

Evolution of Chinese Idol Survival Shows: Localization and Innovation in the Wake of South Korean Influence

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Abstract: In 2016, South Korea launched *Produce 101*, an idol competition reality show, gradually opening up the overseas market. Influenced by South Korea, idol survival shows in China have developed from localized introduction to successful export that breaks the traditional framework. This study selects three representative programs as research objects, including *Produce 101 China*, *CHUANG 2021*, and *Sisters Who Make Waves*, using literature research, case studies, and comparative analyses to study how to localize and innovate the idol survival shows in China. This study illustrates the localization and innovation of these programs from three perspectives, namely production, presentation, and communication, gives suggestions for future development of Chinese idol survival shows based on current insufficiencies, and provides a reference for constant innovation and relevant studies in the future.

1. Introduction

As a country with significant cultural influences whose entertainment industry is highly supported by the government, South Korea has established a reality show format based on its trainee culture of the K-pop industry. The training, growth, and competition of K-pop trainees are recorded, and the votes from the audience determine whether the contestants will debut or not. In 2018, Tencent Video bought the rights to the Korean program and launched *Produce 101 China*, firing the starting gun in the market of Chinese idol survival shows. Later, *CHUANG*, *Youth with You*, *The Coming One*, and a series of reality shows were launched in China, showing the maturity of idol survival shows and the development of a certain program format. In 2020, Mango TV launched *Sisters Who Make Waves*, a girl group survival show, causing quite a stir in China. This paper focuses on the essential questions for Chinese idol survival shows, namely how to localize the Korean idol survival shows in China and how to innovate by integrating the culture with Chinese characteristics considering the current industry status. Within the framework of the Chinese culture and Hallyu (also known as the Korean wave, referring to the craze for Korean popular culture) culture exchanges and inclusion, the focus of this study is narrowed down to the localization and innovation of idol survival shows, aiming to provide valuable knowledge and insights in this field.

In recent years, a number of scholars have studied the influence of Korean variety shows on

Chinese variety shows, or the differences between idol survival shows of South Korea and China by analyzing specific cases. Although there have been extensive studies, the innovation embodied by idol survival shows is seldom discussed, a gap this study aims to fill. *Produce 101 China*, *CHUANG 2021*, and *Sisters Who Make Waves* are the objects of this study. *Produce 101 China* is the first show produced after buying rights from South Korea, being the pioneer of China's idol economy. *CHUANG 2021* is the show launched after learning the previous seasons' experience of the Produce series, which earns a good reputation. *Sisters Who Make Waves* is a program designed from the perspective of women's independence and has been successfully exported to the overseas market with Vietnam buying its copyright. Moreover, this study meticulously examines the localization and innovation from the program narrative, interaction, and other aspects and analyzes the program formats of South Korea. This study finds that the cast of Chinese idol survival shows is diverse and emphasizes the growth and value fulfillment in their stories. Meanwhile, various spin-offs are launched, diverse online interaction modes are created, multi-dimensional communication on multiple platforms is utilized, and positive images are promoted.

2. Localization and Innovation of Chinese Idol Survival Shows

Jean K. Chalaby points out that television (TV) formats have two basic features, namely the unique narrative dimensions and the transnational nature. The transnational nature indicates that the TV format can only be established when the production experiences are exported and the programs are reproduced in cross-cultural contexts [1]. The reproduction of Korean idol survival shows in China has gone through three levels, including foundation establishment and market activation, integration endeavors and imitative introductions, tradition-breaking initiatives and exports to the overseas market.

2.1. Program Production

2.1.1. Cast

When making localized innovations on the formatted TV program, the "individual" becomes the unavoidable variable [2]. Considering the characteristics of the domestic idol industry, Chinese idol survival shows have localized their cast. Since the K-pop idol industry is highly systematic, trainees with extensive training experience from entertainment companies are the main source for the survival show. Conversely, the idol industry in China is relatively immature with less experienced trainees. In addition, the idea of idol as a career choice is not well accepted among the public in China. In order to create a widely popular idol survival show, a line-up of contestants from diverse backgrounds was selected by the production crew, including trainees, amateurs, influencers, and debuted artists. Other than the different identities, the stereotype-breaking performance by some contestants also grabbed attention and sparked heated discussions. For example, Yamy, a contestant in *Produce 101 China*, debuted as a member of the final group. She was 28 years old when she participated in the show. As an already-debuted rapper, her appearance did not conform to the traditional beauty standards of idols. In 2020, Mango TV launched *Sisters Who Make Waves*, only allowing the participation of female celebrities over the age of 30. It soon became a hit with such a distinctive casting standard and concept.

