

## From Global to Local: Examining the Localization Strategies of Transnational Format Reality TV *The Voice of China*

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### Abstract

This study explores the localization of format television programs in China, specifically focusing on the renowned show *The Voice of China*. Through textual analysis of the 15 episodes of the tenth season of the program, the research examines how this popular singing competition serves as a platform for talent exhibition and a powerful tool for reconstructing media discourse power by integrating positive national image and ethnic culture. It reveals the interplay between media, culture, and national image in contemporary China. The findings show that it is a unique cultural hybridization, blending foreign modernity with local elements to present a novel form of local modernity. This research provides insights into the role of format television programs in shaping national identity and cultural representation, highlighting how the program promotes Chinese culture and fosters a sense of national pride among audiences.

**Keywords:** Localization, Reality TV, Format television, The Voice of China, Media Discourse Power.

### Introduction

The advent of globalization has dramatically boosted and transformed the global trade of format televisions (Chalaby & Esser, 2017). Global television formats have emerged as one of the thriving sectors of transnational television since the 2000s (Ganguly, 2019). The Chinese media market needs to import high-quality TV programs from foreign countries to meet the demands of domestic audiences. Reality TV often dominates audience ratings during prime time (Andrejevic, 2004). It attracts Chinese TV producers to introduce the formats to the local

market because of its high ratings and low production costs. Chalaby (2015) proposes that the format's popularity is because it offers programs and improves ratings while lowering risks to the schedule, safe in the knowledge that the same concept has a proven track record in other markets. The production cost of reality TV is very low because it involves a smaller production crew for non-scripted programming and few scriptwriters or professional actors; reality programs are economically attractive to local stations (Hill, 2005). Considering the cultural differences and China's media censorship (Zeng & Sparks, 2018), localization becomes essential for global format television programs to enter the Chinese media market when publicly broadcasted on China's satellite channels.

Television format is a hybrid product that is traded as a concept across countries and cultural backgrounds while being locally adapted to specific contexts (Stehling, 2013). Notably, formats such as *The Voice* have gained significant global recognition as commercial products in the worldwide television program trade (Zhang, 2018). *The Voice*, produced by John de Mol and Roel van Velzen in 2010 and broadcast on RTL4 television in the Netherlands with a high audience rating of 18.2% (Cai, 2018), has been sold in more than 50 countries and regions (Shao & Zhang, 2016). In 2012, Canxing, a Chinese media company, acquired the copyright of *The Voice* from IPCN International Media Company and subsequently produced a new singing talent show called *The Voice of China*. This localized version of the format was broadcasted on Zhejiang Satellite TV, a local satellite channel in China. *The Voice of China* marked the first instance of a TV program being produced and aired by different institutions in China. The show swiftly gained popularity among Chinese audiences, and as a result, the title sponsorship of the program increased to 60 million yuan (Tan & Tan, 2012). The audience rating of the first season of *The Voice of China* was 4%, ranked first among all programs during the same time (Cai, 2018). For Chinese entertainment shows, 1% is a high rating (Zeng & Sparks, 2017). *The Voice of China* has not only achieved remarkable commercial success in the Chinese media market but also received acclaim from the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). SARFT, which operates directly under the State Council in China, plays a crucial role in regulating and censoring traditional mass broadcast media (Wallis, 2015). In recent years, SARFT has imposed increasingly stringent requirements on reality TV programs. One reality show, made by Chongqing Satellite TV, was canceled because of its cheap content and vulgar repertoire (Yang, 2013). Subsequently, SARFT implemented additional regulations to exert control over mass-selecting shows. As per the regulations, each local satellite channel was restricted to producing only one mass-selecting show annually, and these shows were prohibited from being broadcast on television channels from 19:30 to 22:30 during prime time. In 2007, SARFT announced a complete ban on audience voting for out-of-studio audiences (Jiang, 2018). Audience voting, which serves as a means to enhance audience engagement and loyalty in reality TV, is no longer permitted in China. These stringent regulations and censorship measures are aimed at preventing the integration of media (Jenkins, 2006a), and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006b) in the Chinese media market, which has led the media to claim that talent-based reality shows disappeared in China.

Despite SARFT's increasingly stringent requirements for format reality TV in China, *The Voice of China* has achieved remarkable success in the local market in recent years. The show has introduced numerous talented singers, such as Liang Bo and Zhou Shen, to the Chinese music industry and has presented excellent songs to audiences both in China and worldwide. Since its inaugural broadcast, *The Voice of China* has become an annual summer event in the Chinese television market, with each season commencing on a Friday evening in mid-July and concluding on the evening of October 7, coinciding with China's National Day (Jiang, 2018).

