

***Global Adaptation, Local Expression: Taiwanese Trendy Drama
Highlighting 'Zeitgeist' - A TV Practical Perspective***

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Abstract

Trendy drama is an arising TV drama genre popularized in East Asia in the recent decades. Its role has been legitimised by the social and popular culture phenomenon based on its specific features in local TV productions. The aim of this paper is to review the features of trendy drama that transform with the time. For it, this paper utilises the in-depth interview combined with the literature highlighting the practical perspectives of TV specialists on this investigation. The findings of this paper foreground that this new genre, in comparison with the conventional TV drama productions, signifies the current trend of East Asian social atmosphere, and which is bringing this new genre back to its spirit. Importantly, the media text conveyed in the genre represents a tendency towards collective self-reflection in terms of social situation and media ethnics. This paper argues that trendy drama has been reinforced drawing on extra appealing features for TV marketing according to different local popular cultures such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. However, the contemporary trendy drama production in highlights the most feature of this genre, zeitgeist. This meanwhile refers to the TV industry has symbolic power to express bottom-up force of popular culture through media in East Asia.

Keywords: trendy drama, media's symbolic power, collective self-reflection

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Introduction

In March 24, 2019, Taiwan's TV broadcast aired the first episode of the television series *'The World Between Us'* (Lu & Lin, 2019), which was produced by Taiwan Public Television Service cooperating with HBO. The name of the drama in traditional Chinese is *我們與惡的距離*, literally referring to the distance between us and the evil. The drama displays an examination of the aftermath of a mass gun shooting with the scenario adapted from a real social affair occurred in Taiwan. A monologue, led by the murderer in the story, saying: "I have been aspiring to do something huge since I was little", signifies the 2014 MRT murderer Cheng Chieh's calm attitude when he was arrested. Inspired directly from Cheng's tragic case in which four people dead and 24 injured, the societal realist drama has departed from the typical over-idealized storylines that were set up with being acted by the stereotyped characters mainly act in the last two decades in Taiwan. It probes straight into reality. The drama aimed to explore the teenage psychic with 10-part TV drama series, examining the make-up situation of the lives of all those who had survived a mass gun shooting in a movie theater two years ago. The fictional story deals with the examination by interweaving relationships of the killer, the killer's families, the victims, the victims' families, the media and the defense teams.

As mentioned, such storyline had not appeared with public attention in the past two decades in Taiwan. Its departure from the popular TV drama of the mostly-idealized features reflects the audiences' disenchantment. The popular TV drama refers to 'trendy drama' that has been a new drama genre widely circulated within the East Asia since 2000 (Peng, 2018; Peng, 2012). Trendy drama originates from Japan in the 1990s, and it has developed based on local TV adaptations by South Korea, Taiwan and now Mainland China. Initially, trendy drama was created to describe the middle-class lifestyle in Japan's metropolis and the issues that the group faced and discussed. Subsequently adapted by the East Asian TV industries, the genre was renamed as 'idol drama' to appeal its market by the photogenic characters. Exemplifying the most famous, *Meteor Garden* (Chai & Tsai, 2001), which is also the first Taiwanese-produced idol drama, it was aired in 2001 in Taiwan and its popularity has been lasting till now. Its popularity in East Asia can be demonstrated by the following local productions in Japan (2005), South Korea (2009), and Mainland China (2018). The most significant is *Meteor Garden* firstly produced by the Taiwanese TV industry was actually adapted from a Japanese comic book *'Flower Boys'* (Kamio, 1992). The storyline, the settings of the scenes and characters in the drama and camera strategies manipulated in this genre are very distinct from the so-called conventional Taiwanese TV drama (Peng, 2012; Chen, 2008).

The fact that trendy drama has established a standard for local TV productions to earn a large dividend within the Asian TV market can be ascribed to its legitimation in the society. However, Taiwanese trendy drama has been reduced in production due to its limited market in the recent year. Despite this situation, the Taiwanese TV industry started to consider the essence of the genre production. This paper aims to examine the development of trendy drama in Taiwan and its implications for the Taiwanese society. The proposition is that trendy drama has been reinforced drawing on extra appealing features for TV marketing according to different local popular cultures such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. However, the contemporary trendy drama production highlights the most feature of this genre, zeitgeist. The methodology

involves the in-depth interview combined with the literature highlighting the practical perspectives of TV specialists on this investigation. The paper argues that this new genre, in comparison with the conventional TV drama productions, signifies the current trend of East Asian social atmosphere, and which is bringing this new genre back to its spirit. Importantly, the media text conveyed in the genre represents a tendency towards collective self-reflection in terms of social situation and media ethnics. This meanwhile refers to the TV industry has symbolic power to express bottom-up force of popular culture through media in East Asia.

