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If You Are the One and SBS: the cultural economy of difference

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Abstract

If You Are the One (*IYATO*) is China's most popular television dating show. Since Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) bought it 6 years ago, the show has attracted a cult following among English-speaking viewers. SBS subsequently purchased several other Chinese reality shows, and the Seven Network launched its own version of *IYATO*. But none of these programmes have proven to be as enduringly popular as *IYATO*. Taking an industry studies approach, this article draws on the inside knowledge of one of the authors, and on interviews with several other SBS employees, to shed light on the media industry's thinking behind importing cultural products from China, particularly against the backdrop of fear and anxiety about China's influence. We also ask why *IYATO* has endeared itself to Australia's English-speaking viewers in ways that the majority of Chinese media content has not, despite the Chinese government's myriad soft power initiatives.

Keywords

Australian media industry, Chinese dating shows, cultural economy of difference, global TV format, *If You Are the One*, public service broadcasting, SBS

Introduction

Media content, forms and practices travel back and forth between Asia and Australia under a wide range of political–economic circumstances, are motivated by myriad social and cultural considerations and exploit a proliferating number of platforms and pathways. While media entertainment products from China's cultural and creative industries have to some extent achieved flow across national borders (Keane, 2016), the decision to incorporate media content from the state media of the People's Republic of China into Australian television programming is a much more difficult and fraught process.

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If You Are the One (*IYATO*), produced by provincial Chinese network Jiangsu Television, has been hailed as one of China's most enduringly successful television shows. For nearly a decade since its inception in January 2010, *IYATO* has maintained its status as one the highest rating variety shows in China (*TVTV.HK*, 2019). At one stage, the programme boasted some 50 million viewers globally (Wong, 2011). The Chinese title for *IYATO* is *Fei cheng wu rao* 非诚勿扰, which literally means 'Don't bother unless you are sincere'. A high-end studio production, each episode of the show is packed with spectacles of glamour, fashion and unmitigated entertainment. Based on a show called *Taken Out* that began on Australia's Network 10 in 2008,[1] *IYATO* initially featured a panel of 24 single young women and a series of four to five bachelors. Upon reviewing two to three video clips aimed at giving some information about the first male contestant, the women would take it in turns to quiz him and had the option of turning off their light at any time if he failed to impress them. If the man survived two rounds of questioning, he would have the right to choose the woman he liked. If his chosen woman agreed to go on a date with him, the couple would receive a prize such as a return trip to the Aegean Sea. If she turned him down, he would go home empty-handed. But he could also decide to give up his right to choose a date.[2] The show is fast-paced, its conversation brimming with jokes and repartee, and the bald-headed and bespectacled host, Meng Fei, who has become a household name in China since he started hosting *IYATO* in January 2010, is unfailingly humorous, personable and ready with witty remarks and insightful comments.[3]

In the 6 years since *IYATO*'s debut in Australia in 2013, the programme has been shown on *SBS Viceland* (formerly SBS 2) and *SBS On Demand* on a daily schedule, with the current series continuing into 2020. *IYATO* has become the best-known and longest running dating show on Australian television. According to Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) monthly rating reports, over the last 6 years, the show has been consistently among the top 10 shows on *SBS Viceland* and one of the most watched shows on *SBS On Demand*. It has grown a considerable cult following among English-speaking viewers and continues to be one of the most popular reality shows on SBS television and Australian television in general.

The fact that *IYATO* is a Chinese-language-only talk show without a storyline to follow, and that access to it for English speakers relies entirely on reading subtitles – both of which facts require a consistent effort – does not deter Australian audiences from following the show. This demonstrates the appeal and success of the show in Australia. Yet, news about its popularity in Australia has consistently been received in China with a mixture of surprise, frustration, and even embarrassment and disappointment. Despite the Chinese government's concerted efforts to export cultural products as part of its 'going out' policy (Keane, 2019; Keane and Wu, 2018), *IYATO* is not part of that initiative (Sun, 2018). In our conversations with Chinese cultural elites, such as academics and media practitioners, we have learned that *IYATO* is considered to be shallow and vulgar, that it lacks taste and that it does not represent the best of Chinese culture, its traditions and its values. One discussion, titled 'How should we assess the popularity of *IYATO* on Australian television?' (Zhihu, 2018), which appeared on Zhihu, one of China's largest online forums, reflects how some Chinese viewers are puzzled by the show's popularity in Australia. Some comments are dismissive of the show itself, calling the female contestants 'gold diggers' and the male contestants 'hired actors' and are critical of the taste of Australian viewers. Some viewers are bemused, even frustrated, that it is one of the few windows onto life in China that is open to Australian audiences. But most believe that this is testimony to China's soft power, even though China's policy makers and soft power think tanks would never have entertained the possibility that a dating show, such as *IYATO*, could be of any use in lifting China's international image and promoting Chinese culture.

