

# The Decline of British Entertainment TV Formats in China——Three Case Studies based on a Cross-cultural Perspective

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## Abstract

Through an in-depth look into British entertainment Television formats in contemporary China, this article rethinks the role of culture in the adaption of global formats. After ten years of being the most successful format shows, the popularity of British TV formats experienced a sharp fall since last year. In contrast, South Korean formats are now in vogue. The paper presents the decline of British formats from three aspects: rating, audiences' feedback and broadcasters' preference. Its follows the examination of case studies from a cross-cultural perspective of three imported formats: *The Voice*, *Daddy Where are We Going* (Korean reality), and *X Factor*. This study argues that the continuing falling trend of British formats is a result of decades of conflict between the Western culture, represented in the Western formats, and the oriental culture. The culture difference that used to attract Chinese audiences now rejects them. The improvement of China's economy has increased the cultural confidence of Chinese audiences who now expect format shows to reflect their own culture. However, the Chinese TV producers are unable to do that yet. That is why they have to borrow formats from South Korea who has been empowered to take Western formats production skills and use them in an oriental way. What lies behind the changing audience taste is the shifting of global cultural power.

## Keywords

TV formats, British culture, Oriental culture, Chinese audiences, culture conflict

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# 英国真人秀节目模式在中国的衰落 ——基于跨文化传播视野的三个案例分析

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## 摘要

本文通过英国真人秀节目模式在中国现状的考察,反思模式全球传播中的文化因素。经历了十年的辉煌后,英国节目模式自2013年起在中国经历了急剧的滑坡,与之对应的是韩国模式的崛起。本文采用跨文化传播的理论视角对三个引进模式进行案例分析。研究发现,全球化培养了中国观众混杂的文化审美需求;而中国经济的迅速发展也已然期许民族文化的复苏,韩国模式由于文化上的亲近性迎合了这种期许;再次,中国电视制作人仍需要向韩国同行学习如何将西方的模式生产技艺与东方的传统文化相结合,来制造与观众的传统文化整体相近却又有差距的电视节目模式。隐藏在观众喜好变化的背后是全球文化权力的迁移。

## 关键词

电视模式、英国文化、东方文化、中国观众、文化冲突

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## Introduction

For the last ten years, British format was in the leading position in China TV industry. It has profoundly influenced the Chinese TV professionals' views and knowledge of reality TV. However, since 2013, the popularity of British formats suffered a sharp decline in China; meanwhile Korean formats are now in vogue. Ironically, 2013 has been entitled as 'the format year' by the Chinese TV industry, because of 49 imported formats shows broadcasted by Chinese satellite broadcasters. It is important to notice the falling trend of British formats beyond the fact that the UK's annual TV export as a whole is increasing both in China and globally. The abandoning of British formats for Korean formats is not a simply change of audience taste, nor a temporary fashion in this industry. Here are two forms to picture the format market in China last year, which indicates a clear trend of the falling of British formats.

**Table 1: Top ten entertainment shows (Jan-Jun, 2014)**

	Program	Channel	Rating(%)	Original From
1	Daddy Where are We Going 2	Hunan TV	3.749	Korea
2	Take Me Out	Jiangsu TV	2.392	UK
3	I Am Singer	Hunan TV	2.294	Korea
4	Happy Campus	Hunan TV	1.989	China
5	Divas hit the road	Hunan TV	1.809	Korea
6	The Brain	Jiangsu TV	1.705	Germany
7	China Comedy Star	Zhejiang TV	1.582	China
8	Xiao Ao Jiang Hu	Shanghai TV	1.403	China
9	Chinese Dream	ZheJiang TV	1.353	UK
10	China's Got Talent	Shanghai TV	1.306	UK

**Table2: Top ten rating TV channel and their new format show (2014)**

	Channel	Program	Origin from
1	Hunan TV	Divas Hit the Road	Korea
2	Jiangsu TV	The Brain	Germany
		Running Man	Korea
3	Zhe Jiang	Daddy is Home	Korea
4	Shandong TV	Lie Huo Xiong Xin	Korea
5	Anhui TV	None	
6	Beijing TV	None	
7	Shanghai TV	Flower H4	Korea
8	Sichuan TV	Two Days and one Night	Korea
9	Tianjin TV	Xi Cong Tian Jiang	Co-produced with Korea
10	Shenzhen TV	The Amazing Race	US

Since the State Administer of Radio, Film & TV cut back the number of foreign TV formats, every satellite broadcaster was restricted import one per year beginning in 2014. Every channel needs to be more cautious about purchasing new formats. Even though the top ten channels' choice may not fully reflect the whole market, but it does show a distinctive preference. However, before 2013, most formats were imported from Europe, mainly from UK. Take 2012 as an example.