Motivation of trendy drama production and its development

Taiwanese idol drama emerged in the early 2000s. At that time, the main resources for producing Taiwanese idol drama were based on Japanese manga, and the main producers were Taiwanese independent production companies. Subsequently, more and more TV companies began to produce this genre because of its popularity in Taiwan. This paper includes Taiwanese TV specialists' viewpoints on the Taiwanese TV industry's motivation for producing idol drama. One Taiwanese producer, Mark Chen, was interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured interview methodology. Producer Chen works for SETTV, the TV station that has produced idol dramas based on representing local cultures. In addition, I draw on other TV specialists' perspectives collected from previous formal and informal interviews by other researchers to develop the discussion in this chapter. In particular, the focus is on the perspectives of one director, Yuen-Hsun Tsai, and one producer, Yu-Shan Chen, both of whom have been successful in producing Taiwanese idol drama in the recent years.

Essentially, production of Taiwanese idol drama has developed from adapting the Japanese style to creating a specifically local genre. Initially, the idol drama genre was new and challenging for Taiwanese TV directors and producers. The format of the genre and its elements had appeared infrequently in Taiwanese local TV production previously, and they did not have any reference point to guide them in the production of this new genre. Hitherto, the Taiwanese idol dramas produced initially were mostly adapted from Japanese sources. Despite this, this new genre was deemed to satisfy the needs of the Taiwanese TV market at that time. Chen (2010) indicates that before idol drama, local TV dramas in Taiwan had audiences in their 40s, 50s and 60s, while the younger generations, in their 20s and 30s, had been ignored. He argues that the younger audiences "have been ignored when [scriptwriters are] structuring storylines" (personal communication, December 23, 2010). In this situation, the TV dramas would not be able to expand their audience groups. Chen proposed that the lack of storylines concerning the younger generations in Taiwanese conventional TV dramas is one of the main factors that has resulted in the large importation of Japanese and Korean trendy dramas into Taiwan during the early 2000s.

Director Tsai holds similar views about the motivation for producing Taiwanese idol drama. He (cited in Gao, 2009) related when he began to produce idol drama, there were still many unrealistic TV dramas with exaggerated and superficial dialogues, and plots that did not reflect people's ordinary life. He avers: "The new style of my TV work did not attempt to confront traditional dramas. My purpose was to provide Taiwanese audiences with a new genre of TV drama" (p. 192; translated by the researcher). Clearly, for Tsai, the Taiwanese TV market needed different forms of TV

programs in the early 2000s. He believed that a new production does not necessarily replace an existing one; instead, traditional drama can remain in conjunction with new trends to contend different audience groups.

Tsai exemplifies the first Taiwanese idol drama, *Meteor Garden* (流星花園) (Chai & Tsai, 2001), which is also his work, to explain further his motivation for producing a new TV genre for the Taiwanese TV market. Tsai (cited in Gao, 2009) comments that his enthusiasm for producing *Meteor Garden* (流星花園) happened because he realised trendy drama was “the kind of TV drama that should be very close to our life; the performances, materials, content, lifestyles are all very realistic and common” (p. 192; translated by the researcher). Tsai emphasises that *Meteor Garden* (流星花園) represents a love story of the younger generation, even though the story was based on a Japanese manga. Therefore, the portrayal of the young couple’s relationship in the drama appealed to the audiences when it was broadcast in Taiwan. In particular, the format of the drama provided a new feeling for Taiwanese audiences, such as the various styles of the characters, the dialogue, the settings, the costumes and the shots. It is apparent that Chen and Tsai have similar perspectives about the Taiwanese TV industry’s motivation to produce idol drama; these were due to the need for a new TV genre in the domestic TV market.

The previous study has discussed the fact that adaptation has become a crucial factor in the rise in regionalisation in the East Asian TV industry (Peng, 2012). In particular, Japanese TV production has played an important role in this rise. Both Chen and Tsai acknowledge that Japanese trendy drama became the main resource behind the formula and ideas for producing Taiwanese idol dramas in the initial stage. Chen (2010) observes that when Taiwanese audiences watched Japanese trendy drama broadcast on Hong Kong’s TV channel through an illegal satellite in the late 1990s, they were satisfied because the programs were very new and made them feel the stories in the program belonged to their generation. This led to the Taiwanese TV industry creating a new style of local production which accorded with the established form of Japanese trendy drama. Tsai also admits that adaptation became a method to produce a new style of local TV production; however, he considers it to be experimental at the beginning of the production. Tsai (cited in Gao, 2009) claims that when he produced *Meteor Garden* (流星花園) based on a Japanese manga, he attempted to keep the original format, including the story, settings and filming. At that time, he deemed the experience of producing *Meteor Garden* (流星花園) to be a good start in seeking different production techniques.