The Chinese government has spent around 6 billion dollars attempting to boost its soft power agenda, including doing whatever it takes to ensure that its media content 'goes global' (Shambaugh, 2013). However, the rest of the world, especially Western countries, mostly finds

the content of Chinese media boring, hollow and propagandistic (Sun, 2010, 2018). Despite its popularity in China, *IYATO* would not by any means be deemed remotely suitable for export by China's propaganda authorities. Indeed, in October 2011, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued a set of directives that aimed to 'clean up the screen', and a year after its spectacular debut, *IYATO* became a victim of its own success (Bai, 2014). It soon became clear that, having captured the imagination of national audiences with provocatively blunt, even brutal, remarks from some of its contestants, *IYATO* had incurred the displeasure of the Chinese government (Bai, 2014). For instance, Ma Nuo, the contestant widely known as the woman who would rather 'cry in a BMW than smile on a bicycle', grew to become the trademark of the show. SARFT criticised the programme for blatantly promoting materialistic and selfish values, and demanded that the show either lift its moral standards or risk being suspended. In the eyes of the government, *IYATO* had failed to fulfil the mission of all entertainment media in China: to 'provide moral education in the form of entertainment'. Succumbing to this pressure, and in the hope of appeasing the government, the show went through a few cosmetic changes, including adding the trusted social psychologist and academic from the Jiangsu Communist Party School, Huang Han, as a regular guest in 2011.

That said, it has to be noted that even though *IYATO* is subject to the regulatory framework of the Chinese media authorities, it is not produced with the intention – and certainly not charged with the task – of doing propaganda work that primarily aims to promote the Communist Party's legitimacy and its officially endorsed outlook on life and the world, and its values (*People's Daily*, 2016). A sizeable body of scholarly research has been produced with the aim of understanding *IYATO* as a Chinese cultural phenomenon, its social impact in China and the political economy of its production and consumption.[4] But so far there has been no sustained attempt to understand its transnational appeal. Therefore, we are still not clear about what institutional factors and strategic decisions on the part of SBS have enabled the phenomenal success of *IYATO* in Australia. Nor do we know why this Chinese dating show endears itself to Australia's English-speaking viewers in ways that the majority of Chinese media products, including other entertainment programmes, do not. Does SBS's success with the show embody an alternative – and more productive – way of engaging with China, rather than the avoidance approach currently advocated in the China influence narrative?

Aiming to address these questions, this article takes a predominantly cultural-economy approach, which treats television both 'as a series of national industries and apparatuses' and as 'an inherently transnational form' whose content, talent, genres and ideas flow across national borders (Lewis et al., 2016: 20). This case study focusses on SBS's importation of an entertainment programme from China, with the main objective of identifying the possible challenges and opportunities facing Australia's media industries in their efforts to serve the cultural needs of the growing number of Chinese-speaking migrants in Australia, while also bringing to mainstream English-speaking viewers a rare and very welcome facet of China's fast-changing society. Our primary empirical data come from in-depth interviews with SBS channel managers, programmers and subtitle editors who are involved in bringing this Chinese dating show to SBS.[5] In addition, one of the authors of this article has until recently worked as head of SBS's Subtitling Department, and she serves as the leading subtitler of *IYATO*. Our discussion also incorporates her direct experience of translating the show's content.

Through the prism of the experiences of these individuals at SBS and our conversations with them, we aim not just to deal with the way in which a cultural artefact such as *IYATO* is brought to Australian audiences but also to unravel the institutional culture and processes that have produced that artefact. Thus, we approach the statements of these industry people not as a series of self-evident stories accounting for SBS's success with *IYATO* but rather as different narratives about SBS,

the phenomenon of cultural production, audiences, multiculturalism and innovation. Here, taking our cue from 'culture of production' researchers such as Du Gay et al. (1997), we argue that in understanding the processes involved in bringing *IYATO* to Australian audiences, we need to consider not only the occupational roles, job titles and professional activities of key people within SBS but also – and more importantly – how SBS's 'culture of production' informs its intra-organisational decisions and activities, and how these decisions and activities in turn embody the values, ethos and beliefs that have come to be associated with SBS.

Insights from two areas of research provide useful context for this discussion. One area concerns itself with the value and viability of public service media. In recent decades, due to the entrenchment of a neoliberal logic in most countries in the global West, public service media have been confronted with increasingly conflicted imperatives. On one hand, they are first and foremost public cultural institutions whose core mission it is to provide universally accessible content of social value that is not otherwise being delivered by the commercial media sector. On the other hand, increasingly, public service media have had to heed the bottom line. In response to this dual imperative, these organisations have needed to identify ways of generating content that has both social and economic value (Lowe and Martin, 2014). The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) responded to this challenge by expanding its role as a public service broadcaster to become a public service media organisation, incorporating digital platforms so as to engage with audiences via multiple platforms and modes of delivery (Hutchinson, 2014).

