

Remaking *Mother*: The Global Emergence of Japanese Scripted Formats

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Abstract

Until recently, most Japanese scripted television formats did not travel beyond East Asia. However, starting with *Mother* (2010), Japanese broadcasters have opened up new markets in Europe, the Middle East and Latin America, undermining the theory that transnational flows of Japanese scripts are determined by a cultural proximity based on regionalism. Through an industry studies analysis of the rollout of *Mother* as a scripted format, this article examines how the Japanese television industry achieved this breakthrough. I argue that while the quality and narrative transparency of the original story played a role in its success, adopting a flexible approach toward the adaptation process was also crucial. I also discuss why recent successes in the global scripted formats market not only represent a more proactive approach on the part of the Japanese broadcasting industry toward international business but also highlight its continued reliance on existing business models.

Keywords

Japanese television drama, transnational adaptations, international television business, scripted formats, *Mother*, narrative transparency

Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed a global surge in transnational remakes of scripted television programs. According to trade media reports, the number of shows that have been adapted for three or more foreign territories has quadrupled since the 1990s; between 2020 and 2022 alone, television remakes rose 50 percent (O'Meara 2019; Ravindran 2023). This boom comes in the context of the digitization

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and globalization that have transformed the television industries since the turn of the millenium. The growth of television formats—defined as “concepts of TV shows that are licensed for local adaptations” (Chalaby 2016, 3)—has been an integral part of this transformation. The emergence of international streaming services has fueled a demand for quality, bingeable series that will attract subscribers. In a rapidly expanding, fiercely competitive market, formats of proven hit series are seen as a less risky, more economical and time-saving alternative to developing original ideas from scratch. Having lagged behind its unscripted counterpart, the scripted format trade is now also benefiting from improved knowledge transfer processes and the participation of new territories from Latin America, Scandinavia, the Middle East, and Asia, which are expanding and diversifying the market. Scripted formats are now part of a global system of transnational cultural production and commodity exchange (Antoniazzi and Barra 2022; Chalaby 2015, 2016; Esser 2022; Moran 2013).

Asia has drawn particular attention from industry analysts in recent years, with both South Korea and Japan featuring in the top six global suppliers of scripted formats in 2023 to 2024 (Nguyen 2024). In just under a decade, Japanese broadcasters have had a string of successes selling the rights to remake dramas such as Nippon TV’s *Mother* (2010), which recently achieved its eleventh format sale, cementing its status as the most exported script out of Asia (Nippon TV 2024). Spearheaded by Nippon TV, Japanese broadcasters have broken through the regional barrier, opening up new markets in South-East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Furthermore, some of these remakes have themselves been widely distributed, disseminating Japanese storytelling to new audiences across Latin America and the MENA region and bringing additional revenues.

This article examines how Japanese media companies, which have historically adopted a conservative approach to global expansion, achieved this success in the notoriously difficult-to-crack scripted formats market. Through an industry studies analysis, I demonstrate that the cultural proximity hypothesis so often relied on to explain East Asian adaptation practices fails to explain Japan’s recent success with format exports. Instead, I argue that the rise in format sales since *Mother* has resulted from a combination of factors, including the emergence of new markets stimulating demand, Japanese flexibility over remediation and distribution of licensed remakes, and a more proactive approach toward the international format business.

First, through an analysis of previous scholarship, I examine how the transnational remaking practices of Japanese dramas developed in East Asia, arguing that structural and socio-historical, rather than cultural, factors played a crucial role in this cross-border exchange. I echo the argument made by Otmazgin (2014) and Humphrey (2023) that East Asian consumption of Japanese scripted content was largely demand driven, with Japanese media companies often showing reluctance to actively engage in overseas expansion.

As I demonstrate in the following section, this ambivalent approach to international business would change with the groundbreaking deal between Nippon TV and Turkish media companies Medyapım and MF Yapım to remake *Mother*, the first Turkish adaptation of a Japanese drama. Through an examination of interviews published in the

trade press, I show how the format's extraordinary success persuaded Japanese broadcasters of the benefits of expanding its scripted formats trade to new territories such as Turkey and South-East Asia.

