

Interpreting the Television Format Phenomenon Between South Korea and China Through Inter-Asian Frameworks

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This study examines the recent popularity of Korean television shows, their format contracts, and various remakes in China. Rather than focusing on specific cases, it attempts to develop a theoretical understanding on the regional flows of television programs through inter-Asian frameworks. In so doing, it suggests reframing the television format phenomenon between South Korea and China as cultural assemblages, which include not only the details of format contracts but also the reciprocal interchanges of various levels of human, financial, and cultural elements. Approaching television formats as cultural assemblages contributes to framing the format phenomenon as an inter-Asian wave rather than limiting it to a nation-centric approach. In so doing, inter-Asian frameworks approach the format phenomenon as a tool for facilitating cultural encountering, mutual understanding, and social imaginations among regional people. As a conclusion, we suggest that Korean Wave studies is ready to produce a theoretical perspective or concepts and to provide another idiosyncratic yet compatible model in global television studies.

Keywords: television program, format studies, cultural assemblage, inter-Asian wave, Korean Wave studies

This study explores the recent popularity of Korean television programs and their Chinese remakes, including contracts of the formats, their franchises, and the skilled personnel involved in the productions. By deploying an inter-Asian framework, this study suggests approaching such format phenomena between South Korea and China as cultural processes. Such an inter-Asian framework highlights not only the interchanges of human, financial, and cultural elements through format contracts but also the continuous influences on pop flows and the social discourses between South Korea and China

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that follow. By reframing the format phenomenon into cultural assemblages, this study attempts to promote a range of inter-Asian frameworks in East Asian pop culture studies.

Over the past years, several Korean television shows have succeeded in attracting domestic and Asian audiences following the sweeping international trend of Korean dramas and K-pop. Since 2012, these television program formats have been remade by Chinese broadcasting companies, and these Chinese versions have also enjoyed enormous popularity among audiences both in China and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, several program formats have been converted into films, animated series, and online games with considerable success. Meanwhile, Korean professionals and entertainers have joined in the production of the Chinese versions and, in turn, so-called China money has been invested in various parts of the broadcasting and entertainment business in Korea. Such vibrant exchanges and remaking of Korean television formats in China invite intriguing questions: Are they extensions of the Korean Wave? An emerging trend of Pop Culture China? Or a hybrid pop flow in East Asia?

For the past couple of decades, the globalization of television formats has actively and extensively progressed along with the development of communication technology and economic globalization (Moran & Malbon, 2006). Meanwhile, the field of television format studies has been "set to become a significant subfield of present-day research in media and communications" (Moran, 2009, p. 12) both globally and regionally. In its beginning, the field of media studies focused on the different definitions and categories of formats in the television business through concrete cases, many of which are transmitted from the West to the world. Within media studies, formats are "largely studied in terms of their economic and industrial use value" (Oren & Shahaf, 2012, p. 2). That is to say, critical views are relatively underresearched in the field of format studies.

In response to the expansion of globalizing television programs in the 1990s, Asian media studies also began to pay attention to the unilateral expansion of American television formats into the region and homogenization of regional pop culture (Keane, 2004; Keane, Fung, & Moran, 2007; Moran, 2004). It was in 1998 that "viewers in East Asia [were] introduced to a new kind of entertainment television" (Keane et al., 2007, p. 1) such as reality TV, game shows, and a range of lifestyle programs. While American and Western television formats as a hegemonic force attained unprecedented success in Asia (Fung, 2004), considerable developments in Asian television programs were also made both by adopting foreign program formats into local settings and by inventing unique new programs. In explicating the processes of adopting and indigenizing Western formats to local customs, cultural codes, and regional tastes, "the concept of hybridity is construed as a kind of 'clearing house' in the process of localization" (Keane et al., 2007, p. 9).

Similarly, media studies in South Korea began to pay attention to television formats in the context of the globalizing media business. While it is mostly concerned with American influences on domestic business and audiences, Korean media studies also examines the impact of Japanese television formats as well as the confluence of American and Japanese television cultures on the local culture (D.-H. Lee, 2004a, 2004b). Though the attention given to television formats in academia has been more or less lukewarm for years, the surging popularity of Korean television programs and their format contracts overseas have given new momentum to the field of format studies. Much research has been conducted on issues such as the legal and business conditions of format contracts, the ways of producing Chinese versions of the programs, similarities and differences between Korean and Chinese versions, and Chinese audiences' responses to the programs

(Han & Choi, 2014; Roh, 2015; Shi, Kim, & Hwang, 2015). While the number and topics of studies on formats have rapidly increased, a majority of these are simple case studies.