The localization of format reality TV shows in China is dynamic, reflecting the complex and evolving strategies to adapt these shows to fit China's context. However, previous research on *The Voice of China* was primarily focused on the content when it was first broadcast (Cai, 2018; Shao & Zhang, 2016; Tan & Tan, 2012; Yang, 2013; Zhang, 2018), we lack research on the newly broadcasted programs. The 10th season of *The Voice of China*, which reviewed the program's history and introduced new adaptations, can be considered a milestone for the show. The research question is what practical strategies can be derived from the 10th season of *The Voice of China* to adapt global format reality TV to the contemporary Chinese media market? In this study, textual analysis is employed to examine the content of the 10th season of *The Voice of China* to offer practical strategies for adapting global format reality TV to the contemporary Chinese context. For a long time, television has shaped audiences' imagination and perception of society and played a vital role in constructing contemporary life. Therefore, understanding the localization of format TV in China is an examination of its utilization as a mainstream communication tool and an exploration of the composition and culture of the social groups that engage and rely on this media product.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Development of Global Format Television in China**

A television format is a program or program concept with distinct elements that can be exported and licensed to production companies or broadcasters outside its country of origin for local adaptation (Schmitt et al., 2005). Quail (2015) states that formats are standardized television shows with multiple international iterations. Format television shows allow local producers with limited budgets to enter the international media market (Hill, 2011). With their indispensable role in the transnational television trade, format television shows commonly possess a comprehensive document known as a bible, encompassing all program details. It usually includes the critical technique, creativity, and visual cues used to define the program; for example, graphics, script, storyline, music, preference, casting, set design, layout, and camera work (Singh, 2011). While the bible encompasses all aspects of the format, it should be noted that simply replicating the program's content from one country to another does not guarantee a high audience rating. Moran (1998) argues that the global format trade does not always provide standardization and cultural imperialism but still has spaces for local adaptation. When introducing a format television show to a local market, the production team must ensure that the content aligns with the habits and preferences of the local audiences. The rapid development of format programs has provided Chinese television producers with a sustainable and dependable approach to cater to the growing demand of local audiences for diverse media products.

Initially, Chinese reality TV programs imitated the content of renowned foreign programs. For instance, *Super Girl*, a TV contest reminiscent of American Idol, garnered a viewership of over 400 million people in 2005, establishing itself as one of the most triumphant shows in the annals of Chinese television history (Jian & Liu, 2009). In the program, audiences could vote for their favorite contestants and determine the competition results using the short messaging service. The captivating allure of the "TV Cinderella Myth" within the program enthralled both the audience and contestants, who actively participated in the show's production. *Super Girl's* success stemmed from its ability to forge a new form of "affective economy," which empowered local audiences and encouraged their active engagement with the program (Huang, 2018). Reality shows, leveraging new media technologies, significantly empower local audiences and foster democratic ideals within contemporary Chinese society.

The remarkable success of *Super Girl* posed a threat to the dominant position of China Central Television. SARFT soon identified the issues presented in the program. State Council (2008) issued copyright protection policies encompassing various industries, including radio, film, and television, signaling a significant stride by China in safeguarding the copyright of media products within the country. Local producers acknowledged the importance of legally introducing foreign format programs. In addition, voting is only allowed among the studio audience; any form of voting by out-of-studio audiences is strictly prohibited because of worrying the fantasy of democratization and stardom permeates (Fung, 2009). Many people believed that reality shows would lose the audience's attention due to this restriction. Nevertheless, it was not difficult to see from the later reality shows that even if people could not vote, a well-planned program could still obtain high audience ratings (Yang, 2013).

Since successfully introducing the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing* to China in 2006, Shixi Media, a Chinese format agency, has established stable relations with China's satellite television channels and media companies worldwide (Sparks, 2012). In 2010, a Chinese television channel, Dragon TV, purchased the copyrights of *Britain's Got Talent* and *America's Got Talent* from Fremantle Media to produce *China's Got Talent* show. *China's Got Talent* is simultaneously the most technically sophisticated and 'politically correct' reality show in China (Yang, 2013). As one of the most successful cases of foreign format programs in China, it established the concept of buying the copyright of famous foreign television shows. Since then, format programs have ended the era of imitation and entered a new stage of format introduction in China. As shown above, format television is a new production model that brings new business norms and means, thus further promoting the development of China's television industry. In 2012, Zhejiang TV introduced *The Voice* from the Netherlands and successfully produced *The Voice of China*, leading China into a formatting frenzy. It is reported that in 2013, China's television industry introduced about 30 format television programs (Zhang & Fung, 2014). The number of newly introduced foreign format programs reached a peak, which was considered the blowout year for introducing format programs in China. *Super Diva* broadcast by Dragon TV and *I am a singer* broadcast by Hunan Satellite TV were both imported from South Korea and achieved impressive audience ratings in China. In the same year, *Chinese Idol*, *Let's Sing Kid's*, and *Mad for Music* were all introduced and broadcast on China's television channels. The widespread popularity of format programs in China has garnered significant attention from local media companies and television producers. Due to its unprecedented success, more Chinese satellite channels are actively participating in introducing formats. Presently, adopting format television is considered one of the most effective approaches for the Chinese television industry to achieve international standards. Format adaptation cannot solve all the problems in China's television industry. Keane (2002) pointed out whether any format has the ability to contribute to a dynamic media-based economy in China. SARFT soon noticed that too many global format reality television shows were imported into the Chinese media market. SARFT thought that reality shows were growing too fast in China, and the producers should pay attention to the quality of the programs. In response, SARFT implemented regulations to ensure that content was devoid of violence, vulgarity, and negative attitudes toward audiences (Zeng & Sparks, 2018). It issued a list of regulations outlining specific requirements for singing competition programs. These measures aimed to reduce the excessive dependence on foreign format programs while promoting the creation of original Chinese media content. SARFT also implemented a range of supportive policies to facilitate the development of original Chinese programs. As a result,

the growth of global format television programs in the Chinese market has been noticeably impeded due to SARFT's restrictions on the number of imported programs.