Finally, my comparative analysis of the Japanese series and its remakes demonstrates how the narrative transparency (Dunleavy 2016) of the original story, which draws on tropes from the cross-culturally popular genre of melodrama, helped it appeal to transnational audiences. However, I also show that significant changes were required to accommodate differences in broadcasting and storytelling conventions, even when transposing the narrative to close neighbor South Korea, further undermining the cultural proximity thesis so often relied on to explain the preponderance of East Asian adaptations of Japanese drama. My analysis of the negotiations involved in the remaking of *Mother* reveals that, in contrast to the findings of previous scholarship, Japanese rights holders are showing a willingness to build collaborative relationships with international partners and exercise flexibility over use of content. Nevertheless, I argue that this new approach to scripted format sales is also indicative of an industry that continues to adhere to a production model focused on the domestic market.

Existing scholarship on transnational remaking and adaptation practices within East Asia has tended to draw from cultural or area studies, utilizing methods of qualitative content and/or reception analysis to investigate what remade texts reveal about intraregional socio-cultural affinities or differences (Fung 2007; Lee 2020; Stolyar 2022; Yasumoto 2015). There has been little scholarship that approaches this topic from an industry studies viewpoint, a gap that this paper hopes to make a contribution toward rectifying, by examining the processes involved in transnational adaptation, as well as the business and structural factors that shape transnational television flows. In an increasingly diversified media landscape, the relevance of my findings is not limited to the Japanese or East Asian television industries, but should be situated within the broader context of global media studies. At a time when US streaming giants are encroaching on television markets around the world, international collaboration is playing a critical role in the continued survival of national broadcasters.

Japanese Scripts in East Asia: Transnational Flows Shaped by Local Conditions

Until relatively recently, most Japanese scripted formats were sold exclusively to a few countries in East Asia, primarily South Korea and China. According to Yun (2016), twenty-nine of thirty-four Korean drama remakes produced between 2000 and 2015 were based on Japanese shows; South Korea continues to be an important partner for Japan in terms of scripted formats, with scripts regularly traveling between the two countries in both directions (Ōba 2021). Fuji TV has been particularly successful in selling remake licenses for its famed romantic dramas to Chinese and Korean partners (Fuji TV 2018; Tsai 2018). This trend is reflected in the overall pattern of distribution of Japan's drama exports: in 2022, 68 percent of Japanese drama exports came from

sales to East Asia, more than ten times the value of drama exports to North America and Europe combined (MIC 2024).

There has been a tendency to frame such discrepancies in the ability of popular culture to travel across borders in terms of cultural specificity or lack thereof. Iwabuchi's work on cultural proximity has been particularly influential on discussions of East Asian cultural flows. He argued that Japanese television drama was considered unexportable to countries outside of East Asia because they suffered from a high cultural discount. They were able to resonate with Asian viewers due to perceived cultural similarities based on common experiences of modernity and globalization within the region (Iwabuchi 2002). Iwabuchi's articulation of cultural proximity has been seized on as an explanation for shared practices not only in the consumption but also the production of drama across East Asia, including remakes and adaptations of Japanese source material (Fung 2007; Yasumoto 2015; Yun 2016; Lee 2020). However, some have challenged the notion of a pan-Asian identity as an overarching explanation for the success of Japanese cultural products among its near neighbors (Humphrey 2023; Otmazgin 2014). How does one account for the phenomenal success of the Korean wave, which has surpassed regional barriers to make impact on a global scale?

Otmazgin (2014) points to macropolitical, economic and structural factors to explain the dissemination of Japanese popular culture across East Asia during the late twentieth century, including the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and its neighbors, the expansion of Japanese manufacturing into the continent, the subsequent mass movement of people across borders, and the liberalization and expansion of media systems across the region. Notably, Otmazgin's interviews with cultural industry insiders revealed that the high quality of Japanese production played a more important role in the popularity of Japanese culture across the region than any perceived cultural affinity.