Over the last decade or so, SBS, another public service broadcaster in Australia, has also had to operate according to the logic of this dual imperative. On one hand, it needs to deliver content that is popular and has high entertainment value, and will therefore rate well; on the other hand, it also needs to fulfil its mission of increasing public awareness of cultural diversity and promoting understanding and acceptance of cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity. The perceived key to delivering these dual and sometimes conflicting imperatives is to use innovative forms of expression to exploit Australia's diverse creative resources (Australian Government, 1991: Part 2, Section 6). Thus, as SBS's ethno-multiculturalism has evolved to become a mainstream version of cosmopolitan and popular multiculturalism, the notion of difference has been identified as a key resource for innovation (Ang et al., 2008: 19–20). SBS's strategies vis-à-vis *IYATO* must be understood against this backdrop.

The other key area of research here is concerned with the production and transnational circulation of reality TV, especially the cultural economy of localising global TV franchises. Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, a dramatic shift in the television industries to a reregulated, multichannel environment led to inexpensive programming that could potentially flow across different markets (Bonner, 2003; Ellis, 2000; Moran, 1998). These decades also saw the opening of East Asian TV markets and the global flow of their programmes (Keane et al., 2007; Moran and Keane, 2003; White, 2005). Scholars began to investigate why some programmes become successful despite the inherent cultural differences between shows and local audiences, and how genres travel across national borders (Bielby and Harrington, 2008). We learn through an analysis of *Bachelor/rette*, for instance, that Australian audiences prefer a somewhat different way of declaring love from American audiences, despite sharing a common romantic vocabulary; hence the need to 'glocalize' the script (McAlister, 2018). Some argue that the key to success lies in the balancing act between knowing how to make programmes that have global appeal and knowing what the local customs are (Moran, 2010). Similarly, Fung (2015) points to the need for a complex and often long process of cultural adaptation, as well as the localisation of knowledge in different locales and various cultural and social contexts. Drawing on these perspectives, this article explores how SBS fruitfully exploits and negotiates the tension between the global and the local.

IYATO, SBS and the cultural economy of multiculturalism

SBS, one of the five free-to-air networks in Australia, is a national, hybrid-funded commercial and public broadcasting network. To understand the reasons behind the success of *IYATO* on SBS, it is important to understand that the network's management has had to take into account a range of imperatives, including the need to maintain gender equity in addressing the audience's needs, to capitalise on the audience's familiarity with certain genres, to ensure that the translation and subtitling process adds to rather than detracts from the programme's value and to harness social media in effectively promoting the show.

Established in January 1978 initially as a radio-only broadcaster, SBS added television to its services in April 1979 (SBS, 2019). The SBS Charter stipulates the goal of providing 'multilingual and multicultural radio, television and digital media services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society' (Australian Government, 1991: Part 2, Section 6). Thanks to SBS's offerings, Mandarin speakers in Australia can access daily news and current affairs from China, both on *SBS TV* (6:30 a.m.–7:00 a.m.) and on *SBS Mandarin Radio* (7:00 a.m.–9:00 a.m.). In addition to these programmes, SBS recently launched a 24-hour, free-to-air, high-definition *World Movies* channel, where audiences can also access Chinese-language films.

Some of SBS's other initiatives aiming to cater to the Chinese-speaking population, however, have not succeeded. For instance, in 2013, the network simultaneously launched an online Virtual Community Centre for Chinese Australians and a locally produced Mandarin TV news service. Designed to broadcast once a week and featuring locally produced Mandarin news with both English and Chinese subtitles, both initiatives lasted for just 10 months before folding due to low ratings and high production costs.

Although ratings have become increasingly important to SBS, unlike fully commercial channels and media companies in Australia – which are driven primarily by ratings – SBS has an original mandate to ensure equity and access to Australian listeners and viewers from Languages Other Than English (LOTE) backgrounds (Australian Government, 1991: Part 2, Section 6). At the same time, in an era of an increasingly neoliberal economic order and declining government funding, SBS, like other publicly funded media organisations in Australia, has needed to explore innovative ways of turning notions of multiculturalism, diversity and difference into marketable attributes (Sun et al., 2011). As far back as 2003, then-Prime Minister John Howard reframed Australia's multicultural policy by replacing the term 'cultural diversity' with 'productive diversity', thereby emphasising the economic usefulness of diversity and the importance of the pragmatic use of cultural diversity as a resource for economic growth (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003).

