

Where are we going? Parent–child television reality programmes in China

Abstract

This article looks at the role of format television in the People’s Republic of China. It juxtaposes two key ideas: the ‘one format policy’ and the One Child Policy. Both are government restrictions intended to curb reproduction. Formats provide a means for the reproduction of programming ideas, that is, they are generative. When formats ‘fit’ cultural understandings they can be remarkably successful, as with family oriented formats. Yet there is something unusual about China: in comparison to many international markets, China offers a unique demographic – those people born after 1978. The article examines a formatted programme called *Where Are We Going, Dad?*, introduced into China from South Korea, which illustrates a subgenre known as the ‘parent-child caring’ (*qinzi*) format. The article shows how this genre has capitalised on the interest in the health and future well-being of the One Child in China, as well as spinning off its own formatted offspring.

Keywords

Celebrities, China, Korean formats, One Child Generation, reality TV, TV formats

Introduction

Most readers will be aware of the Chinese government’s restriction on reproduction, the One Child Policy. The policy was devised in 1978 as a way to control the nation’s population, which had spiralled out of control in the 1950s and 1960s. It was finally rescinded in 2016.

The One Child Policy exhibits an indirect historical link to the Chinese television industry. The year that the policy came into effect, 1978, Chinese television programming began to develop after being stalled due to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In the

following decades, channels proliferated as television viewing became a focal point of peoples' everyday lives. For children with no brothers and sisters to play with, the television was a source of entertainment, only later displaced by electronic games. It's not surprising that programmes dedicated to childhood emerged, even though most of the focus in the past has been on animation. Many television programmes now address the only child (within the family); this in turn has generated the 'parentchild caring' (*qinzi*) format, the subject of this article.

From an initial trickle in the late 1990s, entertainment formats began to flood into China. Formats now provide channels with an alternative to buying canned (finished) foreign shows, which inevitably have to run the censorship gamut. Western programmes in particular require dubbing or subtitling; sometimes parts of a programme deemed offensive will be erased. Formats are entertainment based, easily localised and for this reason not likely to cause as much conflict with censors as canned programmes. By definition, formats only become such when they are adapted outside of their country of origin. As Jean Chalaby (2016) writes, 'The format industry rests on a compelling premise: *the willingness of broadcasters to pay for the outsourcing of risk*' (p. 12) (emphasis in original).

The role played by imported television formats in China has been the subject of several studies in English over the past two decades, the earliest account being by Keane (2002). Other publications have followed (De Burgh et al., 2011; Fung and Zhang, 2011; Keane, 2004, 2015; Keane and Liu, 2009; Keane et al., 2007; Moran and Keane, 2006; Zhang and Fung, 2014). Several studies have considered elements of reality television and fandom; for instance, studies of Hunan Satellite TV's (HSTV) *Supergirls*, itself a clone of *Pop Idol* (Huang, 2014; Meng, 2009; Wu, 2014; Yang, 2009) or Jiangsu Satellite's *If You Are the One* (Kong, 2013). Other studies have looked at reality-style television shows from the perspective of educating people about modern lifestyle choices (Lewis et al., 2012, 2016). By this time, entertainment formats arrived from Europe and the United Kingdom in the early 2000s Chinese producers had accepted the concept of televised reality (Keane, 2015). At the height of the format boom (from 2010 to 2013) competition-style formats were entering the market from Europe and the United Kingdom, with companies like FremantleMedia operating as intermediaries. In 2013, satellite channels were screening 13 different music talent shows at the same time, most based on imported formats.¹ In

2013, four satellite channels, Hunan, Zhejiang, Dragon and Jiangsu Satellite TV (JSTV), imported a total of 21 music and dance formats from the Netherlands, Britain, United States, Korea and Spain (Keane, 2015).

On 20 October 2013, the State Administration of Press Publicity Radio, Film and Television (hereafter SAPPRFT) introduced China's 'one format policy' as a way to restrict the over-population of lookalike 'singing' talent shows that were coming into China through the format 'open door', and then being cloned, that is, artificially reproduced by rival stations (Global Times, 2013). The regulations applied to China's satellite broadcasters and were in part intended to restrict the entry of foreign business into the Chinese media market. The SAPPRFT rules, which still exist, restrict each satellite channel to importing just one format each year, with the extra constraint that it cannot be broadcast during prime time (7:30 to 10:00 p.m.). The only exceptions to this rule are music talent shows approved by SAPPRFT, and a limit of four of these per year was proscribed. In the lead up to this crackdown, however, the country of origin changed; formats were now entering China via South Korea more so than through the Western door, capitalising on the Korean Wave (*hanliu*) and immediately striking a cultural chord with audiences, young and not so young. It is this entry of South Korea into the format exporting business that we will explore.

