

## A Proposed Approach for Successful Cloning of Foreign TV Shows in China

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It is a popular phenomenon for Chinese TV entertainment to clone Western original TV shows. This paper analyzes this phenomenon and the underlying factors so as to prescribe some solutions to tackle this problem. The hypothesis is that if we expect a successful “cloning” of the Western originals, we should incorporate some Chinese social values into the cloned show formats so that the indigenous version enjoys both Chinese and foreign elements. This paper presents a theoretical framework of cloning that includes indigenous innovation upon foreign shows. It delineates the nine ingredients of show formats, such as the creating time, the types and the selection process, and so forth. This paper compares *Win in China* (*Ying Zai Zhong Guo*), a cloned inspirational reality show launched by CCTV-2, with the original *The Apprentice* of NBC, to verify the hypothesis mentioned above.

It has become very common for Chinese TV entertainment to clone various foreign TV shows. In 2005, *Super Girls* (*Chao Ji Nv Sheng* 超级女声) of Hunan Satellite TV cloned *American Idol*, and it also brought “the entertainment of grass-roots and the carnival of populace” (Long, 2006, p. 1). Meanwhile, *Lai Ka My Show* (*Lai Ka Wo Xing Wo Xiu* 莱卡我型我秀) and *My Hero* (*Jia You, Hao Naner* 加油!好男儿) of Shanghai Dragon TV or *Dream China* (*Meng Xiang Zhong Guo* 梦想中国) of CCTV all copied *Super Girls* (*Chao Ji Nv Sheng* 超级女声) of Hunan Satellite TV, cloned from *American Idol*.

In 2006, other types of cloned TV reality shows also appeared on the TV screen. *Win in China* (*Ying Zai Zhong Guo* 赢在中国) cloned NBC’s *The Apprentice*; *The Dancing Party* (*Wu Lin Da Hui* 舞林大会) of Shanghai Dragon TV imitated *Strictly Come Dancing* of Britain; *I am a Champion* (*Wo Shi Guan Jun* 我是冠军) of Hunan Satellite TV copied *Amazing Race* of America; and *The Well-known Reputation* (*Ming Sheng Da Zhen* 名声大震) of Hunan Satellite TV cloned *Just the Two of Us* of Britain. Of course, the good shows depended on successful cloning while the bad shows only reflected parodies of foreign reality shows.

In 2007, *The First Touch by Heart* (*Di Yi Ci Xin Dong* 第一次心动) of Chongqing Satellite TV was forced off the air by SARFT (the State Administration of Radio Film and Television), which has applied a series of specific management measures and rules to TV shows. Thus, vulgarity became the fatal weakness of TV shows in China (Shi, 2007), bringing the once ascending Chinese TV entertainment to a low point.

In 2008, China had several big shocks attracting people’s attentions, including the South Snowstorm, the Wen Chuan Earthquake, the Beijing Olympics, and the Financial Tsunami, which all left the TV shows fading out of the audience’s vision.

The famous saying of Shakespeare that “...to be or not to be, that is the question” truly reflects the dilemma faced by Chinese TV entertainment. This paper is an attempt to analyze

the phenomenon in which Chinese TV entertainment clones foreign TV shows to identify the causes and propose the solutions for this difficult issue.

Why is the cloning phenomenon widespread in Chinese TV entertainment? This question has been examined by Professor Hong Yin, the Vice President of School of Journalism & Communication at Tsinghua University, who has studied Chinese TV entertainment for many years. He once pointed out:

The creative idea of reality shows was not included at the cost of the shows in China. And the National Intellectual Property did not put the creative idea of reality shows into the strict protection measures and legal provisions. This might be the main reason why most national TV entertainment cloned foreign TV shows. (Yin, 2004, para. 6)

A TV producer once said, "In America, TV entertainment is so mature and developed that every mature show there can endure the continuous examination of the market. If we use it directly, the rating will guarantee" (Eastbay.com, 2001). Di Miao, the President of School of Liberal Arts of Communication, University of China, said, "TV audience is a riddle. Even if we reason logically, we cannot obtain the right result. For the TV professionals, they would rather copy foreign TV shows than create new ones by themselves. It is very important to figure out how foreigners can make them successfully" (Miao, 2006, p. 1).