Since the earliest stages of its development, SBS's LOTE programming has been dominated by European-language content and being primarily driven by audiences who migrated from Europe. Our interviews with key people who were directly involved in the decision to acquire, schedule and promote *IYATO* make it clear that the introduction of *IYATO* to SBS audiences in 2013 came at a moment when SBS was becoming keenly aware of the need to grow a younger audience (i.e. less than 40 years old), largely through popular entertainment programmes. This was evidenced in the relaunch of SBS 2, later rebranded as *SBS Viceland*, as a younger audience channel. It was the view of Ben Nguyen, SBS 2's channel manager, and his colleagues that, in order to balance the network's largely European-language content and respond to the growing number of migrants from Asian countries, SBS needed more popular entertainment programmes from these countries. On the lookout for new possibilities, Nguyen, who was tasked with programming for the newly relaunched channel, came across a story in an international media outlet about the controversy surrounding *IYATO* and its huge popularity, not just within China but also in the Chinese diaspora in Australia

and around the world (Sun, 2018). Also, realising that there was an Australian connection – the format of *IYATO* was originally based on Network 10's *Taken Out* – he approached Jiangsu Television with a proposal to purchase initially 13 episodes as Series 1.

Jiangsu Television was happy to sell the show, and decided to sell the earlier episodes starting in 2010, including those SARFT's clean-up of the series, instead of the most recent episodes broadcast in 2013. This was Jiangsu Television's decision, rather than a deliberate choice by SBS. Yet, in retrospect, it turned out to be hugely beneficial to SBS when its efforts to grow the popularity of the show paid off, and SBS could then continue purchasing episodes of the show in the order of their original production. As will be discussed later in this article, *IYATO* endeared itself to Australian audiences for its brutal honesty, its authenticity and its uncensored representation of China's social reality. Nguyen told us that the show continued to be popular after the 2011 clean-up, both in China and abroad, and its initial success in Australia paved the way for the growth of a sustained and regular fan base who quickly settled into the habit of viewing the show religiously, often as a ritual of gathering around the television with friends and family.

It is important to note that, to date, Australia is the only country in the world that has imported *IYATO* and broadcast it with English subtitles, thereby ensuring its continuing popularity among mainstream English-speaking viewers. When asked to explain Australia's unique success in this regard, SBS channel managers identified multiple factors, but primarily attributed it to the distinctive nature of SBS. *SBS Viceland*'s channel manager John Boehm, who is responsible for making the decision to continue buying the show, believes that SBS is globally unique among media organisations:

> Frankly, it probably just comes down to the fact [that] a lot of television is risk-averse. SBS is unique in that we are partially government funded. TV stations cannot take big risks. They can't risk airing a Chinese show on prime time. No other channels would have that done in Australia because they would have lost money if they hadn't rated well. But SBS is here. It has a Charter about promoting multiculturalism. That is why we can take risks. And we can take risks. That's why we are here. Australia is very unique because we have SBS. (John Boehm, 2019, personal interview)

SBS management indeed took a risk in its initial decision to air the show. When the programming team was asked to provide an estimation of the potential audience size, it was predicted to be around only 4000. But the decision to run the show went ahead as scheduled and, as it turned out, the show's initial ratings indicated that as many as 30,000 people were watching on the first night. And risk-taking was associated not only with the initial decision to import the show but also with the scheduling of the programme. As Nguyen told us, based on the success of Series 1, the network took the bold decision to repeat the series while also screening Series 2, which eventually led to the scheduling pattern of showing two new episodes on weekend evenings, and then repeats each night for the rest of the week, a rare scheduling pattern in television. This decision turned out to be crucial to the long-term success of the show, as the 7-day coverage kept capturing viewers at different times and places.

If there was a risk associated with running the show, it was a calculated risk. And there were other aspects of *IYATO* that decision makers believed would make that risk worthwhile. Boehm told us that many of the entertainment programmes aimed at younger audiences had a predominantly male audience base; therefore, a dating show, whose audience would usually be two-thirds female, would to some extent have the desirable outcome of addressing this gender imbalance.

There were also a few other things about *IYATO* that made this risk-taking safer. For instance, unlike many European television dramas and Latin-American 'telenovelas' (soap operas), which run for many episodes and require viewing continuity, dating shows such as *IYATO* do not suffer too much from discontinuous or intermittent viewing; indeed, each episode can be viewed as a

stand-alone programme. This makes it possible for many viewers to stumble on the show and then become addicted to it. Furthermore, according to Boehm, Australian audiences were already familiar with reality television as a genre, and the format, lighting and tropes associated with the genre were thus 'easily understandable' to Australian audiences.