The programme that we focus on in this article is *Where Are We Going, Dad?* (*baba qu na'er?*), perhaps the most successful *qinzi* format. The article begins with some background discussion of the formatting of programmes in China, the Japanese origins of certain popular entertainment and reality formats, and South Korea's late entry into the format business. We then examine the generational cohort addressed by some of the leading formatted programmes targeted at the One Child Generation, including *If You Are the One*, a successful dating programme produced by Jiangsu Satellite TV (Keane, 2015; Kong, 2013). While *If You Are the One* is a sophisticated and often contentious programme directed at young adults, it provides a useful entry into the discussion of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* in which five celebrity fathers and their sons or daughters are placed in out-of-the-way locations with the focus on how the pairs bond as they encounter a series of tasks. Arguably a hybrid of *Survivor*, *Trading Places* and *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me out of Here*, *Where Are We Going, Dad?* is a cleverly executed sociodrama of today's fragmented society. As we discuss in the final section, the programme ran for three

seasons until it was abruptly terminated due to a policy change that sought to protect impressionable children (those featured in the show) from the effects of media celebrity. This genre actually has a longer title – the ‘celebrity offspring travel survival experience reality show’ (*mingxing qinzi luxing shengcun tiyan zhenrenxiu*). As the name suggests, the format makes use of celebrity branding, as well as tourism experiences, offering the Chinese audience a chance to identify with faraway places. As we will demonstrate in our discussion of one of the overseas ‘special episodes’, shooting in overseas ‘exotic locations’ can be construed as an element of Chinese soft power and ‘ticks the box’ of Chinese media internationalising (‘going out’).

From serial viewing to revolving formats

Before discussing the breakout success of this regional genre, it is worth providing some brief background on the Chinese television industry and its audience. Chinese people first encountered the medium of television broadcasting on 1 May 1958. In retrospect, television was a bit of a disappointment. Radio was king in the 1950s, routinely regaling people from loudspeakers set up across the nation. Television would take some time to gain the ascendancy. Programming over the ensuing three decades was didactic and propaganda laden, mostly comprising serials and news broadcasts, as the nation lurched from years of conflict with Japan, its own civil war, the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and then the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping. The 1980s witnessed a massive increase in the number of channels along with decentralisation policies that permitted local stations greater autonomy in programme scheduling (see Keane, 2015).

Decentralisation was just the beginning of media reform. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping proclaimed that media, except for selected Communist Party propaganda mouthpieces, needed to become even more self-reliant. For many television stations, aspiring to build audience numbers and tap into advertising revenue, Deng’s edict was a green light to buy content from abroad, particularly serial dramas from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Viewers in many parts of China became familiar with programmes from places as far away as Latin America (Hong, 1998). A temporary setback occurred in 1994 when the government imposed a prime time quota on imports, which was intended to ‘protect’ audiences from inappropriate foreign programmes while stimulating local producers to make better programmes (Keane, 2015).

By the mid-1990s a proliferation of satellite channels with national coverage had ushered in a commercial mentality. Each of China's 28 provinces and five autonomous regions was allowed one satellite channel. Suddenly the competitive stakes were higher.

Producers and programme buyers at Chinese television trade fairs looked for content that was cheap, familiar to audiences and attractive. Serials were still much sought after but Chinese television was more than ever open to foreign commercial strategies. The problem was 'know-how': how can you make entertaining programmes with limited financial resources?

It was not surprising that producers looked to borrow international ideas. The television format would ultimately become a Trojan Horse, ushering new ideas into China; some fell afoul of regulators, others failed to impress audiences, and many were modified to accommodate audience tastes. Inevitably, the competitive values inherent in international 'super-formats' like *Survivor*, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and *The Weakest Link* (Chalaby, 2016) were deemed inappropriate. Talent competitions became the default setting and evening schedules started to resemble singing–dancing format wallpaper.

In October 2013, the government reacted and a new stipulation limiting the import of overseas formats, and in particular talent show formats, came into force. Only one singing show was permitted in prime time (7:30 to 10:00 p.m.). Those responsible for programming decisions now had to be more circumspect in order to avoid the ire of censors, worried about the impact of 'western-style' competition formats. A number of shows in preparation were aborted. JSTV, which already had made headlines with *If You Are the One* aborted the second season of *Celebrity Battle* (*quanneng xingzhan*). With the crackdown orders on so-called excessive entertainment (*xianyu ling*) biting into scheduling plans, broadcasters had to find a new way.

