

# *Inner Logic of the Localization of TV Program Models: A Critical Analysis of Netflix's Early Expansion in Asia Pacific*

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**Abstract:** The television industry has been grappling with the opposing forces of globalization and localization when it comes to television programs. This paper will take a closer look at the issue and examine it through the lenses of time and space. To illustrate these concepts, the analysis will focus on original programs and TV series produced by Netflix in Japan and South Korea at early stage, and provide practical solutions to the challenges.

## **1. Introduction**

The Korean dramas *The Glory* and *Squid Game* have recently gained widespread attention, drawing focus to their investor, Netflix. In the television industry, globalization and localization have always been a pair of contradictions the industry faces. How can a TV program or drama be accepted in other cultures through globalization? Admittedly, Netflix is one of many streaming companies that have handled this conflict admirably. This article will discuss the globalization and localization of the TV industry by taking the original shows and TV series made by Netflix in Japan and South Korea in early times as examples.

With the North American market becoming saturated, Netflix has been pushing forward its global expansion strategy, which has extended its tentacles to many countries and regions worldwide. For nearly two years, the Asia-Pacific region has been the focus of Netflix's strategic deployment, so exporting series with Asian culture to the global market is the core of its future, as Frater [1] said. It is a big, risky, and radical plan. Those different countries, regions, and culture shock, which has been hard to overcome, are just a series of insurmountable gaps.

## **2. Netflix's TV Programs Early Localization Efforts in Korea**

In the face of these pressures, Netflix's Asian expansion has not been smooth. In 2018, Netflix's original South Korean variety show *Busted* was launched, with the program positioning as the reasoning variety show. The plot of each episode is very close, compatible with the outdoor reality show, quirky plot, exquisite settings, and other elements. The show takes story clues throughout the whole season as the background. It adds personalized costumes and various games, which have not been seen in previous variety shows, so it is a new variety production method and type.

The platform recruited Jang Hy-Jae, who created the famous Korean variety shows *X-Man* (SBS: *Seoul Broadcasting System*, 2003-2007) and *The Birth of a Family* (SBS, 2008-2010) in the early stage, as well as Cao Hyo-jin and Kim Chu-hyung of “*the longest-running variety show on the SBS channel*” [2] *Running Man* (SBS, 2010-), to bring together the three famous program producers who left SBS one after another. Among the guest stars was Liu Jae-shek, known as “*the nation's most popular entertainer*” mentioned by Yuna [3]. The famous casts and Netflix produced by these two big labels helped make the first season of *Busted* a hit. However, the show's reputation declined after its release, and even Netflix's movie-level production failed to reverse the decline.

## 2.1 Reasons for the Early Failure of Netflix's Localization in Korea

There are several reasons for its failure. First, Netflix's usual full-season release did not satisfy South Korean viewers. Audiences are more used to South Korea's on-air, on-camera programming model, such as the national variety *Running Man*. The characters of the show's actors are gradually formed during the filming and by constantly adjusting the audience's response to the characters in the show. Finally, those characters can gradually penetrate the hearts of people. In the absence of communication with the audience, as a net variety show, *Busted* unexpectedly became the worst real-time and interactive Korean variety show.

The show was filmed centrally in the winter of 2016, and each cast character was forced into the script after pre-evaluation. Some of the characters did not match the personalities of those guest stars, which made the audience suspect that they were holding a script with answers. Netflix refers to the national impression of its guest stars while ignoring their characteristics. Different from the standard Korean reality show, Liu Jae-Shek is not the host Liu Jae-Shek, but the detective Liu Jae-Shek who takes the role in the plot. The other actors also take the detective's identity from beginning to end. In the well-designed detective drama plot, all of them are unable to jump out of this role and show their personal charm.