**Table 3: Top ten entertainment shows (2012)<sup>1</sup>**

		Genre	Original Country	Original Name
1	Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin	Talent show	Holland	The Voice
2	Fei Cheng Wu Rao	Dating Show	UK	Take Me Out (no copy right)
3	Kuai Le Da Ben Ying	Variety	China	
4	Tian Tian Xiang Shang	Variety	China	
5	Bai Bian Da Ka Xiu	Impersonation Show	Spain	Your Face Sounds Familiar
6	Wo Men Yue Hui Ba	Dating Show	UK	Take Me Out
7	China's Got Talent	Talent Show	UK	Britain's Got Talent
8	Fei Chang Jing Ju Li	Talk Show	China	
9	Chinese Dream Show	Reality Show	UK	Tonight's the Night
10	Fei Ni Mo Shu	Talent Show	China	

It is worth questioning why British formats, as a pioneer of export to Chinese TV industry, has become more international, yet has seen the declining popularity in China, while China's market is maturing.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Basis

This study applies cross-culture theory to analyze this question. When it comes to formats, Chinese scholars mainly concern about how to localize a foreign show better, while western researchers pay a lot of attention to the economic system of format industry. This research uses 'British TV formats' as a key word to search published academic papers, including degree thesis, on CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) and analyzes the data. There are 1141 papers concerning this subject, including the earliest one published in 1981. Among all these papers, the most frequent used key word is 'localization'. Correspondingly, those most quoted papers (Chen,2009; Tan,2012; Yuan,2010; He&Xiao,2006) study how to localize an imported format or how to develop a better localized format show. What is also worth to notice is that research appealing to refine China's intellectual property law to support the format industry (Huang, 2011; Ye,2002) has drawn a lot of attention as well. It associates with Chinese format professionals gradually developing a more comprehensive perception of the success of British format industry. However, there are still fields left unexplored by Chinese scholars, such as Chinese television ecology system, related

industry regulations, economic system, and social background, which many western researchers have laid focus on. Both Western and Chinese scholars value culture's function in the globalization of formats. British researchers are eager to understand cultural factors which affect 'the acceptance of program' (Steemers, 2004). Chinese professionals want to do a better adaption by finding a balance between the formats culture and the national culture, but few of them put culture on a pivotal position. Thus, applying cross-culture theories to analyze this question is an innovative means of analysis the subject. However, using this theory is not just for filling a research gap. The theoretic framework is based on a unique perception of format: it has a culture system. Every detail in the bible implies values, thinking models, ideology from its original culture. We choose three groups of cross-culture theories: globalization, cultural discount and cultural proximity, and ethnocentrism. Every group has a strong connection with each others.

To begin with, globalization is the most common concern of any cross-culture communication action. Roland Robertson was one of the early users of the term 'Globalization' (Khondker, 2004). One of the distinguish achievements of his book *Globalization Social Theory and Global Culture* (1992), pointed out that globalization is a long history process of the whole world. It is erroneous to view globalization as the worldwide spread of westernization. Within his book, Robertson analyzed how unique Japanese culture and religion led it to a global position. It noted out a possibility: every country's culture could become globalized in certain conditions. That is what happening in China: learning to globalize our own culture. In addition, Robertson also emphasized the cultural globalization is connected with the history of "the capitalist world-system" (1992). When Joseph Straubhaar considered the localization of international programs in Brazil, he introduced a complexity theory to analyze the process of localization, which is "hard to predict exactly, but bounded by certain factors, such as technology and economics" (2007). It would help us to understand the very close relationship between Chinese economical situation, social background and the format preference of audience.

It may be natural to consider that the Chinese audience is attracted by Korean format due to the cultural proximity between two countries, and attribute the repelling of British show to the cultural discount. Even though, these two theories cannot explain some questions like why Korean formats only become popular in recent two years. It could help to understand certain features, which are the common points of popular Korean formats to some extent. According to the former studies of cultural proximity "given the option, television broadcasters will import programming from the most culturally similar exporters, not the most powerful ones" (Straubhaar, 1991). Zaharopoulos also claimed that language and geography is the premise of cultural proximity (1990). We will find more supporting evidence to

Zaharopoulos' point in the following case study. In terms of cultural discount, Hoskins and Mirus made a clear definition: a particular program (or feature film) rooted in one culture, and thus attractive in that environment, will have diminished appeal elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the styles, values, beliefs, institutions and behavior patterns being portrayed (1988). They believe the notion can also explain why it is fictional drama, which minimizes the cultural discount that is widely traded while there is little trade in informational programming. It may provide a reason to explain British formats as a less informational product being popular in China for a decade.