The *qinzi* genre was the answer, a way to appease authorities and capture audiences. It was introduced from outside China, or at least the most successful examples were. Stories that embrace the family unit would appear to make sense in a Confucian culture rather than winner-take-all-type contests spiced up by conniving among contestants. The family/children format had its genesis in East Asia and this is where the South Korean influence is obvious. 'Cultural proximity' based on history (Straubhaar, 1991) suggests that the two countries can be strong collaborators in media production; for instance, Chinese cultural understandings are close to those of Koreans, both nations sharing a

Confucian heritage.

The interest in licensing and imitating Asian-originated formats is quite recent, that is, if we discount a few notable exceptions. In 1988, Shanghai Television initiated a segment of its variety show *Zhengda zongheng* as *The Great Knowledge Tide* (*zhili da chonglang*), which saw a panel of minor celebrities and educators fielding questions while allowing participation from members of the audience. In 1990, China Central Television (CCTV) took over production and rebranded it as the *Zhengda Variety Show* (*zhengda zongyi*), adding a ‘window on the world’ element. The programme investor, the Zhengda Company, had acquired the copyright of a Taiwanese infotainment show called *Run around the Earth* (*raozhe diqiu pao*), which featured a female host who travelled around the world filming different social customs. This was integrated into the Chinese version along with audience participation and for this reason the *Zhengda Variety Show* is generally regarded as China’s first format acquisition (Keane, 2015). The *Zhengda Variety Show* holds the record for the longest continuous programme, changing its format with the times.

Japan: format brokers in Asia

The first country in Asia to bank on the value of formatting was Japan. Its travelling formats included *The Iron Chef* (*ryouri no tetsujin*), *Happy Family Plan* (*shiwase kazuko keikaku*) and *Future Diary* (*mirai nikki*) (Iwabuchi, 2004). Previously, Japan had achieved international success through animation products such as *Astro Boy* and Pokémon. According to Iwabuchi, Japan began selling formats to the Netherlands in 1987, an example is the format known as *Wakuwaku* in Japan or (exciting) *Animal Land* in Holland. By the late 1990s, Japanese formats were on the move, finding new markets in East Asia as well as Europe.

Interestingly, South Korea began its venture into formats by copying Japanese programmes. Dong-Hoo Lee (2004) notes that Japanese programmes were seen as a way to adapt elements of American production ‘know-how’ already assimilated into the Japanese television industry (Iwabuchi, 2004). Because of a ban on Japanese entertainment programmes in the 1990s due to the legacy of wartime hostilities between the two nations, it was expedient for Korean

producers to simply copy Japanese shows. The 1990s saw many cases of suspected plagiarism and various degrees of imitation, sometimes euphemistically referred to in the industry as ‘emulation’. Shows involving the family were a good cultural fit in a market like South Korea. Lee writes about one of the shows that made a big splash from 1997 to 1999, called *Special Task! Dad’s Challenge*, a clone of Tokyo Broadcasting System’s (TBS) *Happy Family Plan*. The concept involved the family members helping the patriarch accomplish tasks. A task was assigned and the father had a week to prepare. The tasks included feats of memory and acrobatic skills, tricks like balancing an egg on one’s head. Iwabuchi (2004) notes that the similarities between the two were so close that some of the tasks shown on the Japanese version would appear in the Korean show weeks later. It was not until the late 1990s that Korean channels started paying licence fees, the programme being Fuji TV’s *Boys and Girls in Love*. As the Korean industry turned its attention to buying formats, charges of plagiarism decreased (Lee, 2004).

Happy Family Plan was licenced to Beijing Television (BTV) by TBS in 2002. BTV had an existing relationship with TBS through its acquisition of *Wakuwaku Animal Land* (Iwabuchi, 2004). BTV subsequently retitled their version *Dreams Come True (mengxiang chengzhen)*. Whereas in the Japanese and Korean version the father took on the role of contestant and was aided in preparation by the family members, the tasks in the BTV programme were shared among family members. As with successful formats elsewhere in China, it was not long before other stations began cloning, cashing in on the success of the original. Stations in Sichuan and Zhejiang provinces even used the same title and TBS issued a complaint to the Chinese media regulator, then known as State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), and to the Ministry of Culture, seeking to control this ‘infringement’. However, the most they could hope for was trademark protection of their logo and their name (first author interview with producer, 15 July 2004).

South Korea: riding the wave

The tide turned in 2013. South Korea landed two significant licenced programmes into the Chinese market. The first, *I am a Singer (wo shi geshou)*, was a talent elimination contest with live audience voting; the second was *Where Are We Going, Dad? (baba*

qu na'er?). Both were developed and distributed by the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) to HSTV; interestingly, both were elements of South Korea MBC's long running variety show *Sunday Night*, which was already attracting a large Chinese online audience. A third South Korean show with an avid following, *Running Man* (*benpaoba xiondi*), was localised by Zhejiang Satellite Television (ZJSTV) a year later. Of these, *Where Are We Going, Dad?* was the only true *qinzi* format. But more would follow.

