

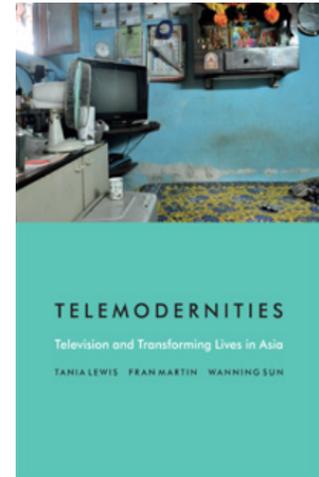
Tania Lewis, Fran Martin, and Wanning Sun, **Telemodernities: Television and Transforming Lives in Asia**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, 314 pp., \$25.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Yang Bai

Pennsylvania State University, USA

With modernization in Asia, lifestyle television has become a popular TV genre that provides emerging middle-class audiences with new codes for life after the collapse of traditional society. **Telemodernities: Television and Transforming Lives in Asia**, at first glance, might be just another addition to a long list of studies about how television has transformed the society into a modern one. However, by exposing readers to the complex roles of lifestyle television as both the front line and the intermediary between tradition and modernization in China, India, and Taiwan, this book distinguishes itself and provides a fascinating and eye-opening account of lifestyle television in East and South Asia. Far from a simple distributor of the Euro-American version of modernity, lifestyle television in the three countries has a much more complicated relationship with modernization projects there. Lewis, Martin, and Sun—with thick description and insightful exposition based on interviews and textual studies—provide a nuanced picture of how modern lifestyles and modern values in the three Asian countries are constructed, introduced, confronted, and negotiated on television.



### **The Political Economy of Lifestyle Programming**

The rise of the modern society in the West corresponds with a series of “modern” values such as individualism, cosmopolitanism, consumerism, and the notion of an independent and malleable self, which are then by and large legitimized and promoted on lifestyle television. On the surface, lifestyle television in East and South Asia has many commonalities with Western counterparts. Nevertheless, unlike many scholars who delve directly into the discussion of how television spurs changes in audiences and society (Bell & Hollows, 2006), Lewis and her colleagues take a highly necessary detour and ask a critical question: Is lifestyle television in Asia really the same as its Western counterparts?

The answer is *no*. In China, the values and lifestyles of the rising middle class are increasingly legitimized and promoted in the lifestyle programs. However, the rise of lifestyle television is mainly a compromise that TV stations make between the “politically correct but commercially unviable news sector” and “the highly popular but politically risky entertainment sector” (p. 30). Also, because modernization is uneven across regions and most lifestyle programs are broadcast on free-to-air channels, the lifestyle television in China focuses more on life than style. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in Taiwan. In Taiwan, 70% of citizens are middle class, and the television market is dominated by paid cable (Kuang, 2011). Therefore, lifestyle programs in Taiwan are more aspirational and stylish. Nevertheless, *lifestyle television* might be a misnomer in the Taiwanese context. The extremely fierce competition in the

television market of Taiwan has led to the infeasibility of lifestyle programming as a stand-alone TV genre. In many cases, it has to be mingled with other TV genres to attract enough audiences in Taiwan.

That lifestyle programs alone cannot attract enough audiences is never an issue in India. Highly localized and niched lifestyle programs abound. As in China, the values of the middle class are always negotiated in Indian lifestyle television. Whereas in China the major tension regarding modernization is fueled by the split between people in the modernized coastal metropolitan areas and those in the semimodernized hinterland, the tension is far more multifaceted in India. If lifestyle television in China is a front line between monolithic "Tradition" and "Modernity," then in India, it is a front line among many traditions and modernities.

### **Imaginative Geographies in Lifestyle Television**

After discussing the political economy of lifestyle television in each of the focus countries, Lewis and her colleagues further contextualize the roles of lifestyle television in the social and cultural negotiation of modernity. First, in East and South Asia, modernity always involves *imaginative geographies*, that is, the perceived relationship between local realities and the exemplary modernized metropolitan areas (Gregory, 1995). Although conventionally, lifestyle television is often analyzed as a change agent that propels the transformation of premodern localities (Schramm, 1964), Lewis and her colleagues, through the examination of various lifestyle TV programs in the three countries, showed that interpreting lifestyle television simply as a change agent is inadequate and inaccurate.

In chapter 2, Lewis et al. compare the lifestyle programs aired on two TV stations in China, Channel Young based in Shanghai and BBTB based in Bengbu, a small city in a rural province. The inclusion of the local TV program is rarely seen in Chinese television studies, and such a comparison between local and metropolitan programs is very rewarding. Different from the promotion of the values and lifestyles of the metropolitan middle class in Channel Young's programs, the content orientation of BBTB is predominantly "staying close to the grassroots" (p. 71) and shows an indifferent, if not repellent, attitude toward the values and lifestyles of the metropolitan middle class. Such a region-based tension between the aspirational metropolitan middle-class values and the local realities is also evident in Indian lifestyle programs. Nevertheless, Lewis and her colleagues point out that it is an oversimplification to summarize the tension only as a divide in the attitudes toward modernity among the urban center and rural audiences. With a detailed account of the rise of various local lifestyle programs, Lewis and her coauthors characterize Indian lifestyle television as a typical example of "regionalism" (p. 92). Highly fragmented by regions, languages, and religious and development statuses, lifestyle programs in India are very diverse, and each program shows its own understanding of modernity and the relationship between local realities and metropolitan middle-class values.