There is no denying that Netflix's production is excellent. When the trailer was released in advance, it could be seen that the producers' efforts were different from the style of variety shows produced by South Korean TV stations. Nevertheless, this feeling, like American TV series, is unsuitable for this variety show. In the screen presentation, the program group maintained Netflix's concise style, delicate and simple, which means that there are no fancy subtitles and special effects in the post-production of variety shows. As the paper *The Korean Wave* [4] described that it is well known that fancy subtitles and exaggerated special effects are the standard collocation of Korean variety shows and have even become the standard collocation of variety shows in Asian countries deeply influenced by *The Korean wave*. Although *Busted* was broadcast in more than 190 countries worldwide, as the program was produced by a Korean team, most of its audience would be in Asia due to cultural differences.

Furthermore, the Asian audience and the program group have been accustomed to taking fancy subtitles and exaggerated effects. This refinement kind of post-production expression is more like a European or American variety show or drama, which is conducive to the authenticity of the current situation. However, it fails the audience, who are accustomed to the post-production of Korean programs to adapt to it. The combination of Korean variety materials with post-production in Europe and America makes the overall style of the program difficult to accept.

## 3. Netflix's TV Programs Early Localization Efforts in Japan

In addition to local original TV shows that Netflix has partnered with in other countries, Netflix is also moving previously successful TV shows to other countries. Another example is the original Netflix show 2019, *Queer Eye: We Are in Japan!* *Queer Eye* has been highly rated in the United

States for its highly touching content. In 2019, *Queer Eye* launched Tokyo, Japan, a season where five presenters teamed up with famous Japanese model Kiko Mizuhara to remake five Japanese non-celebrities. The program did not force the integration of American culture and Japanese East Asian culture together. However, it used American enthusiasm to influence and warm the introversion of Japan so that the collision of the two cultures sparks. Moreover, to meet the expectations of Japanese audiences, the program's content has been adjusted in accordance with Japanese culture.

The protagonist of the second episode of *Queer Eye: We Are in Japan!* He is a gay man in Japan Kan. Because of the environment, and Kan always felt that he and the Japanese life were out of place. He had been missing the cheerful when studying abroad, always thinking about when to escape from Japan. The group of five gave him much psychological counseling. When he and Bobby Berk, who was in charge of interior design, went to choose furniture, they talked about his attitude toward life. Following is the conversation between the two of them in the show.

*Kan: "Well, I find myself rushing to the next place."*

*Bobby: "Planning to move somewhere else is a good thing, but I want to make sure that you can take care of yourself at this moment. You can't control Kan in the past. You don't have to control Kan in the future."*

*Kan: "I see. I always felt like I was so focused on the future, not the present, that I didn't realize what I had in this moment."*

Receiving Bobby's encouragement, his heart slowly opened. The next day, Chef Antoni Porowski took him to the barbecue shop and told him the Japanese proverb, which means a constant looking for self-journey, like the ups and downs of life orbit. In the Japanese-inspired kebab shop, the five finally got to Kan's vulnerable side -- his struggle to be himself and conform to the mainstream. Karamo Brown, who was in charge of psychological communication, introduced Kando Nishimura, a famous Japanese monk, to chat with Kan, hoping to guide Kan's mind further. The Japanese monk and Kan discussed self-knowledge in-depth, and the protagonist's heart gradually opened and accepted himself.

In order to respect the more homogeneous cultural characteristics of Japanese people, the five members of the group did not deal with their colleagues and friends too much but with their closest lovers and family members, which would increase Kan's courage to confront himself and make his choices acceptable to those he cares about on a large scale. It ended with a happy ending at a gay bar in Japan.

This episode is full of Japanese symbols all over the place. From the food to the bar to the Japanese temple, this is more in line with the Japanese and even Asian audience's psychological expectations and viewing aesthetic. The success of the Japanese chapter shows that *Queer Eye* can be successfully transplanted to other cultures, not just in the United States.