South Korean formats have set the benchmark in cultural proximity terms by embracing traditional East Asian values. Yet rather than just adhering to a conventional Confucian social structure, Korean pop culture is playing with stereotypes. This is evident in much of the Korean Wave, a tide of creative culture that began in the late 1990s (Chua, 2012; Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008; Kim and Rhyoo, 2007). In the movie *My Sassy Girl* (2001), the heroine differs from the gentle and submissive stereotype of the traditional Asian woman. Likewise, the hit movie, *My Wife is a Gangster* (2001), cleverly reverses gender roles. This reversal has now taken place in TV, a step away from the male patriarch figure evident in *Happy Family Plan* and *Special Task! Dad's Challenge*.

The current wave of Korean formats embodies lifestyle elements including fashion, food culture and tourism. Korean aesthetic elements have in turn drawn heavily on Japanese Kawaii ('cute') culture with its modern take on fashion and youth lifestyle. Echoing Japanese production styles, reality shows add cartoon captions and text message to reinforce expressions emotions and affect. Contestants are fashionably attired and look attractive. In comparison to their Korean and Japanese counterparts, Chinese television programmes did not pay much attention to visual aesthetics, leading one of China's politburo members, Wang Qishan, head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, to opine that Korean programmes make family values more appealing by wrapping them in designer clothing and cool gadgets (South China Morning Post, 2014).

Where Are We Going, Dad?

To understand *qinzi* formats and the success of *Where Are We Going, Dad?*, we need to understand a little more about China's unique demographic of single parent children. Not only did the One Child Policy succeed in slowing population growth, but it has led to a

generation with some significant psychological issues. As Shuyu Kong (2013) has pointed out, the pressure on the one child in the family is enormous, pressure to marry, pressure to get into university, pressure to get a good job, and then pressure to look after the parents. One programme that illustrates these challenges is called *If You Are the One*, developed by JSTV – or more correctly cloned from a show licenced by HSTV called *Take Me Out* (*women yue hui ba*) (for a discussion, see Keane, 2015; Kong, 2013). *If You Are the One* is a dating show format with a difference, 24 female contestants and 1 male. It is no doubt successful because it airs the insecurities of this One Child Generation to a studio audience, two professional relationship counsellors and an audience of approximately 300 million. It has had a number of moments however when the censors' ire has been aroused. When SAPPRFT cracked down on singing shows, it was also taking aim at the popularity of *If You Are the One*. While it appears tame in comparison with risqué international dating shows, the contestants sometimes express materialist and individualist ideas that run counter to socialist values. *If You Are the One* is China's most successful overseas programme export, broadcast on Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) since 2014.

If You Are One speaks to the post-1980s and post-1990s generation. Females from this demographic are less likely to accept the traditional role of housewife. However, while there is pressure on the one child, there is also pressure on parents. In fact, parents are a major factor in urging their offspring to participate in the show, hoping that exposure might bring about a 'perfect match' (Ma, 2014). The changing expectations among generations evident on *If You Are the One* is what has made *Where Are We Going, Dad?* compulsive viewing, albeit to a slightly different audience demographic. Parents are very concerned about early education. They are also worried about the happiness of the children. Many debates have ensued in the media as well as online reflecting the constant fear of many new parents that they will produce spoilt children, the so-called 'little emperors' (Zhao and Murdock, 1996).

Where Are We Going, Dad? was first broadcast on HSTV in October 2013. It was, however, not the first of its kind to appear in China. HSTV had previously produced a successful reality show called *X-Change* (*bianxing ji*) in 2006, a variation on the role swap genre, in this case swapping urban and rural children from one child families. The director of this show was subsequently called in to produce *Where Are We Going, Dad?* The success of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* in China is due to a range of factors. As mentioned earlier, the popularity of

the Korean Wave (*hanliu*) differentiates it from most Chinese reality shows. Audiences are very aware of the Korean origins and many have seen the Korean version online. A more important barometer of success is the fact that the father assumes the role as central caregiver. In China, women, often nannies and grandparents, take most responsibility for care of the One Child Generation. Because of this fact, audiences of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* are predominantly female and there is a great deal of bemused voyeurism of the very presentable males who are co-opted into duties for which they are not well equipped. Another success factor is tie-ins and product placements with the tourism industry (see below). Yet another obvious advantage is the bottom line. Compared with singing competitions, talent shows and dating shows, parenting/ children (*qinzi*) formats like *Where Are We Going, Dad?* have largely avoided problems associated with censorship, that is at least until 2016 (see below). And they are relatively cost-effective to produce. For instance, the cost for having celebrities on *Where Are We Going, Dad?* is far less than the price of A-list celebrity coaches in *The Voice of China* (*Zhongguo hao shengyin*) which also has additional studio and production costs.