William B. Gudykunst points out "Ethnocentrism refers to our tendency to identify with our in-group (eg. ethnic or racial group, culture) and to evaluate out-groups and their members according to in-group standards" (1984). In China's social context, ethnocentrism is not only judge another culture solely by the values and standards of one's own culture, but also adapt other culture according to its standard.

## Methodology

The methodology of this study is comparative case studies. Even though the study concerns several imported formats, this research only select three with which to carry out the case study. The first one is the Chinese version of *The Voice*, *Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin*, which is a Dutch singing competition show. The second one is in Korean format, called *Daddy Where are We Going* (*Ba Ba Qu Na Er*). It is a reality show about five celebrity fathers taking their own children traveling. The last one is the Chinese version of *X Factor*, *Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin*, which originate from the UK. The former two are viewed as 'phenomenal' in contemporary China, and have generated a strong social influence. The last one was widely expected to enjoy a similar success but failed in its rating. The selection of case studies does not only result from how many people watched these format shows, but also from the impact these formats continue to leave on the Chinese TV industry. It will illustrate how these formats are revolutionizing the business and programming of major broadcasters. The three cases have similarities as well as differences, but not base on genres. It is due to the unique television system in China, which has more broadcasting channels than other countries. There are 15 China Centre Television channels and over 30 satellite TV channels covering the whole nation. Most of them are similar in function and target the largest audiences. Once a format gains success, the same type of format will be widely produced and aired on mainstream channels. Due to China's policy orientation, singing and dancing competition format shows are the most-watched genre, thus these genres demand more attention in this study. These three cases may not fully reflect the whole market, but will enable us to understand the crucial characteristics of the Chinese TV

industry, and the current status of British formats in China. The three cases are presented chronologically and tell a distinctive tale about production on the cusp of today's Chinese TV industry.

The research undertakes semi-structured interviews and documents analysis to support case study. All the data and information were collected during 2011 to 2014, including interviews with British format professionals and Chinese format show producers. The experience as a staff of Creative Development and Research Centre for Hunan TV in 2011, offered an opportunity to carry out participant observation and understand certain decisions about format buying made by Top TV channels during that time. Part of interviews were conducted in Britain with professionals who were either the producer, creator of original format show, or fly producers supporting the Chinese version show. Interviews with the format buyers and creators are in order to reflect the different understandings on the same format between countries. Documents include data from CSM, audience feedback from social media, industry conference material, related news reports, government regulations and TV channels reports and statements.

## Case study

### Case 1: Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin (The Voice)—Empower the Candidate

The original format called The Voice of Holland, first ran in 2010. Even though it was introduced to China by a British company, Endemol, “Chinese broadcasters did not notice the show until it aired on an American network in 2011”<sup>2</sup>. The Chinese version was first broadcasted in July, 2012 by Zhejiang TV. It was an immediate hit, and its rating has kept to rise for the last two seasons. The success of this format could attribute to its renovation of aesthetic standard, production quality and jeopardy design. Before The Voice, the most popular singing competition show in China was Super Voice Girl (first aired in 2004), which enjoyed fame for the candidate's personality rather than their singing skills. Some of them even acquired rapid fame because of their terrible performance or weird sound. Super Voice Girl attracted audience for the opportunity it offered to the most ordinary people. On the contrary, the success of The Voice based on the fact that it is breaking the status-quo assumptions about how amateur singers could perform.<sup>3</sup> The high quality singing in the show changed the aesthetic standard of the major audience from “schadenfreude” to enjoy beauty. Besides, entrusting the production to an independent production company, Can Xing, represented something entirely new. It was the first time the Chinese broadcaster did not produce a show on its own. Zhejiang TV entrusted Can Xing with the responsibility of producing a great show and agreed to split the profits if the show actually receive certain rating. This new production model not only changed the business model, but also improved the quality of the show significantly.

The independent professional team extricated itself from bureaucracy of the broadcaster and was able to introduce high quality lighting, sound system and studio design to Chinese TV industry, which set standard for the industry. After *The Voice*, high level investment, advanced equipment, the use of A-list celebrity and a sophisticated production system became a necessity to make a successful entertainment show. In addition, the jeopardy design of this format has also brought cultural change. Like BBC producer Quigley<sup>4</sup> points out:

In the *Voice* the singers could choose which A-list star would coach them (after they turn round). It is a huge cultural change. ‘Ordinary’ people having A-list high society people pitching for them to join their teams is a big shift of the balance of power, which has not been seen in China before, and carried a strong underlying message. This does not happen in the *X Factor* format.

