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Translating Code-Switching in the Colonial Context: Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden*

Jinsil Choi, Kyung Hye Kim and Jonathan Evans

Keimyung University, South Korea; Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China; University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK

Abstract

Park Chan-wook, one of the most internationally acclaimed Korean filmmakers, uses language as part of characterization in *The Handmaiden*, his adaptation of Sarah Water's novel *Fingersmith*. The historical background and the characters' nationalities are changed, but code-switching between two languages—i.e., Korean and Japanese—recurs throughout the film, thereby enhancing its dynamics for the Korean audience. Drawing on the notion of 'proximity' and reader response theory, this study examines the role of languages in Park's characterization and proximation of the original work for the Korean audience, and the extent to which the shifts in proximity and the use of languages contribute to British audiences' affective experiences when this Korean adaptation is subtitled in English.

Keywords: characterization; code-switching; *Fingersmith*; Park Chan-wook; proximation; *The Handmaiden*

Introduction

Park Chan-wook's 2016 film *Agassi/The Handmaiden* demonstrates both cultural relocation and code-switching.¹ It is a Korean film adaptation, set in Japanese-occupied Korea, of the English novel *Fingersmith* (Waters 2002), which was set in Victorian Britain. According to the Korean Film Council,² *The Handmaiden* was the eleventh highest earning South Korean commercial film released in 2016, despite having a limited audience, as it was rated 'not allowed for adolescents' in Korea, equivalent to 'R' (restricted) in the US. The film's setting is significant, as the period of Japanese occupation still rankles in South Korea today (Armitstead 2017); the period still has an affective charge for South Korean audiences,³ as it is both in living memory and connected to the development of national identity. This particular historical shift was carefully designed by producer Syd Lim to avoid replicating the BBC miniseries of *Fingersmith* (Topalovic 2016), but the colonial setting brings significant changes to the hierarchy and identities of characters in the film.

In the UK, where the novel that inspired the adaptation was published, the film was also critically acclaimed. When it was released in July 2017, it ranked highest among Korean films released in the UK (Kim 2018). It held sixth position on *The Guardian's* list of the top 50 films of 2017 in the UK (2017), and its UK box office revenue was about £1.35 million,

¹ All Korean names are given in the traditional Korean order of family name, personal name. Park is therefore Park Chan-wook's family name.

² www.kobis.or.kr/kobis/business/stat/offc/findYearlyBoxOfficeList.do, last accessed 12 August 2020.

³ Our discussion of affect is influenced by Steven Shaviro's use of the term in *Post Cinematic Affect* (2010, 3–4) as something that is pre-subjective and non-conscious, rather than more individualized emotion. Shaviro takes his definition from Brian Massumi (2002), but we find Shaviro's application to film to be more directly relevant to our work in this area.

an all-time high for a Korean film in the UK (Kim 2018). It was the first Korean film to win 'Best Film Not in the English Language' at the 71st British Academy Film Awards in 2018.

The film undertakes what adaptation theorist Julie Sanders calls a proximation of its source text, or "an updating or the cultural relocation of a text to bring it into greater proximity with the cultural and temporal context of readers or audiences" (Sanders 2016: 215). Sanders develops this term from Gérard Genette's (1997/1982: 304) 'movement of proximation.' The change in the socio-cultural context in adaptation and translation encourages viewers' reinterpretation of the narrative, giving it a local, Korean aspect where languages play a key role. The context and the situation in which texts are consumed are also important for reader response, or in this case viewer response. Stanley Fish argues that meaning is not intrinsic or embedded in texts; rather, readers' experiences establish the meaning of the work. Focusing on the readers' interpretive actions, he further argues that a group of like-minded competent readers form "interpretive communities," which share "interpretive strategies" (Fish 1980: 171), writing meaning into the text and defining how the text should be read. Since the interpretive strategies exist prior to the act of reading, and they are "not natural or universal," different interpretive communities will deploy a different set of interpretive strategies, hence disagreement and opposition among the different communities (1980: 171–173). This concept will later help explain audiences' different affective experiences of the Korean adaptation.