However, the adaptation of Japanese trendy drama has been criticised by many Taiwanese audiences insofar as Taiwanese idol dramas were merely imitations, and did not represent local Taiwanese lifestyles. Moreover, at that time, some senior TV producers disagreed with the adaption of Japanese manga because they thought it meant discarding local cultures (Lin, 2006). Idol drama was even deemed to be a form of cultural imperialism and a ‘metamorphosis’ which made local culture deteriorate. In this regard, Tsai did not acknowledge contemporary Taiwanese idol drama as an imitation of Japanese trendy drama. He (cited in Gao, 2009) claims, “I did not wish to make a product of an imported culture; instead, I sought and still seek to produce Taiwanese-ness” (p. 194; translated by the researcher). That is to say, Tsai attempts to produce TV dramas based on Taiwanese materials. His following works, such *The*

Hospital (白色巨塔) (Yu & Tsai, 2006) and *Black & White* (痞子英雄) (Yu & Tsai, 2009), were indeed produced from local scripts.

Chen (2010) supports Tsai's claim indicating that, in the beginning, it was very challenging for Taiwanese TV producers and directors who endeavoured to produce idol drama because the production was very new. Therefore, the adaptation became the major, but temporary way forward for this new type of local production. Chen further contends that Tsai's experiment of producing *Meteor Garden* (流星花園) was very worthwhile because it opened up a new vision of TV programs for Taiwanese audiences. Taiwanese audiences began accepting this new genre, identifying themselves more with the structure of this version of idol drama. This led to Taiwanese idol drama recently establishing storylines created locally. As a consequence, the Taiwanese TV industry has developed this particular genre successfully and now idol dramas made in Taiwan are starting to sell to the other countries in the Asian region. For example, SETTV has produced many Taiwanese idol dramas based on local scripts which have been profitable overseas during the last ten years.

From adaptation to creation, Taiwanese idol drama has become the most popular genre of TV programs in Taiwan. Chen (2010) opines that the age groups focused on by idol drama had been ignored by the marketing of conventional TV drama productions. Idol drama focuses on this group and heightens the relevant elements to appeal to these audiences, such as the urban lifestyles. Chen states, "The scenes of idol drama are usually set up in urban areas where the younger generations prefer to develop their career and life in the future" (personal communication, December 23, 2010). In addition, Chen agrees that the new attitudes towards life portrayed in idol drama are also acknowledged by most audiences saying, "What the characters say and how they behave in the drama and their lifestyle seem to be an indication for the audience about what to desire and learn about" (personal communication, December 23, 2010). Clearly, idol drama has developed to be an acknowledged, specific genre, which audiences consider as depicting younger persons' world.

For selling to a wider TV market within Asia, trendy drama was given a new term to emphasise idols in this genre advertise the photogenic characters. The Taiwanese TV industry treats idols as symbols of certain cultural values which are at the core of popular culture in the Asia TV market. Nevertheless, for this new term which emphasises the idols, the Taiwanese TV specialists hold different attitudes. Chen (2010) considers 'idol drama' as an appropriate term for this genre because it highlights the distinctiveness between the genre and traditional TV drama. Chen (2010) argues:

the term, idol drama, can definitely catch people's attention; especially the young generation [because idol drama emphasises] new actors who ... have some particular characteristics, such as having a pretty face and beautifully toned body, and having the potential to be a star". (personal communication, December 23, 2010)

Chen insists idols to be the most appealing part of this new Taiwanese drama; therefore, the TV industry should promote the drama by highlighting the name of the genre to attract the attention of the audience. Indeed, Chen's attitude can be associated with the symbolic power of the Taiwanese TV industry, which attempted to utilise

'idols' as the symbol for the marketing of this new local Taiwanese production. This accretion of symbolic power has led to success in the cultural industries, followed by economic success in other areas. For example, the fashion and accessories industry increased their sales due to the success of 'idol' drama.