Social media, together with strategic programme scheduling, were effective in encouraging the formation of a viewing habit on the part of audience members as well as the ritual of family or group viewing, both of which were crucial to the cultivation of a loyal fan base. SBS's social media team took advantage of the emergence of *Twitter* and other social media platforms, such as *Facebook*, to share audience responses, screenshots and funny remarks online. Caleb James, former channel manager of SBS 2, attributed some of this success to the fact that the screening of the show coincided with the emerging popularity of social media as a platform or 'second screen' to discuss the show in real time while watching the show. According to James, *Twitter* connected viewers across Australia, allowing them to post 'sharable' screenshots from the show and creating an instant ripple effect, thereby allowing the show to gain momentum in forming a solid fan base, as well as facilitating the ritual of group viewing among family and friends. He also noted that the show presented itself as conversational fodder among friends, colleagues and family members, contributing both to habit formation on the part of the audience and socialisation among them. Some of the screenshots from the show became widely circulated memes, and many viewers formed a rapport with a certain guest on the show, and made a point of following her journey in the search for Mr Right.

The greatest challenge SBS took on with *IYATO* was the decision to subtitle the show. Prior to *IYATO*, SBS had not subtitled a reality show. Not only is a reality show like *IYATO* talk intensive but, more importantly, in terms of impediments to accessing the programme's content, there is no storyline or plot – as there is in a film or scripted drama series – to make the viewing experience easier and get audiences hooked on the story. Typically *IYATO* is subtitled from beginning to end, with only occasional gaps when contestants dance. To follow the show, non-Chinese-speaking audiences virtually have to glue their eyes to the TV screen all the time, and that is by no means a small ask. Well-produced subtitles that are intelligible and relevant to Australian audiences and that communicate the programme's unique Chinese flavour and experiences have been essential to the accessibility and success of the show. The fact that the English subtitles convey host Meng Fei's humorous and witty banter so successfully to Australian viewers is testimony to the effectiveness of the translation. In the meantime, the fact that audiences consistently enjoy watching a heavily subtitled talk show demonstrates *IYATO*'s exceptionally strong appeal. As Nguyen points out, while people relate to universal experiences of dating, love and relationships, the ultimate appeal of the show comes from what he calls a 'sense of cultural uniqueness' it brings to Australian audiences. This uniqueness or point of difference has a lot to do with the cognitive, cultural and linguistic processes that are mobilised when the two languages and cultures intersect, and this helps to explain why there is a gap between what Chinese viewers see – or miss – in the show, and what Australian viewers pick up – or what goes over their heads. For example, while living far apart is perfectly acceptable in a relationship in China, it is viewed as a primary obstacle to starting a relationship to many Australians. Also, while certain words that are used to comment negatively on another's appearance are regarded as normal and acceptable by many Chinese people, those words, once translated into English, are often seen as 'blunt' or 'brutally honest' by Australians. This is because making negative comments on another's appearance is commonly accepted in China, whereas Australians tend to refrain from making such comments.

IYATO has had to go through a cross-lingual and cross-cultural translation before it is brought to Australian audiences. Mismatches in cognitive environments between source and target language groups, together with missing contexts when transplanting the show from China to Australia,

become inevitable and require careful manoeuvring and skilled negotiation in the translation process. As the key subtitler of the show, one of us regularly has had to deal with such challenges. For example, we found that the word 'simple' in Chinese (简单) has the same meaning when it is used to describe both a lifestyle and a person, but in English 'a simple lifestyle' and 'a simple person' mean completely different things, with the latter having a negative connotation. For another instance, in English, the expression 'spare tyre' carries the extended meaning of extra fat around one's belly, while in Chinese it means 'back-up boyfriend/girlfriend'.

Often enough an expression is innocuous in Chinese but becomes laden with meaning when translated into English. Things such as 'long-distance relationship', 'living with one's parents-in-law', 'handing over your salary to your wife', 'carrying your girlfriend's handbag indicating your love for her', or comments on someone's appearance or personal circumstances are normal in a Chinese context and hence are taken for granted. But in an Australian setting, these 'normal' expressions and practices become cultural elements that inform Australian audiences about differences in Chinese life and society, of which they have only limited knowledge. Similarly, social practices and behaviours that are revealed in the show, such as widespread entrepreneurship, with virtually every contestant starting up her or his own business; the prevalence of prenuptial agreements; attitudes towards gay relationships; the unabashed embrace of materialism; buying frenzies, as seen in the 11 November nationwide online sale; or even racist remarks – all of which are taken for granted by Chinese viewers as aspects of their daily lives – are keenly picked up on by Australian viewers, who then judge these practices and behaviours – for better or for worse – against their own cultural background. A typical example is around the expression of love. When a male contestant follows a girl he likes on the show, Chinese audiences view his obsessive behaviour as evidence of his love, passion and sincerity, while such behaviour is immediately perceived as stalking and creepy by Australian viewers. This sense of the cultural uniqueness of the show partly comes from genuine cultural differences, such as filial piety, and partly from perceptions grounded in an Australian cultural and cognitive setting. It seems that the English-subtitled version of the show has assumed a life of its own and has opened up new ways of seeing the original Chinese version. It is clear that the value-adding subtitling process, in addition to the host of strategies discussed here, has ensured the phenomenal success of the show on SBS.