In fact, this is something never happened before in Chinese TV history, and which matches the zeitgeist.

Case 2: *Ba Ba Qu Na Er* (Daddy Where are We Going)——Production Experiments Based on Confucian Culture

This format provides an informative case. Similar to *Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin*, this format show has also brought innovations to industry. But the society’s change brought by this format show deserves more attention. As mentioned above, before 2013, most formats in China were mainly from Britain or Europe. However things dramatically changed after Hunan TV introduced the Korean format *I Am Singer* in 2013. Actually, as far back to 2011, Hunan TV has sensitively noticed the market fatigue regarding typical western shows.<sup>5</sup> Based upon long history of co-operation on drama with Korea, Hunan TV was planning to introduce Korean formats to China. Korean drama has been widely accepted by different audience demographics, and helped to build an audience base for Korean reality shows. Around 2011, some Korean format shows had already been quite popular online, *Daddy Where are We Going* is one of those shows.

Not only did this show alter expectations about the norm of program content, but it also introduced a vast variety of production practices. First of all, it converges the journey of celebrity families with remote gorgeous scenery documentary into a visually pleasing reality show. Outdoor reality show is a new production practice of a different genre. Before this show, most entertainment shows were filmed in studio and mainly about competition rather than focus on showing the personality of characters. Secondly, the show also derived significant rating from its uncommon focus on father-child relationship, which has been previously absent from television shows (including drama). This is the key point to strike a chord with the



audience, and producers as well. As the executive producer Xie Dikui noted:

I have a three-year boy, this show makes me rethink about our relationship, things we experience together. What mistakes I made as a father, what I can do to fix it, how can I do better..... In fact, many new ideas added to the format are from my colleagues' own parenting experience<sup>6</sup>.

Because Chinese producers could fully understand the core design of the format, they made a successful adaption. Third, this format show has revolutionized its profit model. Usually, unlike drama, reality shows are less profitable than drama. However, this show proved surprisingly valuable in many secondary markets, its spin off mobile game, movie, and commodities are all popular.

In fact the success enjoyed by *Daddy Where are We Going* could not have been predicted when it began production in August 2013. "Worrying about the risk of a new genre, the original sponsor of the show (Mei De) gave up the contract shortly before its air" (Sang, 2013). All these success are based on the format's enriching culture connotations, which enables good story telling. The jeopardy of this format is challenging of the role of father in Confucian culture, which is supposed to be distant to their children. Handing the children over to their fathers is therefore automatically dramatic in Asian culture. Meanwhile, the format requested fathers to carry out emotional introspection on their relationship with their children. It also added the western emotional self-reflection into the format, which does not exist in Confucian culture before. Confucian culture guides people to carry out self-examination about career, and the way they contribute to their country, but less about their family relationship and emotional feelings. That was why *Ba Ba Qu Na Er* offers the audience a fresh culture experience. The audience saw a familiar father figure like their own dads', neighbors', friends', strangers'. Meanwhile, they also see an unfamiliar part: the relationship changes made by these celebrity fathers and how both they and their children benefit from them. It is like a mirror for ordinary people to rethink the traditional behavior of parenting, and sets off a heated debate in the society. They also borrow western-style competition to exhibit spirit of the struggle and brother-like friendship, intelligence rather than toughness. In a western 'finding-ego' journey, it expresses tolerance, understanding, humility, friendship and fealty, which are traditional spirits of Confucianism.

#### Case 3: Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin (X Factor)—Fail to Meet the New Aesthetic Standard

The format has been successfully produced in over 40 different territories around the world, often achieving the number one rating. It was not the first time that this format has been adapted in China, but previously never worked. This time it was produced by one of the best production teams in China and aired on one of the top TV channels during prime time in 2013. However, the market reactions was poor so the

broadcaster had to cancel it after the very first season. As Ye (2013) said, “Before it aired, it was expected to be the only music show, which could compete with the Chinese version of *The Voice*.” It was aired right after the big hit show *I Am Singer*. The production team was the same group who produced *Super Voice Girl*, and the investment of the show was unprecedented. There is no doubt that this show attempts to bring changes to the industry. It invited an A-list star cast to be judges, which included an internationally famous movie Star, Zhang Ziyi, who unfortunately was regarded as a boring personality in the show later. It introduced a fragmentation style of editing that audience complained a lot. The former executive producer of the British version of *X Factor*, Paul Jackson believes “The failing of the show could be blamed on its insensitivity towards audience aesthetic standard.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, several British producers (from different format companies) agreed that Chinese production team’s misunderstanding about the format design ‘ruined the show’. The content of the format basic remained the same as *Super Voice Girl*. It still tried to attract the audience by the personality or background story of the candidates rather than their talents, which regarded quiet old fashion by the masses. It also offered the judge too much power rather than share this equally with the candidates or the audience. The format did not allow the candidate to choose their own coach. Meanwhile, it failed to be creative about rituals such as the chair in *Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin*, not to mention the cheap stage set of the first two episodes. It is a little wonder that it was not popular despite of its unprecedented casting, and investment. Crucially, it lacked the new type of dramatic conflicts and visual experience. At the same time, other top channels carried out some good experiments regarding with genre and use of visuals in order to develop new format shows.