Contrarily, Tsai disapproves of promoting the new genre by emphasising idols, preferring 'trendy drama' rather than 'idol drama' when he produced *Meteor Garden* (流星花園). Tsai (cited in Gao, 2009) argues that this new genre of TV drama should not only be focused on idols, even if they play an important part, but instead, the genre should be considered as being contemporary with the spirit of the times. He (cited in Gao, 2009) claims:

I always wanted to produce a new format of TV drama. The content is different from traditional dramas. I thought I just directed a new type of TV drama; I did not have any thought of it as the term, idol drama. I expected to produce a specific type of TV drama, which could represent 'our stories', not just being a fantasy but also a reality. (p. 59; translated by the researcher)

Clearly, Tsai emphasises the content of the new genre more than the idols, further contending that the term, idol drama, may attract immediate attention; however, the audiences will expect more than idols after viewing this new genre for a time. For example, through watching examples of this new genre the audiences may seek certain cultural messages or specific new ideas with which they can identify when desirous of following a popular trend. In this situation, Tsai believes the genre should put more effort into the content and offer relevant material other than just idols. He concludes that the TV industry has aimed to represent the ideas of fashion through idols in the drama, but "fashion comes and it goes" (p. 191). If producers give their efforts to fashion and idols only, this new genre will become superficial, and weakened in the future. Therefore, Tsai regards the term idol drama as unrepresentative of the spirit of the new genre he produces.

It is apparent that idols are specific symbols for the new Taiwanese TV drama; they become the specific and crucial element in Taiwanese idol drama. Chen (2010) intimated that idols could even be cultural signposts for this genre, which is expected to show "new faces" regularly (personal communication, December 23, 2010). He comments: "We attempt to stereotype the stars for a drama, so they will probably have an influence on the audience's point of view toward the drama ... this is the primary meaning of idol drama" (personal communication, December 23, 2010). Similarly, for Tsai, idols can be deemed as an important reference point for new TV productions. He (cited in Gao, 2009) indicates that new faces are part of the new format of this genre because they represent the new values of so-called 'pretty people'. Therefore, in his work *Meteor Garden* (流星花園) (Chai & Tsai, 2001), he seeks new faces as actors. Tsai says, "I created the four main male characters for this drama by using the idea of selecting new faces because the TV market requires new artists" (p. 192; translated by the researcher). Tsai further indicates that new artists can reinvigorate the domestic TV market and establish a new direction for local TV production. However, he suggests that TV producers need to be aware that they have to spend an extensive amount of finance and time training new actors. In particular, the new actors need to be trained as Asian idols for the Asian TV market, because these idols are currently a symbol of cultural production in a global market.

To summarise, Chen's and Tsai's perspectives are clear: 'idols' are the specifically key element in Taiwanese idol drama; the TV industry uses their stereotyped images to represent new norms of beauty. Additionally, the new genre opens the potential for introducing and connecting local Taiwanese culture to popular culture in Asia. This can achieve cultural exchanges for Taiwanese local culture in the Asian region. However, there has been a concern that the amount of Taiwanese talent available has not met the needs for these new TV productions. Chen (2010) thinks that idol drama has been developed so rapidly in recent years that the Taiwanese TV market has not had sufficient human resources to fulfill and act in the dramas. Furthermore, Chen reveals that when Taiwanese actors playing in idol dramas start to be appreciated by the public and become popular, they usually move to the big screen and films. Hence, there is always a lack of actors for idol dramas. In this regard, Chen suggests that the Taiwanese TV market needs to establish a star system of training new actors to produce idol drama in the future; otherwise, it could lead to declining development of Taiwanese idol strategy.

The emphasis on idols is not approved of to any extent by the Taiwanese TV producer Yu-Shan Chen, who (cited in Lai, 2008) argues that no one can individually represent an 'idol' in the present idol dramas because there are different idols for different groups in different contexts. Chen is of the opinion that using actors of different ages or any ordinary persons in idol drama can make the drama closer to ordinary people's daily life. Therefore, almost anyone could be a performer for this new genre. Chen believes that if actors are selected from among ordinary people who do not have an extremely attractive appearance, the stories of trendy drama would be closer to the audiences' everyday lives. If this idea flourished then in the dramas she produces, the characters are not emphasised as having extremely pretty faces; contrarily, they are depicted as having a role in ordinary life.

