

remains a strong, if altered, relationship between television and national identity.”¹⁵ Studying streaming television in a transnational context requires contending with this changing relationship to national identity as well as the differential development of digital media across the world. The transnational articulations of streaming television provide an opportunity to rethink how infrastructures, texts, and stratified audiences intermingle at multiple scales. *

15 Anna Cristina Pertierra and Graeme Turner, *Locating Television: Zones of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 53.

Black Ships? Locating Netflix in Taiwan and Japan

by YU-KEI TSE

This article compares the discourses around Netflix’s expansion in two East Asian markets, Japan and Taiwan. Specifically, it looks at how the term “black ship” (*kurofune* in Japanese)—a historical reference to the Perry expedition to Japan in the 1850s—is frequently used as rhetoric by both Japanese and Taiwanese media critics to discuss Netflix’s possible impact on their respective domestic markets. It explains how and why, although media critics in both Japan and Taiwan used a common rubric (i.e., black ship) to discuss the introduction of Netflix, the ways Netflix is situated in each country are substantially different.

As a video-streaming platform operating simultaneously in more than 190 countries, Netflix persistently proclaims itself as a service capable of deterritorializing our television experience by offering content that comes from around the world to audiences across the globe.¹ The future of online television, in Netflix’s vision, seems to be both borderless and postnational. In practice, however, Netflix continues to abide by national and regional regulations, as other transnational television systems do. Its role as a business and a cultural form varies significantly across the globe. Such variations, nevertheless,

1 CES, “Reed Hastings, Netflix Keynote 2016,” YouTube video, 42:39, January 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5R3E6jsICA>.

are often overlooked in journalistic and scholarly discussions of Netflix. This tendency limits scholars' account of Netflix and the ecology of internet-distributed television in diverse global contexts. It is imperative to examine Netflix's specific cultural role comparatively across different national contexts, in the understanding that Netflix, similar to television, is a set of cultural practices, technologies, and markets that "can only be studied as located."² By contextualizing the black-ship discourses in Japan and Taiwan, this article not only accounts for the introduction of Netflix in these two East Asian markets but also shows the importance of a comparative approach for studying internet-distributed television in increasingly transnational contexts.

Originally, *kurofune* referred to US Navy Commodore Matthew Perry's gunboat diplomacy and military expedition, which forced Japan to open its borders to foreign trade in the 1850s, after two centuries of isolation. In contemporary Japanese contexts, the term is often used by the public to describe the launch of a Western (usually American) product, service, or enterprise, as well as its impact on the domestic market. Depending on the intentions of the people employing the term, *kurofune* may imply a wary or defensive tone of uncertainty about the unpredictable impact, or it may be used in a descriptive sense.

To examine the *kurofune* discourses around Netflix, it is important to consider how the arrival of transnational satellite broadcasting was understood in Japan during the 1990s. Transnational satellite broadcasting was one of the first media phenomena analogized as *kurofune* by Japanese media. According to Koichi Iwabuchi, the *kurofune* discourse on Japanese media suggests that, with the rise of transnational satellite broadcasting, the Japanese industry "can no longer enjoy a self-contained domestic market, but rather is now under threat of being forced to open its doors to the world."³ However, different from the Perry Expedition, in which the foreign forces had profound influence on Japanese society, Iwabuchi points out that in practice, the presence of foreign television in Japan did not seem to pose a real threat to the domestic market, as audiences strongly preferred domestic content. By comparison, he argues that in Japan in the 1990s, there were doubts over the ability of the famously inward-looking Japanese producers to create content that would be appealing to international markets, where they faced considerable competition. For Iwabuchi, concerning the impact of transnational broadcasting on the domestic industry, "what is at stake this time is less a foreign invasion of Japan than a Japanese advance into global media markets."⁴

How, then, can we understand the resurgence of *kurofune* discourses when Netflix Japan launched in September 2015, the company's first venture into East Asia? While Japanese media critics tended to employ *kurofune* to describe, quite defensively, the arrival of transnational satellite television as a threat to the domestic industry in the 1990s, they have tended to use the term in a looser and more ambiguous manner when it is applied to Netflix. Such usage can be roughly classified into three types of rhetoric.

2 Anna Cristina Pertierra and Graeme Turner, *Locating Television: Zones of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 5.

3 Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 4.

4 Iwabuchi, 4.

First, some public discourses have regarded Netflix not as a *kurofune* conquering the local industry but as a force that brings positive changes, such as enhancing the quality of domestic content with stronger global appeal and providing new opportunities for collaboration between a range of local businesses. Such rhetoric was deployed at Netflix's press conference on the launch of its Japanese service. The Japanese comedian Ryota Yamasato, one of the hosts of *Terrace House* (2015–present), a reality television series coproduced by Netflix and Fuji TV under the Netflix Original label, worked as the master of ceremonies for the conference. He excitedly and jokingly analogized Netflix as a *kurofune* and its arrival as the dawn of a new and upgraded entertainment era to the world.⁵ (In the context of his speech, the “world” refers mainly to Japan.)

