

Navigating Digital Borders: Netflix's inclusion and Exclusion in China

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Abstract: *Since the television has gradually been expanded into the digital world, streaming platforms are becoming more and more popular. Netflix, as one of the most representative one around the worlds, made an impact on media infrastructures. Its ambition is not merely about content transmission but to be a media institution to control media resources. This essay concentrates on the condition of Netflix in China, representing that its inclusion and inaccessibility were embedded in the complex relations. Netflix's case in China serves as a striking example of how digital sovereignty can function as a form of resistance to digital colonialism, as well as illustrating the limits of SVOD platforms to provide truly universal access.*

Keywords: Media infrastructure, Netflix, SVOD, Streaming platforms, Chinese regulations.

1. Introduction

The growth of streaming platforms explains that SVOD services have gradually become acceptable in the media market, especially a conglomerate platform, Netflix. There was a 65% rise in its paid subscriptions in the Asia-Pacific area, a chef of which acknowledged the potential of the Asian market (Iyengar, 2021). Simultaneously, as global popular culture, such as Hollywood films, pop music, and other media, has subtly permeated the localization of Asia, a significant question arises: whether Netflix, a Western streaming platform, can dominate the globalization of culture in Asia, especially in China or not (Fung & Chik, 2022). To counter such a phenomenon, the development of these platforms in China is limited by various factors, particularly the distribution of digital infrastructure.

Hence, this chapter will explore three key areas to interpret this question: first, how Netflix tries to distribute content to China; second, the inaccessibility of Netflix, as a platform, is mainly driven by strict regulatory requirements and the need for localized content; and finally, how Netflix's potential digital colonialism exacerbates issues of cultural inequalities, raising concerns about power imbalances and cultural imperialism in the global digital marketplace. As such, the complexity of those power relations among Netflix, the Chinese domestic market, and civic engagement embedded in the digital infrastructure reveals broader geopolitical and cultural tensions.

2. Digital Inclusion: Netflix's Efforts to Penetrate the Chinese Market

Rather than attempting to operate within China as it does in other markets directly, Netflix has pursued partnerships with local streaming platforms and explored opportunities for content distribution. One notable example of Netflix's efforts is the streaming of its content on Chinese platforms. By partnering with domestic giants like iQiyi, *House of Cards*, as an example, was available through a content licensing deal. It was a successful attempt, gaining some attention from Chinese audiences with its portrayal of American politics. However, it was subject to heavy censorship, particularly

scenes involving sensitive political content that the Chinese government deemed inappropriate for local audiences (Chin & Jaffe, 2017), so it was delisted in the end. Similarly, the shows *Stranger Things* were streamed through partnerships, reaching Chinese viewers but often with certain episodes or specific scenes altered. Netflix's high-profile sci-fi series *Sense8* and *Orange Is the New Black*, both of which deal with themes like LGBTQ+ rights, global interconnectedness, and social justice, were less successful in penetrating the Chinese market. Their themes, often seen as politically sensitive, made it difficult for Netflix to include these shows in its offering to China without substantial censorship or risk of outright rejection by regulatory bodies (Fung & Chik, 2022).

In addition to showcasing some of its flagship series, Netflix also sought inclusion through collaborations on content production specifically for the Chinese market. For instance, the animated film *Over the Moon*, co-produced with Chinese animators, was intended to appeal to both Chinese and international audiences, as well as *The Wandering Earth* distributed on its international platforms. However, Netflix's attempts to cater to Chinese tastes are often met with mixed results due to cultural mismatches and limited authenticity (Lotz & Eklund, 2024b). While Chinese films and series can easily make their way to Netflix's global audience, the reverse is far more restrictive. Meanwhile, these inclusion efforts are mainly limited to content distribution rather than allowing Netflix as a platform or infrastructure, with its algorithms, user data, and independent distribution channels, to operate freely in China.

3. Digital Exclusion: Barriers to Netflix's Full Access to China

Despite numerous attempts at inclusion in China, Netflix has faced significant rejection, largely due to China's digital sovereignty policies and cultural barriers.