## Case comparison and analysis

We could use three indicators to evaluate and define whether a show is successful or not: rating, reputation and commercial revenue. Rating refers to the audience voting by remote. It reflects the scale of the audience. Meanwhile, reputation reflects the audiences’ attitude towards a show, and commercial revenue indirectly reflects how audiences’ attitudes affect their behavior, especially the potential for consumption.

**Table 4: Average Rating (%)<sup>8</sup>**

	Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin (The Voice)	Ba Ba Qu Na Er (Daddy where are we going)	Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin (X Factor)
1st Season	3.87	4.015	1.2
2nd Season	4.585	3.096	
3rd Season	5.613		

\* In China, if a primary time show's rating is over 1%, then it is a good show, if it is over 2%, then the show usually consider to be a hot topic among the society. In China's TV history, the highest average rating record achieved by entertainment show was created by Super Voice Girl (2005), which is 8.54%, and it is unlikely be surpassed, considering today's multiple entertainment choices enjoyed by the audience.

This table clearly indicates that both Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin and Ba Ba Qu Na Er achieve a highly success rating, especially Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin, which has seen a rare increasing rating over three consecutively series. In fact, Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin has more advantages, such as a much higher production investment than the former two shows, one of the best satellite TV channels—Hunan TV as platform, a large potential audience base attracted by I Am Singer which filed by it in the same time slot. However, its rating is disappointing.

#### Comparison on Market Reputation

According to the data analysis of online comments on Weibo by the New Media Department of Xinhua News Agency, Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin maintained a mainly positive reputation (85.95%) in the first season(Liu, 2013). While, other media tended to consider the show has a controversial reputation. They criticized the show for emphasizing too much on candidates' sad stories rather than focusing on their singing ability, and the judges over performing and stealing the show, etc(Zhong, 2012). On the contrary, when the first episode of Ba Ba Qu Na Er aired, it created a record called 'Zero negative comments' within entertainment TV shows. It only started to be criticized from the fourth episode but its positive comments remained higher than any other show in the same period. The report by the Xinhua news agency also claimed that its primary audiences are concentrated in affluent areas. Unlike the former two shows, Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin was mainly suffering from negative judges. Criticisms against the show were from two groups: TV critics and audience (Cheng, 2013). And even the high-level of Hunan TV announced rethinking of the show on social media<sup>9</sup>. What was worth noticing is that both the critics and Hunan TV admitted that Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin and I Am Singer set a high bar for music shows in terms of quality and aesthetic standards, but Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin failed to reach them(Liang, 2013<sup>10</sup>; Wang, 2013). In addition, the four judges of Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin enjoys remuneration, while, candidates earn a little. While all the fathers and children of Ba Ba Qu Na Er have received more commercial earns and promotion benefits after the show. However, neither judges nor participants benefit from Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin.

**Table 5: Commercial Revenue (Pounds)<sup>11</sup>**

	Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin (The Voice)	Ba Ba Qu Na Er (Daddy where are we going)	Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin (X Factor)
1st Season	6million	3million	50 million *
2nd Season	20million	30 million	
3rd Season	25 million	50 million	

\* News report claimed the show attracted 50 million pounds' commercial sponsor before it aired, but Hunan TV never confirmed the amount of money officially.

Compared to its rapid growth in ratings, the commercial revenue of Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin has grown slowly. In contrast, regardless of its slight decline in rating, Ba Ba Qu Na Er has consecutively rewritten the record of commercial revenue of entertainment TV shows. Thanks to the high expectation of Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin both from professionals and audiences, it has earned a high commercial revenue in its first season, but was cancelled immediately afterwards. Its failure not only caused a traumatic financial loss for its sponsor but also influenced the commercial revenue of the first season Ba Ba Qu Na Er, which access filed Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin. This was because advertisers were curious to undertake a similar risk. In fact, compare to the dynamic extent of Weibo before and after Ba Ba Qu Na Er, three unconnected sponsors all witnessed a fast rise in interaction both online and offline with customers□Liu, 2013□. Commercial revenue indirectly reflect a vivid market influence of these shows.