When studying mature western TV shows, not only should we study the "outside" of their shows, also we should learn from the "inside" of them. That is to say, we should learn how they put western values into TV shows to make them steady while amusing the audience. The problem is that some cloned TV shows lack the social values of our society and fail to present the spirit of the TV show. Thus, they have only cloned the "outside" of foreign shows and have not been able to cast off their destinies of failure.

#### Literature Review

The phenomenon of Chinese TV entertainment cloning Western original TV shows results from the international flow of TV programs. According to a UNESCO study, this international flow began in the 1970s with a clear trend of one-way traffic from the big exporting countries to the rest of the world (Varis, 1974). With the development of this trend, there was a significant rise of global television since the mid-1980s. Global television needed to be understood historically and sociologically in the wider context of globalization (Barker, 1997). Under the influence of globalization, TV stations in China were required to be more financially independent after the open door policy was implemented. There was growing pressure on the Chinese TV station to consider its programs in the context of the market (Chan, 2002). All these issues mentioned above contributed to the cloning phenomenon of TV shows in China. In contrast to researchers abroad, national researchers and professionals have recently drawn their interests in this field.

In 2001, Yong Wu, a professional in TV entertainment, pointed out that many TV practitioners were fully aware of the cloning phenomenon in the field but they sometimes had

no other choice than to accept it. Everyone knew innovation was good, but innovation required the effective superposition of money, wisdom, and time. It was efficient to employ the “successful” experience in other countries, but it also became the most deadly flaw for the further development of TV shows (Wu, 2001). With the popularity of *Happy Camp* (*Kuai Le Da Ben Ying* 快乐大本营) and *Love Date* (*Mei Gui Zhi Yue* 玫瑰之约) on Hunan TV, there appeared an unprecedented “entertainment fever” in the national TV entertainment. During this period, various TV shows claiming “fun” and “joy” appeared on the screen, and their formats and contents were similar. A surge in the “cloning wind” suddenly emerged in the national TV industry (Xiao, 2003). The professionals and researchers put forward their own views regarding the notion that Chinese TV shows lacked innovative ideas and blindly cloned foreign TV shows from the following perspectives:

- Cloning ignores the differences among different countries. As Xiao Bin points out:

Those imitators learnt from the formats of foreign shows while ignoring the cultural differences, geographical differences and other important factors. Therefore, the cloned show had many problems, causing low ratings. Could you imagine why? In addition to personal qualities, artistic skill and other factors, the lack of individuality was the crux of the problem. To change this situation, individuality was the source of life in Chinese TV shows. (Xiao, 2003)

- In the long run, cloning TV shows lead to a lack of creativity. Zhishun Zhou, director of *The First Touch by Heart* (*Di Yi Ci Xin Dong* 第一次心动) of Chongqing Satellite TV, stated that as Chinese TV shows had been copying British and American TV shows, the whole TV entertainment was short of creative ideas because the well qualified shows were copied by other TV producers in the nation. In the long term, the audience would feel bored due to the similarities shared among the shows on different TV stations (Zhou, 2006).
- Cloning resulted from the profits of business and the lack of innovation. Its popularity was due to “business profits, in other words, the pursuit of ratings and the lack of innovation” (Wang, 2003, p. 34). Tackling the problem needed creative thinking and establishment of brand shows.
- When cloning foreign TV shows, divergences were expressed in different ways. When national professionals produced reality shows, they not only employed successful TV shows’ modes and advanced technology adopted in Europe and America, but knew well the differences between the two. These differences were mainly reflected in ideological, cultural, and aesthetic differences (Ran, 2003).
- Cloning was an unconscious stage in the development of Chinese TV shows. Hong Yin (2004) proposed a number of issues raised in the area of TV study, two of which fit our discussion of the cloned phenomenon of TV shows: (1) “what kind of difficulties the

foreign reality shows should confront while they are transplanted to China”; and (2) “what kind of problems we should pay attention to when China develops its reality shows.” He believed that “at present, the understanding of reality shows remains still unconscious for both national researchers and professionals. They have no clear thought of the cloned phenomenon of Chinese TV shows. Thus, their understanding lacks both systematic analysis and tentative thinking” (Yin, Ran, & Lu, 2006). This indicates that Yin was keenly aware of the problems that existed in the cloning process of reality shows in China, but his later study did not address the clear answers of these two issues, and he did not further elaborate on the cloning phenomenon in this field.