Rather than singling out specific formats or individual producers, this study approaches such format phenomena between South Korea and China as an important case through which we promote a range of inter-Asian frameworks into Korean Wave and East Asian pop culture studies. This study reviews the diverse perspectives of journalists, critics, and intellectuals on the format phenomenon both in South Korea and China and also integrates them in the existing scholarship on the Korean Wave and East Asian pop culture. Inter-Asian frameworks enable us to reframe the format phenomenon as a regional iteration that consists of East Asian pop culture while also underscoring their historicity and mutual borrowing of various regional pop flows, including the Korean Wave. This study concludes with the suggestion that Korean Wave studies is ready for a decolonial turn in knowledge production by both developing theoretical terms based on regional experiences and providing multiple modalities in understanding global television phenomena throughout the world.

The Television Format Phenomenon Between South Korea and China

This section traces the popularities of Korean television programs and their formats in China. In media studies, as discussed, television formats are largely defined from the industrial perspective (Keane et al., 2007). Rather than formulating a similar position, this study approaches television formats as cultural processes that include the interchanges of human, financial, and cultural elements as well as the ensuing social discourses around the television formats. Such an approach underscores formats as the processes in which we can “elaborate successive activities and material resources” (Moran, 2009, p. 9) and “investigate the patterns and meaning” (p. 11) of formats. Therefore, we refer to the active exchanges of the various elements, including the ensuing social discourses about the Korean television formats between South Korea and China, as the (television) format phenomenon. In this vein, we explore the format phenomenon in relation both to its overall development in the Chinese broadcasting business and its relations to the Korean Wave as one of regional pop flows.

The popularity of Korean television programs as well as their formats has emerged as a major trend in China following various genres of imported media constituting the Korean Wave. Whereas version 1.0 of the Korean Wave was ignited by the Korean dramas such as the *Winter Sonata* (Korean Broadcasting System [KBS], 2002) and the *Jewel in the Palace* (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation [MBC], 2003–4), the Korean Wave 2.0 was propelled by K-pop and idol groups (Jin, 2015; S. Lee, 2015). While Chinese audiences actively watched Korean television programs both online and offline, in 2012, their popularity led the Chinese TV industry to venture into remaking Korean television formats. Since then, Chinese broadcasting companies have purchased more than 20 Korean television program formats, and most of the Chinese remakes have been scheduled in prime-time TV slots, which speak for their mainstream success.² As Korean television shows and their formats have appeared as another major

² In Chinese broadcasting, prime times are usually between 8 and 10 p.m. because most national and regional channels broadcast news programs around 7 p.m.

trend, in one respect, the television program format as a commodity appears to have replaced the role once played by Korean drama and K-pop in the Korean Wave in China and Southeast Asia.

However, it needs to be noted that Chinese broadcasting companies were initially interested in purchasing mostly Western television formats in the 1990s, when famous program formats from the U.S. and Britain were globalized (Fung, 2004; Keane, 2004). For instance, China Central Television-2 [CCTV-2] purchased the format of the program *Go, Bing* from the British Broadcasting Corporation and used it to produce the program *Fortune Lucky 52* (*xing yun 52*) in 1998. In 2004, Hunan Satellite TV launched a clone of *American Idol*, which was originally broadcasted by FOX in the U.S. in 2002. In 2010 and 2012, respectively, the format of *Britain's Got Talent* was contracted and remade by Shanghai Eastern Satellite Television, and the format of *The Voice of Holland* was remade into *The Voice of China* by ZheJiang Satellite TV. These Western formats, which mostly fall under quiz shows, built-in potential dilemmas, or audition types, led the trend of imported program formats and remakes in China.

However, the business strategy of purchasing Western television formats has drastically changed since 2013, when Hunan Satellite TV purchased the format contracts and produced Chinese remakes of the programs *I Am a Singer!* and *Father! Where Are You Going?* from MBC of South Korea. The huge success of these programs signaled the beginning of a new era of remaking Korean television formats in China, which led to the format phenomenon. Since then, more than 20 Korean television formats have been sold and remade into Chinese versions: exemplary ones include *Infinite Challenges* (MBC/CCTV1, 2015), *King of Mask Singer* (MBC/Jiangsu Satellite TV, 2015), *We Got Married* (MBC/Jiangsu Satellite TV, 2015), *The Return of Superman* (KBS/ZheJiang Satellite TV, 2014), *Running Man* (SBS/ZheJiang Satellite TV, 2014), and *Non-Summit Meeting* (JTBC/Jiangsu Satellite TV, 2015).³ Furthermore, several programs with successful viewer ratings are reproduced every year as sequels and feature films. The rating records in 2014 and 2015 show that three to four among the top 10 programs are categorized as format programs.⁴ As of writing, both of *I Am a Singer!* (*wo shi ge shou*) and *Running Man* (*ben pao ba xiong di*) finished their fourth seasons in 2016, while *Father! Where Are You Going?* (*ba ba qu na er*), *The Return of Superman* (*b aba hui lai le*), *We Got Married* (*wo men xiang ai ba*), and others are planning their next seasons after their successful ones in 2015. It is no exaggeration to say that most successful Korean television programs have been contracted by Chinese broadcasting stations and are being remade into Chinese versions.