**Table 6: Production Condition of three Format Shows**

	First Air	Production Cost	Production Team	Broadcaster	Target audience	Time slot
Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin	2012.7	£6 million	Can Xing Production Company <sup>12</sup>	Zhe Jiang TV <sup>13</sup>	19-30	Friday Night 21:30
Ba Ba Qu Na Er	2013.10	£5 million	Hunan TV	Hunan TV	14-60	Friday Night 22:00
Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin	2013.4	Over £10 million	Hunan TV <sup>14</sup>	Hunan TV	15-45	Friday Night 22:00

Examination of these shows' hardware, such as production cost, broadcasting platform, broadcasting schedule, etc, can enable us to discover the success or failure of a show. As we can see, the basic condition of these three shows is much the same. Then we examined the contents and production skills of these

shows. Every successful show has a cultural jeopardy.

**Table 7: The core of the show**

Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin	Ba Ba Qu Na Ee	Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin
Choice and be chosen between authority and normal people	Challenge the traditional father' s role	A story about overnight success of ordinary people

The vice president of Hunan TV's head office, Wang Xubo(2013), mentioned five levels of show from audience experience perspective.

The first level is bearable, a show which brings some fun, the second level is sensory stimulation, a show that has good visual and sound quality, the third level is 'vicarious', which means audience could connect the content to themselves somehow, and makes them thinking, the fourth level is inspiration whereby audience could learn skills or knowledge, establish or emphasis a value by the show, the final level is the turning over of the original value system of the audience.

Obviously, unprecedented production quality and sharing power with authority presented in Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin has enabled it to reach the third level. The social debate on existing parenting model and rethinking on family relationship and society gender role caused by Ba Ba Qu Na Er had made the show achieve a higher level. The new media data analysis also supports this evaluation. It shows that compare to other entertainment programs, the fan of this show has a more discerning taste on media choice which is highly connected to policy and public interests (Liu, 2013). At the same time, the core of Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin remains the same as Super Voice Girl which was produced ten years ago.

Both the globalization and localization process of these shows should also be taken into account. Compare to the original version, the Chinese version of The Voice had over emphasis on the portray of its candidates' sad stories<sup>15</sup>. Even though this simple manipulation was criticized a lot by the critics, it did work initially. For Chinese people are sentimental, and care more about whether the people suffer most could success. Meanwhile, the format of Daddy Where are We Going? required these celebrities to search for food and cook, hooking itself to the strong food culture in Asia. And the rating

shows the cooking part also attracted a high attention<sup>16</sup>. By contrast, cooking show like Master Chef never get popular in China. Cleverly combining cooking and family relationship together requires a comprehensive understanding of the role of food within Asian culture. Also, the editing of Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin suffered plenty complains for it exactly replicated the editing style of the American version of X Factor (Yu, 2013), with the original version's features as rapidity, intenseness and high frequency. Unfortunately the pace is too fast for Chinese audiences, and the flamboyant style and fragmented story-telling logic failed to be appreciated by the more reserved Chinese people.

## A potential explanation for the decline of British reality formats

The data of Chinese format market mentioned above reflects the trend of decline of popularity of British reality formats. The following case studies confirm the trend: not only the rating but also the influence of British format show is sharply cutoff. It also explains the reason of the decline in certain context. Based on the findings of case study and a general overview of market with a broader inspection of China's social background, this part attempts to figure out possible reasons of the disfavor of British formats.

The globalization created a hybrid culture aesthetic

Since 1980s, Chinese audience be able to access western media products. New media technology in 21 century has accelerated this change. According to CNNIC report, till 2013 the younger and better educated citizens watched more online video than TV shows, while according to Ent group's China TV Series Market Report 2012-2013, high-educated and high-income people were the main group watching western TV shows. Since 2010, big video websites in China has fought for the copy right of these popular western shows (Xu, 2013), which are mainly from UK and USA. Comments on social media of those video websites shows that all of these experience has risen the aesthetic standard of Chinese audience, and the production quality has become a common subject of griping. However, (even among these audience) the cultural proximity can never be replaced by advanced production of western shows (Shao, 2013). For the majority, watching TV is a relaxing activity, it should not require much knowledge of a foreign culture. As Zhen & Yang (2005) pointed out the audience expectation required TV programs close to their daily life experience and should be understandable.