Due to licensing costs, local restrictions on cultural imports and the reluctance of Japanese companies to make their content available to Asian markets, piracy and plagiarism of Japanese television became widespread during the 1990s. As the East Asian media industries expanded rapidly, producers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and South Korea regularly took inspiration from Japanese series to create content quickly in a competitive environment. By emulating and borrowing Japanese concepts, techniques and esthetics, East Asian creatives were able to advance production know-how, eventually developing their own genres, adapted to suit local tastes (Lee 2004; Liu and Chen 2004; Otmazgin 2014; Stolyar 2022; Tsai 2018). Access to the Japanese source material, which became easier with deregulation and widespread diffusion of the internet, also meant that local producers could not simply copy without fear of accusations of plagiarism or Japanization, which were particularly sensitive issues in South Korea, prompting Korean creatives to adapt in a more considered way (Keane and Moran 2005; Lee 2004). As local producers learned their craft, they were also developing the expertise needed for successful adaptation.

Humphrey (2023) links the rise and eventual decline of Japanese television drama in East Asia to the shifting stance of Japanese media companies toward copyright enforcement and an adherence to advertising-based revenue models, which has

encouraged broadcasters in the country to protect the domestic market at the expense of international expansion. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the height of popularity for Japanese drama in the region, Japanese broadcasters were largely ambivalent toward unauthorized copying, and did not make any concerted push to establish legitimate pathways for IP transfer. Access to a large, affluent domestic market meant they were able to fund production through local sponsorship and advertising; thus, international expansion was not a priority (Humphrey 2023; Iwabuchi 2004; Ōba 2021; Otmazgin 2014). This changed in the mid-2000s, as Japanese media became increasingly aware of the opportunities available in expanding Asian markets and began to adopt a policy of stricter copyright enforcement. If, as Humphrey suggests, this clamp-down contributed to a fall in transnational consumption of Japanese drama in its original form, it may have, conversely, played a role in stimulating the market for Japanese scripted formats by forcing East Asian television companies to pay for licensing rights.

The international success of South Korean drama has also factored into demand for Japanese scripts, which play a strategic role in maintaining Korean television exports (Ju 2018). Not only do they provide source material for producing drama for domestic audiences, but this content can also be sold overseas, including to Japan, where the format has already proved successful. Japan is one of South Korea's most important foreign markets, accounting for 20.9 percent of Korean television export sales in 2023 (KOCCA 2025). The Korean television industry has a much smaller domestic market than Japan, and thus has long been reliant on external investment, including the pre-sale of overseas broadcast and streaming rights, to fund drama production (Park et al. 2023). Meanwhile, in China, Japanese scripted format sales have been driven by politics: when the Chinese state introduced restrictions on the airing of foreign television series in 2004, Japanese broadcasters began collaborating with Chinese producers on local remakes (Yoshioka 2015). By 2018, Fuji TV alone had sold the format rights to almost forty drama series to Chinese partners (Fuji TV 2018).

Until relatively recently, Japanese television companies have seemed largely content with their partnerships in East Asia and shown little interest in expanding beyond the region, as highlighted by their failure to invest in international business. Scholars and industry insiders have criticized the dearth of staff in overseas sales offices, a lack of commercial awareness among creatives, and inflexible business practices, which have resulted in protracted negotiations and stymied the ability to develop long-term relationships with international partners (Murakoshi 2016; Nishiyama and Miyata 2019; Otmazgin 2014). This contrasts with South Korea, which, owing to its dependence on international sales, has demonstrated a more accommodating approach toward overseas partners (Otmazgin 2014). Such factors explain the large disparity between the two nation's international scripted content sales. In 2023, Japan's drama exports came in at a modest ¥4.01 billion (\$27.8 million), or 4.9 percent of the country's total broadcast exports (MIC 2025), compared with the over \$539 million in sales for Korean drama, making up 92.1 percent of all Korean broadcast exports that year (KOCCA 2025).

While Korean drama in its original form has made the most visible impact, the industry has also had tremendous success in the scripted format trade. Having

established a foothold in East Asian markets on the back of the Korean Wave, South Korea expanded beyond the region during the early 2010s, selling scripts to South and Southeast Asia, the US, UK and Europe, as well as forming a fruitful trade with Turkey (Esser 2022). The first Turkish adaptation of a Korean series appeared in 2013; by 2016 South Korea had overtaken the US as the main source for Turkish drama remakes (Behlil 2023). Sales to top buying nations Turkey, Thailand and India have allowed South Korea to become the leading provider of scripted formats globally in 2023 to 2024 (Nguyen 2024).