### **The Localization of Global format television programs in China**

Localization is the process of transformation that will inevitably involve the conflict and fusion of different cultures. Given the variations in political systems, religious beliefs, languages, and customs across countries, transnational television shows face the challenge of addressing these disparities. The localization of format televisions is commonly attributed to cultural differences among national audiences, often based on the assumptions of cultural essentialism and methodological nationalism (Esser, 2014; Oren, 2012). Consequently, producers try to ensure the format is culturally specific (Ndlela, 2013; Waisbord & Jalfin, 2010). The process should be understood as an ongoing cultural negotiation. In most cases, local audiences exhibit a preference for domestically produced media content (Adriaens & Biltreyst, 2012). By incorporating local accents and adapting the structural elements of a format television (Keane et al., 2007), localized format programs aim to reduce cultural differences through modifications to the original format framework. Moreover, format producers are often regarded as cultural translators who deeply understand local audiences' preferences (Moran, 2009) and even gatekeepers who protect national media culture from foreign influences (Keinonen, 2018). Moran (2009) examines the localization of global format television shows, distinguishing among three distinct phenomena. Firstly, linguistic-code translation pertains to adapting form and style specific to television, encompassing poetics and linguistic aspects. Secondly, intertextual-code translation involves the localization of format elements based on considerations of local television production, technicalities, and genre characteristics. Finally, cultural-code translation encompasses the localization of formats addressing various cultural dimensions, such as gender relations, historical contexts, language, geography, ethnicity, public behavior, and cultural values. As the global flow of formats continues to expand, cultural products undergo intricate adaptations to align with the cultural and social norms, as well as the political contexts, of local markets. Above all, language is the most potent unifier and divider that forces media production to adapt imported content to the audience's needs (Waisbord & Jalfin, 2010). Utilizing the local language in adapted media products facilitates better comprehension for the local audiences while simultaneously accentuating their ethnic identity (Yin, 2015). Nevertheless, it is essential to note that localization entails more than mere linguistic transformation, as careful consideration of cultural differences is also crucial. Zeng and Sparks (2017) highlight a case of format failure exemplified by the program *Ding Ge Long Dong Qiang*, a collaborative production between China and South Korea, aired on CCTV 3. It did not achieve the expected audience ratings because the editing work was done by Korean producers who did not consider the local cultural differences. Cho and Zhu (2017), two Korean scholars, examine the impact of Korean format programs in China and highlight their utilization of diverse Chinese locations to vividly showcase the country's history, legends, and folk tales to the Chinese audience.

Banerjee (2002) states that in most Asian countries, television has been integrally linked to state discourse and policies on development, national identity, and cultural sovereignty. Political pressure and censorship are unavoidable conditions for producing an entertainment show in China's television industry (Zeng & Sparks, 2018). The protectionist policies of Chinese media also encourage the producers to localize the content based on the local market. The primary objective of localizing format TV in China is to address the issue of disparate values



presented in television shows (Lu, 2019). In Yang's (2013) study on the reality show *China's Got Talent*, it is revealed that the production of such shows incorporates an increased emphasis on dream discourses. These shows are deeply ideological, aiming to portray diverse visions of an ideal life and a fair society. In *China's Got Talent*, the contestants' success stories are cautiously balanced or even replaced by familial care and contentment with the status quo (Yang, 2013). Game shows have enjoyed long-standing popularity in the United States, with gambling being considered a practical means to engage American audiences. However, the SARFT restricts the number of monetary prizes in Chinese game shows. It is not feasible to anticipate overnight wealth accumulation through Chinese television programs. The Chinese government intentionally avoids promoting such values through mainstream media platforms to the audience. *Where Are We Going? Dad* is an outdoor reality show introduced by Hunan Satellite TV from South Korea in 2013. The program involves several celebrity fathers caring for one of their children, aligning with the context of the one-child policy and the prevalent nuclear family structure in China during that period (Keane & Zhang, 2017). Local policies exert strict control over format television programs. The negotiation between the local production team and SARFT is to ensure compliance with boundaries and avoid politically, socially, and culturally sensitive content. An exceptional television program in China not only fulfills the professional and financial objectives of the production team but also aligns with the cultural and political goals set by SARFT.

### **An overview of The Voice of China**

*The Voice of China* made its debut on Zhejiang Satellite on July 13, 2012, with the aim of discovering new singing talent through public auditions (Jiang, 2018). Each season, four renowned local singers are invited to participate as judges on the show. Throughout the competition, these celebrity judges carefully select contestants who demonstrate exceptional talent to join their respective teams. Subsequently, the contestants from each team compete against each other, with only five finalists advancing to the ultimate competition. The contestant who garners the highest number of votes from the panel of experts and the studio audiences is crowned the champion of that year. In the tenth season of *The Voice of China*, the panel of celebrity judges consists of Li Keqin, Wang Feng, Li Ronghao, and Na Ying (Na Ying withdrew from the program after the blind audition, and Liao Changyong assumed her position). Notably, Li Keqin, a renowned Cantonese singer from Hong Kong, joined the program for the first time, emphasizing the inclusion of a celebrity judge from Hong Kong or Taiwan each season. The selection of a celebrity judge plays a vital role in connecting audiences from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Wang Feng, a prominent figure in Chinese rock music, participated in the program for the fifth time, while Li Ronghao, a well-known original singer in the Chinese music industry, joined for the third time. The female singer Na Ying has participated in *The Voice of China* eight times and has become the most experienced judge. Liao Changyong, who succeeded Na Ying, is the dean of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. It is the first time that the program has invited government officials to serve as the judge. The selection of celebrity judges exemplifies the local production team's objective of attracting audiences from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, the judges' comments will play a crucial role in shaping public opinion.