Finally, the captive audience of carers for young people translates well into advertising revenue. Females and children are important demographics in China's rapidly growing consumer culture. *Where Are We Going, Dad?*'s audience is predominantly female, 68.37% according to reports (*Xinhua News*, 2013). Compared with women in South Korea, Chinese women aged from 20 to 49 years are more likely to remain at least partially in the workforce after having children; they are expected to take on the role as a child carer. Having the double burdens from family and work, these young women suffer intense pressure; they have to compete with males in the labour market. In this sense, the husbands' caregiving role in the reality show makes interesting and amusing television for women. They can find some gratuitous comedic relief. In some respects, the five celebrity fathers are dream husbands: a (former) Olympic diving champion, a Taiwanese idol singer, a model, a director and husband of a famous TV host, and a TV actor. These caring, empathetic, loyal, ruggedly handsome, and charming celebrity fathers are undoubtedly attractive to the women audience. Zhang Liang, the only dad in the show who could cook, found greater celebrity by just being a 'good dad' than through modelling.

In fact, what adds to the appeal is its integration with digital media, not unlike most reality shows. Viewers share the shows with virtual friends through instant messaging

(IM), IM application on smart phone (WeChat) and social network services (SNS).

Through Weibo feeds and personal blogs, viewers' comments about the show are distributed to fans. Audiences can watch the programme on the television screen, on mobile and tablet devices as well as on the cinema screen. *Where Are We Going, Dad?* is shown on HSTV Channel's Mango TV, as well as online sites including LeTV, Youku, Sohu online, iQIYI.com, PPTV and Kunlei.

Tourism tie-ins

Product and place endorsement are defining features of the outdoor reality experience format represented by *Where Are We Going, Dad?* Tourism attributed to the Korean Wave has generated windfall revenues. In particular, the Wave has seen a dramatic increase in the number of female tourists going to South Korea from China and Japan, increasing from 28,909 (or 4.8% of the total number of tourists) in 1995 before the Wave, to a staggering 314,433 (or 11.8%) in 2005 (Korea Tourism Organization, 2006, cited in Kim and Ryoo, 2007). Promotion of tourism has led to further collaboration between television networks in China and Korea. CCTV, HSTV, Sichuan TV, Dragon TV and Zhejiang TV have announced collaboration with Korean TV production companies and TV networks. After the successful experience of HSTV, Heilongjiang Province's Daqing TV station is collaborating with the South Korea production company JTBC and broadcaster MBC to launch a reality show *Most Beautiful Memory* (huayang nianhua), in which the Chinese newlyweds will experience their honeymoon on Jeju island in South Korea.

The use of local tourism elements and recreation activities provides a range of commercial tie-ins. Each episode of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* features a different location ranging from Tengger Desert in Inner Mongolia to Yunnan province in Southwest China, to Jiming Island in Shandong and a ski resort in Heilongjiang province bordering with Russia. According to the producer, this strategy has led to a dramatic rise in tourism in these locations (Interview with producers, Perth, 28 September 2015). Places are promoted as desired travel destinations for the family trip; travel agencies offer *qinzi* tour packages that feature visits to these locations. The outdoor experience element reflects the popularity of tourism in China. In series 2, the show visited New Zealand's Rotorua district and Fiji. In

keeping to themes of personal development in such reality formats, the celebrities get down and dirty, cooking and cleaning as well as doing mundane tasks while endorsing products and places. There is ample scope for propaganda and public service messages, endearing the show to the government: for instance, the need to look after cultural relics and respect property. The 72-hour rural ‘experience’ of smelly toilets and a lack of modern appliances, brings these distant parents closer to their sons and daughters, who in turn become the real branded celebrities of the programme, with their own product endorsements and websites. The children, aged between 4 and 6, who have lived in apartments looked after by nannies and their grandmothers, all receive English names. The fathers, now reintroduced to paternal responsibility and Confucian values, exhibit loving embraces, despite inevitable tantrums.