Balancing sameness with difference

The reasons that account for the popularity of *IYATO* in China are also to some extent applicable when it comes to Australia. Both Chinese and international audiences appreciate the 'brutal honesty' of the contestants, which presents an unofficial, and even alternative, version of the China story. The contestants, who are ordinary young people from all walks of life, are encouraged to speak their minds on the show; Chinese and Australian audiences alike relate to their experiences and stories, and frequently share them via social media. The show deals in the universal and enduring themes of love and the search for intimacy, and all of our interviewees at SBS identified this as the ultimate factor that delivers the element of cultural familiarity, relatability and resonance. Furthermore, it is a high production value show, with a visuality that is 'over the top', the sound, glamour and spectacle so overwhelming that it feels like it may 'break the television set', in the words of Brenden Dannaher, a producer and subtitle editor who has been responsible for the post-production of the English version of the show. Besides, he adds, 'given that there are always 24 good-looking and glamorous young women and often a handsome young man, what's not to like?'

Was the initial decision to buy *IYATO* driven by the need to procure popular entertainment programmes that would potentially rate well, or was it motivated more by the desire to introduce nourishing and rich cultural content from non-English-speaking countries to Australian audiences?

Among our interviewees, the answer was without doubt the former. In this sense, SBS's programming decisions do not seem to differ much from purely commercial television networks. But what sets SBS apart from commercial stations is its strategy of bringing culture through entertainment. As Nguyen said, 'For a TV show to be successful, we need to have a large audience. In order to bring groups of different audience members to a show, entertainment value is the best way to achieve that'. To Nguyen, entertainment is the goal, but culture is the added value that comes with and through the entertainment, and in this sense, the dating show format is a 'Trojan horse' that smuggles cultural content in without the audience knowing that they are being offered some inside knowledge of Chinese culture and society in addition to pure entertainment. The Trojan horse strategy aims to attract young viewers who would normally watch entertainment programmes on commercial channels, while also retaining the 'rusted-on SBS viewers'. And judging by the popularity of the show, the strategy seems to have worked.

Our conversations with SBS managers, editors and subtitlers suggest that the appeal of *IYATO* to English-speaking Australian audiences stems from that 'magical balance' between familiarity and reliability, the notion of sameness, on one hand, and the fascinating, entertaining, revealing and sometimes shocking and confronting element of difference, on the other. In Dannaher's view, if it is the sameness factor that gets the audience in the door, it is the difference that explains its enduring appeal. As James remarked, many reality shows you see on local television can be quite parochial, but *IYATO* 'opens a rare window onto Chinese life' and, in doing so, enables English-speaking audiences to learn something about a country that sends so many Chinese migrants to live in this country, some of whom are their neighbours, friends and colleagues. Given the growing importance of China to Australia's economic prosperity, Nguyen notes, it stands to reason that SBS's audience would be interested in content that 'helps inform them about current social issues in China'. As Stephen Schafer, one of the subtitle editors of the show, says,

> To non-Chinese viewers it presents issues related to dating, social conventions and values from another culture, and is unlike most Western dating shows. So both sameness and surprise would be at work in this case, depending on the audience segment.

For this reason, Schafer believes that the show attracts a 'more-curious-than-average non-Chinese viewer':

> I'm sure that Australians would also like to learn more about the politics, culture and society of one of Australia's most important trading partners and a dominant political force in the region. But twentieth- and twenty-first-century Chinese history and current affairs are fraught with political difficulties, so Chinese programs about these subjects could be regarded as problematic or propagandistic. Most of what we do see, made by Westerners, does seem to skirt most of the real tough issues.
>
> At first, I guess *IYATO* was a novelty. Even though it has settled in to a long-standing regular spot, I think something of that novelty may persist, but perhaps it now serves more as a window into the lives of people like the Chinese students, Chinese workers, Chinese families who are much more in evidence in society these days than they were even a decade ago. (Stephen Schafer, personal interview)

Dannaher also confesses that as a viewer, he personally has learned a lot from the show. Prior to working on *IYATO* as a post-production editor, his understanding of China came mainly from three sources: the theories of socialism and communism that he learned at high school, some old films about China and coverage of China in news and current affairs. He thought that the first two sources were dated and the third was a largely negative portrayal of China, because 'bad news travels fast'. *IYATO* has enabled him to see what China is like after a few decades of rapid social

change. Besides, he has learned about the significance of filial piety in Chinese culture, as well as the impact of China's one-child policy.