How and to what extent the movement of proximation is employed in film adaptations of novels, in terms of the use of different languages, has largely been ignored, particularly in films where English is not spoken. However, in this globalized era when audiences of popular culture are "embracing multilingualism like never before" (Bennett 2019: 2) and the mix of languages or code-switching reflects the growing tendency in the commercial film industry (O'Sullivan 2011: 4), "there has been a certain urgency amongst translation scholars to explore the implications of hybridity for translation theory, description and practice" (Bennett 2019: 5). In *The Handmaiden*, code-switching between Korean and Japanese is fundamental to the narrative development and characterization. While the Japanese occupation period's cruelty and brutality permeates many layers in this film, it is packaged in a sophisticated and subtle way, unlike other films from the era, which present a stereotypical opposition between Korean victim and Japanese victimizer. In this film, the generalized power structure between Japanese and Korean characters during the colonization period is reversed, and code-switching and the use of different languages is key to understanding such characterization.

In the UK DVD version, however, the Korean and Japanese source languages are subtitled in standard English, attenuating the differences and affective impacts, although the use of linguistic varieties in audiovisual translation is "an invaluable resource for a more accurate depiction of the interpersonal relations established between characters and the discursive situation" (Ramos Pinto 2018: 17). When a film in which multilingualism and code-switching play a pivotal role in narrative is translated into the standard target language, it eliminates the dynamic subtext of the different languages involved and marks a significant loss to the target audience, which relies solely on translation for access to the film, as evidenced by Määttä (2004), T. Lee (2016), and more recently Attig (2019). However, in the case of *The Handmaiden*, the languages are signaled by different colored subtitles, allowing an English-speaking audience some awareness of the different languages, if not the same level of nuance as a Korean-speaker's viewing of the film, but the inconsistent use of color, as will be discussed, fails to deliver the affective charge of the source.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the extent to which the role of multilingualism employed in this adaptation contributes to the characterization and its success, in line with Park's aim. When asked about the intention of using Japanese in the Korean film, Park explains that it was his decision to psychologically distance the audience from the scene (S. Lee 2016a). He also said his aim was to highlight the two women doing something together, rather than to accentuate the woman's vengeance on the male character, unlike in the novel *Fingersmith* (H. Kim 2016). Such aims suggest a narrative emphasis more on solidarity than vengeance, unlike the source novel and unlike Park's earlier work in the 'vengeance trilogy.'⁴ From this perspective, this article reads *The Handmaiden* with an emphasis on the role of code-switching in developing such solidarity and unity between characters in the Japanese colonial context and examines how Korean and British audiences received Park's adaptation. While acknowledging the importance of the non-linguistic elements featured in the film, which may well complement some inevitable loss in subtitling, this study pays more attention to linguistic considerations, due to space restrictions.⁵

We first explore the film's cultural relocation and the code-switching between two languages (i.e., Korean and Japanese) in the Japanese colonial context, before investigating how this proximation was received in South Korea. We then examine the extent to which the shifts in proximity and the use of the two languages contribute to audiences' affective experiences when this Korean adaptation is subtitled in English. The DVD distributed in the UK was chosen to identify and analyze any shifts in subtitles, because the UK is the country where the original novel was based, and thus it would be interesting to analyze how the DVD translation proximates Park's twists and cultural relocation for the British audience.⁶ For analysis of its reception, media reviews and cinephile blogs in Korea and the UK will be explored.

The Colonial Setting of *The Handmaiden*

The Korean adaptation is relocated to 1930s Japanese-occupied Korea, adding Asian components and languages that were completely absent from the source text. The nationalities and languages of characters are key components in the film's narrative development. The film tells the story of a Korean maid, Sook-hee; a Korean masquerading as Japanese, Count Fujiwara; and a Japanese noblewoman, Hideko. These characters correspond to the characters Sue, Gentleman, and Maud in the novel. Like Sue, Sook-hee is an adopted orphan, groomed to become a 'fingersmith,' or petty thief. Fujiwara employs her to steal the fortune of a Japanese heiress—Lady Hideko—who lives with her authoritarian uncle, Kouzuki (the equivalent of the novel's Mr. Lilly). Kouzuki is a pro-Japanese Korean, who as an interpreter made a fortune in return for helping with the 1910 Korea-Japan annexation

⁴ Boksuneun naeui geot/Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance (2002), Oldeuboi/Oldboy (2003), and Chinjeolhan Keumjassi/Lady Vengeance (2005).