2.1.2. Narrative

Narrative analysis was initially used in the literature field. Since the entertainment program boom in 2000, talent shows have gained wild popularity and narrative analysis has become an essential method to analyze talent shows [3]. Within an idol group, there are positions such as the

main vocalist, main dancer, and the center who would always be at the center of the group in all activities. Only with outstanding abilities can a member win such a position, leading to competition among members [4]. The Korean idol survival shows typically dramatize the show to attract audience, stressing the tension and conflicts of selecting the center while editing. However, in China, where social benefits outweigh individual benefits in its national culture and value orientation, the narrative of Chinese idol survival shows focuses more on the team growth and breakthroughs of contestants. For example, in the first group battle of *Produce 101 China*, the center of the team was decided by the production crew based on the ability and efforts made by contestants. The emphasis on the training process diminishes the sense of rivalry and highlights the importance of abilities and endeavors. The fundamental logic of *Sisters Who Make Waves* remains the same as many idols survival shows, namely selecting girl group members. However, the debuted group will not engage in idol activities. The production crew emphasizes "how can females break the invisible age barrier" in their storytelling. "Sisters" have to challenge different styles, and will be examined by the society, market, and audience, ultimately realizing self-worth [5]. Since most of the idol survival show audience are female and the anxiety of aging pervades Chinese females against the backdrop of social transformation, the production crew, hence, chooses the narrative theme of an "anti-aging girl group" based on the characteristics of the targeted audience and social phenomenon.

2.2. Program Presentation

2.2.1. Extension of Contents

All the idol survival shows in China are launched online, enjoying fewer format restrictions compared to variety shows aired on TV. Since the shows are usually produced and owned by the same video-streaming platforms, spin-offs are launched to enrich the content of the main shows. The spin-offs provide extra opportunities for contestants to show themselves and solve the problem of uneven screentime distribution. For example, there are as many as six spin-offs of *Produce 101 China* that record the first stages, training process, dorm life and other contents of contestants. The multiple scenarios cater to the different demands of audience. In addition, the spin-offs can increase the awareness of the main shows, as well as strengthen the themes. *Definition*, hosted by Yi Lijing, is an in-depth talk show together launched with *Sisters Who Make Waves*. In the show, she interviewed the "sisters" off the stage, discussing career, life, family and other challenges faced by them, delivering diverse life values. This show builds the female image in another dimension and guides the audience to renew their perception of females [6]. Moreover, the advertising and the membership payment system have increased the profitability of idol survival shows, whose commercial values are also improved by the spin-offs. Both *Island Diaries* and *Will We Turn into Dummies in Another Dimension* are representative spin-offs of *CHUANG 2021*. The former is presented in the format of contestants' vlogs while the latter shows the contents of contestants playing multiple games such as *Werewolf*. Such innovations in spin-offs demonstrate different sides of idols instead of simply showing them singing and dancing, further promoting the idol culture among the public.

2.2.2. Interactive Experience

In the theory of participatory culture put forward by the American scholar Henry Jenkins, the audience is no longer a passive recipient, but someone who is actively engaged in the process of the production and communication of media content. Idol survival shows need to interact frequently with the audience. Through constant interactions, the level of involvement of the audience will be

increased, enhancing the bond between them and the contestants. This process satisfies the psychological need of "crafting the celebrity". Chinese idol survival shows are streamed on online platforms. By means of communication technologies, video-streaming websites now have social features, such as commenting and bullet commenting. Meanwhile, by establishing online fan communities, these online platforms strengthen the attachment of fans and build a sense of togetherness. Through the building of togetherness, the empathy of the audience will significantly increase, thus enhancing their sense of involvement [7]. For example, Doki, an interactive official community launched on the Tencent Video app, features news, interactions between idols and fans, re-created works of fans, communications, and other functions. It is a base where fans are able to discuss their idols' performance at the show, evoke emotional resonance, and organize others to vote for their idols. By virtue of the fan communities, contestants are able to interact with fans in diverse manners, such as making calls, bullet commenting, and live streaming. During the interaction process, the emotions of the audience are amplified and will last until the next interaction, deepening the bond between idols and fans. *Produce 101 China* also "assigns" fans with different identities according to their level of engagement. The "Head" at the highest level will enjoy the priority of being selected for the offline events of contestants. Such "competitions" make fans more active.

2.3. Program Communication

2.3.1. Promotion

As mobile media technologies develop, new media now function as vital platforms for people to obtain information, exchange ideas, and interact. Tencent Video, iQIYI, and other Chinese platforms are powerful in internet communication and have natural advantages. Therefore, as the producers of idol survival shows, they are able to fully leverage digital strategies to attract potential audience, guide them to vote, and drive profitability [8]. When the shows are being broadcast, contents from the shows prevail on various Chinese media platforms such as WeChat Moments, WeChat Official Accounts, WeChat Channels, Weibo, Douban, Zhihu, and Douyin. The multi-platform and multi-dimensional communication mode goes beyond the limitations of traditional media, caters to the watching habits of the young generation, effectively reaches the target audience, captures the public attention, and quickly increases the popularity of the shows [9]. In addition, in the new media age, every audience is an independent disseminator. The audience is encouraged to re-create the contents from survival shows, which effectively extends influences, lowering the bar for watching such shows. For example, *CHUANG 2021* jointly launched a fan creation competition with Bilibili, an online video platform, which had attracted more audience at that time. According to the statistics and contents analysis of Huoshanyun, a company providing online marketing services, there are 140 videos uploaded by the official account of *CHUANG 2021* on Bilibili, more than 200 million views and more than 2 million comments for the videos with the hashtag of "CHUANG 2021" [8].