While the number of Korean television formats that are contracted and remade in China has recently skyrocketed, we can discern three different patterns in the format phenomenon. The first pattern is to reproduce the original formats with little efforts of localization. In this pattern, which can be easily observed in the earlier period of the format phenomenon, Korean staff members in charge of the Korean programs are dispatched to convey the producing know-hows and details to their Chinese counterparts,

³ Information such as Korean broadcasting titles, Chinese broadcasting titles, and the years when the first season of the programs were broadcast in China are provided in parentheses.

⁴ Ratings are based on the survey on CSM Media Research, which covers 36,000 households among 225 cities. Retrieved from <http://www.tvvtv.hk/archives/708.html>

without the official preparation of a so-called format bible.⁵ In turn, Chinese staff members visit the filming sites of the Korean programs to have hands-on experiences and to observe the procedures of the production. Examples of this first pattern are programs such as *I Am a Singer!* (2013) and *Father! Where Are You Going?* (2013). In the second pattern, Chinese broadcasting companies make efforts to localize the Korean television formats to incorporate local tastes, cultures, and norms. The characters and plot points, for instance, are indigenized, and the editing, such as the usage of subtitles, is altered based on local procedures. This pattern includes full-package contracts with format bibles, licenses, consulting, and “flying producers” (PDs) and coproductions between Chinese and Korean broadcasting companies. Along with localization, it is noteworthy that many Korean celebrities are casted in the Chinese programs in this pattern of the format phenomenon. Examples of this are *We Got Married* (2015), *Running Man* (2014), and *I Am a Singer!* (2015–16). The third pattern is to produce new programs via joint production between South Korea and China. In this pattern, Chinese broadcasting businesses mainly recruit professional Korean producers and staff members who collaborate with a Chinese team in designing and running a new program. In 2015, around 11 Korean PDs quit their jobs in Korean broadcasting companies and eight of them chose to then sign contracts with Chinese broadcasting companies.⁶ Furthermore, a couple of well-known Korean producers have started up their own production companies with the help of investment by Chinese entertainment businesses.

The format phenomenon between South Korea and China invites considerable attention from both businesses and from academic perspectives. While Korean media hail it as a new version of the Korean Wave, they are also concerned about the brain drains of Korean pop culture into China and a possible counterattack of “Chinese Wave” against both Korean entertainment businesses and the Korean Wave.⁷ Such responses in Korea seem to repeat both the cultural nationalist and neoliberal capitalist approaches, which characterize the mainstream discourses on the Korean Wave on its outset in the early 2000s.

Articulating the Television Format Phenomenon Through Inter-Asian Frameworks

More than a decade ago, Chua (2004) advocated “a discursive construction of an ‘East Asian Pop Culture’ as an object of analysis” (p. 200) based on regional circulations of pop cultures and related discussion. In turn, East Asian pop culture has enabled various and intensive academic conversations as well as activities in the region. Following such inter-Asian conceptualizations as well as movements, this section focuses on developing theoretical rationales for articulating this format phenomenon between South Korea and China within East Asian pop culture. To incorporate inter-Asian frameworks, this section suggests theoretical development of the notion of formats as cultural assemblages. This notion underscores mutually referenced and historically iterated characteristics of the format phenomenon, which provide us with a useful hint for imagining an inter-Asian wave. Such inter-Asian frameworks pay attention to recurring trends and reciprocal referencing in East Asian pop culture by situating the format phenomenon as another regional iteration that consists of East Asian pop culture (Cho, 2011).

⁵ In the TV industry, *bible* “refers to the total set of written information and instructions covering the adaptation of a TV format” (Moran, 2006, p. 5).

⁶ “The Crisis of MBC” (2016).

⁷ “Korean Media” (2014).

Television Format as Cultural Assemblages

First, this study advocates the expanded definitions of television formats as cultural assemblages, which include not only the details of the format contracts but also the reciprocal interchange of various and different levels of human, financial, and cultural elements. As cultural assemblages, the television format phenomenon refers not only to the ways of consuming, circulating and producing different versions of Korean television formats but also to their continuous influence on local pop cultures and the ensuing social discourses between South Korea and China. The concept of formats as cultural assemblages, therefore, enables us to expand the scope of television format studies beyond its industrial and technical dimensions: rather, it underscores diverse, recurring, and reciprocal flows and ensuing social discourses through television formats. As another cultural flow, the formation phenomenon would provide useful resources in imagining cultural sensibilities and social issues in East Asia.

Such an extended notion of a format can be compared with the traditional understanding of a format based mainly on its economic and industrial usages. Moran (2004), one of the pioneering researchers in the field of format studies, defines format as a “set of invariable elements in a programme out of which the variable elements of an individual episode are produced” (p. 5). However, this narrow definition is not enough to expound the vibrating and diverse exchanges of the different dimensions between South Korea and China throughout formats. Instead, articulating the format phenomenon as cultural assemblages enables us to consider not only format contracts and franchise transactions but also people’s movement and shared local or contemporary connectedness. Such an articulation also helps us to consider the roles of Chinese interlocutors and networks in regional pop cultures beyond business and industrial importance. We particularly pay attention to two dimensions: that of human migration in various levels and the regionalization of pop culture.