⁵ For example, Park presents Kouzuki's house as a large mansion featuring both British and Japanese styles. The style of house, with its Korean paintings and pottery presented inside, is deliberately used to create a sense of the distinctive colonial period, while at the same time demonstrating both Kouzuki's desire to be Japanese and his admiration for Europe, as noted by the art director, Ryu Seong-hee, in an interview (S. Kim 2016).

⁶ A comparative analysis of the English subtitles on the DVD distributed in Korea and the British version revealed some stylistic differences such as modal verbs (for example, may have been vs. may be) and metaphoric expressions. Given this, it is possible that the subtitles used for streaming on, among others, Amazon and NAVER MOVIE (a Korean streaming service) are different. This article chose to analyze the English subtitles for the British DVD version.

treaty. He collects paintings and works of sadistic erotica, and he has trained Hideko and her aunt to read extracts from them at private readings. He had married a Japanese woman (Hideko's mother's sister), but after she died, he proposed marriage to his niece, Hideko, in order to inherit her wealth. As in *Fingersmith*, Sook-hee and Hideko become lovers. While Kouzuki is on a business trip, Sook-hee destroys his book collection, and she, Fujiwara, and Hideko escape from the house. Afterward, Fujiwara and Hideko double-cross Sook-hee and have her incarcerated in a mental institution. Sook-hee escapes from the asylum, while Hideko poisons Fujiwara's wine and takes his money. Sook-hee and Hideko reunite and flee to Shanghai. Kouzuki captures Fujiwara and asks him for sexual details about Hideko. While making up a story, Fujiwara smokes cigarettes laced with mercury, which kills them both.

Interestingly, the novel's author Sarah Waters affirms the film's faithfulness to the original novel despite such explicit changes, in interviews in *The Guardian* (Armitstead 2017) and on BBC Radio 4's *The Film Programme* (April 16, 2017, cited in Shin 2019: 3). However, as we discuss, the Korean adaptation focuses more on the solidarity of Sook-hee and Hideko and highlights the dynamic relationship between Fujiwara and Kouzuki as accomplices.

Language and the act of translation govern the story and characterization, as in the interpreter Kouzuki's betrayal for becoming Japanese and his material success. Code-switching between Korean and Japanese plays a key role in narrative development and the evolving relations between characters.

The colonial setting has brought significant changes to the hierarchy and identities of characters in the film. First, the colonial background conspicuously introduces a compelling class tension to the hierarchy between characters. The colonized-colonizer (or dominated-dominator) relation of Sook-hee and Hideko, together with that of Sook-hee and Kouzuki, brings another layer to the existing master-servant relation described in *Fingersmith*, and the social hierarchy became more visible and rigid. Such tension is illustrated in scenes that feature more violence than the original novel, such as a snake to demarcate where a visitor may not enter in Kouzuki's reading room (the novel uses a finger) and the feature of armed soldiers. For example, the first scene clearly depicts the more consolidated hierarchy and the colonial setting of the film, which features Japanese soldiers marching in the rain, juxtaposed with singing Korean children in rags, who were taken aback by the brandishing swords. In another scene, Kouzuki is carried by a Korean servant while reading a book on a chair. Similarly, when Sook-hee goes to Kouzuki's house, her Korean name (she is using the name Okju at this point) is forcibly changed by Sasaki, the chief maid, to the Japanese name Tamako. This name change evokes the Japanese impact on language in colonial Korea, particularly from the late 1930s, when the use of Korean was completely prohibited not only in public (schools, offices, etc.) but also in private (between friends) (Kim 2010). Koreans were also forced to change their names to Japanese ones in November 1939, as part of the Japanese Government General's One policy (內鮮一體, 'Japan and Korea are one') (Koo 2005).