In interviews with the trade press, South Korean television industry insiders credit the transnational appeal of Korean finished programs and formats to an emphasis on universal themes and appealing stories (Fry 2020). Successful formats are able to resonate across cultural boundaries—a quality Dunleavy (2016) refers to as “narrative transparency,” a term borrowed from Olson to describe texts that offer tropes, values and myths that have the same meanings and significance in other cultures. Dunleavy (2016) argued that the universality of the trope of the crime narrative played a critical role in the transnational appeal of the Danish series *The Killing*, both in its original form and as a format. Dunleavy’s articulation of narrative transparency echoes Obregon’s concept of genre proximity—the idea that some genres travel easily across diverse cultures. For example, melodrama, a genre that has roots in many different countries and regions across the world, is particularly attractive to transnational audiences due to underlying oral structures, formulas, archetypes, values and themes that have cross-cultural appeal (in Straubhaar 2007, 199).

However, others have noted the impact of specific Korean strategies to increase format sales, including the establishment of vehicles and departments specializing in format development and the commercial awareness of creatives, who create content with international audiences in mind (Martin 2021). Behlil’s (2023) research also found that business considerations played a more significant role in the trend for Turkish remakes of Korean dramas than cultural ones. Turkish producers were attracted to Korean scripts due to their comparatively low cost and because Korean rights holders offered more flexibility over adaptation and distribution, allowing local producers and distributors, who are best placed to understand the target market(s), the freedom to tailor their product accordingly (Behlil 2023).

Flexibility over remediation is particularly important to enable localization of the remake to meet the expectations of the target audience. Transferring a script to another context needs not only to account for socio-cultural, linguistic, and political differences, but also bridge disparities in media systems (public service or commercial), regulations, budgets, scheduling slots, and other broadcasting conventions (Bignell and Woods 2023; Chalaby 2016; Esser 2022; Stolyar 2022). Case studies of inter-East Asian adaptations reveal that such productions require significant remediation to make accommodations for differences in moral and socio-cultural values, trends and lifestyles, as well as variations in episode length and number (Lee 2004; Stolyar 2022; Tsai 2018). As well as providing further evidence against the cultural proximity argument, this underscores the complexity involved in transnational adaptation and explains why

rights holders who offer more flexibility in allowing changes have been particularly successful in the scripted formats trade (Behlil 2023; Chalaby 2016).

The Korean drama success story, and the failure of Japan to make a similar global impact, highlights the importance of structural factors in determining the ability of content to travel across borders. However, the unexpected transnational success of *Mother* would mark a shift in the strategy of Japanese television companies toward international business, at least in the case of scripted format sales. As I demonstrate below, they would achieve this by adopting a more open and flexible approach toward international collaboration. Nevertheless, I argue that the rollout of the format hinged, to a large extent, on market demand and the efforts of Turkish producers, who overcame the obstacles of doing business in Japan and utilized their expertise in adaptation and marketing.

Selling *Mother*: Riding the Global Scripted Format Wave

As noted earlier, the worldwide scripted format boom was driven in part by new participants expanding and diversifying the market. Among these newcomers, Turkey has emerged as a leading buyer driving global demand for scripts. During the 2000s and early 2010s, the appeal of Turkish series increased rapidly across the MENA region, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Latin America; by 2014, Turkey had become the second largest exporter of television drama worldwide (Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu 2016; Behlil 2023). The international success of Turkish narrative serials has been attributed to many of the factors that have been cited to explain the transnational appeal of Korean dramas, including local and regional economic and political factors, high production values, universal themes and genres—with a heavy focus on melodrama, and a willingness and flexibility to integrate into global trading systems (Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu 2016; Yesil 2015).

This growth created a demand for new stories, including foreign scripts that could be remade locally—Behlil (2023) notes a significant increase in the number of Turkish adaptations from 2013 onward. As noted above, while US scripts were once the main source for Turkish remakes, over the past decade, South Korea and Japan have emerged as leading suppliers. *Mother* was the first Japanese drama to be adapted in Turkey; its phenomenal success reinvigorated the Japanese scripted format trade, opening up new revenue streams and new markets. Through an analysis of trade press articles and press releases, I examine how *Mother* changed Japanese attitudes toward international business.