#### 4. Lessons from Netflix's Asian Early Expansion

The comparison between the failure of Netflix's original variety in South Korea and the success of its transplant in Japan can be seen that before making a program, it is necessary to fully understand the viewing habits and aesthetic characteristics of the local audience. After experiencing continuous success and failure, the Netflix team reflected on the experience and lessons and made continuous progress in the subsequent practice, thus concluding a relatively successful localization road.

Netflix wisely has chosen to work directly with established local teams: on the one hand, buying the rights and streaming them simultaneously; On the other hand, it starts one-to-one customization and cooperates to produce accurate local original works. Because of its sound production, this kind

of cooperation mode produced many excellent local original works.

Taking *The Kingdom* made by Netflix in South Korea as an example, the play is adapted from the comic book *Kingdom of God*; the comic book author is also *The Kingdom* screenwriter Kim Enhee. The story is set in ancient Korea in the 15th and 16th centuries, and the content is a combination of palace politics and intrigue and the zombie thriller theme that has been popular in South Korea for the past two years. The movie-level scenes restore the ancient East's freehand style and aesthetic feeling, which is a typical small-volume South Korean story.

The Kingdom combines zombie viruses with the power system, staging a zombie siege and the prince's revenge. New elements are implanted in the original genre, the plot is no longer empty and dry, and as Tanwar [5] mentioned "*the narrative has been greatly surpassed*". As viewers of zombie dramas and films know, it is no surprise that genre elements have been fully developed: *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004) with its British humor, *Zombie Land* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009) with its killer competition, and *Snow of the Dead* (Tommy Wirkola, 2009) with its Nazi spoof, according to Vlahos [6].

These classic zombie movies have exhausted the material out of the genre, as it mentioned in *Zombies* [7]. In the case of aesthetic fatigue of the audience, Netflix cleverly used fresh elements of Asian culture. For example, in *The Kingdom*, the audience can see that the change of crown prince, the destruction of the three tribes, the use of ancient medicinal herbs, Confucian classics, the Confucian scholar to save the country, as well as the palace fight anecdote and so on many remarkable Asian culture fragments.

As a result, Netflix's reshuffle and cultural implantation were a success. While *The Kingdom* is full of plot details, it also imparts cultural wonders into the zombie scene, a kind of salvation. *The Kingdom* explains the formation of zombies in detail and makes people convinced. The source of the zombie is related to the use of herbs. Because of the great disaster brought by the zombie to the country, the protagonist spends much effort to break through the obstacles and finally dig up the information of the source of the zombie. These plots in the TV series used a great deal of detail to show.

## 5. The Localization Process of Netflix in Asia Pacific

### 5.1 Signing Copyright Agreements

Back in 2016, Netflix opened up the Asian market. In April 2017, Netflix signed a copyright agreement with South Korean TV station JTBC covering 600 hours of programs, including the famous South Korean variety show *Life, Chef & My Fridge*, *Non-Summit*, and the South Korean drama *Something in the Rain*. In January 2020, the company announced that 21 Studio Ghibli's film rights in 190 countries worldwide, including the Academy Award best-animated feature winner *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *My Neighbor Totoro* and other works (Netflix Media Center, 2020).

### 5.2 Investing in Local Programs in Asia Pacific

After a thorough understanding of content production in the Asia-Pacific region, Netflix has also started to invest in the investment of many local film and television variety shows in Asia to further intervene in the production of the entire industry chain of film and TV shows in the Asia-Pacific market. After all, building its substantial intellectual property (IP) makes Netflix stand firm in Asia. In July 2018, Netflix announced that it had ordered nine Japanese animations, such as *Mobile Altman*, *Boxing Asura*, and *Cannon Destroyer*, mainly invested by Netflix (Netflix Media Center, 2020).

### 5.3 Producing original projects

Following the logic of prioritizing high-quality manga and classic IP adaptations, Netflix accelerated the opening of the Japanese market. In November of that year, Netflix announced a series of original film and television projects from India, including eight movies and one original series. Netflix placed 18 original series in India in 2019 and increased production to 33 in 2020 for \$420 million, according to Singh [8].