In the format phenomenon, Korean television format contracts entail the exchange of various human elements in the process of making Chinese versions of the programs (Shi et al., 2015). In its early stages, the remaking procedures tended to depend on people’s knowledge and hands-on experience of program production. The format contracts entailed a format package that included not only production guidelines and consulting but also flying PDs and other professional staff members for supporting, graphics, and technical issues. When the first season of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* was produced in 2013, most of the Chinese production staff had no previous experience of outdoor shooting in the context of the “real variety show” genre, and so Korean staff members were sent there to assisting in filming the remake version. Even when format bibles are prepared, format contracts usually include flying PDs to assist in their own production know-how. At the same time, the success of Korean television shows and their Chinese versions accelerated the trend of including Korean professionals in the Chinese entertainment business beyond simply the format contracts. By offering significantly higher salaries and better conditions, Chinese broadcasting companies were able to recruit more Korean PDs and script writers, who decided to quit their jobs in South Korea and head for China.⁸ In these procedures, it needs to be noted that Chinese personnel also frequently travel to South Korea not only to visit the film sites but also to negotiate the terms of contracts and recruit Korean professionals.

⁸ “Brain Drain” (2016).

Among the various levels of Korean migrations, one notable case is a project by Kim Younghee, a renowned Korean producer who, for decades, led several trends in Korean television shows and was also the creator of *I Am a Singer!* (MBC, 2011). After he submitted his resignation to MBC in 2015, Kim started his new entertainment business in China along with several Korean and Chinese personnel. As principal executive producer, he developed a new television series, *The Greatest Love* (*xuan feng xiao zi*), which was broadcast by Hunan Satellite TV in 2016. *The Greatest Love* casts six Chinese celebrities who travel to their parents' hometowns with their parents for six days. While appealing to filial piety, which is commonly known as a characteristic Asian sensibility, this program combines the genres of entertainment, education, and documentary film. The show was hugely successful: The viewing rate for its first episode was 1.591%, and the overall average record for the whole season was more than 1%.⁹ The success of Kim and his program may signal a new business strategy for both Korean and Chinese investors and professionals, while the Chinese government tends to act heavy-handedly when it comes to television broadcasting. Besides this, a program such as *The Greatest Love* is the embodiment of a synthesized pop product between South Korea and China in which Korean expertise, know-how, and sentiments are combined with Chinese systems, celebrities, and cultural backgrounds.

In the format phenomenon, many Korean entertainers and celebrities are casted in the Chinese remakes of Korean program formats. Chinese programs make use of Korean celebrities to attract Chinese audiences who are fans of the Korean Wave. Among numerous examples, Kim Jongkuk, a singer and main cast member of the Korean TV show *Running Man*, appeared in the first episode of the Chinese *Running Man*, and "the One," a Korean singer, was casted in both the Korean and Chinese versions of the TV show *I Am a Singer!*. Korean celebrities who do not appear in the Korean programs are also casted in the Chinese equivalents only: Choi Siwon, a member of *Super Junior*, an idol group, and Song Ji-hyo, an actor and a member of *Running Man*, were casted in the TV show *We Got Married* (Jiangsu Satellite TV, 2015–16). Meanwhile, a couple of celebrities have followed unconventional paths: Hwang Zhi-lie, a Korean singer, has become a big star in China by joining the singing competitions in the Chinese *I Am a Singer!* It is noteworthy that Hwang is neither an original cast member in the Korean version nor a celebrity in South Korea; rather, his name later became well-known even in South Korea due to his success in China. Another such case is Zhang Yu-An, a former news anchor in China, who became popular in South Korea when he was casted in the program of *Non-Summit Meeting* (JTBC, 2014). Due to the success of the program, he is now a celebrity in both countries and was also cast in *A Bright World* (*shi jie qing nian shuo*; Jiangsu Satellite TV, 2015), the Chinese remake of *Non-Summit Meeting*. While Hwang and Zhang are celebrities born from the format phenomenon, Hwang is a Korean celebrity rooted in Chinese pop culture and Zhang a Chinese celebrity in the Korean Wave.

Such a migration of producers or artists in the region is not an unprecedented phenomenon in Asia. While East Asia is emerging as a powerhouse and a more lucrative market, "South Asia has become the sender of 'raw recruits' into the entertainment" (Liew, 2010, p. 183) in East Asia, which reflects a "narrative of the degree the simultaneous de-territORIZATION and hierarchization of culture flow" (Liew, 2010, p. 202). At the same time, human migrations in this format phenomenon show various paths and

⁹ In the Chinese television business, any program with more than 1% viewing rate is regarded as a big hit (CSM Media Research, www.csm.com.cn).

novel ways that particularly illustrate reciprocal exchanges. The reciprocal migration is actively happening as another novel trend, which “is informed by the growth of what is called the knowledge economy, or knowledge-based service and production in the global economy” (Duara, 2010, p. 979). Also, the increasing number of travelers between the two countries can be attributed to the format phenomenon. As such, its human migrations are complicated two-way processes rather than a unilateral expansion from South Korea to China.