The original series of *Mother* first aired from April to June 2010 on NTV, one of the nation's "Big 5" commercial television networks and consistent ratings leader. The series was a critical and commercial success, receiving numerous accolades, including best drama prizes at the Tokyo Drama Awards and Japan's The Television Academy Awards, as well as numerous awards for leading actors Yasuko Matsuyuki and Mana Ashida and screenwriter Yūji Sakamoto (JBA n.d; The Television n.d). The drama achieved a peak audience rating of 16.3 percent (Mainichi Shimbun 2010).

Nevertheless, the drama's unprecedented success as a format was by no means predictable. Having sold the broadcast rights to *Mother* to established Asian markets and making a deal with Korean media company CJE&M to produce a local remake, Nippon TV appears to have had no further plans for the format. Indeed, staff at the company admitted they were surprised when production house MF Yapım, which specializes in transnational adaptations, first approached them about acquiring the Turkish format rights in 2015 (Nishiyama and Miyata 2019). Having no prior experience of partnering with Turkish producers, the Japanese broadcaster was initially skeptical about working with them. According to Fatih Aksoy, vice president of MF Yapım, it took six months to convince Nippon TV to do business with them—the Japanese side were eventually convinced by the Turkish company's track record remaking Korean scripts. Even so, it took a year to finalize the deal (Nishiyama and Miyata 2019; Tavsan 2024). A co-production between MF Yapım and fellow Turkish production house Medyapım, itself a prolific maker of original and adapted television since the early 1990s (and a majority stakeholder in MF Yapım), the Turkish remake, titled *Anne*, would eventually air from October 2016. As well as exemplifying the slow pace at which Japanese companies operate, these events also revealed crucial gaps in the broadcaster's international network building and market knowledge, another manifestation of their failure to invest in their international business department.

However, any doubts on the part of Nippon TV were soon quashed. Broadcasting on free-to-air channel Star TV, Turkey's second biggest television platform by market share, *Anne* secured the top audience share at 25 percent in Turkey (Daswani 2017a). Again, casting played a crucial role—popular model and actress Cansu Dere won widespread acclaim for her starring role, garnering several award nominations and being named Woman of the Year by GQ Turkey in 2016 (GQ Türkiye 2016), while her co-star Beren Gökyıldız, already feted as a rising talent, was named Best Child Actress at the 2017 Golden Butterfly Awards (Hürriyet Daily News 2017).

The broadcast/streaming rights for *Anne* sold to more than forty territories around the world, making it the most exported Turkish series in 2018 (Nippon TV 2020b); the series was particularly popular in Latin America, where it was the recipient of an award for best telenovela in a foreign language (Premios Produ 2019). With regards to international distribution of the remake, Nippon TV adopted the same strategy as Korean rightsholders, ceding distribution rights to their Turkish partners but taking a share of the revenue from the tape sales – Aksoy estimates the broadcaster earned tens of times the amount it received for the initial format fee (Fry 2021; Tavsan 2024). The global success of *Anne* played a pivotal role in marketing *Mother* as a format brand within the global drama industry. Showrunner Eduardo Galdo, who helmed the Spanish adaptation of *Mother*, titled *Heridas* (2022), first learned about the series through the Turkish remake (Hasegawa 2022).

Screenings and events at international trade shows and awards festivals, which have become the driving force of global sales and distribution, played a key role in publicizing the format and bringing further sales. During the 2016 edition of the Cannes-based content market MIPCOM, Turkish distributor Global Agency held a lavish cocktails and dinner event in Monte Carlo to launch *Anne* (MIPMarkets 2016).

Both the South Korean and Thai versions of *Mother* were also highly feted, winning national and international awards that bolstered the franchise's reputation and garnered the attention of buyers. After airing simultaneously in ten countries across Asia and winning several domestic awards, Korean remake *Madeo* was nominated for a Canneseries award in 2018, bringing it to the attention of French production house Incognita, which would ultimately produce its own adaptation, *Sauver Lisa*, for French screens in 2021 (Fry 2021; Nippon TV 2021). In total, *Mother* has broken new ground for Nippon TV in eight new scripted format markets to date, including Turkey, Ukraine, France, Spain, Mongolia, the Philippines, Greece and Saudi Arabia.