In 2019, Netflix saw an explosion in its homegrown content in South Korea. The first season of *The Kingdom* scored 8.3 on IMDb, and romantic school romances *Because is My First Love* and *Love Alarm* also received positive reviews. At the core of Netflix's content layout across Asia is a homegrown, Hollywood-quality strategy. In the past, Netflix said, from *First Round Review* [9] that when it comes to creating original shows abroad, it does not cut and choose local elements to cater to other countries' tastes but instead shares intensely local content with the world. As a result, Netflix gives local directors plenty of room for content. Of course, Netflix has its insistence as a producer.

### 5.4 Implementing of Hollywood industry standards

After quickly mastering local creative themes and collaborative processes, Netflix use the strict standards of the Hollywood industry to demand original dramas, all of which must have the texture of a movie. As *The Kingdom* director Kim Seong-hun mentioned in the documentary *The Making of The Kingdom* [10] that Netflix has high requirements for post-production: “Although I'm not very clear some professional terms, generally the movies are made with 2K, only produce high-quality CG use 4K, but this time, we are all adopt the 4K, take off lots of the effort.” For nearly two years, the Asia-Pacific region has been the focus of Netflix's strategic deployment, so exporting shows with Asian culture to the global market is its most significant move in the future.

From the perspective of economic globalization, the TV program itself is a creative product of the global cultural industry, and its market goal is to promote the transnational reproduction of a TV program. In fact, from the perspective of the program of global circulation, although there are differences in program ideas and rules, they all focus on universal issues and connect with the typical psychological structure of humanity. As an illustration, two TV shows, *Kingdom* (aired in 2019) and *The Glory* (aired in 2022), have explored the theme of revenge. This theme resonates with human emotions of pleasure and pain, and has resulted in these shows garnering a significant number of views.

In other words, for a television show to be a model for global distribution, it must be culturally and socially universal. In this respect, the internal logic of the globalization of TV program mode can be discussed from two dimensions space and time.

## 6. The Localization of TV Programs from the Spatial Dimension

### 6.1. Building Shared Cultural Elements

From the perspective of spatial dimension, firstly in the production process of TV programs, producers always integrate some common cultural elements and establish a cultural foundation for the transnational circulation of program mode by focusing on issues and meeting demands. On closer inspection, these common cultural elements have two dimensions: One is to focus on issues of common concern to humanity, such as environmental problems.

The other is how close it is to the audience. Whether it is homologous cultural and artistic forms such as music and dance or is embedded in daily life experiences such as cooking, consumption,

and home decoration, or shared social topics such as marriage, education, and health. These elements are the objects that people all over the world care about and can arouse the interest and attention of the whole nation. Because of this, music programs, food programs, love and marriage programs, and life service programs have been the enduring hard currency, and topic focus has become one of the inherent meanings of the circulation of the program.

## 6.2. Satisfying Psychological Needs

Second, from a unique perspective to meet everyday psychological needs. Each successful program has its unique creativity. Taking a few well-known TV shows as examples, such as *Pop Idol* (ITV, 2001-2003), a beloved talent show that originated from the community. The show's format includes popular auditions, public voting, and various promotional stages. Another example is *The Amazing Race* (CBS, 2001-), a reality show that involves a worldwide competition. Contestants form teams based on their relationships with each other and race against other teams through a series of checkpoints. The ultimate prize for the winning team is a substantial amount of money. Although the positioning, ideas, and rules are different, the former show is about ordinary people competing with their talents to achieve their dreams of self-transformation and growth, while the latter is about the temptation of setting up considerable bonuses to motivate participants to push forward to achieve their goals. In the final analysis, this is a grassroots stage drama to change the fate of the dream, transformation, and victory as the keywords, one side to attract the general public to participate, and the other side to stimulate the television audience's psychology of sharing as the audience are often attracted by these dramas.

