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'MONEY HEIST: KOREA' REIMAGINES NETFLIX'S HIT SERIES AS A K-DRAMA — AND IT WORKS

The Spanish TV phenomenon gets remade and reset in an imagined unified Korea, complete with charged political commentary and BTS namedropping

By **JAE-HA KIM**

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(L to R) Jun Jong-seo, Lee Hyun-woo, Jang Yoon-ju, Park Hae-soo, Lee Won-jong and Kim Ji-hun in 'Money Heist: Korea.'

JUNG JAEGU/NETFLIX

Money Heist: Korea – Joint Economic Area is a mostly faithful adaptation of Álex Pina’s crime drama *La Casa de Papel* — you may know it as *Money Heist*, which aired from 2017 to 2021 and went from semi-successful Spanish TV series to global Netflix phenomenon. Once again, a bespectacled and somewhat squirrely braniac named “the Professor” (*Oldboy*’s Yoo Ji-tae) gathers together a motley crew of criminals and masterminds a heist at a national mint. This isn’t stealing from *people*, he explains, since they’re going to print new money and redistribute that wealth to, um, themselves. Once the gang is inside, the expected hostage situation is established, and the Professor’s plan is out into motion, things get complicated. *Very* complicated. All of this will be familiar to viewers who saw the Spanish series.

But what stands out in this new six-episode adaptation (it drops on Netflix on June 24th) is the addition of quintessential Korean cultural elements — and some of these specific tweaks are key. As in the original, the thieves are told to select code names based on cities. It’s Heist Planning 101: the less they know about each other’s personal lives, the safer they

all are. Hence, we have another group adopting the aliases Berlin, Denver, Helsinki, Moscow, Nairobi, Oslo, and Rio. But when this version's Tokyo (adeptly played by *Burning's* Jun Jong-seo) picks her pseudonym, she's met with resistance. "Why Tokyo of all places?!" she's asked. Her answer? "Because we're going to do something *bad*." It's a seemingly throwaway line that's a nod to the ongoing animosity between Korea and Japan, its one-time colonizer. *Vive le différence*.

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Set in 2025, *Money Heist: Korea* presents a North and South Korea that have not yet been unified, but are no longer at war. The North is now so open that BTS — and other K-pop artists whose music had previously been banned in the North — is selling out concerts in Pyongyang. (It's probably not a coincidence that the "Dynamite" group and their Army get namechecked several times in the first episode's opening five minutes.) Citizens are free to travel between the nations, and the promise of capitalism entices North Koreans like the young Tokyo to head to Seoul. Once there, she quickly learns her options are limited. She can work legally as a waitress, or illegally as an escort for South Korean men who have a kink for North Korean women. On the night she decides her life is no longer worth living, she encounters the Professor, who recruits her for his gang.

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The disparate group of experts includes Rio (Lee Hyun-woo), a young hacker who looks like a K-pop idol; a dense but strong fighter (Kim Ji-hoon) who took the name Denver because he couldn't pronounce his first choice of Philadelphia; his father, Moscow (Won-jong Lee), a skilled miner; counterfeit expert Nairobi (Jang Yoon-ju); and Berlin (*Squid Game*'s Park Hae-soo), the only North Korean to escape from the country's brutal labor camp.

The Korean version omits most of the sweaty trysts that made the Spanish version so damned sexy. The Professor and a police inspector (played by *Lost* actress Kim Yunjin) flirt and even sleep together, but little heat is generated between this standoffish couple. And while Rio has a crush on Tokyo, their relationship shares none of the animalistic lust that fueled some of the most thrilling plotlines in the Spanish series. There *is* a moment of erotica that conforms to K-drama expectations, which traditionally cater more to the female gaze: When nudity is depicted between Denver and a hostage, the camera shows off *his* naked and sculpted backside.

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One of the original *Money Heist* subplots centered on an ambassador's daughter who's taken hostage. The Spanish series' version was an outcast who was tricked by a classmate into flashing her breast, which was then shared on social media without her permission. In *MH: K*, the teenager (Lee Si-woo) has been reinvented as a popular and savvy student who is no one's patsy. Given South Korea's epidemic of *molka* — the illegal filming of girls and women — it appears the showrunners wanted to steer clear of victimizing a young character with an overtly sexual storyline. This young woman is a badass who's less skittish and more forthright than her Spanish counterpart. And just as teenage empowerment worked so well in the Korean zombie series *All of Us Are Dead*, this supporting character's adjustment here provides a strong contrast to the underhanded, bickering adults. She's a high school student whose survival mode has kicked in.

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Though the thieves try to pit the North and South Korean hostages against each other, the real adversaries are the wealthy political elite who don't care who they abuse, as long as the outcome benefits them. The parable of this series is that the tension isn't between the two Koreas so much as it is between the haves and the have-nots. And while director Kim Hong-sun keeps the story moving at a good pace, he has a tendency to veer towards campiness on occasion. For instance, when a hostage who was presumed dead makes their reappearance, the others happily clap as if they're at a hootenanny.

It's a shame that the show's first episode is the weakest, because some viewers may get impatient and drop the series. *Money Heist: Korea* gets progressively better and culminates in a season finale cliffhanger that, much like the original, will test the Professor's moral compass — or lack thereof. (Netflix says the second season will drop later this year.) The all-star cast is more than capable of delivering the goods. Yet the lack of chemistry between the romantic partners hinders, rather than enhances the plot. Here's hoping that the second season will focus more on the backstories of the thieves — and their preparation for the pulling off their epic robbery — than any romantic affairs. Because the heist is where the heart is.

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