Having scored a global hit with *Anne*, Nippon TV and its Turkish partners have since collaborated on another five remakes, including *Kadın* (2017–2020), an adaptation of the 2013 series *Woman*, which was produced by the same creative team behind *Mother* and shared similar themes. Extending over three seasons, a rarity in a country where few series make it past the first season, *Kadın* was even more popular than *Anne*, eventually selling to almost fifty countries. Nippon TV was keen to take advantage of these successes to increase its visibility as an originator of high-quality scripts by taking part in various PR opportunities, including having the Japanese creatives behind its hit formats appear at international trade shows and give interviews to international industry publications, (Daswani 2018; Hasegawa 2019).

Grasping this momentum, the Japanese government has, since 2018, organized several networking events for Japanese and Turkish television companies (JETRO 2025; Tavsan 2024). Collaborative networks between the two countries are expanding; Japanese broadcasters Fuji TV, Kansai TV and TBS have also concluded scripted format deals with Turkish producers (Fuji TV 2020; Kansai 2018; Waller 2024). In 2019, Fuji TV partnered with MF Yapım on the Turkish adaptation of Fuji TV series *Itsuka kono koi o omoidashite kitto naite shimau* (Love That Makes You Cry, 2016), which was based on a script by Yūji Sakamoto, the same writer who penned *Mother* and *Woman*. This connection was leaned on by the distributor of the remake, which billed the drama as “From the creator of *Mother* and *Woman*” in promotional material (Madd - Entertainment n.d), further evidence of the reputation these formats have garnered within the global television industry. Fuji TV operates a similar model to Nippon TV in that it also receives a share of the revenues from tape sales of remakes, and according to the company, its Turkish partnership has also allowed its IP to travel to South America (Fuji TV 2020). Alongside Turkey, Southeast Asia has also emerged as a growing market for Japanese scripts. Since 2019, at least ten remakes of Japanese dramas have been produced in the region, mostly in Thailand but also in Malaysia and the Philippines. In order to meet rising demand from foreign clients and increase its market knowledge, Nippon TV hired additional staff and engaged external consultants (Daswani 2019).

Japan's scripted format success has also boosted the distribution of Japanese dramas in their original form in emerging markets in South America. Following the international distribution of *Anne* and *Kadın*, Nippon TV concluded deals to air *Mother* and *Woman* in Ecuador and Bolivia, contributing to an almost 200 percent increase in program sales rights of Japanese drama to the region in 2019 (MIC 2024; Nippon TV

2020a). This contrasts with the presence of Japanese drama in Middle Eastern television markets, where there have been almost no sales recorded for finished programs, which includes broadcasting rights, streaming rights, and physical media sales, according to industry data for the years 2020 to 2023 (MIC 2024, 2025). Indeed, while the Turkish television industry has demonstrated a healthy appetite for adaptations of Japanese dramas, it has shown little interest in acquiring the broadcast rights to the original series on which they are based, most likely due to strong local production capacity, local preferences for national content, as well as genre and systemic differences in broadcasting formats and conventions (see more below). In other words, scripted formats can offer an alternative way into markets where Japanese drama in its original form would not typically succeed.

These events suggest a change in strategy among Japanese media companies, which are now demonstrating a more open and proactive stance toward developing and exploiting opportunities for international scripted format sales, including increasing resources and investment. At the same time, there does not seem to have been any material shift away from a production model that relies on local sponsorship to produce drama for a local audience in Japan. Rather than investing in the development of scripts that will travel globally, as South Korea has done, Japanese broadcasters prefer instead to mine their back catalog for dramas that could appeal to foreign format buyers. Nippon TV's most recent scripted format deal involved melodrama *Without Family* (*Je naki ko*), first broadcast in 1994, which was remade by MF Yapım almost thirty years later as *Taçsız Prenses* (Crownless princess) in 2023 (Nippon TV 2023). Their recent achievements suggest being conscious of an international audience during the creative process may not be necessary to achieve success in the format business. Indeed, as I argue below, despite being created primarily for a Japanese audience, *Mother* was able to appeal to transnational audiences due to its narrative transparency and localization to accommodate the specificities of the target markets.

Remaking *Mother*: Remediating a Transparent Narrative to Fit Local Conventions

In this section, through a comparative analysis of *Mother* and some of its remakes, I demonstrate how the narrative transparency of the original series, which drew on common tropes of melodrama, enabled the story to travel across borders. At the same time, I show that while the basic elements of storytelling remained consistent across the remakes, extensive remediation was necessary to fit local narrative and systemic conventions.