This celebratory rhetoric, however, is not the only understanding of Netflix's *kurofune* status, which brings us to the second use of *kurofune*, in which the term is still used by Japanese media with a slightly wary tone to consider how Netflix may threaten the current practices of the local media industry. Japanese markets had already been packed with numerous local digital media services, including telecom providers and consumer electronic companies, before Netflix Japan launched. These local players were well established nationally, if not internationally, but Japanese audiences had not widely adopted the internet-based subscription video-on-demand model before Netflix's arrival. As a result, rather than considering the local enterprises and industry as weak players in danger, the media discourses tended to focus instead on how Japanese services and enterprises (sometimes dubbed as “giants”) could fight against the *kurofune* of Netflix in the war of internet-distributed television.⁶

Speaking after Yamasato at the press conference, Netflix's CEO Reed Hastings first emphasized how Netflix has built strong content partnerships with companies all over the world, including local Japanese producers “believing in Netflix” and “the possibility of creating global franchises for new content.”⁷ He then argued jestingly that his company, therefore, was not “what critics say (a Black Ship)” but instead “the Orange Ship of great hope”—a reference to the platform's original series *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019). The way in which Hastings claimed that Netflix was *not* a black ship seemed to indicate his intention to distance his company from the complexity and negativity surrounding *kurofune* as a metaphor in Japan. Hastings's rhetoric, in fact, is not fundamentally different from Yamasato's *kurofune* analogy in the sense that both emphasized Netflix's potential to bring positive changes from which the local industry would benefit. However, Hastings's statement still prompted Yamasato, who must also have known the negative implications concerning *kurofune*, to “apologize” playfully to Hastings for calling his company *kurofune*. The dialogues between Hastings and Yamasato demonstrate how the general public would interpret the rhetoric of Netflix as a *kurofune*, contradictorily, as both a foreign threat and “hope” for the local Japanese industry.

5 “Netflix Suddenly Launched Its Service in Japan—‘A Historical Moment,’ Nankyan's Yamasato Excited,” *Livedoor News*, September 1, 2015, <https://news.livedoor.com/article/detail/10539800/>.

6 Munechika Nishida, *The Age of Netflix: Distribution and Smart Phone Are Changing Television* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2015).

7 MAiDIGITV, “Netflix CEO ‘We Are Not a Black Ship but the Orange Ship with Great Hope,’ Netflix Japan Launch Event 2,” YouTube video, 5:39, September 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Avsh-sdw9g>.

Third, the Japanese media also frequently use *kurofune* as a term to underline Netflix as the leading, US-based player in the global streaming industry, without carrying a clear positive or negative attitude. In such cases, the platform's impact on the Japanese industry is often considered as not particularly profound. As in the 1990s, the Japanese media market in the 2010s remains a prosperous market where domestic content is favored over foreign content. In practice, upon its launch, Netflix had in stock a significantly higher percentage of local content for its Japanese audiences than it did in many other markets, with some Netflix Originals being coproduced with local partners like Fuji TV.⁸ However, most media critics in Japan still considered the quantity of local content insufficient to appeal to Japanese audiences. They often regarded Netflix's high quality and large quantity of Western content as a selling point, but not a threat to audiences' preference for domestic content. In such contexts, the *kurofune* reference emphasizes how, despite being a US giant, Netflix has failed to expand its market or challenge the persistently inward-looking and well-established Japanese industry as much as it has in other parts of the world.⁹

Although this essay categorizes three types of *kurofune* discourses around Netflix, it is worth noting that, in many cases, the various, sometimes contradictory implications of *kurofune* may coexist in a single news article, indicating that the term is often used ambiguously and that Netflix's impact on Japan is understood in a multivalent manner. While *kurofune* is less likely to be used as a metaphor in the discourses around Netflix now than when the platform was first introduced to Japan, the *kurofune* discourses represents the way Netflix was imagined in its initial years of operation in Japan.

By contrast, in Taiwan, "black ship," or *hei-chuan* in Mandarin Chinese, is mainly used under two circumstances: when reporting on the Japanese discourse of *kurofune* (usually accompanied by a brief introduction to the Perry expedition), or alternatively, when referring to the arrival in Taiwan of well-established Western products, services, or enterprises.¹⁰ In both circumstances, *hei-chuan* might carry a slightly wary tone, or it might also be descriptive. When it came to Netflix, the media followed closely the platform's expansion to Japan in September 2015. Some journalists discussed how and why Japanese media dubbed Netflix's possible impact as a *kurofune*. After Netflix Taiwan launched in January 2016, the Taiwanese media understandably turned the focus from the platform's Japanese expansion to its implications for the domestic media landscape. This changed *hei-chuan* from a reference exclusive to Netflix Japan to a phrase that described the challenges the Taiwanese television industry was facing. Some reporters characterized Netflix Taiwan's premier as "the arrival of *hei-chuan*" without referring to Netflix Japan or the Perry expedition. Some also debated whether Netflix would make audiences lose their interest in cable and network TV, and thereby contribute to the decline in TV ratings. Not all reporters

8 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 127.

9 Kyoko Shimizu, "3 Years after Its Arrival . . . the Market Barriers Faced by the 'Kurofune of Video Services,' Netflix," *Biz Spa!*, August 14, 2018, <https://bizspa.jp/post-52342/>.