The tenth season of *The Voice of China* consists of three distinct stages: blind auditions, battle rounds, and live performances. During the blind auditions, the four celebrity judges sit with their backs facing the stage, making decisions based solely on the contestants' singing skills. Jiang (2018) points out that *The Voice* format is intended to set the selection criteria solely on

aural esthetics to avoid any possible bias caused by the visual distraction of a contestant's physical appearance and stage manner. If a judge thinks the contestant's singing skill is excellent, he/she can rotate the seat direction by pressing the button. The unique feature of *The Voice of China* is that the judges can only see the contestants' appearance after they have rotated their seats, setting it apart from previous Chinese talent shows. If more than one judge rotates their seat, the contestant has the freedom to choose which team they want to join, while the absence of any button press leads to the contestant's elimination. After the performance, the judges frequently ask the contestants, "What is your dream?" prompting them to tell their personal stories. This program effectively employs the notion of fulfilling dreams as a central narrative device, successfully evoking emotional engagement from both contestants and audiences (Zhang, 2018). The tenth season of *The Voice of China* consists of 15 episodes, with the blind auditions taking up six episodes, emphasizing their significance within the show. Following the blind auditions, the competition shifts to the battles between the four judge's teams. In each battle, the team that falls short is required to eliminate one contestant from their ranks. The live performance serves as the show's grand finale, where the ultimate champion is crowned. The annual finals are held at the Bird's Nest Stadium, known for hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which represents China's impressive achievements and evokes a feeling of national pride among the target audience (Kwok, 2015). In adherence to SARFT regulations, the selection of the champion in the program is determined by the combined votes of the experts and studio audiences, excluding the outdoor audiences from voting for the contestants they support. The unique voting system employed in *The Voice of China* sets it apart from other foreign reality shows that emphasize mass participation, thereby showcasing the distinctive political culture inherent in contemporary Chinese society. It cannot be seen as a simple transnational reality show that emerged in the trend of introducing global format television. It is, more importantly, a show that narrates the current political, social, and cultural ideology of the Chinese in the discourse of globalization (Jiang, 2018).

### Methodology

Text analysis can be used to answer questions about media, social movements, and hegemonic processes (Tyree, 2011), as well as social practice and social structure (McKee, 2003). People interpret text (films, television programs, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti, and so on) to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them (McKee, 2003). It is a data-gathering process; communication researchers usually use textual analysis to describe and explain the meanings of visual information (Frey et al., 1999).

In order to study localization strategies and understand the format phenomenon, textual analysis is used to explore the tenth season of *The Voice of China*. This exploration enables a deeper understanding of the impact of local elements within Chinese format television programs. The tenth season of *The Voice of China* comprises 15 episodes, of which 13 are contestants' competitions, 1 is a special show for the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, and 1 is a special show dedicated to the National Day of China. All 15 episodes are readily accessible on the Internet. A total of 15 episodes are reviewed carefully to find what strategies *The Voice* employs to engage Chinese audiences and meet SARFT's requirements. Every verbal and non-verbal symbol associated with adaptation strategies, including narratives, scene layouts, people's dialogues, and behaviors, is meticulously recorded. These adaptations of the content

hold significant meaning and require careful analysis. The collected data is classified according to distinct features and themes, and thematic analysis is employed for data interpretation.

### **Results and Discussions**

The tenth season of *The Voice of China* introduces a new model called 4 judges + 4 assistants, providing the audience a fresh viewing experience. The inclusion of ethnic minority contestants and their pre-recorded videos are crucial for the producers to highlight the cultural diversity and promote connections among diverse groups in China. Individuals are carefully selected as visiting guests to convey positive energy to the target audience. They are imagined and mediated as heroes by the program, and producers try to connect China with the positive and successful images portrayed by these people (Kwok, 2015). More Chinese elements are being incorporated into the content to the revitalization of Chinese culture. Patriotic songs are also used in the program to strengthen the emotions of the audience and the country, distinguish them from one another, and reaffirm their identity boundaries (Cerulo, 1993). A positive national image of China is carefully established to subtly foster a deep-rooted acceptance of national identity and pride within the audience, often without their conscious awareness.