Mother, an original series consisting of 11 one-hour episodes, first aired on NTV from April to June 2010 in its Wednesday 10pm slot, which typically features women-centered dramas. The plot centers on an elementary school teacher who kidnaps a seven-year-old girl to save her from the abuse and neglect she suffers at the hands of her mother and the mother's boyfriend. The teacher and the girl go on the run and develop a strong emotional bond, but are eventually caught by the authorities and separated. The series shares many of the elements typically associated with melodrama. It explores

issues commonly associated with the feminine realm, including maternal love and the mother-child bond, familial relationships, conflict, and estrangement. It also shares common melodramatic tropes, such as the socially-isolated woman facing injustice; a socially-relevant topic (child abuse); archetypal characters, such as a suffering protagonist, a villain, and a protector; and heightened emotions, conveyed through close ups to invite viewer identification and dynamic music. The combination of universally resonant themes—motherhood and family—packaged within a unique, intriguing story with a strong emotional pull, has been cited by industry insiders as key to the drama’s transnational appeal and success as a format (Asakura 2019; Hasegawa 2022; Layton 2022). *Mother* drew on the well-established, widely-recognized genre tropes of the maternal melodrama to achieve a narrative transparency that allowed it to transcend cultural borders.

This narrative transparency is evident in the consistency with which core elements are replicated across the remakes I was able to view, including the setting, framing, composition, dialog, score, and tone. For example, a scene toward the end of the first episode that evinces common melodramatic tropes, plays nearly identically across the Japanese, Turkish and Korean series. The teacher and the young girl are sitting on a beach. Suddenly the girl runs toward the sea after a flock of birds, imploring them to take her with them (the migratory bird acts as a powerful symbol of freedom in all versions of the drama). Deeply affected by the girl’s longing to escape her misery, the teacher embraces the girl and reveals her plan to kidnap her and become her mother, as the girl sobs in her arms. The displays of emotion are heightened by close ups of their tear-streaked faces and the dynamic score, which reaches a crescendo as the teacher hugs the child tightly and reassures her that she has not been abandoned, while waves crash against the shore behind them. The scene represents the emotional climax of the episode, functioning as a hook for the viewer across all versions.

Nevertheless, changes in the adaptations reveal that, while the basic narrative structures of melodrama are shared across cultures, the conventions of the genre can vary at the local level, necessitating remediation to meet audience expectations. For example, displays of suffering, a recurring theme of melodramatic genres, tend to be more excessive in Korean dramas than Japanese ones, functioning as an emotional outlet for the nation’s historical ordeals (Yoshida 2011). This is manifested in *Madeo* through the introduction of a storyline that involves the young girl being held captive and tortured by her birth mother’s partner, who is revealed to be a serial child murderer. This plot twist, which does not appear in the original, intensifies the dramatic tension, eliciting a stronger emotional response from the viewer. It also increases the content, allowing the production to expand from the eleven episodes of the original to the sixteen more typical for Korean series. The extensive modifications and lengthy script development process may explain the long gap between creator Park Jee Young’s acquisition of the format in 2011 and the production finally being released in 2018 (Fry 2021; Lehner 2018).

Significant changes were also needed to accommodate the differing broadcasting conventions and schedules in Turkey, where television series usually air in two-hour slots and consist of many more episodes than Japanese productions—33 in the case of

Anne. New characters and storylines were added, including a narrative arc in which the teacher falls in love, marries, and is later widowed. In the Japanese original, the focus of the narrative is on the teacher's maternal aspect and on the pseudo mother-daughter bond, with no space given to any kind of romantic intrigue, conforming to a familiar trope in Japanese culture of the asexual maternal figure (Mithani 2020). However, love stories are extremely popular in Turkey and its main export markets—according to the Turkish producer, the addition of a romantic plot to *Anne* was a specific strategy to appeal to Latin American audiences (Behlil 2023).