At the same time, the format phenomenon indicates the regionalization of pop culture, which not only reflects the localizing procedures of the television program formats but also constitutes the regional specificities of pop flows (Choi, 2010). Korean television formats are indigenized in the process of remaking them in China, which can be regarded as a narrow version of localization. Such localizing processes not only reflect the cultural differences and specific cultural modes of Chinese societies but also indicate the increasing number of contact zones between Korean and Chinese pop cultures, which entails more than exporting program formats and making economic profit. Vibrant circulation and consumption of regional television formats in East Asia demonstrate both “the potency of local content” and “the revitalization of local content through the agency of formats” (Keane, 2004, pp. 12–13).

In the format phenomenon, there are various methods of localization. One of the common ways is to use local language, local celebrities, and popular songs. In *I Am a Singer!*, most songs in the competitions are not only written in Chinese but also generally popular among Chinese audiences, including overseas Chinese. As the show’s popularity increased, its third season cast the most popular singers in China, which is different from the Korean format and its past two seasons, in which usually very good and veteran singers were cast. In *Father! Where Are You going?*, Chinese family culture under the “one child per couple” policy is reflected well because the show is about fathers taking care of their infant children.¹⁰ In the Chinese version, the diverse ethnic cultures of the 56 minority groups in China are vividly represented and recorded while family members travel all around the nation. In *Running Man*, cast members also complete missions in various locations, and in so doing, the show features local histories, scenery, legends, and folk stories to national audiences.

Thus, many television programs provide audiences opportunities of experiencing each society vicariously. Following the cast and their journey, audiences are given the chance to become acquainted with local places, witnessing daily activities, learning cultural codes, and encountering local people. In the format phenomenon, Chinese audiences are already able to enjoy Korean television shows both through national–local television broadcasting and the Internet, which allows them to experience and learn Korean cultural elements, daily activities, and everyday culture (Shi et al., 2015). Watching Korean programs often prompts Chinese audiences to also turn their attention toward Chinese remakes, even vice versa. Such consumption of television shows often become everyday practices in their daily lives for a long time, which also leads audiences to be acculturated to cultural codes and features of the TV shows they watch. Furthermore, the consumption of the television shows and other pop culture often propels regional

¹⁰ In China, the “one child per couple” policy was announced in 1980 for the purposes of population control, but this policy has recently been modified to allow two children per couple (Cai & Cho, 2017).

migration and travel to the respective countries: In this case, Korea becomes a destination for Chinese audiences.

Another notable point in the format phenomenon is that the “real variety” genre is particularly popular among different genres of the television programs both in South Korea and China (Kim, 2011). The surge of these real variety shows can be witnessed first in Korean television programs. In the past decade, Korean broadcasting companies have produced more than 250 entertainment shows in which the real variety show has emerged as the mainstream as a hybrid format (Roh, 2015). The real variety show can be characterized by the following features: entertainers and celebrities rather than ordinary people are cast, the character development of the cast members is important, and the overall mood is emotional sympathy rather than sarcasm or sheer competition (Kim, 2011). In the process of remaking Korean television formats, the real variety show is favored both by Chinese broadcasting companies and Chinese audiences. We can identify from the shared interest in the same format that “format adaptations within Asia are influenced by specific structures of feeling” (Keane, 2004, p. 14).

Such shared popularity of the real variety show can be regarded as a regional specificity in contrast to the trend in which genres such as quiz shows and survival/audition programs are mostly globalized. Around the globe, as discussed earlier, the most popular genres used to be quiz shows and audition programs whose formats originated from America or the West. Such a trend is clearly contrasted in the format phenomenon, in which the real variety show has become the mainstream. Also, many programs in the format phenomenon focus on family relations and their emotional bonds, particularly between parents and children. The regional popularity in the real variety genre and their shared emotions in its programs provide a hint of the regional specificities in East Asian sensibilities. The regional sensibilities within the regional pop flows both reflect and promote specific kinds of connectivity, sharing, and coequality among the audiences in the region (Cho, 2017).

By advocating an expanded definition of format as cultural assemblages, this section highlights the format phenomenon that facilitates diverse exchanges in cultural, economic, and human dimensions in the region. In so doing, this approach contributes to expanding existing scholarship on the globalization of television formats that previously depended either on the cultural imperialism thesis, with a focus on the unilateral expansion of American formats into the globe, or the hybrid thesis, with a focus on the adaption and assimilation between global and local cultural codes throughout the formats (Oren & Shahaf, 2012). In other words, understanding a format as cultural assemblages helps media scholars pay serious attention to “not just the West-East trade flow, but the equally important East-East and East-West dynamics of television program trade” (Keane et al., 2007, p. 4). In so doing, the format phenomenon as cultural assemblages provides a useful source for theorizing regional specificities in pop cultures as well as concretizing East Asian sensibilities.