#### **The New Mode: 4 Judges + 4 Assistants**

The Chinese producers introduced a new format called the 4 + 4 mode in the tenth season of the program, which deviates from the original format. This adapted format involves the participation of four assistants who are former contestants and currently renowned singers in China. In this mode, each team consisted of a judge and an assistant, with both having the authority to select contestants during the blind auditions. However, the final decision still rested with the judge. Once the contestants finish their performances, the assistant has 30-seconds to persuade the judge to select the contestants. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the final decision ultimately rests with the judge. Based on the textual analysis of the 15 episodes, it is evident that instances of the assistant successfully persuading the judge are rare. However, this does not imply that the assistant's role is without value. Each assistant is granted a unique opportunity to select contestants directly by pressing the judge's button without requiring any discussion with the judge. This new rule proves advantageous for the contestants as it significantly enhances their chances of advancing through the blind audition. This unique situation occurred twice during the tenth season of *The Voice of China*. In the third episode, Pei Chen, a 24-year-old graduate student from Hebei Province, caught the attention of assistant Wu Mochou with her distinctive vocal quality. As a result of the new rule, she gained the opportunity to join judge Li Keqin's team. Similarly, in the fourth episode, assistant Huang Xiaoyun exercised her right and enabled 28-year-old Zhuang Yuliang from Zhejiang Province to successfully pass the blind audition, leading him to join judge Wang Feng's team. Only two assistants bravely used their rights to help the contestants pass the blind audition, demonstrating that the authority of these experienced and famous Chinese judges cannot easily be challenged. It becomes evident that an inherent inequality exists in the status of the assistants and the judges.

#### **The Selected Visiting Guests and Their Positive Stories**

In the tenth season of *The Voice of China*, the production team dedicated a special episode to celebrate the Chinese National Day. The theme of the episode revolved around praising China with the best voice. To convey positive energy and core social values to the audience, the



judges invited four special visiting guests who shared their stories. According to Kahle and Kennedy (1988), social values directly impact individuals' interests, time-use activities, and roles, thereby influencing their behavior. Hoffner (1996) emphasizes that television offers a diverse range of compelling role models, and audiences' identification with specific characters serves as a mechanism for the socialization process. Television messages are purposefully crafted to shape the attitudes and behaviors of target audiences. The invited guests from each team shared their personal stories, followed by performances of 3-4 songs by individuals from each team. Finally, the team that garnered the highest decibel value from the audience had the opportunity to contribute an art classroom to a primary school in an underprivileged ethnic minority village in Sichuan Province. This initiative was a collaborative effort between *The Voice of China* and the China Women's Development Foundation, aimed at promoting public welfare. By utilizing dream funds and public welfare projects as incentives instead of high monetary bonuses, the producers aimed to motivate the contestants and foster audience values in alignment with mainstream society.

Judge Li Ronghao and his assistant Ji Kejunyi invited renowned singer Jin Zhiwen, who had participated in the first season of *The Voice of China* in 2012, to share his story of pursuing his music dream in Beijing. Jin Zhiwen, an ordinary person who realized his music dream by participating in the program, perfectly embodies the program's theme. During his time on stage, Jin Zhiwen expressed gratitude for his 16 years of dedication to his music dream in Beijing and acknowledged the unwavering support of his wife throughout those years. It is worth mentioning that he had previously expressed gratitude to his wife (his girlfriend at the time) in 2012 when he first participated in the program. His perseverance in pursuing his dream and his loyalty to his wife were instrumental in his selection as a guest for the special episode celebrating Chinese National Day. Judge Liao Changyong invited Zhu Jiaqing, a nurse at a traditional Chinese medicine hospital in Hangzhou, to share her experiences working at a hospital in Wuhan during the initial outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. During that time, Wuhan faced a shortage of medical resources, prompting doctors and nurses from across the country to come to its aid, showcasing the unity and solidarity of the Chinese people. Inviting such a guest to participate in *The Voice of China* demonstrates a deep respect for medical workers and reflects the collective cohesion among the Chinese population. Later, two contestants performed *Suzhou River*, the closing song of the patriotic Chinese film *The Eight Hundred*. *Suzhou River* was adapted from the Irish folk minor - Londonderry minor, which explained the desire of soldiers for the peace of their country. The choice of this patriotic song aims to evoke feelings of love for China and commemorate the national day, holding significant meaning for the Chinese audience. Judge Li Keqin invited a young girl named Liu Shiyao, whose occupation involved manufacturing cables for China's spaceships, to share her experiences with the audience. The program emphasized Liu Shiyao's birth year as 1995, positioning her as a representative of the Chinese youth who actively contributes to critical national industries. Liu Shiyao explained that she chose this career path due to the influence of her grandfather and mother, who also worked in the same industry. She perceived it as her responsibility to carry on the work of her predecessors and contribute to China's aerospace industry. This multigenerational dedication from her family highlights not only the sense of responsibility among young Chinese individuals but also emphasizes the collective effort required for the rapid development of China. Judge Wang Feng invited Wang Liping, the champion of the walking race in the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, to share her personal experience in the Olympic Games. Wang Liping said that after finishing the 2000 Olympic Games, she had a baby and did not plan to participate in the next 2004 Athens Olympic Games. However, with the

national team facing the challenge of lacking young athletes to carry the baton for the 2004 Olympics, Wang Liping decided to participate, hoping to serve as a bridge between generations and support her young teammates. Wang Liping was chosen as a role model, exemplifying the dedication that individuals should do when the country needs help. In other words, individual dreams are important, but only acceptable when they support the national dream (Callahan, 2015).