It is noteworthy that the improvement of China's economy has a deep impact on China's social structure, and citizen's cultural confidence (Li, 2012). It also formed a relatively high degree of national identity (Wu and Kimizuka, 2001). In addition, social media becoming the 'public sphere' for the

masses (Shi, 2009), help the youth feel be connected and achieved a sense of belonging. Consequently, these changes all demand more culture product to reflect its original values. Case studies of the three format shows reveal that a successful format show usually value traditional culture highly. Their settings have more Chinese factors: narrative follows traditional narrative art; genre turns to unaffected and introverted; the editing pace and subtitle all considerate traditional aestheticism. The overall aesthetic standard of these format shows from “schadenfreude” to enjoy beauty could be considered as a return to intellectual idealism of Confucian culture. Also compared to western audience, Chinese prefer to watch celebrities to ordinary people in reality format shows in recent years<sup>17</sup>, which is another evidence of the return to intellectual Culture. As mentioned by British producers in interviews, Chinese audience tends to watch the behaviors of upper class.

In addition, the shift to traditional culture in format shows caters for the new centre government of China, which is eager to establish China’s own discourse system. In fact, there are experts (Wang & Huang, 2014) believing that the way to make Chinese culture going global is to encourage China’s cultural industry to absorb and imitate excellent foreign culture achievements). In China, ambitious producers<sup>18</sup> in top TV stations are inclined to believe buying foreign formats is for selling our own formats eventually. Undoubtedly, considerable financial benefits created by format shows like *Ba Ba Qu Na Er* and *Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin* allure more professionals to develop China’s original formats.

The mature of Korean formats offers a better option

Since 2005, the popularity of Korean soap drama have attracted plenty of Chinese audience (Wei, 2014). The gentle way it tells story; depicts on details; sublimes daily trivialities into the nature of life; desire for a happy life and surreal aestheticism (Lian, 2014) meet the value system of Chinese. These production features are carried out in Korean reality formats and are apt to accepted by Chinese audience, who has been familiar with the ‘Korean style’ for a decade. On the other hand, for the last ten years, Chinese audience embraced western formats such as *Pop Idol*, *Strictly Come Dancing* without truly understanding the essential of the format. According to the cultural discount theory, the longer civilization history is, the higher level of audience comprehension requires (Yan, 2008). Both China and Britain have a centuries-old culture. The meaningful cultural resource enlarges the cultural discount between these two countries. In contrast, Korean formats are close to Chinese audiences’ ordinary life experience and have the ability to disseminate Confucian culture. No matter what the expression of the show is, both the core and the rule design are based on Confucian ethics, morals

and aesthetic. The unexpected success of Ba Ba Qu Na Er should partly attribute to fill a void, it has challenged and rethought about the Confucian father's role.

Besides, cultural discount usually happens among 'gatekeepers' before the audience (Xue, 2009:44). As mentioned in the case study of Ba Ba Qu Na Er, because of the cultural proximity of Korean formats, the gatekeeper, the commissioner of Chinese channels and program producers found it much easier to understand and adapt a Korean format than a British format. Also instead of providing a fascinating detailed production bible like their western counterpart, Koreans usually send their format designers and the whole production team to China to help producing the show. In 2014, China introduced 24 Korean formats. 11 of them are co-developed or co-produced with Korean teams. Compares to one or two fly producers offered by western format companies, the Korean way enables the different professions of the Chinese production teams to have a better understanding of the format design.

Korean formats is a role model in multiple level

At the first level, Korea offers a model of how to study western, as the old saying goes: "learn from foreigners to compete with foreigners". During the process of globalization, increasing Chinese audiences get access to western shows and are impressed by the quality. They desire Chinese shows to achieve the western production quality<sup>19</sup>. Meanwhile, from a cultural proximity perspective, Chinese audiences naturally feel more close to shows reflecting Chinese culture. But they want an intelligent combination rather than a simplistic mix. One of the most important reasons of Ba Ba Qu Na Er's sudden success is that it delicately borrowed western emotional self-reflection to rethink about traditional Confucian father-children relationship. Korean formats find a modern way to explain Confucian culture. The rule design values family relationship and ethical order, a diligent attitude, the spirit of struggle, which are part of Chinese traditional culture and have resonance among Chinese audience( Lian, 2014). They enjoy it with fashionable celebrities, entertainment expression, and high production quality adhere to Asian aesthetic standard.

On the second level, Korean format shows a life that Chinese audiences could learn from, and see their future in it (Zhao,2005). China has a long history of absorbing the essence of alien cultures and making them become part of Chinese culture. That is why the 'Han' culture remains the mainstream culture over thousand years, despite being governed by several minorities or western colonial power. As Qian (1994:205) pointed out: the key feature of Chinese cultural spirit is to believe that all



differences could be combine into one. Until today, China is always looking for elements from other cultures to improve itself. William noted that the television audience would carry a pragmatic formula when they enjoy programs (Zeng, 2005). So when Chinese audience watch a show from an alien culture, they are not just enjoying a different cultural experience, they are also looking for guides of life improvement. One of important theme of Korean reality show formats is to encourage celebrity participants to promote themselves during the process, and to revere for a high moral standard. While, as mentioned by several format producers from mainstream British format companies, western formats prefer to use ordinary people to exhibit ordinary life. Under the circumstances, British formats are unlikely to offer that kind of guide to Chinese audience anymore. No wonder its popularity in China descends so quickly.