The Television Format Phenomenon Beyond the Nation-Centric Approach

Second, this study suggests that the concept of format as cultural assemblages illuminates the potential for overcoming a nation-centric understanding of pop culture. In East Asia, most regional pop flows are conceived through the nation, such as Hong Kong noir, J-pop and the Korean Wave, in which

"the nation/national is conceptually central to the analysis of regional pop culture" (Chua, 2012, p. 14). The understanding of formats as cultural assemblages enables us to underscore human, financial, and cultural exchanges through the format phenomenon, which further assists us to imagine an alternative approach rather than limiting the format phenomenon to a national framework. In a heuristic purpose, we suggest referring to the television format phenomenon as an inter-Asian wave. As such, the format phenomenon underscores mutual borrowings among regional pop products and the historicity of regional pop cultures within East Asian pop culture.

In the format phenomenon, it is worth questioning whether the trend of remaking Korean television formats in China can be categorized as another Korean Wave. Existing scholarship in South Korea tends to perpetuate the nation-centric approach. That is to say, Korean scholars regard these remade programs in China as extensions of the Korean Wave because the localization in the Chinese programs is limited (Shi et al., 2015) or because Korean experts and their know-how are critical in their production procedures. In this vein, several studies conclude by advocating this trend as the post-Korean Wave or a new market of the Korean Wave (Roh, 2015; Shi et al., 2015). While we recognize the considerable relation of the format phenomenon to the Korean Wave, we are concerned that the nation-centric approach in South Korea might "defeat the border-crossing capacity and potential of inter-Asian pop culture" (Wee, 2016, p. 308). In South Korea and East Asia, pop products are often embellished by nationalist discourses, regarded as export items, and propelled by the government. Similarly, the Korean Wave as another export brand is often orchestrated by the Korean government, entertainment corporations, and pop nationalism in South Korea (Lie, 2012). As Nye and Kim (2013) caution, the "Korean version of nationalist discourses and expansionist cultural policy has a tendency to develop into another form of hegemonic cultural imperialism in the region" (p. 41). Furthermore, several Asian countries' governments, such as Japan and China, recently began to use their cultural products and resources for diplomatic and economic purposes by "provoking a regional soft power 'competition'" (Chua, 2012, p. 7). Considering in particular the intense and thorny relations in East Asia, one of the important questions is whether a new trend would be able to "overcome the older fractious nationalism from the Cold War and before" (Wee, 2016, p. 309). In this vein, the notion of formats as cultural assemblages provides useful resources for imagining an alternative framework, which we refer to as an inter-Asian wave. As discussed, the various exchanges through pop cultures might not guarantee mutual understanding and cultural diversities in the region. The theoretical rationale of interpreting the format phenomenon beyond a nation-centric approach is both opportune and necessary for holding back imperialist and expansionist desires and policies.

As discussed, the regionalization of culture in the format phenomenon directs our attention to regional specificities of the pop flows between South Korea and China. In comparison to the narrow sense of localization, the broad sense of localization attests to inter-Asian natures of the format phenomenon. A notable example is that the television formats are converted into various genres such as film, animated series, and online games in China. Among the many TV show formats adapted in China, *Father! Where Are You Going?* and *Running Man* have been made into several films, each with huge box-office success. The first *Where Are We Going, Dad?* (*ba ba qu na er da dian ying 1*) film was released on January 31, 2014, during the celebration of the Chinese New Year, and earned about 696 million CNY (around U.S.\$100

million) ranking eighth in the Chinese box office.¹¹ After this landmark success, the second *Where Are We Going, Dad?* (*ba ba qu na er da dian ying 2*) film and the first *Running Man* film were successfully released in 2015. An interesting spin-off titled *Emperor's Holiday* (*ba ba de jia qi*; 2015) was another format film, which was not a sequel of, but simply used the core ideas of *Where Are We Going, Dad?* The cast of *Emperor's Holiday* were not only the Chinese families who appeared in the TV show but also Sung Dong-il and his family, part of the original Korean cast. Furthermore, the formats were converted into several spin-off productions. In collaboration with Baidu game company, Hunan Satellite TV released the online game for *Father! Where Are You Going?* in 2013.¹² Several other television formats, including *Running Man*, were adopted by the character industry and remade into animated series and online games.