3.1 Internet Policies and Digital Sovereignty

China's approach to digital content regulation is deeply intertwined with its broader political objectives of control and sovereignty. The government of China recognizes all

audiovisual content as a form of ideology, which must be regulated (Fung, 2016). In this context, China's exclusion of Netflix can be largely attributed to its strict internet policies encapsulated in the concept of digital sovereignty. There are two layers to this concept, integrating the ideal of self-supremacy with the ambition of transferring the privileges associated with sovereignty from an international perspective into the realm of digital technology (Gordan, 2024; Celeste, 2021; Couture & Toupin, 2019). Thus, digital sovereignty seeks to reconstruct the notion of sovereignty within digital domains. In line with this, China developed the "Great Firewall," a system that serves as the backbone of its internet censorship mechanism, preventing foreign digital platforms, including Netflix, from operating freely within its borders. The firewall is not merely a technical barrier but also a tool for controlling the flow of information and protecting digital borders from perceived foreign influences.

This stringent legal framework for digital content is a reflection of the tight relationship between the Chinese state and its internet (Kokas, 2020). In China, all content, whether produced by domestic or foreign companies, must comply with local regulations. This regulatory framework positions the Internet as an extension of national territory, a key element in safeguarding China's Internet sovereignty. Consequently, the Chinese government restricts foreign digital content to maintain control over the flow of information and protect its digital borders. Therefore, this concerns not only ideological conflict between political parties but also safeguarding domestic participants in the nation against outside competitions. A long-standing import quota on foreign entertainment material for public and private television has been imposed by the Chinese government (Fung & Chik, 2022). The Communist Party of China Central Committee's Publicity Department took over the role of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT), which was in charge of policing media content, including digital media. Then, the former announced an internet streaming cap for foreign motion picture works while the specifics were kept under wraps. As such, foreign enterprises find it challenging to enter the Chinese market. In this sense, Netflix's exclusion can be regarded as a form of infrastructural protectionism, where digital sovereignty, through utilizing the Great Firewall, acts as a barrier to external cultural and political influence.

3.2 Cultural Exclusion and Localization

In such a context where China imposes restrictions on foreign media content, Netflix converts to pursuing collaboration with local companies. Thus, Netflix's expansion in China presents a gradual lowering of expectations, shifting from an infrastructure-oriented platform introduction to content distribution agreements to adapt to the Chinese market, but this does not mean that its Western culture-oriented works can successfully enter the Chinese market under government supervision. As it failed to meet the localization demands, there are few chances to operate within Chinese markets.

For instance, Netflix launched the animation film *Over the Moon* (2020) in China in 2020, cooperating with iQiyi, one of the largest streaming platforms in China, while the box office reception was not satisfactory. The reason should be

considered from the perspective of localization, which is the process of adapting the products for a global company to suit the taste, preferences, and regulatory environment in the local market (Pettini, 2021). In the case of this film, localization is not just about providing Chinese-language content but about adhering to deeper socio-political and cultural norms. The creator continuously wavers in the two paths, whether based on the local or integrating into the world. As a consequence, this film uses the Western playground structure to construct a classical Chinese palace scene, which is divorced from Chinese daily life experience, merely narrating the image of traditional China with the stereotype of China as the starting point. The failure to integrate Western and Eastern cultures is predictable, so Chinese audiences are unable to empathize with such characters. This narrative strategy undermines the authenticity and credibility of the story. From the perspective of cultural significance, the myth of Chang'e flying to the moon is interpreted by the film as true love eternal, which is a distortion of the core of the spirit of selfless dedication conveyed by the story itself. Therefore, taking this film as an example, although Streaming services expanded the scale of storytelling narrative (Lotz & Eklund, 2024a), the cultural differences and difficulties faced by Netflix in entering the Chinese market are the internal reasons that make it unable to gain audience support based on strict government regulation. In other words, Chinese media often emphasizes collective values, Confucian principles, and a strong sense of nationalism (Sun, 2020). Netflix's content library, largely rooted in Western individualism, does not align with these cultural values. At that moment, cultural exclusion arises when Netflix is unable or unwilling to sufficiently adapt its content to local standards.