Instead of the emphasis on 'idols', the Taiwanese TV specialists now expect attraction of storylines. The Taiwanese TV specialists emphasise that the storylines of idol drama could feature diverse stories based on local scripts. The storylines representing contemporary lifestyles attract audiences because they can identify themselves with the local cultures conveyed in the drama. Chen (2010) proposes that "the idol dramas created locally reflects Taiwanese social reality more compared to previous productions" (personal communication, December 23, 2010); this increases the demand that Taiwanese idol dramas begin production based on local scripts. Local scripts can represent local cultures and contemporary ideas, and make the storylines of Taiwanese idol drama appear diverse. The importance of the storyline based on local scripts in idol drama is also emphasised by Tsai who (cited in Gao, 2009) believes the script and TV program creators should not leave their homeland because they must develop their work based on the inspiration of their own culture. He suggests that when the creators "engage themselves in their motherland" (p. 59; translated by the researcher), love their country and its people, and sympathise with local lifestyles, they will be able to produce good work. Furthermore, this work, which connects to their homeland, should be copious in quantity and quality. To sum up, storylines in idol drama should be improved being based on local scripts; in this way, the audiences will feel that the drama is very close to their ordinary lives.

The perspective of enhancing the storylines in Taiwanese idol drama by local scripts is supported particularly by the producer Yu-Shan Chen, who is also a scriptwriter.

She (cited in Lai, 2008) contends that love stories in this genre must be depicted with various scenarios; especially, the storylines need to be designed as experiences that could happen to ordinary people. She says that the visual elements applied in idol drama, such as costume and settings, are important in the production; however, the storylines are even more crucial, because they are the spirit of the dramas. In order to represent the spirit, Chen suggests, the storylines and endings of idol drama must be adjusted so as to enable the drama to look diverse and close to reality.

Conclusions

This paper has provided practical insights into Taiwanese idol drama production as given by Taiwanese producers and directors who have been involved in the development of this genre. From discussing the motivation for producing the new genre, the emphasis on the specific elements and its implications for the drama, it has shown that Taiwanese TV specialists were aware of the influence of this new genre in Asian societies before they began producing Taiwanese idol drama. This further demonstrated that the Japanese TV industry held symbolic power because the popularity of Japanese trendy drama encouraged its adaptation by other TV industries in the region. Therefore, in the early stage of the development of Taiwanese idol drama, this new local production reproduced the power of the Japanese TV industry. This is the reason that the early work was criticised for ignoring Taiwanese local culture and supporting cultural imperialism. Nevertheless, Taiwanese idol drama production was shown to begin expressing its own characteristics, based on local culture, in its later stages.

Apparently, the Taiwanese TV industry has found itself in an advantageous position in expressing its strength in producing popular TV drama for the Asian TV market. In particular, the TV industry has dismissed adaptation; it has started to produce TV dramas based on local scripts. This means that the Taiwanese TV industry has made an attempt to influence the Asian region in terms through the TV market's adherence to a blend of local scripts and popular culture. Taiwanese TV dramas have been sold to other Chinese communities since the 1970s; however, sales have gradually declined. Moreover, these sales were not based on a targeting strategy but simply for the purpose of profit; they did not aim to promote Taiwanese drama actively as a cultural production. Nevertheless, since *Meteor Garden* (流星花園) (Chai & Tsai, 2001) was successfully sold to Mainland China and other Asian countries, Taiwanese local production has been based on the representation of local culture with a global context in mind. This has led to an attempt on the part of Taiwanese TV producers to establish the Taiwanese brand for dramas in this new genre. The attempt was shown to mean the Taiwanese TV industry already had the ability to establish the specific symbolic form necessary to legitimise certain cultural meanings as part of popular culture in Asia. In such a way, Taiwanese local culture could participate in cultural exchanges within the Asian TV market.

Broadly speaking, the two opposing positions of developing Taiwanese idol drama and it being representative of Taiwanese local TV production have been reconciled. The first is that 'idol drama' should reflect contemporary Taiwanese society and culture, the specialists stating this in a number of different ways especially that the Taiwanese audience is the primary audience. In contrast, the second point emphasised the importance of appealing to a broader regional audience and growing the domestic

TV market, so ensuring the Taiwanese TV industry remains capable of continuing to produce quality drama. The views of the TV director and producers were embedded in this reconciliation of achieving success with a local Taiwanese audience.

Importantly, in spite of the decline of Taiwanese trendy drama production, the circumstances have brought forth a reflection to Taiwanese TV specialists. They seek for the deeper cultural meanings embedded in the media text of the genre. Therefore, the recent TV dramas, such as *The World Between Us*, represents a tendency towards collective self-reflection in terms of social situation and media ethnics. It demonstrates that trendy drama has been reinforced drawing on extra appealing features for TV marketing according to different local popular cultures such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. However, the contemporary trendy drama production in Taiwan highlights the most feature of this genre, zeitgeist. This meanwhile refers to the Taiwanese TV industry has symbolic power to express bottom-up force of popular culture through media in East Asia.

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