The narrative's conclusion was also a point of departure for many of the remakes. In the original version the teacher is separated from the girl she kidnaps when the law catches up with them. The justice system enjoys high levels of trust in Japan (Stolyar 2022); therefore, the teacher must accept the proper punishment for her crime and cannot be reunited with the girl until the latter reaches adulthood. By contrast, many of the foreign productions, in keeping with local genre conventions, offer a happy, if somewhat unrealistic, ending in which the kidnapper faces no significant legal consequences and is able to raise the girl as her daughter. The trope of a suffering protagonist finally achieving a happy ending is a common feature in South Korean dramas because it resonates with an audience wishing for a better life (He and Huang 2021).

Securing consent to make remediations was not a straightforward process, often requiring extensive negotiations. The Korean producers met with their Japanese partners several times before gaining approval to change the ending for *Madeo* (Frater 2022). During the production of *Anne*, the original Japanese creative team visited the location to liaise with the local crew and cast. Interacting directly played an important role in establishing a good working relationship, so that the Japanese side felt more comfortable about trusting their partner to make changes to the script and storyline without deviating from the central theme (Daswani 2018; Nishiyama and Miyata 2019). According to Aksoy, staying in touch with the original producer during the development of the remake was useful when trying to understand the motivations of a character and any subtext that was not immediately apparent, allowing them to expand the story in a way that made sense to the local audience (Daswani 2017b, 2018).

The transnational remaking of *Mother* demonstrates the importance of remediation in transferring a script to a new culture. The kernel of the story—a woman's instinct to protect a vulnerable child—might have the narrative transparency to resonate across cultural boundaries, but extensive modification is required to tailor the production to meet local tastes, expectations, and values, as well as accommodating disparities in media systems. As I have demonstrated, this is equally true whether a Japanese script is being transposed to South Korea or Turkey, casting further doubt on a region-based cultural proximity thesis as an explanation for patterns in scripted format flows.

Conclusion

This paper has contributed to the ongoing debates over the role of cultural proximity in transnational flows of scripted television, arguing that structural and business considerations have played a more significant role in shaping remaking practices within East

Asia. The case study of *Mother* demonstrates that Japanese broadcasters can overcome perceived cultural barriers to sell scripted formats outside of the region. An important factor in the success of *Mother* as a format was its reproduction of melodramatic tropes that have a narrative transparency enabling it to travel across multiple borders. Nevertheless, flexibility over remediation was crucial as it allowed local producers to extend existing plotlines or introduce new ones, enabling the series to be expanded for markets with different broadcasting conventions. Both *Anne* and *Madeo* are indicative of the significant effort required to accommodate differences in audience expectations and genre precepts, challenging the notion that cultural affinities or narrative transparency alone are enough to ensure a successful adaptation. Building strong, collaborative relationships played a crucial role in facilitating a more effective knowledge exchange process that directly contributed to the localization of the production. The expertise of local producers and distributors in adaptation and marketing also play a key role in format success: the quality of the Turkish and South Korean remakes and their exposure at international trade fairs and festivals, which reintroduced the story of *Mother* in new forms, increased the appeal of the format to global buyers and audiences.

The rollout of *Mother* as a scripted format heralded a more proactive Japanese strategy toward scripted format sales that has opened up new overseas markets. At the same time, the tendency to mine titles from existing archives, rather than produce new content specifically for global audiences, suggests a continued reliance on a model that prioritizes linear broadcast, which Humphrey (2023) argues has prevented the Japanese television industry fully exploiting opportunities to increase drama exports by leaving them dependent on overseas streamers for international distribution. Japanese protectionism over the domestic market has, thus far, allowed them to avoid the fate of their South Korean counterparts, whose power has been eroded by Netflix, which has usurped their role in the financing and distribution of high-quality drama production, while holding on to full IP rights (Chalaby 2025; Park et al. 2023). However, with television advertising revenues in Japan in perpetual decline (Dentsu 2025), while the SVOD market, led by Netflix with a 21.5 percent share, continues to expand (GEM Partners 2025), the nation's broadcasters may find their current dominant position under threat. Staff at Japanese networks have themselves expressed pessimism in their outlook on the domestic market and argued that a global strategy is needed for the industry to survive (Fry 2019; MIPMarkets 2019).

The recent expansion of Japanese scripted formats may not have been sufficient to warrant a wholesale change in structural conditions in the domestic television market, but it has brought Japanese broadcasters in closer alignment with the global system of transnational cultural production and distribution, as well as becoming an important platform for showcasing Japanese storytelling to the world.

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