

Cultural Translation and Censorship: Localizing Japanese Media for U.S. Audiences through Sailor Moon and Naruto

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of cultural translation and censorship in the localization of Japanese media for American audiences, focusing on the anime series *Sailor Moon* (1990s) and *Naruto* (2002). It explores how original narratives are altered to align with U.S. cultural norms and market expectations. Drawing on theories of cultural translation, media censorship, and soft power, the analysis reveals that localization is not a neutral process but a politically charged act of cultural negotiation. The findings highlight how localization practices can obscure or erase culturally specific meanings, reinforce dominant ideologies, and shape cross-cultural media consumption. This research contributes to broader discussions in communication studies about media globalization, representation, and the ethics of intercultural exchange.

Keywords

anime localization, cultural translation, media censorship, Sailor Moon, Naruto, soft power, queer representation

Introduction

The globalization of popular culture has led to an increased demand for localized versions of foreign media that cater to specific national audiences. This essay focuses on part of the localization process of Japanese media products intended for consumption in the United States. This paper will examine how cultural translation and censorship intersect within this context, influenced by political considerations. As a scholar interested in the ethical and ideological

dimensions of media globalization, I approach this analysis with a focus on how localization practices reflect broader power structures and cultural negotiations.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on theories of cultural translation, media censorship, and soft power to analyze the localization of select Japanese media. Cultural translation involves not only linguistic conversion but also the adaptation of cultural norms and values. Media censorship, often driven by political and social norms, plays a significant role in shaping how media is presented to different audiences. Soft power, as conceptualized by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability to influence others through cultural means.¹ *Sailor Moon* and *Naruto* were selected as primary case studies due to their global popularity, long-standing cultural impact, and well-documented histories of localization and censorship. These series represent two distinct genres, magical girl, and shōnen, and span different decades, allowing for a comparative analysis of evolving localization practices.

Case Study 1: Censorship and Queer Erasure in Sailor Moon

In the case of *Sailor Moon*, there were many changes made from the Japanese version. When *Sailor Moon* was first brought to Western audiences in the 1990s, it underwent extensive cultural translation. This process involved not just translating the Japanese dialogue into English, but also adapting cultural references, names, and even character behaviors to better align with Western norms. Names were anglicized (e.g., Usagi became Serena), and cultural references were replaced with Western equivalents to appeal to a younger, unfamiliar audience.² These changes were made to make the show more accessible to children unfamiliar with Japanese culture, but they also diluted the cultural specificity of the original work.

One of the most contentious aspects of *Sailor Moon*'s localization was the censorship of LGBTQ+ content. In the original Japanese version, Sailor Uranus (Haruka) and Sailor Neptune (Michiru) are explicitly portrayed as a romantic couple. However, in the English-language dub produced for North American audiences, they were recharacterized as very affectionate cousins in an effort to obscure their relationship and conform to conservative broadcasting standards of the 1990s.³ This change not only erased LGBTQ+ representation but also introduced confusion and discomfort, as their closeness appeared inappropriate within the new familial framing. It also disrupted the narrative and emotional dynamics of the series, particularly for queer viewers seeking visibility in media.⁴

Censorship extended beyond romantic relationships to include depictions of violence and gender expression. Certain fight scenes were edited or removed entirely, and male characters who cross-dressed or exhibited feminine traits were either rewritten or excluded.⁵ These changes reflected a broader discomfort in Western media with gender nonconformity and a tendency to sanitize content for presumed child audiences.⁶ As a result, the localized version of *Sailor Moon* diminished the show's progressive messages about identity, empowerment, and the fluidity of gender and sexuality.

One of the most notable censored episodes of *Sailor Moon* in the American version is the Season 1 finale, originally titled "The Sailor Warriors Die! The Tragic Final Battle" in Japan, but heavily edited and renamed "Day of Destiny" in the U.S. version.⁷ This was the 40th episode of the U.S. *Sailor Moon* series. In the original Japanese version, the episode is a tragic and emotionally charged climax. Sailors Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, and Venus die one by one in battle against Queen Beryl's minions. Their deaths are portrayed with emotional weight and finality, underscoring the stakes of their mission. Tuxedo Mask also dies protecting Sailor Moon, who ultimately transforms

into Princess Serenity and sacrifices herself to defeat Queen Beryl. The episode ends with the characters being reincarnated, having lost all memories of their past lives.