The cloning, to some extent, was beneficial to the development of Chinese TV shows because it could also be regarded as an innovation on the basis of employment. Huali Zhang, director of Hunan Entertainment Channel, believed that cloning was not entirely pejorative, for some cloned actions included a kind of self-innovation. “For example, the PK in *Super Girls* (*Chao Ji Nu Sheng* 超级女声) and the public review is entirely original” (Zhang, 2007, para. 5). Unfortunately, he did not elaborate on how to innovate in the process of cloning TV shows.

From the angle of global communication, “due to the influence of institutional background, the development situation and other factors, Chinese TV shows studied more from the formats of foreign TV shows, even the producers thought of the imitation of foreign TV shows as the shortcut of creation” (Wang & Qian, 2008, p. 2). Therefore, while studying the successful cloning of foreign TV shows, they adopted a cross-cultural comparative method to both master cultural connotations of the shows and figured out the cultural constraints of TV shows.

From the view of a conceptual metaphorical analysis of cognitive linguistics, the people of China and the U.S. had different concepts regarding shows’ construction, causing differences in metaphorical usage. Specifically, in China, reality shows were considered to be fierce struggles while in America, people were more inclined to regard the shows as interesting games (He, 2007).

So-called successful cloning has been proposed to account for current popular cloned TV shows. Qu (2009) concluded that a successful clone requires innovation and the soil of vitality of TV shows; successful cloning was the strategic choice for getting rid of the difficulties TV shows faced.

To summarize, the researchers who studied the phenomenon of cloning Chinese TV shows analyzed the causes and dangers of this phenomenon and proposed positive and negative judgments. The final study also mentioned clone and successful cloning, but did not strictly define the concepts and did not analyze the deep linkages between the two.

In contrast, this paper focuses on defining clone and analyzing the importance of cloning successfully. This paper hypothesizes that to clone TV shows successfully, we must include our social values in the TV shows while imitating the format of the foreign TV shows<sup>1</sup>. By doing so, the shows will embrace both indigenous values and foreign TV shows’ elements. Only in this way can foreign TV shows successfully be cloned. This paper tries to present a theoretical framework of a “clone.” We analyze the process of cloning by using the nine

elements of TV shows' formats and the condition of successful cloning in the way of showing social values in the cloned shows.

Lifen Wang, the producer of *Win in China* (*Ying Zai Zhong Guo* 赢在中国), once said "the idea of creating *Win in China* actually comes from *The Apprentice*" (Wang, 2006, p. 6). As a case study, then, we attempt to identify the laws of cloning foreign TV shows by comparing the cases of *The Apprentice* and *Win in China* (*Ying Zai Zhong Guo* 赢在中国) and to determine factors leading to the success of cloning foreign TV shows.

### Methods

There are two methods used in this paper: case study and comparative study. We compare *Win in China* (*Ying Zai Zhong Guo* 赢在中国), a cloned inspirational reality show launched by CCTV-2 with the original *The Apprentice* of NBC in order to demonstrate the validity of the hypothesis mentioned above.

#### *The Theoretical Framework*

Cloning in biology refers to any group of plants or organisms produced asexually from one ancestor. In the computer field, it refers to computers designed to copy the functions of another, usually more expensive, model. In this paper, cloning means a kind of copy in which Chinese TV entertainment learns from foreign TV shows.

To analyze the cloning of Chinese TV shows, we see if Chinese TV shows appear after the identical foreign ones and if Chinese TV shows share consistent elements with the foreign original ones. If these two conditions are met, we can conclude the two TV shows share similarity<sup>2</sup>, which is the basis for concluding that the Chinese TV shows cloned the original foreign ones.

#### *The Time of Creating TV Shows*

We have mentioned above the cloned TV shows should chronologically follow the Western original ones. In other words, the original TV shows must appear first and then the Chinese clone follows.