In 2015, as part of a promotional initiative, SBS aired a documentary titled *Nineteen Reasons to Love IYATO*, in which local personalities in the media and show business – all fans of *IYATO* – were invited to nominate their own reasons for liking the show. The responses were exceptionally diverse and provided clues to why viewers from other cultures and nations also like the show. Forum guests described the programme as 'addictive' and 'like an episode of *The Hunger Games*'; they liked its 'sheer honesty', because it reveals both the 'brutal side of love' and 'all the awkwardness of a first date'. Many singled out the show's host Meng Fei, describing him as a 'humorous host full of wisdom' and expressing appreciation of his relationship tips. In response to our interview questions, Schafer echoed these sentiments but described the situation in a most imaginative manner: 'As a competition it has a sporting aspect to it, things are at stake, there are winners and losers'. To Schafer, 'the big set and large audience create a grand scene, like a sports match, pop concert or political rally, perhaps. It's an arena, like the Colosseum, where girls and contestants are like gladiators'.

An effective policy for attracting and growing the audience is to 'get the audience in the door first' through entertainment by carefully negotiating difference (novelty) and sameness (familiarity), and then smuggle in a regular dose of cultural knowledge through the back door. But this policy can only work if viewers are not aware that they are being taught a class in cross-cultural literacy while they are watching the show. In Dannaher's words, anything worth teaching has to be learned voluntarily by viewers, not taught by the show: 'You have to want to learn the info yourself, through lots of raw information, from authentic people who speak naturally'. In the current era of neoliberal cultural economy, cosmopolitan multiculturalism has to a large extent depended on the strategy of popular multiculturalism as a prerequisite. On a regular basis, Dannaher has to decide what to leave in and what to edit out so as to shorten the show to fit within SBS's time slots, and in doing so, he can weed out the potentially boring parts of each episode. To him, the appeal of the show comes from the fact that 'Chinese culture is exposed, not lectured on'. Adept at choosing potentially sharable screenshots, he always tries to pick those that are still funny when taken out of context, those that can give viewers a different slant on the programme. One of his screenshots featured a female contestant asking the male contestant, a butcher, 'What do you slaughter? Is it pigs, ducks or chickens?'

It is clear that the great majority of Chinese television content fails to be chosen for broadcast either because it is not entertaining enough or because it has not figured out how to tell stories in a way that is entertaining enough to foreign viewers. Nguyen told us that SBS had looked at some drama series from China. These programmes clearly want to express some vision of Chinese identity or reinforce certain national mythologies, and are using content to try and advance those aims. However, if these intentions are too transparent, Nguyen said, these programmes would be considered to lack appeal for Australian audiences.

In the hope of capitalising on the success of *IYATO*, SBS has subsequently purchased a number of other Chinese television shows in the reality television genre, including 12 episodes of each of these shows: a parenting show called *Where Are We Going, Dad?* 爸爸去哪儿; *The Brain* 最强大脑; the highly popular Chinese dating show, *Meet the Parents* 中国式相亲 featuring transgender host Jin Xin; and *Dating with Parents* 新相亲时代 (also hosted by Meng Fei). But none of them have rated as well as *IYATO*. Nguyen attributed China's lack of success in exporting television shows to its lack of capacity to tell globally resonant stories:

> Different countries have different levels of maturity when it comes to producing cultural and media exports. For instance, Korea and Turkey are big exporters. China needs to catch up and figure out how to produce shows that will sell internationally.

In other words, SBS is keenly aware of the under-representation of Chinese-language programmes on the network, given China's growing importance to Australia in social, economic and political terms, and given that as many as 4% of Australians currently speak Chinese at home. As Boehm says,

> We regularly assess new Chinese factual/scripted/entertainment series and also investigate recommendations that come to us from audiences/communities. Engaging Chinese-speaking viewers with other [English-language] content is also a strategy, with options like *The Handmaid's Tale* being made available with Chinese subtitles.

Nguyen says it is their goal to pursue more content from big language groups, and he believes that 'it's potentially a growth area for *SBS On Demand*'.