By 2015, at the time of writing, the programme was in its third series, still featuring well-known destinations in China such as a rainforest in Xishuangbanna (Yunnan) and northwest grasslands in Urumqi (Xinjiang Province). In August 2015, the production team and cast visited the Margaret River region, 240 km south of Perth, the provincial capital of Western Australia, sometimes called the most remote capital city on the planet. The collaboration was instigated by the West Australian Tourism authority, which had previously approached HSTV about making a travel documentary. According to the director, the idea of making another offshore episode of *Baba* grew from this conversation (Interview with producer, Perth, 28 September 2015). The theme of the two episodes filmed in Margaret River is ‘Back to the Stone Age’, an interesting choice considering that Margaret River is a tourist region known for film festivals, wineries, bushwalking and surfing. Nevertheless, the intent was to locate the contestants in a pure organic environment. The region is adjacent to the Indian Ocean with ample bush, stunning flora and an abundance of native fauna. The celebrity kids and farmers visited farms, the beach and played with kangaroos. In addition, they also visited wineries, tapping in on the growing penchant of Chinese to drink wine. Local film services assisted with the shoots, even assisting with recruiting an ‘Australian mermaid’ into the action, an addition that was as bemusing to the locals as characterising Margaret River as the Stone Age.

The overseas episodes of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* are about more than just catering to the tourist market. Since the mid-2000s, China’s media has been encouraged to ‘go out’, a term referring to internationalisation. For many Chinese media producers, it is very hard to break into international media markets because the content produced is either too culturally specific

or too propagandist. An exception is the abovementioned dating show *If You Are the One*. This raises an interesting observation about format trade in China. First, the format is obviously a way for foreign companies to enter the Chinese market, and second they are a way for Chinese companies to show that they are responding to the government's 'going out' strategy, even if this is only overseas location shooting. *If You Are the One* has also played this overseas game with social episodes featuring guests from overseas countries, usually Chinese nationals living overseas seeking a partner. At the same time as *Where Are We Going, Dad?* was filming in Margaret River, *If You Are the One* was shooting Australian segments for its down under special, following on from a previous New Zealand special.

Qinzi variations, copycats and spin-offs

Unlike the One Child Policy, a format can spawn numerous offspring, although as indicated above the Chinese regulators have sought to control the kinds of formats allowed to multiply. The question of how long a format's life is depends on reception. One of the risks of the trade, Chalaby (2016) says, is that a poor adaptation can instil doubt in a buyer's mind. According to David Loye (1999), a programme that is new, interesting and which has some pull factor is likely to register a ripple in the marketplace. The ripple effect will then result in imitation whereby competitors are compelled to replicate, sometimes adding new novel elements but at the same time contributing to market saturation, eventually leading to progressive degradation of the idea, that is, audience boredom and satiation. This phenomenon is evident in China with the government now stepping in to rectify the market. According to an investigation by *China Youth Daily* and sohu.com in May 2013, 64.7% of viewers thought there are too many singing programmes, with 44% expressing dissatisfaction about the homogenisation of offerings (Xiong, 2013).

Despite the restrictions imposed, the *qinzi* format has become 'generative' in the Chinese market, in both licenced and illegal spin-offs; it has produced a variety of subgenres and variations, generally incorporating family and ethics. In particular, *Where Are We Going, Dad?*'s popularity has inspired copycat shows by provincial satellite TV channels. Parenting relations shows are now a feature of Chinese television. More than 23 *qinzi* reality shows emerged in 2014 alone. While many are copycats, some have embraced local content with creativity and originality. For example, the online video sharing

site iQIYI.com created episodes in the form of short interviews with celebrity fathers on how to educate their children. The national broadcaster, CCTV has collaborated with the UK production *Super Nanny*. International Programme Content Network (IPCN), the Chinese distributor of *Super Nanny*, claimed the show averaged 20 million viewers per episode (Burrell, 2014). Elsewhere, Zhejiang Radio Satellite TV's *Dad is Back (baba, hui lai le)* 'borrowed' another format idea from Korean Broadcasting System's (KBS) (Korea) *The Return of Superman*, in which celebrity dads take care of their children for 48 hours. The fascination with how celebrity fathers cope with the responsibility led to another Korean format spin-off devised by CJ E&M, called *Granddads (huayang yeye)*, ostensibly about how grandfathers bond with and teach their grandchildren good social values: this is currently licenced to Shanghai's Dragon TV. *The First Time (rensheng diyi ci)*, an adaptation of a Japanese format by ZJSTV in 2013, added Chinese elements of parents and children travelling together to learn Kung Fu.

Another show that cashes in on the One Child parenting craze is Beijing Satellite TV's *Mum, Listen to Me (mama ting wo shuo)*, in which a panel of precocious young children evaluate the performance of mothers. During the show, three children talk about their mothers who are made to walk on to a T-shape stage reminiscent of *If You Are the One*. The jury of 20 is made up of 5- to 10-year-old children who learn something about the family issue in question through watching video clips, once again a similar mode of presentation to *If You Are the One*. The similarity even extends to the host, the bald headed psychologist, Le Jia, who was poached from JSTV's *If You Are the One* to front this show. The children can question the mother following the screening of each video clip. As they learn more about each mother, children vote and determine the right or the wrong of the matter.