At the same time, the ways of circulating and consuming the Chinese remakes also illuminate inter-Asian characteristics of the regional pop culture. Several of the Chinese remakes have been successfully sold and broadcast overseas, including Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as in Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. The list of exported TV shows includes *I Am a Singer!*; *Father!*, *Where Are You Going?*; *Running Man*; and *The Return of Superman*.¹³ Furthermore, *Father! Where Are You Going?* (Season 3) was broadcasted in the United States in 2015, having been sold to SKY LINK TV, whose target audience consists of Chinese Americans or overseas Chinese.¹⁴ The success of these programs was possible due to the popularity of the Korean Wave and its celebrities as well as the contribution of overseas Chinese audiences as cultural interlocutors. Overseas Chinese all around the world are the main consumers and transmitters of format shows and Chinese pop culture: previously, they played similar roles in the spread of J-pop and the Korean Wave. The term Pop Culture China refers to this "dense flow of cultural economic exchanges between geographically dispersed Chinese populations" (Chua, 2001, p. 114). Along with the importance of overseas Chinese, the format phenomenon also attests mainland China's "growing influence over the production and flow of screen media" (Curtin, 2010, p. 117). While cultural policy makers in China "are hoping that the next cultural wave will be one from China—one that will gain China's status as the cultural core of Asia" (Keane & Liu, 2013, p. 233), inter-Asian frameworks for conceptualizing the format phenomenon are imperative for both China and South Korea. As much as the various transformations of K-pop or J-pop in Asia are inter-Asian by nature, the format phenomenon is also another kind of trans-Asian cultural traffic (Iwabuchi, Meuche, & Thomas, 2004).

Furthermore, an inter-Asian wave framework highlights the historic construction of East Asian pop culture. As the Korean Wave can be conceptualized as an iteration of East Asian pop culture, the format phenomenon as an inter-Asian wave is iteration as well as constituents of East Asian pop culture (Cho, 2011). The regional exchanges in pop cultures might be traced back to the 1960s in the form of a "pan-Asian big picture" when South Korean director Shin Shang-Ok collaborated with Shaw Brother Cinema in Taiwan to release the film *The Goddess of Mercy* in 1966 (S, Lee, 2012). Then, the extensive

¹¹ "Father! Where Are You Going?" (2014).

¹² "Baidu Exclusively Launches" (2013).

¹³ From the statistics published by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of People's Republic of China. Retrieved from <http://www.sarft.gov.cn/>

¹⁴ "Father! Where Are You Going? (ba ba qu naer)" (2015).

and various exchanges of regional pop flows since the late 1980s engendered drastic and subtle reconfigurations within East Asian pop culture (Cho, 2016). Likewise, the regional interchange of television formats has been ongoing since the 1990s: Japanese television formats, in particular, which were preferred over American ones, were contracted or copied by Korean, Taiwanese, and even Chinese broadcasting companies (Iwabuchi, 2004; D.-H. Lee, 2004a; Liu & Chen, 2004). It was a well-known secret that Korean producers copied many Japanese television program formats during the time in which official cultural exchanges between South Korea and Japan were prohibited (D.-H. Lee, 2004a). Since the 2000s, several Japanese television formats have been officially remade into Korean versions with legal contracts. Subsequently, several of these Korean versions, based on Japanese television formats, have also been exported to Taiwan and China. Regarding such regional interchanges of formats, Keane (2004) commented that “the success of Korea in learning from Japan has helped Korean television (and film) industries compete in the Asian market place” (p. 16). The current popularity of Korean television programs and their formats in the region was made possible in part from learning from Japanese broadcasting, meaning that the format phenomenon is then a very much inter-Asian outcome, which cannot necessarily be said to belong exclusively to either South Korea, China, or even Japan. The format phenomenon as an iteration of East Asian pop culture simultaneously connects, albeit unevenly, various national pop cultures (Yang, 2012).

Historic examples of format exchanges also compel us to recognize the increasing importance and richness of inter-Asian referencing in East Asian pop culture (Iwabuchi, 2013, 2014). As Iwabuchi (2014) succinctly advocates, inter-Asian referencing, which is “not just matter of academic but also the advancement of people’s cross-border dialogue as mundane practice,” indicates “a significant maneuver for making concepts and theories derived from Asian experiences” (pp. 43–44). The expanded definition of format as cultural assemblages illuminates various exchanges in television formats as well as people and cultural codes between South Korea and China. The audiences who enjoy Chinese or Korean versions or both have a chance to share a similar but different contemporaneity through format television programs. The attention given to the historic genealogy in format exchanges also helps us discern continuity and disruptions between the current ways of remaking Korean television formats in China and previous regional collaborations in producing pop products. Inter-Asian referencing corresponds to inter-Asian frameworks by juxtaposing the differences and similarities of cultural phenomena in both horizontal and diachronic dimensions.