Finally, Liao Changyong's team won the highest decibel. A week later, they went to a small village in Sichuan Province and donated an art classroom for the children. The producers used public welfare projects as a reward to encourage people, and they believed that they played a positive role in guiding the audience. These narratives align with the requirements set by SARFT, which emphasize the responsibility of TV programs in disseminating positive energy and promoting core social values to the audience.

### **Media Representation and Ethnic Minorities in China**

China, as a multi-ethnic country, comprises primarily of the Han Chinese population, with 55 ethnic minorities making up the rest. Traditionally, the portrayal of ethnic minorities in media has been dominated by the state and the Han majority. However, the emergence of new media platforms has provided ethnic minorities with the opportunity to attain a new public voice and shape their representation within the mainstream (Baranovitch, 2001). In a united nation, the mainstream media actively engages and coordinates both minority and majority identities to cultivate a shared sense of identity. The media's depiction of ethnic minorities becomes the audience's perception, capable of shaping, altering, or eliminating prejudices and distances between groups (Arnold & Schneider, 2007). By introducing the geographical spaces associated with ethnic minorities, the video creates a distinct setting apart from the Han majority and urban life. Such descriptions evoke the audience's fascination with the exoticism of China's ethnic minorities while reinforcing their recognition and appreciation of China's diversity. Ultimately, this portrayal signifies the country's political unity and its dominant position in maintaining political integrity.

In the tenth season of *The Voice of China*, four contestants from different ethnic minority backgrounds participated in the competition. Before their performances, the producers showcased pre-recorded videos that introduced the hometowns of two contestants. Sha Nanjie, a contestant from Daliang Mountain, Sichuan Province, began his performance on *The Voice of China* by greeting the audience in the Yi language, the local language of the Yi minority. He shared that when he graduated, his father wrote a Yi poem and asked him to turn the poem into a song. His father hoped that he would express the Yi minority's spirit through this song. During his performance, Sha Nanjie wore modern attire and sat in front of his house with his guitar while his father donned a traditional Yi costume. For his blind audition on *The Voice of China*, he presented an original composition titled *Waiting for Me to Sunset*, which seamlessly blended English, Chinese, and Yi languages to express his love for his hometown and parents. On the stage, Sha Nanjie adorned unique clothing with ethnic elements and wore three ethnic necklaces around his neck. Among the four assistants, Ji Kejunyi, who also belongs to the Yi minority, immediately pressed the button upon hearing the Yi language in his song, showing her support for their shared culture. However, despite his impressive performance, none of the judges pressed the button for him, resulting in his elimination. It is worth noting that contestants who do not proceed to the next round are typically not featured in the program. The producers deliberately included this Yi contestant in the first episode to emphasize the diversity of Chinese ethnic groups and cultures to the

audience. Ze Yusiji is a Tibetan girl from Jinchuan County, Sichuan Province. The producers made a video about the outdoor activities in her hometown: *Qiu Yanyan* and *Throwing Longda*. Longda refers to a small piece of paper that is full of scriptures, and throwing Longda is a unique Tibetan prayer ritual. The video provided glimpses of the local landscapes in Sichuan Province and showcased the cultural activities of the local Tibetan community. Television overcomes the limits of geography and serves as a crucial platform to highlight the rich cultural heritage of ethnic minorities and foster connections among diverse groups.

Cai Wangluobu, a contestant from Tibet, initially did not emphasize his identity as a member of a minority group during the blind audition. However, after successfully passing the blind audition and joining Na Ying's team, Na Ying advised him to incorporate Tibetan elements into his R&B performances, distinguishing him from other contestants. In the twelfth episode, Cai Wangluobu appeared in traditional Tibetan attire and delivered a powerful performance of his original song titled *Going Home* during the battle rounds. The music skillfully blended traditional Chinese musical instruments and the Tibetan language to convey the essence of his hometown and its people. Following his performance, the judge acknowledged Cai Wangluobu's proficiency in singing English songs but encouraged him, as a young artist, to integrate contemporary elements with local culture, expressing love for his hometown, family, and culture. The judges were motivated to guide contestants from ethnic minorities in actively showcasing their cultural heritage and instilling in young audiences the importance of preserving and promoting ethnic cultures.

Media representation is important in shaping how audiences understand and make sense of the social world (Lavie-Dinur & Karniel, 2013). The cultures of ethnic minorities are diverse, yet for a long time, communication between ethnic minorities and the Han Chinese people has historically been limited due to geographical and technological constraints. However, the advent of television and new media has shattered these limitations, providing a platform for disseminating information. Television, in particular, possesses the unique ability to showcase China's diverse cultures. By portraying ethnic minorities in media content, the construction of national identity among audiences is facilitated, and the channels for communication between different social groups are promoted.

### **Embracing Chinese Culture through Local Productions**

Formats usually leave room for local producers. Within the constraints dictated by their owners, domestic productions can fit local narratives, histories, humor, events, and characters into the basic formulas that they purchase (Waisbord, 2004). Format programs are produced locally to enhance cultural proximity and cater to local expectations, goals, or limitations (Keulen, 2016). The local media quickly filled the identification gap for local people as it helped the audiences to share their collective memory and create an indigenous culture (Ma, 1999). Audiences are likely to identify with their motherland when the contents resonate at the cultural level so that they can have a sense of belongingness and the imagined cultural identity (Kwok, 2015). In the tenth season, the program incorporated elements such as cities, cuisine, and traditional Chinese skills to establish a stronger connection with the audience. In line with the government's current emphasis on promoting traditional culture and cultural confidence, showcasing China's lifestyle and cultural characteristics on media platforms is paramount for revitalizing Chinese culture.