HSTV has exploited the format franchise *Where Are We Going, Dad?* by investing in a movie of the same name in 2014 and 2015, taking highlights of seasons 1 and 2.

Produced by an HSTV affiliated production company Tianyu Media, the first iteration of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* generated massive box office revenues. The format has also had a life as an animation, exclusively distributed on Hunan's own Mango Internet TV (hunantv.com) and Hunan TV Golden Eagle Cartoon Channel in May 2014.

Yet even as the Korean momentum was building, the government was moving to thwart its progress. In 2015, SAPPRFT issued a revised 'excess reality order' (*xian zhen ling*), that took effect at the beginning of 2016. Among its directives is a restriction of

Korean formats and influences. The key point is that Chinese television stations are encouraged to come up with their own ideas, be more creative and enterprising, and move away from ‘excessive entertainment’.

Concluding remarks: the One Child Policy and the one format policy

Television formats are a means of outsourcing risk, following the principle that these programmes are road-tested in other territories. Should the success or failure of television shows therefore be left to the audience? This raises the question of whether or not regulatory interventions by SAPPRT enhance the creativity of the industry or engender a loss of confidence. As for the ‘reproducibility’ of formats, should they self-regulate or be eugenically controlled? If they are over-populating and producing homogeneity, how should they be managed? In China, it seems that the government is willing to step into the market just as they have by controlling women’s reproduction. A recent reversion however may change the demographic makeup of China over time. In 2015, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party suddenly announced the end of the One Child Policy. Part of the rationale for rescinding the 35-year-old edict is stimulation of the economy, arguably something that producers of reality TV shows have been doing.

In this article, we have addressed the productive link between Korean culture and formats in China, showing how a sea change occurred, bringing more productions from China’s near neighbour at the same time as the government regulator SAPPRT cracked down on entertainment formats and their clones. In fact, a shift in production away from crude talent shows towards educational and *qinzi* formats was a market response to SAPPRT’s criticism of gross commercialism and erosion of social values reportedly displayed in some of the segments of *If You Are the One*. Yet the *qinzi* format, like many before it fell afoul of the regulators. In 2016, the SAPPRT suddenly announced that the days of television programmes exposing children to excessive media scrutiny were numbered. The aim of the ban, according to the state-run news agency, Xinhua, is to protect ‘impressionable’ children from the pitfalls of ‘overnight fame’ (Qin, 2016). While this edict obviously makes a great deal of sense, it should be noted that these shows have served a valuable role of educating

people about child-rearing practices and drawing attention to the need for the males in the nuclear family to take more responsibility.

Because of the One Child Policy, *qinzi* genres have deeper social implications for audiences in Mainland China. The question remains, why wasn't this concept discovered in China? The fact that the show was introduced via South Korea demonstrates the role that formats play in opening up Chinese television to new kinds of programming. *Where Are We Going, Dad?*'s success in South Korea and its following by Chinese online viewers created the conditions for its introduction into China, as has been the case with other transplanted Korean shows including *Running Man* (*benpao xiongdi*) and *I am a Singer* (*wo shi geshou*). Indeed, the success of these shows in China has added the TV format trade as another element to the Korean Wave. In the process while China's television industry is maturing, the government continues to address audiences like young children, worried that new elements introduced from abroad will engender unhealthy tendencies.

Funding

Research for this article was funded through the Australian Research Council Discovery-Projects DP140101643 Willing Collaborators: Negotiating Change in East Asian Media Production.

Note

1. These included Zhejiang Satellite TV's *The Voice of China* (*Zhongguo hao shengyin*), Dragon TV's *Chinese Idol* (*Zhongguo meng zhi sheng*), Hunan Satellite TV's *X Factor* (*Zhongguo zuiqiang yin*) and *Happy Boys* (*kuai le nansheng*), Hubei Satellite TV's *Superstar China* (*wode Zhongguo xing*), Tianjin Satellite TV's *Copypat Singers* (*tianxia wushuang*), Anhui Satellite TV's *Mad for Music* (*wo wei ge kuang*), Shandong Satellite TV's *Cpop Star* (*Zhongguo xing lilian*) and Jiangxi Satellite TV's (*Zhongguo hong ge hui*).

References

Burrell I (2014) China learns to love British TV with a little help from supernanny. *The Independent*, 6 May. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/china-learns-to-love-british-tv-with-a-little-help-from-supernanny-9324694.html> (accessed January 2015).

Chalaby JK (2016) *The Format Age: Television's Entertainment Revolution*. London: Polity Press.

Chua B-H (2012) *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture*. Hong Kong, China: HKU Press.