The cultural economy of difference

Our discussion has focussed primarily on SBS as a cultural institution and its institutional culture of production. No doubt future research may benefit from a more systematic study of the viewers and fans of *IYATO*. Our interviews at SBS – and this is also confirmed by one of the authors who worked there – suggest that, with the exception of a regular slot for China Central Television's news as part of SBS's multilingual news service, Australian media organisations do not generally choose to import media and cultural content from China's official media, and what does get selected for import from China is deemed to be free from government propaganda or, in some cases, is labelled as either critical of the Chinese regime or banned. This default avoidance approach stems from fear and anxiety about a perceived threat to Australia's democracy and press freedom if Chinese government propaganda and its underlying communist ideology were to be allowed to become part of Australia's media landscape. Despite this concern, it is clear from our discussion that *IYATO* has also effectively presented itself as a window through which mainstream viewers outside China, such as those in Australia, can understand and even come to like China, or at least become more interested in Chinese society and culture. Furthermore, the show has gone some way towards correcting an image of the Chinese population and media production companies as victims of a totalising censorship. *IYATO*'s success in Australia embodies another irony that so far has eluded public commentators in this country. Due to growing fear and anxiety about China's influence in Australia in recent years, any attempt on the part of Australia's media, publishing and other cultural industries to form a partnership with China is generally eyed with suspicion and distrust (Burrows, 2018; Wen, 2016). Yet, despite its phenomenal and unexpected success in Australia, no public commentators have cited this show as an example of China's soft power, nor as evidence of Australia having come under growing Chinese influence. In the words of one SBS channel manager, *IYATO*, because it is an entertainment show, has flown under the radar amid the often fractious debate about China's soft power, even though, by offering a glimpse of Chinese society that is largely missing from the current China narrative, the show can be seen to bring a much-needed balance, even a healthy antidote, to the China influence narrative. In this sense, even though the Chinese government does not charge the programme with the task of promoting an attractive China, *IYATO* has nevertheless presented an aspect of contemporary Chinese society that is more convincing, relatable and even somewhat endearing to many Western viewers. It has thus inadvertently become a soft power asset, or, as Schafer puts it, *IYATO* 'is simply itself another instance of the "China influence" in action', even though neither the Chinese government nor the China influence pedlars in Australia care to acknowledge it.

In response to China's rise and Australia's economic dependence on China, Australia has seen the gradual entrenchment of the China influence narrative in public discourse over the past few

years. Of course, the issue of China's influence in Australia is complex. But there is a heightened level of anxiety about that influence, and the reason for this anxiety is simple. For the first time in its history, Australia has had to deal closely with a world power – and its biggest trading partner – that is not, as Hugh White puts it, 'Anglo-Saxon', that is not a liberal democracy and, in a nutshell, that is politically and ideologically different (Clark, 2018).

IYATO did not flow into the Australian media space because of digital connectivity. Nor did it land in the country as a result of the Chinese government's globalising strategies. Rather, it arrived as a result of SBS's deliberate strategy of importing popular culture content from China. But our discussion brings to light some key challenges and opportunities for SBS, and for Australia's media sector in general, in attempting to import culturally diverse programmes from overseas. To be sure, Meng Fei and *IYATO* were a godsend to SBS, in its quest for entertainment with a difference. However, apart from this happy alignment of intentions on both supply and demand sides, what accounts for SBS's success with the show is a constellation of many factors, including managerial decisions, programming and promotional strategies, sound editorial judgement and the translator's in-depth cross-cultural sensitivity, knowledge and deft translation skills. In addition, one has to take into account the less tangible resources available to SBS, including the vision of its key decision makers, the passion and enthusiasm of some individuals involved in the programme's English post-production and even a general institutional attitude that supports and even nourishes innovation through risk-taking.

The political, cultural and economic imperatives facing SBS have evolved considerably since its inception, but it is the uniqueness of SBS as a public institution with a mandate to encourage cultural diversity and promote multiculturalism that ensures that it continues to be space where the notion of difference is celebrated. However, in this era of an increasingly entrenched neoliberal economic order and a shrinking space for cosmopolitan multiculturalism, SBS does face challenges in continuing to drive innovation and bring content 'with a difference' to Australian audiences.

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Notes

1. *If You Are the One* (*IYATO*) is one of more than 30 shows globally that were modelled on Network 10's *Taken Out*. Coming full circle, The Seven Network's *Take Me Out* was in turn inspired by the success of *IYATO*.
2. The new format of the show, which started in 2017, is quite different. It starts with the male contestant allocating each woman either to his 'favourite' zone or to a 'maybe' zone for observation. There are a number of other significant innovations (Lim, 2017). Australian viewers tend to prefer the old format.
3. Meng Fei started his career as a printing factory worker. By chance, he became a cameraman in Jiangsu Television and, in 2002, showed his talent as a news presenter in a morning news programme. He shot to fame after he started hosting *IYATO*. One of the authors of this article has had a long-standing connection with Meng Fei, and much of the information about the host and *IYATO* draws on her first-hand knowledge.
4. For a selection of scholarly works that analyse *IYATO*, see Bai and Song (2014), Lewis et al. (2016), Luo and Sun (2014), Sun (2018), Wang (2016) and Zavoretti (2016).
5. The interviewees from Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) were Caleb James, former SBS 2 channel manager; John Boehm, SBS Viceland channel manager; Ben Nguyen, SBS channel manager; Brenden Dannaher, subtitle editor; and Stephen Schafer, subtitle editor. Interviews took place at SBS's headquarters in Sydney on 1–3 July 2019.

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