## Conclusion

A format with a familiar but slightly different cultural background seems to have a stronger attraction in China. It demands Chinese producers to take Western formats production skills and use them in an oriental way. However, China only has thirty years' history of TV industry, it still lacks experience. Chinese professionals currently are unable to localize western formats to a high level as their Korean counterparts do. Studying Korean formats is in order to combine western format production experience and Chinese traditional culture. Regardless of that, it seems to be the beginning of the end of blind worship of British culture in China, and an implication of the shifting of global cultural power. The phenomenon does not necessarily mean the fall of British culture around the world. China has an abundant historical and cultural heritage, and an increasing economic power and confidence to revive our traditional culture. But there are many small countries neither have the money nor the ability to produce TV programs to reflect their own culture. Despite that, China's new culture trend will further complicates the global power structure in culture.

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## 注释 [Notes]

1. These three forms are sort out based on CSM data and Program Schedules of Satellite TV Channels
2. Interview with Paula Warwick, Head of International Productions of Shine Group. Feb.19,2015
3. Interview with Simon Quigley, Producer of BBC Worldwide, Feb.16,2015.
4. Correspondence from Simon Quigley, Producer of BBC Worldwide, Feb.17,2015.
5. Li Hao and Song Dian discussed their concern about audiences get tired of typical western shows

- several time at internal meetings of Hunan TV in June 2011. Li Hao was the Vice President of Hunan TV, Song Dian is the head of Creative Development and Research Centre at that time.
6. Interview with Xie Dikui, the executive producer of Ba Ba Qu Na Er. May.2, 2014.
  7. Interview with Paul Jackson, the former executive producer of British version of X Factor, Oct.8,2014.
  8. Sorted out from CSM DATA
  9. The vice president of Radio, Film & TV Bureau of Hunan Province, Jiang Xin expressed his disappointment about the show on Sina Weibo, on Apr.19,2013.
  10. Liang Huan, a famous online critic, post on Sina Weibo on Apr.19,2013, says: “After Zhong Guo Hao Sheng Yin and I Am Singer set a bar of sounds, editing and live music band for entertainment TV shows. No one would want to watch a show like Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin.”
  11. Company reports of Hunan TV and Zhejiang TV
  12. Original production stuffs of Can Xing are mainly from Dragon TV. Now Can Xing also inducing production team from Hunan TV and other top production organizations.
  13. Zhe Jiang TV ranks in top 3 amongst satellite TV channels, while Hunan TV usually ranks in the 1st.
  14. The executive producer of Zhong Guo Zui Qiang Yin is the same person created Super Voice Girl.
  15. Interview with Kevin Mundy, Head of UK Formats and Global Consultant of Keshet Production, Feb.9,2015.
  16. Interview with Zhen Huan, producer of Hunan TV, Mar.6,2014.
  17. Develop director of Can Xing, Xu Fan mentioned in interviews, Chinese audience prefer to watch celebrities in reality show due to their traditional aesthetic standard.
  18. Peng kan, the develop director of Legend Media, who introduced Korean format Running Man, and Xu Fan, the develop director of Canxing, both pointed out buying Korean format is to learn to create our own format. (Mao, 2015)
- Yin Xiaowei, Vice president of Canxing and the executive producer, announced the news of selling Chinese format Sing My Song to ITV, says: ‘It is the time to produce our own format’ . (Li, 2014)
- Sun Tieling, the executive producer of Guo Se Tian Xiang, which is an original reality show of traditional opera, claims they plan to export the format to ‘draw more attention on Chinese traditional culture’ . (Qiu,2014)
- Luo Xin, the executive producer of Happy Camp, believes that Happy Camp could be a good format and have the potential to export to other country. (Interview, Jun. 21, 2011)
- Du Xin, the Operations Director of Zhe Jiang TV, claimed they were planning to sell the format of Chinese Dream Show to its original production company BBCW. (Qiu, 2012)
19. This is a hot topic among social media. Da Qi Website sorted out some representative viewpoint to one article: Why American and British TV shows are better than domestic shows, a scientific and reasoned analysis.Retrieved from: <http://ent.daqi.com/article/3687857.html>

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