Chinese opera is a traditional art form that originated from primitive song and dance in ancient times. Before the performance, Yu Kong, a 26-year-old contestant from Guangdong Province, was introduced through a pre-made video showcasing his family members. His

mother is a traditional Chinese painting teacher and an inheritor of the Inner-painted snuff teapot, an intangible cultural heritage of China. His grandparents and father are all actors in the Guangdong Han Opera. After his performance, Yu Kong sang Han Opera to the judges and shared a heartwarming story about how his grandmother taught him singing skills at home after being eliminated from a student singing competition. This young male contestant's participation showcased how his family actively preserves and promotes traditional Chinese culture. Zhang Mei, a 25-year-old girl from Luoyang, Henan Province, shared her story on the show. She participated in many opera competitions in her hometown during childhood. The program showcased a video of her as a young girl participating in the local TV program *Li Yuan Chun*, a classical opera television show in Henan Province. Then, Zhang Mei performed a popular song called *Chi Ling* which skillfully incorporated traditional opera elements while narrating the history of the Japanese invasion of China.

Food is a communication system, functioning as a language through which we express our identities and relationships (Gunkel, 2016). Hiroko (2008) further asserts that famous foods play a role in reinforcing nationalism and establishing semiotic connections with local culture. In the ninth episode, a special celebration was held to commemorate the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, one of the four major festivals in China. At the beginning of this particular episode, the four judges took different kinds of mooncakes on the stage to share with the contestants. Mooncakes are one of the most representative foods of Chinese culture. Subsequently, two female contestants performed the song *Moonlight in Front of the Window*, evoking a sense of longing for their hometown. The lyrics of this song included verses from the renowned Chinese poem, which originated from the Tang Dynasty and remains familiar to most Chinese individuals. Moving to the fourteenth episode, eight contestants competed for the five positions in the finals. Judge Li Ronghao organized a Chinese-style afternoon tea to help the contestants relax before the competition. The table was filled with exquisite traditional Chinese pastries and Chinese tea. The local producers effectively used local foods to construct and preserve their cultural identity within the global format programs, thereby enhancing national cultural confidence.

The landmark may also carry historical significance, or its purpose may signify cultural and creative development (Dittmar, 2016). In *The Voice of China*, when introducing the contestants' hometowns, the production team presents special videos showcasing the city's culture through its landmarks and famous buildings. Dong Shuhan, a 20-year-old female student from the Zhejiang Conservatory of Music, aspires to become a music teacher in her hometown after graduation. A video featuring her hometown was displayed on television, capturing the picturesque sea, beach, and island. The final competition took place in an indoor studio in Hangzhou and four outdoor locations in different cities across China: Beijing, Shenzhen, Wuhan, and Shanghai. Wuhan was selected as one of the locations due to its recognition as a heroic city in China during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The other three cities were chosen for their political and economic significance within the country. Featuring these four major metropolises, the show aimed to portray the rapid progress of China under its opening-up policy. The outdoor shooting locations symbolize the nation's modernization and prosperity, evoking a sense of national pride among the audience. Moreover, these settings are crucial in shaping the local image, ideology, and identity within China's public discourse.

Cultural confidence refers to a country's belief and assurance in its history, civilization, and values. This concept has gained significant attention in China in recent years. Zhou (2012) highlights that China recognizes the importance of bolstering its soft power and identifies

cultural confidence as a critical factor in enhancing a country's cultural soft power. In this context, media plays a pivotal role in fostering and reinforcing the ideology of cultural confidence among the Chinese public. In the fifth episode, two contestants performed their original hip-hop songs. One contestant, Li Yanxin, presented a song titled *Huo Yuanjia*, which encapsulates a positive attitude toward life. After his performance, Li Yanxin shared his opinion on hip-hop culture, highlighting that just as noodles originated in China but are transformed into spaghetti in Italy, and tea originated in China but becomes Indian black tea in India, hip-hop culture should also have a distinctive Chinese flavor rather than mindlessly imitating foreign styles. One of the judges, Li Ronghao, echoed his sentiment, emphasizing the importance of using the Chinese language to express hip-hop music. Li Yanxin successfully advanced in the competition and continued to showcase his original hip-hop songs in subsequent rounds. Cultural confidence is not just a slogan; the Chinese government seeks to enhance the public's cultural confidence and improve the nation's cultural resilience and ability to navigate the complex issues of globalization through media products.

### **Cultivating Patriotic Sentiment through Local Music**

Patriotism encompasses the positive and supportive attitude individuals or groups hold towards their motherland, exemplifying the profound connection between individuals and their country. It signifies a collective sense of belonging, identity, dignity, and honor toward one's homeland, nation, and culture. Given its role as a prominent medium for information dissemination in China, television naturally assumes the responsibility of fostering patriotic education.

