EMPOWERING LOCAL IDENTITIES THROUGH GLOBAL TV FORMATS IN CHINA AND INDIA

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ‘SUPER GIRL’ AND ‘INDIAN IDOL 3’

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REGIONAL ADAPTATION OF GLOBAL FORMATS: REALITY TV IN CHINA AND INDIA

- Focus on migration into China and India of Idol talent show format, sub-genre of reality tv

- Comparative analysis of two popular talent shows during the last decade:
  - China’s Super Girl and India’s Indian Idol 3

- Shows’ cultural and social effects carry political implications for issues of identity and citizenship in the world regions under observation
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Question:
  - how are identity and citizenship articulated and performed in the tension between the local and the national dimensions, with the mediation of global tv formats?

- Observed through the conjuncture between:
  - interactive television entertainment empowering audience participation
  - unscripted drama, with its emphasis on unexpected outcomes
  - emphasis on ‘authenticity’ and ordinariness of contestants
CHINA’S SUPER GIRL

the challenge of the Chinese provinces
Hunan Satellite Television ‘Super Girl’

- Talent show modelled on the Pop Idol/American format

- Broadcasted by local satellite television channel Hunan Satellite TV

- Hugely popular:
  - during the 2005 second edition, final episode watched by 400 million viewers
HUNAN SATELLITE TELEVISION ‘SUPER GIRL’

Show challenged closely controlled programming tradition of state television CCTV

Popularised local and marginal identities among Chinese women, not fitting with ethic and aesthetic codes request by Chinese authorities

New type of mediated politics in China:

“regionalism, gender and other workings of power played out in the representations of intimate and mundane life offered by reality TV” (Kraidy and Sender, 2011)
REALITY TV IN CHINA

- September 2004: then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao encouraged CCTV to create programs focusing on ordinary people:
  - Speech coincided with the launch of CCTV's talent show *Special 6+1 China Dream*

- State television network’s attempt to keep up with new wave of non-scripted programming based on amateurs competitors

- In particular, competition with popular HSTV show Super Girl, “conceived in response to viewer dissatisfaction with the overly pedagogic tone of existing variety formats” (Keane et al. 2007)
NEW CELEBRITIES

Super Girl claimed of representing ‘authentic Chinese girl’, creating an idol “among ordinary people with the assistance of ordinary people” (Keane et al, 2007)

Before reality TV, producers closely followed government directive:

- Promotion of an “iconography of designated role models and official heroes” (Keane et al., 2007)

Popularity and tensions around Super Girl encapsulated the challenges between the provincial/local vs metropolitan/national level
CRITICISM OF STATE AUTHORITIES

- SARFT - China’s State Administration of Radio, Film and Television - disapproved of Super Girl alleging that ‘it focused solely on entertainment, and that candidates were harshly criticized and humiliated by judges’ (Di, 2010)

- However censorship in China follows often hidden economic agendas (Martel, 2010) in particular with respect to the competition between HSTV and CCTV

- SARFT has a proprietary interest in CCTV revenues, since CCTV gives a share of its profit to the regulatory organ
LI YUCHUN: NEW CHINESE WOMAN?

- Li Yuchun: winner of the 2005 Super Girl edition

- Most popular singer to emerge from Super Girl is a tomboyish girl who has since then become a bona fide pop star in China

- Triumphed despite ‘average’ performance, but popular verdict rewarded her individuality, unique presentation of self and decision not to conform

- Popularised androgynous image:
  - extroverted, non-tender and outgoing women - different from the state-run beauty contests
LI YUCHUN: NEW CHINESE WOMAN?
DEMOCRATISING CELEBRITY AND EMPOWERING LOCAL IDENTITIES

- Authorities worried about Li Yuchun popular election in a process that attracted the masses of provincial China

- As argued by Van Zoonen (2004) fandom activities generating around television entertainment serve as sites for a vicarious political experience

- Important to observe that since it comes from the agricultural province in central China, HSTV also identified itself as entertainment television for the “common people”
DEMOCRATISING CELEBRITY AND EMPOWERING LOCAL IDENTITIES

- Super Girl offered opportunity for girls from small cities to become nationwide celebrities

- It successfully democratized the previously unattainable TV stage as well as “celebrity status” (Jian and Liu, 2009)

- Utilizing contrast between local and national - and between ordinary people and elite - Super Girl successfully appeals to provincial audiences as opposed to elites of Beijing and Shanghai
INDIAN IDOL 3
OVERCOMING ETHNIC DIVISIONS IN NORTHEASTERN INDIA
TRANSFORMATIONS IN INDIAN BROADCASTING

- After the 90s liberalisation, transnational networks such as Star Plus and Indian commercial networks such as ZEE TV challenged the hegemony of the state-sponsored network Doordarshan.

- Sudden appearance of a state-free televiusal space in the context of market-led globalization (Rajagopal, 2015).

- Several programming innovations based on adaptation of global formats.
Some of the more popular presentations of Indian cultural themes often emerged from foreign-owned channels (Rajagopal, 2015).

Sony TV's *Indian Idol*: an interesting case study to observe how adapted global media format offered platforms for representation and reworking of local and subregional identities.

In the process also offering new opportunity to experience citizenship and social participation for Indian publics.

- A social and political movement began to organise around a contestant from Shillong, the capital of the Northeastern Indian region of Meghalaya.

- Amit Paul, singer from a region of India that had suffered years of inter-ethnic strife, started to receive support from a plurality of ethnic groups of his region.

- This sort of local collaboration between previously divided ethnic and linguistic groups was unprecedented in the region.
The local institutions tried to leverage on the political potential of the Amit Paul’s sensation.

Reality television program created opportunities for a redefinition of the political sphere in the Meghalaya region.

Amit Paul’s worked as a unique opportunity for Meghalaya to claim that their belonging to ‘national family’ (Punathambekar, 2010)
Ethnically diverse public in support of Amit Paul created renewed forms of interaction across ethnic and linguistic boundaries.

Such interactions previously difficult also for the lack of adequate representation and articulation on the part of state media.

Indian Idol 3 created spaces in which people could leave their differences aside, even if briefly:

"as they stood in lines at telephone booths, shared mobile sim cards, and took part in rallies to support their idol" (Punathambekar, 2010)
EMPOWERING LOCAL IDENTITIES VIA GLOBAL FORMATS IN CHINA AND INDIA: CONCLUSIONS

- *Super Girl* and *Indian Idol 3* point to the unexpected outcomes of the adaptation of global formats in world regions characterised:
  - by vast territories
  - large populations, often linguistically or ethnically diverse
  - where central governments traditionally maintained centralized, propagandistic or pedagogic approach to state broadcasting
EMPOWERING LOCAL IDENTITIES VIA GLOBAL FORMATS IN CHINA AND INDIA: CONCLUSIONS

- Model of post-colonial modernisation based on high culture, secularism and centralised control of national state media caused for the marginalisation of local cultures.

- Media globalization challenged the supremacy of national dimension by creating unexpected synergy between global entertainment formats and local or subregional cultures.

- In the process, marginal identities have gained unprecedented representation and have been empowered, albeit temporarily, as a political categories.
REFERENCES


Thank you

Questions?