In contrast, the American version softened or removed much of this emotional intensity. The deaths of the Sailor Scouts were heavily edited to appear as if they were merely teleported away. Dialogue was rewritten to avoid references to death, and scenes showing the characters' emotional goodbyes were trimmed or cut entirely. The tone was shifted from tragic to hopeful, with a greater emphasis on victory and friendship.

The localization strategies employed in the adaptation of *Sailor Moon* significantly influenced how American audiences perceived the series. Although the show achieved widespread popularity, many viewers only came to appreciate the full narrative depth and cultural nuances of the original Japanese version years later, often through fan-subtitled editions or official re-releases.⁵ This phenomenon has fueled ongoing scholarly debates regarding the ethics of localization and the imperative to preserve cultural authenticity in transnational media flows.⁸ Decades after the controversial localization practices of the 1990s, the franchise was reimagined in *Sailor Moon Crystal*. In contrast to earlier adaptations, the American release of *Crystal* adhered more closely to the original Japanese content, reflecting a broader shift toward fidelity in contemporary localization practices.

Case Study 2 - Cultural Translation and Censorship in Naruto (2002)

Naruto (2002), a flagship title in the shōnen anime genre, offers a compelling case study in the complexities of cultural translation and censorship during the global anime boom of the early 2000s. As the series was localized for Western audiences, particularly in the United States, it underwent significant modifications to conform to broadcasting standards and cultural

expectations. These changes extended beyond linguistic translation to include visual and thematic alterations, highlighting the broader tension between preserving artistic integrity and ensuring market accessibility.

Cultural translation in *Naruto* involves more than simply converting Japanese dialogue into English; it also requires adapting culturally specific elements such as honorifics, idioms, and social customs. Japanese honorifics like “-san,” “-kun,” and “-sensei” are often inconsistently used or entirely omitted in English dubs, thereby stripping away layers of social nuance that define interpersonal relationships in the original version. In Episode 5, “You Failed! Kakashi’s Final Decision,” the character Kakashi is referred to as “Kakashi-sensei” by Sakura.⁹ This usage is preserved in both the Japanese and English versions. However, in other instances, this consistency is lost. For example, the character Sasuke rarely uses honorifics when addressing others in the Japanese version, even referring to Kakashi simply by name. This omission can be interpreted as a sign of aloofness or disrespect, which aligns with his character. In contrast, the English version does not convey this nuance as clearly, since English lacks a comprehensive honorific system, and omission is generally the norm. This example underscores that Japanese honorifics are not merely markers of deference. As Dr. Barbara Pizziconi notes, they can also convey personality, or affective meanings such as intimacy, affection, or irony.¹⁰

One of the most visible forms of censorship in *Naruto* involved the visual sanitization of violence. The original Japanese broadcast included scenes of bloodshed, impalement, and death, elements that were either edited or removed entirely in the U.S. version to comply with broadcasting regulations and the expectations of children's programming on networks such as Cartoon Network. For example, scenes involving kunai impalement or excessive bleeding were either cropped, recolored, or replaced with less graphic imagery.¹¹

Translation decisions also affected iconic phrases and techniques. According to translator Mari Morimoto, who worked on the English adaptation of the *Naruto* manga, the term “*rasengan*” was left untranslated because it was phonetically accessible to English speakers and a literal translation would have been unwieldy.¹² Another challenge was Naruto’s catchphrase “*dattebayo*,” a nonsensical yet rhythmically distinctive phrase with no direct English equivalent. While the manga occasionally rendered it as "Believe it!" or "I tell ya!", the anime dub settled on "Believe it!" primarily because it matched the character’s mouth movements during animation. This choice, while functional, altered the tone and frequency of Naruto’s speech, contributing to a different characterization in the English version.

Episode 124 of the original *Naruto* anime, titled “The Beast Within,” is a prime example of how censorship altered both the tone and clarity of the narrative for U.S. audiences.¹³ In the original Japanese version, the character Rock Lee (inspired by the late Bruce Lee) consumes a small bottle of sake, which triggers his transformation into a wildly unpredictable and powerful fighter.¹³ The humor and danger of the scene lie in the fact that Lee, a minor, becomes intoxicated and fights with erratic brilliance, reminiscent of Jackie Chan’s performance in *Drunken Master*. However, in the U.S. broadcast version, the sake is replaced with a vague mention of an “elixir,” and all references to alcohol are removed. This change not only confuses the viewer, since Lee’s behavior is clearly drunken, but also strips the scene of its cultural and comedic context.