Furthermore, Chinese streaming platforms such as iQiyi and Tencent Video have mastered the art of catering to local tastes with a mix of variety shows, historical dramas, and nationality-produced films, which align with government-approved messaging (Keane, 2016). These platforms benefit from their deep integration into China's digital ecosystem, offering bundled services that combine streaming with social media (Li, 2018). As such, Netflix's exclusion interprets that digital inclusion is not merely a matter of technical access but cultural and political alignment. Its cultural exclusion is enforced through the combination of regulatory barriers and market dynamics that appreciate and adapt to the complex interplay of policies, culture, and media consumption preferences. The ideological negotiation through cultural works is what Netflix should think about when entering the Chinese market.

4. Digital Colonialism and Global Power Dynamics

Netflix's exclusion in China could also be viewed through the lens of digital colonialism, which describes the delivery of Western cultural and economic dominance through digital platforms (Taskeen, 2019; Petrakaki et al., 2023; Young, 2019). As Netflix has expanded globally, a representation of the increasing share of SVOD service, the one-way flow based on the US content was concerned. It has become a powerful vehicle for the dissemination of Western values, norms, and ideologies. From this perspective, China's exclusion can be regarded as a resistance to digital

colonialism. Such a renaissance of cultural protectionism (Flew, Iosifidis, and Steemers, 2016) is supposed to interpret why China utilized a series of restrictions and localizations to enhance its market and identity. Netflix's ambition can be seen in how it portrays China in different countries. For instance, China has constructed a strong intimacy with Brazil of economic and political connection but extreme cultural differences. When searching for China on Netflix's platform in Brazil, the initial five items do not originate from China. One of the contents is the US documentary *American Factory*, which portrays the image of China with political bias (Khoo, 2023). Thus, digital colonialism highlights the power dynamics embedded in global digital infrastructures. If there is no neglect or inaccessibility of the others' media content or products, the ambition of dominating the distribution of the network will exist and grow in the Western narrative. As such, Netflix, as a global platform, is not just an entertainment service but a tool of cultural power. What China rejects is not a platform but rather a transmission of cultural hegemony and a subtle influence on local audiences.

The exclusion of Netflix from China also highlights broader issues of global inequality in the digital infrastructure. While digital technologies have the potential to bridge gaps and create more equitable access to information and entertainment, they often exacerbate existing inequalities (Christiansen et al., 2023). Netflix's transnational expansion can be attributed to a two-part process: facilitating the localization of new content imports by hiring local staff and creating a broadly stable production studio in international locations through the hyper-nationalization of attempted productions. As such, Netflix reaches the goal of producing high-quality content at a lower cost. Until now, its ambition is not limited to content distribution but to pursue a transformation to a media infrastructure that provides original works in an attempt to achieve a monopoly on Internet content. Based on its algorithms and recommendation strategy, Netflix processes and collects vast amounts of users' data, reinforcing the power imbalance between Western and non-Western countries (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). In such a context where smaller and local platforms struggle to compete in a marketplace, China's exclusion of Netflix represents a divergence from this trend. However, the potential issue of the digital divide should also be considered in the next step.

5. Conclusion

Netflix's case in China highlights how digital inclusion and access are deeply influenced by power relations, where dominant Western platforms often fail to accommodate or respect the cultural and regulatory frameworks of non-Western societies. Its exclusion in China goes beyond simple regulatory barriers, reflecting the intricate power dynamics embedded in global digital infrastructures. This includes issues of digital sovereignty, cultural exclusion, and digital colonialism. The limitations of such inaccessibility are shaped not only by state-imposed restrictions but also by the platform's inability to adapt to local content norms and political sensitivities.

As an example, this phenomenon illustrates the challenges global SVOD platforms face in navigating the political, cultural, and economic realities of non-Western markets.

While Netflix continues to expand its global footprint, its exclusion from China underscores the limitations of global platforms in achieving truly universal access. The core of Netflix's case can be understood as a protection of China's cultural and digital sovereignty, even if it comes at the cost of isolating its citizens from global digital networks.

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