmark (C Quail, 2014, A Esser & P Jensen, 2015) , as well as in non-western countries such as Ukraine (C Smith, 2014), Latin America (S Waisbord, 2014), China(X Zhang & A Fung,2014) etc. Naturally, these research explore the influence of imported formats on national culture, modernity & selfhood (T Lewis & F Martin &W Sun, 2012), media structure, production and output (Y Kjus, 2009). Localization of formats has been considered as an evidence against cultural homogenization in certain research, but scholars like Jolien van Keulen and Tonny Krijnen emphasize the limitation of localization, and the rise of television exports from several regions can hardly challenge Hollywood's dominant position in global television (S Waisbord, 2004). Also academics were aware that both the global integration of economy and the standardization are the precondition of the global dissemination of formats. Previous researches from a macro perspective have been pay a close attention on the uneven globalization in media flow for a long time. However, a mature global format trade system has not established until recent 10 years. It has changed and complicate the whole global media flow. In terms to the three formats chosen by this study, regardless the Japanese format show *Takeshi's Castle* enjoyed a popularity of a time around western countries, it gain a little attention in academic circles, even Japanese researchers show little interest in it. (It may connect with their academic tradition, Japanese prefer to do theoretical research based on a regional angle rather than the practice cases) *Rising Star* has met with a similar indifference, not mention to the little-known format *Sing My Song* from China. While format research in China truly reflect a relatively primary understanding of format industry. Most scholar view television format adaptation as an industry development strategy in China (M Keane,2002) without notice the damage it may caused by imitating western production knowledge and media structure without critical thinking. Case study in formats field still focus on those worldwide famous format such as: *Idols*, *Big Brothers*, which are Westerns'. Moran and Keane's book: *Television Across Asia: TV Industries, Program Formats and Globalisation* is one of the few monograph studies about the formats in non-western countries. There is relatively little work being done on the globalization of western formats complex the global culture configurations.

Theoretical Basis

This study applies Thussu's contra-flow theory to analyze this question. Thussu defines contra-flow as a flow originate from the erstwhile peripheries of global media industries to the global North. It reflect a refiguring of hegemony in more complex ways. There are three important concepts of this theory will imply in this study. First of all, the globalization of western culture triggered possibilities of other culture multiply in the era of globalization. In another word, the success of British and American formats offered a model of how one's television content and national culture could go global. The questions is whether other countries can find another way to achieve a similar goal. Thussu is inclined to believe Japanese has found out a new pattern. His point supported by the Japanese scholar Iwabuchi, who argues that Japanese producers would decline or hide the national culture identity intendedly for the international market. Secondly, hybridity is the process of globalization of global Americana. This phenomenon is more obvious in format, which is designed to combine cultures from the export country and culture from imported country. Third, glocalisation accelerate Western media flows across the globe. Localisation of global media content is the process of global Americana for it serving for 'a commercial imperative' rather than protect national cultures. Thussu regarded the imbalance between the dominant and the subaltern and geo-cultural global media flows reflects the asymmetries in flows of ideas and goods.

Methodology

The main methodology of this study is case studies. It analyses three formats respectively to find out the difficulties which stop them go further in Western market. The comparative study followed aims to find out the common points leading to the less popularity of the three formats. The research undertakes interviews with British format experts and Chinese format show producers. Documents analysis is also applied in this study to support case study. Documents include reviews and news reports of these three formats shows, company reports and statements, industry conference material and government regulations. Brief analysis of production and broadcasting history of the three countries mentioned is made to figure out how traditional television cultures shape the feature of formats in each nation. This study also offer a special perspective by observing these three formats in China's market to examine their influence compared to other western formats¹.

Findings:

The finding of this study consisted of three parts. The first part is the explanation the fact that three formats fail to gain similar popularity as western formats in a practice level. From a western perspective, the failure of *Rising Star* is due to its less professional on production, and need to do more to connect viewers' feeling of involvement to the show. While, *Sing My Song* is less attractive on Western mainstream platform in that the concept is stale, and the expression way is western, only the content is Chinese. Audience used to Hollywood narrative style may not adapt to *Takeshi's Castle*, which lacking of a direct story telling. That is why western countries did a series of changes on editing, narrative, duration of the format before broadcasting in their countries.

¹ China Central television 3 bought the format of Rising Stars, broadcast the original format show Sing My Song. Several Chinese game shows such as Zhi Yong Da Chong Guan have inspired by Takeshi's Castle.

The second part is the conclusion about the influence of each format on Chinese market. The main thing Chinese producers learn from *Rising Star* is the production skill. Due to the limitation regulation of audience vote in China, the ground-breaking concept of this format: real time online vote was unable display its full charming. In contrast, *Sing My Song* is more inspiring to Chinese entertainment production. For it applied western format production skill to create a show to present original Chinese music and the beauty of language. Meanwhile, the concept of 'body violence' or 'physical conflict' brought by *Takeshi's Castle* had refreshed Chinese audience's watching experience, by liberating human nature in physical games.

The last part and most important part is the theoretical interpretation of why formats production companies from non-western countries stays in a dilemma in a so-call 'free market'.

1. The success of Anglo-America formats set up the standard of all the formats. The format trade is not a one-way flow only from the West to the non-west, but it seems to be the only model of format's globalization.
2. The western countries used selling production knowledge and commercial model to realize hegemony. However, hybridity nature of formats allows non-western values and culture slowly impact the western production community. It makes the configurations of global culture more complicated.
3. Limited achievements of non-western formats have nothing to do with their creativity and production quality, each of three countries has an integral and complex civilization system. Their formats design is a balancing act between their national power and dependence on the wave of global imbalance. The asymmetrical world order is the reason of an asymmetrical model in global format trade.

Reference

- i. M Keane. 2008, Television's New Engines , Television & New Media, Volume 9 Number 2,155-169
- ii. M Keane. 2002,As a Hundred Television Formats Bloom, a Thousand Television Stations Contend, Journal of Contemporary China, Volume 11, Number 30, 1 February, pp. 5-16(12)
- ii. C Quail, 2014, Anatomy of a Format: So You Think You Can Dance Canada and Discourses of Commercial Nationalism, Television & New Media, 16: 472-489
- iii. A Esser & P Jensen. 2015, The use of international television formats by public service broadcasters in Australia, Denmark and Germany, International Communication Gazette, vol. 77 no. 4 359-383
- iv. C Smith, December 1, 2014, Global migration meets TV format adaptation: The post-Soviet diaspora, 'Whiteness', and return migration in Dancing with the Stars (US) and Ukraine's The Bachelor, European Journal of Cultural Studies. 17: 753-768
- v. S Waisbord, 2004, McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats, Television New Media; 5; 359
- vi. J Keulen,T Krijnen, May 1, 2014, The limitations of localization: A cross-cultural comparative study of Farmer Wants a Wife.International Journal of Cultural Studies 17: 277-292
- vii. T Lewis, F Martin, W Sun, November 1, 2012, Lifestyling Asia? Shaping modernity and selfhood on life-advice programming International Journal of Cultural Studies 15: 537-566
- viii. X Zhang, A Fung, September 1, 2014,TV Formatting of the Chinese Ugly Betty: An Ethnographic Observation of the Production Community Television & New Media 15: 507-522
- ix. Y Kjus, September 1, 2009, Everyone Needs Idols: Reality Television and Transformations in Media Structure, Production and Output European Journal of Communication 24: 287-304