#### *The Types of TV Shows*

This paper follows Yin et al.'s (2006) classification of TV reality shows into nine types: survival challenges, relationship tests, performance pick-outs, simulated job interviews, identity replacements, puzzle exams, game matches, heterosexual dates, and life skills. All of these types will be applied to analyze cloning in this paper. That is, if we analyze Chinese TV shows cloned from Western ones, they should be the same type of TV show.

The two conditions mentioned above are necessary for determining whether or not the Chinese TV shows are cloned from the foreign ones. In addition, seven properties of each

show need to be similar in order to state the conditions are sufficient and the Chinese TV shows are clones of the foreign original ones, as follows:

*Qualifications of the Participants.* The qualifications of the participants refer to the show organizers' decisions as to what kind of participants have the qualifications to take part in the shows. In this aspect, the cloned TV shows do not share every specific rule with the original foreign ones, but they should share consistency in terms of the qualification of participants.

*The Process of Participation.* The process of participation means how the participants are selected between the time when the participants sign their names with the show organizers and the time when the final round ends. While comparing the two TV shows, the Chinese cloned ones will be slightly different from the Western original ones in the number of participants or one or two sections of the process. But, if the main processes of selection in the two TV shows are similar, we would consider these conditions satisfactory for a true cloning.

*Background of the Players.* The background of the players refers to the personal information of the players, including gender, age, personal experience, and academic background. If we compare a Chinese TV show cloned from an original western TV show, we can see if the backgrounds of the players of the two shows share similar characteristics. If the players share similar background information with the foreign TV show, we can say the national TV shows were cloned from the foreign ones.

*Purpose of Participation.* The purpose of participation means why the players would like to take part in the show. If the TV shows in China have similar purposes for participating in the program with the foreign ones, this indicates the Chinese TV shows were cloned from the foreign ones. Of course, it does not require that the two programs have identical motives; only that similar goals need to be present.

*Participation Tasks.* The participation tasks refer to the tasks the players should finish in the fixed time while taking part in the shows. In this aspect, the tasks involved in the Chinese TV shows should be similar to the tasks in the foreign ones. Only in this condition can we say the Chinese TV shows were cloned from the foreign ones.

*Show Narrative.* The process of shows means how the shows speak its story, which is also called the narrative of the shows. The Chinese TV shows should have the same kind of narrative skills as found in the foreign ones, with only slight alterations. In this case, we can say the Chinese TV shows were cloned from the foreign ones.

*Conflicts in Competition.* The conflicts in competition refer to the process of elimination in the shows in which players compete with each other and are eliminated until a final champion emerges. In this respect, the cloned TV shows should share high consistency with the foreign original ones, with only small differences being permitted.

## Case Study

### *Introduction of the Two TV shows*

*The Apprentice (NBC).* *The Apprentice* is a professional reality show created by Donald Trump which has been broadcast for eight seasons, with approximately 15 episodes per

season. It was first broadcast in January 2004. *The Apprentice* requests its participants<sup>3</sup> to finish difficult commercial assignments in a fixed time and the winner is hired as a senior manager with a high salary in one of Donald Trump's companies.

*Win in China* (*Ying Zai Zhong Guo* 赢在中国) of CCTV-2. *Win in China* was an inspirational commercial reality show launched by CCTV-2 on March 29th, 2006. By June 3, 2008, the third season had been completed. The 12 participants were asked to finish challenging business tasks in a provided time. The final five winners were to receive venture capital funds supported by the venture company and the amounts of the money were not the same.<sup>4</sup>

#### *The Basis of Determining Cloning*

Through the analysis of *Win in China* and *The Apprentice*, we can determine if a TV show appears after another TV show and if the two TV shows share similarities in the types of shows, the qualification of participants, the process of participation, the background of the players, the purpose of participation, the tasks in participation, the process of shows, and the competitive conflicts, and from this we can conclude whether the former TV show was a clone of the latter one.

#### *The Time of Creating TV Shows*

From the time of creating TV shows, *Win in China* met the conditions for it to be considered a clone of *The Apprentice*. The latter was first broadcast in 2004, while the former aired for the first time in 2006.