In sum, the notion of format as cultural assemblages provides theoretical reason and resources for overcoming nationalist understandings of regional pop flows. In so doing, this notion helps us to imagine the formation phenomenon as an inter-Asian Wave rather than as the Korean Wave or the Chinese Wave. Together, inter-Asian frameworks “problematize the supposition of national culture as a unit of cultural connection and connectivity” (Iwabuchi, 2013, p. 52) and push us to ponder over “what kinds of mutual understanding are predominantly promoted” (Iwabuchi, 2013, p. 50) through the format phenomenon. When we regard the format phenomenon as an inter-Asian wave, we can also imagine that the cultural habits of watching, enjoying, and talking about the Chinese versions of Korean television formats will bring about “new kinds of cross-border relationships, mutual understanding and self-reflexivity about people’s own society and culture” (S. Lee, 2015, p. 14). Inter-Asian frameworks can

inspire reflexive and self-critical conversations and encounters among Asian scholars who experience other modern Asian societies and their people through pop cultures and mundane practices in their daily lives.

Conclusion

By examining the recent popularities of Korean television programs and their formats in China, this study advocates inter-Asian frameworks drawn from the academic conversations among inter-Asian cultural studies scholars. As a way of multiplying inter-Asian conceptualizations, we reframe the format phenomenon as cultural assemblages, which highlight mutual borrowing and historic iterations within East Asian pop culture. Furthermore, inter-Asian frameworks contribute to interpreting the format phenomenon as an inter-Asian wave rather than the unilateral expansion and economic profit of any specific national pop culture. In conclusion, we suggest that the field of Korean Wave studies is ready to produce theoretical perspectives or concepts and to provide another idiosyncratic yet compatible model in pop culture studies. As this study attempts to develop a notion of formats as cultural assemblages, in this stage, Korean Wave studies is able to encapsulate the key tenants of "Asia as method," as advocated by Chen (2010). Korean Wave studies "can be posited as a method that unsettles binaries and offers in their place the far richer potential of multidirectional critiques" (Shih, 2010, p. 482) in pop culture studies.

First, we refine inter-Asian frameworks by coining formats as cultural assemblages and as envisioning them as part of an inter-Asian wave by tracing regional popularities and exchanges through Korean television program formats. As this special issue and other essays demonstrate, the Korean Wave has been eliciting various discussions both regionally and internationally for a decade. What is urgent now for the field of Korean Wave studies is not simply to explain current forms, activities, and ways of consuming Korean pop culture as case studies, but rather to produce appropriate theoretical frames and terminology. The readiness and richness of East Asian pop cultures and their studies strongly indicate the possibility as well as the necessity of advocating Korean Wave studies as method. Also, our work is greatly indebted to various theoretical inquiries and case studies on East Asian pop cultures. Inter-Asian frameworks and the terms developed in this study are another intellectual example of "making concepts and theories derived from Asian experiences translocally relevant and shared, as well as developing a nuanced comprehension of Asian experience through reciprocal learning process" (Iwabuchi, 2014, p. 44).

Second, the format phenomenon provides an idiosyncratic yet compatible model in understanding the globalization of television formats and related studies. As discussed, the format phenomenon between South Korea and China provides a strong argument for conceptualizing television formats as cultural assemblages, which elicit ensuing transactions and discourses around formats. Furthermore, formats as cultural assemblages illuminate the historic accumulations and influences of Western and regional formats. In so doing, both Korean television programs and their remakes in China are able to be explicated neither as copies of Western formats nor their unique inventions. Furthermore, this notion recognizes that not only Western but also regional formats simultaneously but unevenly constitute the television cultures and industries of the region (Chua & Cho, 2012). Rather than criticizing Euro-centric theories or deploying a dichotomist approach between the West and the East, we explicate the emerging cultural phenomenon through referring to theoretical discussions and conceptualizations among Asian cultural studies scholars. In so doing, inter-Asian frameworks efficiently underscore the importance of transcending the West-East

paradigm in which any Asian pop products, including the Korean Wave, have been understood as objects that either assimilate, oppose, or even hybridize their Western/American counterparts. "Once recognizing the West as fragments internal to the local," as Chen (2010) suggests, "we no longer consider it as an opposing entity but rather as one cultural resource among many others" (p. 233). The ways of selecting themes, recruiting cast and staff, and producing programs in the format phenomenon provide novel and unique as well as comparable and commensurate examples for considering other regional flows both in temporal and spatial senses. For instance, formats as cultural assemblages can be used for explicating regionally repeated and mutually influenced pop trends in the world, such as the *telenovela* in Latin America, epic dramas in Pop Culture China, and Bollywood among the Hindi population.

Such intellectual efforts in the field of Korean Wave studies in conjunction with East Asian pop culture studies may represent both an "intellectual endeavor of what can be called the 'decolonial-turn' in knowledge production" and a movement "that construct connectivity, relationality, and commensurability within the inter-Asian region" (Ching, 2010, pp. 184–185). The endeavors of developing theoretical terms and approaches in this study would attest to Chen and Chua's (2007) claim that Asian cultural scholars have begun to break free from "West-oriented singularity and to multiply frames of reference and sites for identification" (p. 1). Ultimately, Korean Wave studies as method signals the de-Westernization of the academic field in East Asia by promoting further academic undertakings and for conceptualizing knowledge that is place-specific and integrated with daily practices and living conditions.

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