Chua B-H and Iwabuchi K (eds) (2008) *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave*. Hong Kong, China: HKU Press.

de Burgh H, Zeng R, Chen S (2011) Chinese television 'internationalization' and the search for creativity. *Creative Industries Journal* 4(2): 137–153.

Fung A and Zhang XX (2011) The Chinese *Ugly Betty*: TV cloning and local modernity. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14(3): 265–276.

Global Times (2013) Regulation 2.0. Available at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/820057.shtml> (accessed October 2015).

Hong J (1998) *The Internationalization of Television in China*. New York: Praeger.

Huang Y (2014) From 'talent show' to 'circuses': Chinese youth resistant acts and strategies in the Super Girl voice phenomenon. *Critical Arts* 28(1): 140–151.

Iwabuchi K (2004) Feeling global: Japan in the global television format business. In: Moran A and Keane M (eds) *Television Across Asia: Television Industries, Programme Formats and Globalization*. London: Routledge, pp. 21–35.

Keane M (2002) Send in the clones. In: Donald SH, Keane M and Yin H (eds) *Media in China: Consumption, Content & Crisis*. London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 80–90.

Keane M (2004) A revolution in programming and a great leap forward for production. In: Moran A and Keane M (eds) *Television Across Asia: Formats, Television Industries and Globalization*. London: Routledge, pp. 88–104.

Keane M (2015) *The Chinese Television Industry*. London: BFI Palgrave.

Keane M and Liu B (2009) Independent television production, TV formats and media diversity in China. In: Moran A (ed.) *TV Formats Worldwide: Global Flows in Television*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, pp. 241–254.

Keane M, Fung AYH and Moran A (2007) *New Television, Globalisation, and the East Asian Cultural Imagination*. Hong Kong, China: Hong Kong University Press.

Kim EM and Ryoo J (2007) South Korean culture goes global: K-Pop and the Korean wave. *Korean Social Science Journal* XXXIV(1): 117–152.

Kong S (2013) *Popular Media, Social Emotion and Public Discourse in Contemporary China*. London: Routledge.

Lee DH (2004) A local mode of programme adaptation: South Korea in the global television format business. In: Moran A and Keane M (eds) *Television Across Asia: Television Industries, Programme Formats and Globalization*. London: Routledge, pp. 36–54.

Lewis T, Martin F and Sun W (2012) Lifestyling Asia? Shaping modernity and selfhood on lifeadvice programming. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15(6): 537–566.

Lewis T, Martin F and Sun W (2016) *Tele-Modernities: Television and Transforming Lives in Asia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Loye D (1999) Hemisphericity and creativity: group process and the dream factory. In: Purser RE and Montuori A (eds) *Social Creativity*, vol. II. Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press, pp. 33–60.

Ma XL (2014) An undercover story: if you are the one. Available at: <http://www.creativetransformations.asia/2014/02/an-undercover-story-if-you-are-the-one/> (accessed June 2016).

Meng B (2009) Who needs democracy if we can pick our favorite girl? Super Girl as media spectacle. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 2(3): 257–272.

Moran A and Keane M (2006) Copycat TV and new trade routes in Asia and the Pacific. In: Harvey S (ed.) *Trading Culture: Global Traffic and Local Cultures in Film and Television*. Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, pp. 105–117.

Qin A (2016) China cracking down on reality TV. *The New York Times*, 18 April. Available at: http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/04/18/china-cracking-down-on-children-on-realitytv/?_r=0 (accessed June 2016).

South China Morning Post (2014) Wang Qishan draws lesson from craze for Korean drama, but Chinese media split on what that lesson is. Available at: <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1443830/wang-qishan-draws-lesson-craze-korean-drama-chinesemedia> (accessed October 2015).

Straubhaar JD (1991) Beyond media imperialism: asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8: 39–59.

Wu JC (2014) Expanding civic engagement in China: Super Girl and entertainment-based online community. *Information, Communication & Society* 17(1): 105–120.

Xinhua News (2013) Where is Love? Deciphering big data of *Where are we going, Dad* (ai zai na'er? baba qu na er dashuju jiedu). *Xinhua News*, 8 November. Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-11/08/c_125668894.htm (accessed 3 May 2014).

Xiong Y (2013) Repeat offenders. *Global Times*, 28 July. Available at: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/799624.shtml> (accessed January 2015).

Yang L (2009) All for love: the Corn fandom, prosumers, and the Chinese way of creating a superstar. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12(5): 527–543.

Zhang XX and Fung A (2014) TV formatting of the Chinese *Ugly Betty*: an ethnographic observation of the production community. *Television & New Media* 15(6): 507–522.

Zhao B and Murdock G (1996) Young pioneers: children and the making of Chinese consumerism. *Cultural Studies* 10(2): 201–217.