Different from lifestyle television in China and India, which mainly deals with imaginative geographies within the countries, Taiwanese lifestyle television seems to focus mainly on the tension between the local reality of Taiwan and the idealized West. Using U.S.-style lifestyle programs as examples, Lewis and her colleagues found that, in general, these programs show admiration of the young, educated, middle-class audiences in Taiwan toward the West, though many acknowledge that the

lifestyles and values promoted in the programs are an ideal far from their daily lives. Because Taiwan is geographically very small compared with China and India, it is understandable that the authors choose to focus on the imagination of the West rather than on different places within the state. Nevertheless, focusing on the U.S.-style programs and interviewing mainly young, urban, educated audiences make it quite difficult to have any meaningful comparison between the mediascape in Taiwan and those in China and India.

### **Negotiating Modernities Through Different Types of Lifestyle Programs**

Although the political economy of lifestyle television in East and South Asia and imaginative geographies are the central foci of *Telemodernities*, Lewis and her colleagues also selected four specific types of lifestyle programs that participate in constructing people's post-traditional social lives and identities. After the neoliberal economic reforms in many Asian countries in the 1970s or 1980s and the retrieval of the state from direct social regulation, not all people have started enjoying freedom. Instead, disorientation and confusion have become common feelings. In this context, lifestyle television has taken on the role of "teaching people how to live" (p. 2).

Perhaps the most direct response to the commonly felt disorientation is the rise of the life advice programs featuring experts in many different areas. The life advice programs have become so popular in India and China that, even though "popular experts" might not have any official credentials, they are often viewed by audiences as trustworthy guides. The unique cultural and social heritages of the countries shape the life advice programs differently. Although the programs typically convey the message to audience members that they should and can be responsible for transforming themselves, the life advice programs in India often play the role of "culture broker" (p. 133), whereas in China, these programs often take a more top-down, pedagogical approach.

Among all kinds of life advisors, Lewis and her coauthors, pay special attention to spiritual experts. Often viewed as the antithesis of the values required by modernity, religion and sometimes even supernatural beliefs have successfully found their way onto lifestyle television in Taiwan and India. In both countries, two popular types of spiritual lifestyle programs have emerged. One type is focused on providing religious, supernatural, or magical solutions to specific life issues. The other type features the rationalization of values associated with modernity, which many people in Asia find hard to incorporate into their traditions, in line with religious principles.

Romantic relationships are another area where tradition and modernity often meet and confront each other. The center of the tension is between the notion of independent partner choice and emotional compatibility and the emphasis on family duty and material compatibility. By carefully examining some of the most popular dating lifestyle programs in India and China, Lewis and her colleagues effectively show how diverse the responses of lifestyle television are to this tension. Many programs play an intermediary role and seek to prove that the two value systems can coexist, whereas some take a more pedagogical approach and urge people to either embrace the modern values of romance and marriage or stick to the old traditions.

Femininity and the social roles of women are important issues in modernization (Felski, 1989), and these topics are popular themes in lifestyle television in China and Taiwan. Lewis and her colleagues provide the readers with a much-needed account of how lifestyle television constructs the ideal woman in the post-traditional society in Asia. Similar to many Western programs, Taiwanese lifestyle television aimed at female audiences often celebrates and encourages female independence and uniqueness. Lifestyle programs in China, however, often reveal an ambivalent view in which liberation and oppression coexist: Women should manage themselves so that they can better fit in their social roles as a mother or wife.

### Conclusion

As in the West, lifestyle television has played an important role in the social and cultural negotiation of modernity in Asia. To what extent does lifestyle television in East and South Asia resemble its Western counterparts? How are the values associated with the global metropolitan middle class accepted, altered, and confronted in Asian lifestyle television? *Telemodernities* provides some timely answers to these often ignored but important questions. Writing a book about TV programs is often challenging because of the lack of audiovisual affordance in print media. Nevertheless, Lewis and her colleagues effectively overcome this issue and show readers a vivid picture of the complex landscape of lifestyle television in three selected East and South Asian countries. The scope of the book is expansive, covering all three aspects of media studies: production, content, and audience analysis. The thick description helps immensely with the goal of showing how modernities are interpreted, negotiated, and confronted in nuanced ways, but can make the reader feel disoriented and lead to a loss of focus. To fully appreciate the impressive complexity of the East and South Asian lifestyle programs that Lewis and her colleagues successfully depict, readers need to be familiar with a number of media studies terms and concepts. Therefore, for those who are not familiar with media studies and, to a certain degree, with modernity studies, this book can be overwhelming and difficult to read.

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