#### *The Types of TV Shows*

In *The Apprentice*, the purpose of the participants is to find a good job and get a bright future, so *The Apprentice* belongs to the type of simulated job interviews. The theme of *Win in China* is inspiration and venture and seems to have no relationship with jobs at first glance. But venture means the participants look for a "job" for themselves and others as well. In fact, in a broader sense it means the process of personal pursuit and development and belongs to the type of simulated job interviews. Therefore, the two TV shows belong to the same type.

In summary, in regards to the time of creating TV shows and the type of shows, that *Win in China* has the necessary conditions to be considered a clone of *The Apprentice*.

#### *Qualification of the Participants*

*The Apprentice* demands the participants should be legal American citizens or work legally in America, should be more than 21 years old, able to express themselves clearly, should be healthy, and should not be professionals. *Win in China* required that the participants should be more than 18 years old and accord the participation conditions as stated in the law.

They should speak Mandarin while taking part in the show. The venture projects should be done in China proper, not including Hong Kong, Macao, or Taiwan.

The qualifications for taking part in *The Apprentice* were minimal. It is in line with “no threshold” of the current TV shows. *Win in China* is also “no threshold.” Anyone having the dream of venture can realize their dreams and exert their potentials. Therefore, the two share similar qualifications of participation.

#### *The Process of Participation*

Prospective participants for *The Apprentice* download the application form from the internet and record a 10-minute video to introduce themselves, explain why they want to be the apprentice and what kinds of advantages they have. After acceptance, competitors are interviewed in the 16 cities in America. After primary selection, they fly to Los Angeles for two weeks to participate in final interviews.

In *Win in China*, 3000 prospective participants were selected from a database using a professional assessment of Chinese network of excellence. After a complex and strict selection, 108 hopefuls gathered in Beijing for interviews which resulted in the selection of 12 players from 36 participants and 5 players selected from 12 participants.

The players of *The Apprentice* initially prepared a 10-minute self-introduction tape while the players of *Win in China* were chosen from a database system with professional assessment. Therefore, regarding this aspect, the two are not identical, but share a similar process of participation.

#### *Background of the Players*

The 16 participants of *The Apprentice* in the first season were from all walks of life. They had different backgrounds and did not know each other. They were all good-looking and had admirable educational backgrounds or high levels of commercial achievement. Different from *The Apprentice*, some of the 12 players who competed in commercial practices in *Win in China* had run their own businesses for many years while some had just started up. Some had gone abroad while others had not. The players interacted for the first time in the shows, but they shared the same dream of creating their career.

The players of *The Apprentice* and *Win in China* were strictly selected from mass participants all over the country. They differed in terms of age, gender, and educational background, but they all shared the same dream of changing their fates or creating their own careers. The players of *The Apprentice* all competed to be the apprentice of Donald Trump. The players of *Win in China* all wanted to realize the dream of creating their own careers. Therefore, the two TV shows were similar in respect to the background of the players.

#### *Purpose of Participation*

In *The Apprentice*, the players wanted to be the apprentice of Donald Trump to gain experience and learn how to become a billionaire quickly. In *Win in China*, the players wanted

to take advantage of this platform, learn from successful commercial elites, meet potential partners, and receive venture capital funds provided by a venture company to lead to a successful career in the future.

In comparison, the players of both TV shows wanted to improve their professional skills in order to develop and have a greater professional potential. In other words, the players of the two shows shared the same purpose.

#### *Participation Tasks*

In *The Apprentice*, the commercial tasks ranged from easy to difficult. In the commercial practice of the first season of *Win in China*, the tasks also ranged from easy to difficult. The tasks in the first two parts included selling insurance and donating milk for a primary school. The middle parts were rather difficult and the last part was most difficult, such as large-scale business planning activities. Therefore, participation tasks for the two shows shared similar characteristics.

#### *Show Narrative*

In *The Apprentice*, every part contained a commercial task, with the sequence of tasks as follows: reviewing the content of the previous part, assigning the task, finishing the task (parallel narrative), announcing the result, encouraging the winner or announcing the loser, and eliminating the loser. The whole show was structured in chronological order, interspersed with later interviews of the competitors.

In *Win in China*, every part also had a commercial task: reviewing the content of the previous part, assigning the task, finishing the task (parallel narrative), announcing the result, the winner going to the safe place, the loser accepting the evaluation, and eliminating the loser. The show was structured in chronological order, interspersed with later interviews of the players. In comparison, from the aspects of the show narrative, the two TV shows were similar.