The core of a successful TV program is to express, present, and even create the value elements of common human interests. Even some of the best shows offer findings about life, like *Queer Eye* tells messages that anyone can be themselves, accept themselves, and love themselves.

## 7. The Localization of TV Programs from the Temporal Dimension

Also, from the perspective of the time dimension, most of the successful programs are connected with the track of the times, which can explore and reflect the social development trend in the new era, such as *Queer Eye* shows how people can be changed after they are spending several days with the five mentors. What will happen to the trend of TV shows as the times change? Currently, the television market offers a few glimpses of the signals.

### 7.1. Going against the Trend

One is the rise of *Slow TV* in some highly developed cultural environments. *Slow TV*, a type of TV program that broadcasts a joint event in an entire marathon broadcast, is characterized by long time, slow pace, anti-climax, and little editing, as Dehnart [11] mentioned in an article. Since 2015, BBC 4 has launched the *All Aboard Slow TV* series, filmed and recorded in real-time, from a sled trip to a canal trip to a country bus trip, to rediscover the power of silence in noisy modern life. In 2018, BBC 2 launched *Love In The Countryside* reality show. Led by British TV presenter Sarah Cox, eight of the show's guests living in villages across the UK have been shown their intimate and fun single lives.

Meanwhile, city dwellers from all over the UK also have the opportunity to participate in the program with their favorite guests. In the fast-paced modern society, slowness is definitely against the trend. However, going against the trend may be the beginning of another trend.

## 7.2. The popularity and accessibility of New Media Technologies

Next are the impacts brought by the application of digital technology and network interaction exploration. With the popularization and application of new media technology, more and more TV programs have begun to seek a new mode of network interaction, including the interaction between audience and TV, between celebrities and audience. For example, *Fantastic Duo* (SBS, 2016-2017), a music duet program launched by SBS of South Korea, allows ordinary people to sing with the singer through the APP. The three ordinary people with the most votes from netizens will also come to the show and sing with the stars. In *My Little Television* (MBC: Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, 2015-), stars act as anchors on the Internet, running their live shows and interacting with viewers in real time, which are eventually edited and shown on the TV screen.

In addition, *The Circle* (Studio Lamber, Motion Content Group, 2018) on Channel 4, the original British reality show, invites eight strangers living in the same building but not seeing each other and chatting only through the circle. Through chatting, contestants build their popularity, and the one with the highest popularity wins. Similar interactive programs may take new technologies as the intermediary or new media as the scene; some even start producing content through new media. They create a shared space that surpasses restrictions, breaks barriers, pays attention to equality, communicates, and interacts. This is not only the creative direction of TV programs in the new era but also the inevitable result of network linkage and media convergence.

The TV programs in global circulation should not only connect the space and build a bridge of cross-cultural communication but also be based on the times and grasp the pulse of social changes. In other words, when platforms and investors look for and introduce TV formats, they must be close to the audience, understand the needs, and gain insight into the environment to find cultural trends and the following hot style.

## 8. Conclusions

To globalize and localize the program, the following points are needed to pay attention. Firstly, local cultural resources should be used, including local scene selection, folk customs, history, and popular culture. Secondly, local cultural values, such as transforming sensual revelry into exquisite emotional expression, should be conveyed. Finally, it should fit into the local social structure.

In the process of TV program localization, there is often a reverse structural transformation; that is, the local elements are insufficient while the global elements are too much. In order to avoid this kind of reverse transformation, the program producer needs to understand the local social structures and social expressions to avoid this kind of incompatibility.

In all, by integrating local cultural resources into the program, conveying local humanistic values, and fitting into the local social structure, the original program modes can reach the local audience deeply. And finally, through connecting with the psychological needs and constructing social identity, programs will make contribution on realizing the cultural re-creation based on creative rules.

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