Additionally, the episode features combat sequences that were significantly moderated for American broadcast. In the original Japanese version, the character Kimimaro employs a technique that involves extruding sharpened bones from his body to use as weapons, imagery that is both graphic and thematically unsettling, underscoring the grotesque nature of his abilities. In contrast,

the U.S. adaptation edited or abbreviated these scenes to reduce their visual intensity, thereby diminishing the character's narrative menace and the visceral impact of the original animation.

These examples underscore the intricate balancing act involved in localizing anime: translators and editors must navigate the tension between remaining faithful to the source material and adapting it to fit a new cultural and commercial context. *Naruto* exemplifies how localization involves a series of nuanced decisions that affect everything from language and tone to cultural representation and audience perception. It is important to recognize that younger American audiences are often perceived as especially impressionable in discussions surrounding media influence. This perception, frequently emphasized by advocacy groups and policymakers, adds to the complexity of debates around content moderation and localization.

Discussion

The case studies of *Sailor Moon* and *Naruto* illustrate how localization is not a neutral process but a politically charged act of cultural negotiation. The alterations made during localization reflect dominant ideologies and broadcasting standards in the target culture, often at the expense of cultural authenticity and narrative integrity. These practices can obscure or erase culturally specific meanings. The ethical implications of such practices are significant. While localization can make media more accessible, it also raises questions about representation, cultural preservation, and the responsibilities of media producers and translators. As global media consumption continues to grow, there is a need for more transparent and culturally sensitive localization practices.

It's important to note that the politics of localization intersect with broader questions of power, identity, and representation. Decisions about what content is deemed appropriate or

relatable are often informed by dominant ideologies, which may marginalize or erase minority voices. This dynamic positions localization as a site of ideological negotiation, where cultural meanings are not merely translated but actively reconstructed. These decisions are rarely neutral; they reflect institutional priorities and cultural hierarchies that shape how stories are told and received. As such, localization becomes a mechanism through which global media flows are filtered, regulated, and, at times, contested.

In recent years, however, there has been a discernible shift toward more faithful localization practices. This trend is driven in part by the globalization of fandoms, the rise of participatory culture, and the proliferation of streaming platforms such as Crunchyroll and Netflix. These platforms increasingly offer simulcasts, subtitled versions, and even multiple dubbing options that preserve much of the original content, including culturally specific references and non-Western narrative structures. This evolution reflects a growing recognition of the value of cultural specificity and the importance of preserving artistic and narrative integrity in transnational media flows.

Conclusion

The localization of Japanese anime for American audiences, as exemplified by *Sailor Moon* and *Naruto*, reveals the complex interplay between cultural translation, censorship, and global media politics. These case studies illustrate that localization is not a passive conduit for cross-cultural communication but an active site of ideological intervention. Through the selective adaptation of content, localization reshapes narratives to align with the sociocultural norms, institutional expectations, and commercial imperatives of the target market.

In *Naruto*, graphic scenes were frequently edited or removed in Western broadcasts to comply with children's programming standards. These changes often weakened the emotional intensity of key story arcs, particularly those dealing with trauma and the psychological consequences of violence. Similarly, *Sailor Moon* underwent significant alterations in its depiction of violence, with battle scenes toned down, deaths obscured or rewritten, and darker themes minimized to present a more sanitized and child-friendly version. These modifications not only diluted the dramatic stakes of the narratives but also undermined the original creators' efforts to explore complex emotional and moral themes through conflict. Alongside these edits, the erasure of queer identities in *Sailor Moon* further exemplifies how localization can marginalize non-normative representations to conform to heteronormative and culturally conservative expectations. Such interventions raise critical questions about cultural ownership, authenticity, and the ethics of representation in transnational media flows.

As anime continues to expand its global influence, the process of localization warrants ongoing scholarly scrutiny. Future research should examine how fan-sub communities and platform-based distribution models, are redefining the parameters of cultural exchange. Special attention should be given to how these developments may enable more inclusive localization practices that honor the cultural integrity of source material while fostering meaningful engagement with diverse international audiences. Investigating how audiences interpret and negotiate meaning across multiple localized versions of the same text can further illuminate the complexities of transnational media reception. Such inquiries not only deepen our understanding of media globalization but also contribute to the development of more ethically and culturally responsive communication practices in an increasingly interconnected world.

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