10 The Chinese characters of *hei-chuan* (黑船) are very similar to *kurofune* (黒船) in Japanese Kanji.

described Netflix as *hei-chuan*, but they used terms such as “giant” or “king” (e.g., “the streaming giant” or “the king of global streaming”) to emphasize how Netflix as a foreign player might bring unpredictable impacts on the local industry—rhetoric that closely resembles *hei-chuan*.

When Netflix Taiwan launched, the ecology of internet-distributed television on the island was marked by a significant lack of established legal services—a substantial difference from the industrial conditions in Japan. Most broadcast networks and cable television providers in Taiwan did not have online TV portals; even when they did, the portals were often underdeveloped, with little content and a poor user interface. Local over-the-top (OTT) and video-on-demand (VOD) services were hard to find. While transactional video-on-demand (TVOD) services such as iTunes existed, they were not popular. The ecology largely consisted of illegal streaming apps and websites and the unlicensed sharing of content on YouTube and similar sites. Moreover, the general public has long criticized the local television industry for the low quality of self-produced content and endless reruns of outdated programs. It was not until after Netflix’s arrival as a *hei-chuan* that additional local and foreign streaming platforms emerged as legal businesses, a transition often noted by commentators as “the beginning of a new era—the era of OTT.”¹¹

In this regard, Netflix’s niche in Taiwan’s internet-distributed television market is determined by not only its Western, English-language-focused content but also its status as a legal, well-established internet-distributed television model in the formal media economy. In the media discourse, while some journalists considered Netflix as a possible threat to local businesses (in terms of the quality of content and the infrastructure of distribution), it is more common to find critics holding a positive view on Netflix’s arrival. The critics with the latter perspective considered that the US platform had helped launch a new age of television, one in which Taiwanese audiences have more choices of legal online platforms and high-quality content. Meanwhile, Netflix remains the only platform available in Taiwan that does not feature local and East Asian content, which in general enjoys wider popularity than American and Western content. This condition has been commonly cited by major local competitors as the reason Netflix, despite being the pioneer that led Taiwan to the dawn of formal internet-distributed television, does not threaten their businesses as latecomers.¹²

For this reason and others, in the Taiwanese media discourse, Netflix has not been considered a *hei-chuan* threatening the local market but celebrated as the best vehicle through which Taiwanese content could be circulated across the world, which was rarely possible before Netflix emerged. It is worth pointing out that the small amount of local content Netflix has coproduced with Taiwanese production teams so far—such as *A Taiwanese Tale of Two Cities* (2018–2019)—was licensed exclusively abroad. However, in Taiwan, such coproduction is exempted from license exclusivity on Netflix—it is available on Netflix as well as on other platforms and local television

11 Jing-lin Hung, “The Age of OTT Has Arrived: Lots of Content at the Touch of a Button,” *Business Today*, June 10, 2016, <http://www.businesstoday.com.tw/article-content-80394-155596-OTT>.

12 “LiTV Not Frightened by Netflix’s Arrival,” *Storm Media*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.storm.mg/article/78182>.

channels. The local media industry usually regards such content as more valuable for making Taiwanese productions seen overseas than for attracting local audiences.¹³

This essay has located and compared the “black ship” discourses surrounding Netflix in the geo-linguistic, cultural contexts of both Japan and Taiwan. As a case study, the article has also demonstrated the importance of a comparative approach for studying internet-distributed television in increasingly transnational contexts. It is through a comparative approach that it can explain how Netflix has functioned differently as a foreign, niche service in the two markets—even if Japanese and Taiwanese media critics both dubbed Netflix as a black ship in regard to their respective domestic markets. Netflix has only been operating in Taiwan and Japan for around five years, which is rather short compared to its history in North America, Latin America, and Western Europe. It remains too early to predict the long-term effects of Netflix in Japan, Taiwan, or other markets Netflix entered following its global switch-on. To account for Netflix’s long-term effects in the future, the primary task for media studies scholars will be to document its prompt development and some seemingly short-term effects across different markets through cross-cultural and transnational collaboration.

With the growth of internet-distributed television and the emergence of Netflix in particular, streaming television seems to be increasingly understood or expected to be territorially free. However, the way Netflix has operated and functioned across the world is by no means deterritorialized or postnational, despite its being the most globalized internet television network. Netflix, as Ramon Lobato rightly argues, should be better conceptualized as “a collection of national media services tied together in one platform rather than as a uniform global service.”¹⁴ The more Netflix endeavors to emphasize its potential to be a universal service worldwide, the more important it is for media studies scholars to investigate carefully the cultural and industrial structures of each location. It is only through collaboration and dialogue with researchers across countries and cultural contexts that we can understand what Netflix has to tell us about the ongoing reconfiguration of global television. *

13 Yi-qing Liu, “Taiwanese Dramas on the Global Stage! A *Taiwanese Tale of Two Cities* released in 30 Languages,” *TVBS News*, January 7, 2018, <https://news.tvbs.com.tw/entertainment/848523>.

14 Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 184.