

Joining the ‘Office Tribe’ [上班族] and ‘Marrying into a Grand Household’ [嫁入豪門]: Women’s television in Taiwan and pedagogies of late modern gender

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時間: 2011 年 03 月 08 日 (週二)10:00-12:00

地點: 中央大學 文二館 C2-108

Abstract

Lifestyle television is non-fictional programming that aims to instruct its viewer in everyday life practices, from home decoration and food preparation to fashion shopping and child-rearing while promising, in the process, to make the viewer over as a thoroughly modern cosmopolitan subject. The genre has been extensively analysed in Euro-American contexts as connected with neo-liberal regimes of subject formation and governance, whereby the individual is encouraged to take on the project of creating a “D.I.Y. biography” and crafting a new kind of self that takes on personal responsibility for areas of care that were once the province of the state (such as healthcare).

“Lifestyle television” [生活風格電視類型] is not widely recognized as a genre in Taiwan outside of niche cable channels like TLC [旅遊生活台]。 But popular genres like variety and talk TV do include content that seems to aim at equipping people with the new skills of self-management needed to make the most of the opportunities in, and avoid the risks of, life in late modern commodity culture. Much of this programming specifically targets female viewers—offering advice on everything from dressing for work to negotiating the perils of office gossip, and from effective make-up techniques to the skills required to nab a rich husband. Acting in effect as feminine etiquette manuals for the 21st century, these forms of advice-oriented programming provide rich insights into the ways in which contemporary Taiwan media are negotiating models of individualized femininity and ‘enterprising’ modes of gendered selfhood.

This paper explores these questions through close engagement with the popular Taiwan program 女人我最大 (TVBS-G). After briefly placing the program in the context of other examples of “women’s TV” in the Asian region, this paper moves into a closer analysis of how, through the use of comedy and a democratizing mode of address, 女人我最大 negotiates the contradictions between the ideal of reflexive, choice-based selfhood, and the structural constraints on this emergent feminine subject in the context of ongoing gendered social and economic inequities.