2.3.2. Impact on Values

Young people are the main target audience of idol survival shows, who also spread social values. The Korean idol survival shows are developed based on the idol culture in Japan and South Korea. Their emergence collides with the demand of developing the K-pop idol industry, which is more about culture development and the consumeristic attachment to entertainment. However, overseas programs are usually adapted to satisfy the demands of local audience when being introduced, incorporating local culture and value connotations. The cultural atmosphere in China is different

from that in South Korea. Unlike the Korean idol survival shows that focus more on entertainment, the Chinese idol survival shows, in light of the social values of China, express the positive idea of pursuing dreams through endeavors instead of "becoming famous overnight", an idea being conveyed in typical idol survival shows. Through the positive influence of idols, fans will learn to improve their self-worth and gain mental growth during their idol worship [10]. Other than that, with different characters, idol survival shows in China reflect social topics that resonate with audience, offering mental inspiration. For example, in *Produce 101 China*, Wang Ju, a girl with tanned skin and dressed in a bold manner, caused a heated discussion on "appearance anxiety", altering the traditional public perception of the appearance of girl groups. Regarding *Sisters Who Make Waves*, it directly responded to the social phenomena of judging women by age, expressing the values of independence, confidence, bravery, mutual support, and upbeat energy of women.

3. Suggestions for Chinese Idol Survival Shows

Chinese idol survival shows have developed a mature mechanism with their success. Meanwhile, as the variety shows market expands and various shows emerge one after another, the supervision mechanism has become stricter, and it becomes more difficult to satisfy the growing curiosity and emotional needs of audience. There's still room to optimize the development of Chinese idol survival shows, and producers should continue to summarize and learn from experiences and innovate constantly.

3.1. Reducing Reliance on Celebrity Effects

In terms of production, the market concept of "chasing clout" should be abandoned in order to tell a good story. Celebrities may attract certain attention, but they are not the guarantee of the quality and value of the show. Too much reliance on celebrities with huge fanbase but lacking professional skills might have negative effects on the public perception and opinion of such shows, diminishing their reputation. The level of professionalism of survival shows is reflected by the mentors they invite. It is suggested to invite professionals in related fields as mentors rather than celebrities who are not in the idol industry. The production crew can also invite qualified music producers and mentors from overseas to provide professional instructions on the training, recording, and performing of contestants. These can improve the quality of the content and maturity of the idol industry in China.

3.2. Leveraging Short Video Platforms

As a newly-emerged social platform, short video apps have become one of the main information sources with significant impacts. It is suggested that the Chinese idol survival shows fully leverage short video platforms to increase their popularity and appeal to a wider audience. How to find the convergence of idol survival shows and short videos should be considered to effectively spread content through short videos [11]. K-pop groups have been used to promote their newly-released songs via TikTok. Typically, they upload challenge videos with other artists dancing to the highlights of their songs, trying to impress viewers. The production crew can also utilize short videos to build up the hype before the premiere and continue to do so to promote afterwards.

3.3. Enhancing Invisible and Positive Value Delivery

Chinese idol survival shows attach significance to value-building, highlighting the core values through slogans. The values they are trying to convey are also summarized and further inculcated by the copywriting and dialogues in programs. However, discrepancies exist between these values

and the connotations being directly received by the audience. In *Sisters Who Make Waves*, the audience can see female celebrities' obsession with youth and beauty. It imperceptibly conveys the consumption value that money is the solution to the aging appearance and that maintaining beauty consumes a great amount of time and money [5]. Therefore, values cannot be instilled bluntly. More descriptions of characters should be strengthened through edits and narratives. It is more intriguing to instill values naturally through plots instead of directly showing the audience the summarized values.

4. Conclusion

Based on the development of Chinese idol survival shows, this paper mainly analyzes how to localize the Korean counterpart and further innovate in China. In terms of production, Chinese idol survival shows have diverse contestants and idol images that benefit their public acceptance. Meanwhile, the narrative that highlights growth and self-realization reflects and emphasizes the values of the shows. In terms of the presentation, abundant spin-offs and interaction modes derived from the online variety show format strengthen the bond between idols and fans and extend business values. In terms of communication, the multi-platform and multi-dimensional communication mode produces impacts integrated with the society culture of China. In the future, Chinese idol survival shows should reduce their reliance on celebrity effects, fully utilize short video platforms, and strengthen the invisible, positive value delivery. Nevertheless, the research method used by this paper is limited, lacking the perspectives of the production crew and fans. The two perspectives should be considered when illustrating the results. The author hopes to include in the future study the interviews of the production crew and surveys of target audience on the basis of this study's findings, providing more comprehensive perspectives on how to localize and innovate idol survival shows.

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