#### *Competitive Conflicts*

In *The Apprentice*, Trump chose 16 participants, divided them into two groups and assigned the tasks. The winner continued while the loser was released. The commercial practice of *Win in China* had seven parts. Twelve players were randomly divided into two teams and assigned commercial tasks. The winning team continued to take part while the losing team exited. The last five players competed to be the three top players: the champion, second-place, and third-place. In this way, the two shows exhibited similar competitive conflict.

From the perspectives of the qualification of participants, the process of participation, the background of the players, the purpose of participation, the tasks in participation, the process of shows, and the competitive conflicts, we can conclude that *Win in China* has the necessary

and sufficient conditions to be considered a clone of *The Apprentice*. In other words, *Win in China* has cloned *The Apprentice*.

### The Secret of Successful Cloning

#### *The Apprentice and the “American Dream”*

The big attraction of *The Apprentice* is its reflection of the social values of America. America is a commercial society, and the core values are that everyone is born equally, and can start his or her career from the bottom of the society. If they work hard they can achieve success. People admire those who climb the social ladder from the lower levels, and believe if you are bright and hard-working, you definitely can succeed. So, *The Apprentice* presents the “American Dream” to the audience.

#### *Win in China and “Venture Dream”*

The success of *Win in China* is due to its successful cloning of *The Apprentice*. When Lifan Wang (2006) planned this show, she tackled the problem of how to achieve a successful cloning of *The Apprentice*. However, she warned that simply cloning without any alteration would definitely fail because the Western social values of *The Apprentice* would not be accepted by the audience in China. But if we remove them, the attraction of the show will undoubtedly increase. Therefore, if we want to introduce this kind of TV show, we should consider the show under Chinese circumstances. After considering this problem for some time, she picked out two themes: inspiration and venture. The former inherits the striving spirit of Chinese and the expectations of all parents. The latter is not only the guarantee of our harmonious society, but also the best stage for Chinese to realize their own self-worth, as China today becomes more involved in the business society (Wang, 2006).

Through comparing the cases of *Win in China* and *The Apprentice*, we can conclude that if Chinese TV shows are in line with the show formats of foreign TV shows and the social values of our country, successful cloning can be accomplished.

### Conclusion

The successful clone of *Win in China* leads us to think that the vulgarity of much Chinese TV entertainment may result from the fact that these shows, cloning the foreign TV shows, did not reflect the social values of our society because they lacked innovation. For example, *Wife Swap*, an American TV show, makes wives think over the problems existing in their own family by examining their peer’s family. Without realizing the social value of *Wife Swap*, *Exchange Housewives (Jiao Huan Zhu Fu 交换主妇)* of Qi Lu TV station exchanged the life of a rural and an urban housewife. After this exchange, the urban husband took the exchanged wife to bathe in a sauna center. Among the other failures of the show, bathing in the sauna center with the exchanged half could not be accepted by Chinese audiences.

In contrast, the theme of *Win in China* which involves inspiration and venture reflects the social values of our country and caters to the current situation of rapid Chinese economic development. Only in this way could *Win in China* have succeeded amidst the downturn of current TV shows. Undoubtedly, *Win in China* is a successful cloning and practitioners can learn from it.

To conclude, we can assert that if TV shows meeting the cloning conditions and can reflect the social values of our country, then these TV shows can complete the innovation as a successful clone of foreign original TV shows.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The formats of TV shows in this paper includes show types, the qualification of participants, the process of participation, the background of the players, the purpose of participation, the tasks in participation, the process of shows, and the competitive conflicts.

<sup>2</sup>Similarity here refers to Chinese TV shows sharing a high degree of consistency with the foreign original ones.

<sup>3</sup>Every season the number of participants is slightly different. For example, the number of the participants in the first season was 16; the number of the participants in the second season was 18; the number of the participants in the seventh season was 14.

<sup>4</sup>The champion got 10,000,000 yuan to manage a new enterprise, the second one got 7,000,000 yuan, and the third, fourth, and fifth ones got 5,000,000 yuan. All of them will obtain 35% of the shares of enterprises and will be CEO of the enterprises.

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