Zheng Zhihong, a contestant from Wenzhou, revealed that he was born in Portugal. Although he grew up listening to European and American songs, he was deeply moved when he discovered the emotional depth of Chinese songs. This experience inspired him to immerse himself in Chinese music and literature, aiming to learn Chinese songs and return to China. One of the judges, Na Ying, explained that Chinese programs often evoke strong emotional connections with individuals living abroad. Zheng Zhihong emphasized that Chinese songs were important to him as they represented his cultural roots. As a foreigner born in Portugal, Zheng Zhihong reconstructed his connection to China by engaging with local music. *The Voice of China* effectively utilizes local music to foster emotional connections with Chinese communities worldwide. It also highlights the enduring influence of Chinese culture on overseas Chinese individuals and their deep affection for their homeland.

Singing patriotic songs is another way to demonstrate people's support for China in *The Voice of China*. In the context of a fully independent state, China's music nationalism is always related to a cohesive national identity. The national symbols and ritualistic-ceremonial activities arouse powerful, emotional expressions of national sentiment because they uniquely accentuate audiences' identification as national members (Schatz & Lavine, 2007). In the first and last episode of the program, two patriotic songs were used at the beginning to resonate with the audiences. Four judges and four assistants performed *I love you China* at the first episode's opening. This particular composition employs the metaphor of China as a mother to effectively convey the deep affection of the Chinese populace for their homeland. Through the harmonious melodies, these songs successfully foster a sense of belonging and unity, primarily by incorporating cultural symbols, shared historical experiences, and the collective memories of the audience. Among them, assistants Wu Mochou and Huang Xiaoyun dressed in red clothes, the same color as the flag of China. Red holds significant cultural symbolism in Chinese festivals and celebrations, signifying joy and happiness. The opening



song of the final competition also selected a classic patriotic song, *Legend of the Dragon*, performed by the ex-judge Yi Chengqing and his team members who live all over the world. Yi Chengqing's team members recorded this song in famous landmarks such as the Great Wall and West Lake of China and some foreign countries such as Singapore and Malaysia to show that Chinese people live worldwide. The song expresses a sense of pride for being Chinese and conveys the national spirit. These chosen shooting locations testify to China's rich history, glorious traditions, and the widespread influence of its descendants worldwide.

### Conclusions

The localization of format television programs in China is the reconstruction of media discourse power that integrates positive national image and ethnic culture. Under the influence of globalization, the Chinese government has realized that using the media to tell Chinese stories is a critical way to showcase a positive national image to the world. *The Voice of China* indicates a new form of cultural hybridization that presents a novel form of local modernity.

Through the textual analysis of the tenth season of *The Voice of China*, we find that it is a media platform that extends beyond a mere singing competition. It not only showcases the talents of contestants but also harnesses the power of music to foster emotional connections, construct national identity, and promote a positive image of China. Through the stories of contestants like Zheng Zhihong, who reconstructed his identity through Chinese music, and the incorporation of patriotic songs and national symbols, the show successfully creates a sense of belonging, unity, and pride among the audience. The performances' use of cultural symbols, shared history, and collective memory resonate deeply with the audiences, reaffirming their connection to China and inspiring a sense of patriotism. Furthermore, *The Voice of China's* global reach, demonstrated by the participation of contestants from different parts of the world and the inclusion of shooting locations across China and various foreign countries, emphasizes the enduring influence of Chinese culture and the widespread presence of the Chinese people. Overall, the show is a powerful medium for promoting Chinese culture, nurturing a sense of national pride, and strengthening the bond between overseas Chinese and their homeland. As *The Voice of China* continues to captivate audiences, it can further deepen the appreciation for Chinese music, strengthen cultural ties, and foster a shared sense of identity among individuals of diverse backgrounds. This study enhances our understanding of the dynamic nature of localizing format reality TV shows from a theoretical standpoint, as summarized in Table 1, which outlines the study's contributions. We gain insights into the evolving strategies employed to tailor these shows to fit the Chinese context through analyzing the adaptations and reviewing the program's history. This research contributes to the theoretical frameworks surrounding media localization, cultural hybridization, and the interplay between media discourse power and national identity construction. Furthermore, this study holds significant contextual value by highlighting the importance of *The Voice of China* as a cultural phenomenon within the Chinese media landscape. We deepen our understanding of the role of format television programs in shaping cultural representation and fostering a sense of national pride by examining how the show fosters emotional connections, constructs national identity, and promotes a positive image of China. The narratives of contestants and the incorporation of patriotic songs and national symbols serve as rich contextual examples that demonstrate the show's influence on the audience's sense of belonging, unity, and patriotism. This research offers valuable insights into the interrelationships between format television, national identity, and global

connectivity. Further research should focus on conducting audience studies to examine the effects of The Voice of China on audiences' perceptions of Chinese culture, national identity, and their sense of connection to their homeland.

Table 1

*Summary of Major Conclusion*

Major Conclusions	Description
The Importance and Significance of This Study	Theoretical standpoint: We gain insights into the evolving strategies employed to tailor these shows to fit the Chinese context through analyzing the adaptations and reviewing the program's history. Contextual standpoint: This study holds significant contextual value by highlighting the importance of <i>The Voice of China</i> as a cultural phenomenon within the Chinese media landscape.
The Contribution of This Research	Theoretical frameworks: This research contributes to the theoretical frameworks surrounding media localization, cultural hybridization, and the interplay between media discourse power and national identity construction. Contextual standpoint: This research offers valuable insights into the interrelationships between format television, national identity, and global connectivity.

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