All of these represent Koreans' powerless, controlled, and submissive status under Japanese colonial rule, further emphasizing the difference in power in the adaptation. These aggressions, varying from the linguistic to the physical, raise affective responses, as Korean audiences associate them with their knowledge and experience of history. Language highlights colonial hierarchies. In passage 1 below, Kouzuki's ability to use the Japanese Government General's electricity contrasts sharply with Sook-hee's inferior position.

- (1) Sasaki (in Korean): uri narimanimeun ... chongdokbuedo yeonjuri isseoseo cjeongikkaji kkeureoda sseuneunde ireon daege wasseuni niga eolmana ssakssakhan hanyeoga doeeoyagenni? [We can use electricity as our Master ... has connections

with the Japanese Government General. You came in such a house, and [I assume] you know how affable a maid you should be]⁷

Park directs this scene in a large, dark British- and Japanese-style mansion, which, together with dreary acoustic effects, provides a gothic horror atmosphere, thus accentuating in the film the important difference in their respective status (S. Kim 2016). Park, in an interview with *Cine 21*, explains that, although Sook-hee enters Kouzuki's house to swindle the Japanese, the scene shows the class hierarchy and clear distinction between Japanese and Korean through the poor Korean woman character in need of money entering a rich, Japanese-naturalized Korean's house (H. Kim 2016).

The colonial terms chosen by Park unavoidably entail the use of two languages (i.e., Korean and Japanese) throughout the film, to the extent that even Korean audiences need subtitles for the lines in Japanese. What is more interesting is that Park employs the two languages intentionally to highlight initially the inequality of and later the *intimacy* between characters, thereby signaling their solidarity. Language and the act of translation is at the center of the story and narrative development of *The Handmaiden*. This aspect is clearly in contrast to many Korean films set in the Japanese colonial period, in which Japanese simply reflects the language and identity of those who invade, or the language of those who were forced to use it to communicate with the invaders or achieve wealth in the Japanese-occupied society. The multilingualism in this Korean adaptation thus not only contributes to the consolidation of the hierarchy between the Korean and Japanese characters but also to their characterization. In particular, the characterization of the Korean-speaking Japanese woman, Hideko, in contrast to the Japanese-speaking Korean man, Kouzuki, is an attempt to accentuate the solidarity and union between the Japanese (Hideko) and the Korean (Sook-hee), while underlining the opposing relationship of the Japanese-speaking Koreans (Kouzuki and Fujiwara).

What follows is an in-depth textual analysis of the ways in which multilingualism is employed for such characterization in the Korean filmic adaptation of *Fingersmith* and how Korean audiences received this aspect.

Code-switching, characterization, and Korean audiences' affective experiences

As in many cases of contemporary film production (O'Sullivan 2011; T. Lee 2016; Attig 2019), multilingualism in *The Handmaiden* plays a key role in the development of plot and formation of a sophisticated colonial narrative and characterization. Code-switching/code-mixing in multilingual film has occasionally been discussed (e.g., Monti 2014), but code-switching to signal the relationship between characters, which is our focus, has rarely been documented.

In this film, both the Korean and Japanese languages are used throughout to emphasize the social order. Historically, languages played a vital role in representing the stratification between the two nationalities in 1930s colonized Korea, in that Koreans were dominated by Japanese. The Japanese language had achieved what Michael Cronin (1995: 87) calls a "majority status," which is determined by "political, economic and cultural forces," since from the late 1930s the use of Korean in public was completely prohibited. Suh Serk-bae calls Japanese in this situation "the language of authority" (2013: 3). The forced ascendancy of the Japanese language demonstrated asymmetry and inequality during the colonial period, thus stressing the inferior "position of minority-language speakers in relationships of language and power" (Cronin 1995: 89). This asymmetry is employed throughout the film to

⁷ All translations are ours unless otherwise indicated.

highlight the inequality between characters, as evident in the forcible name change from Korean to Japanese (discussed earlier), while the shared use of Korean accentuates the intimacy between Japanese and Korean characters against such historical background, where they should not have been speaking it.

More importantly, in this film, the use of Korean represents solidarity, while Japanese is symbolized as the language of obscenity, hypocrisy, and alienation. When the film features Kouzuki's use of Japanese, Japanese seems to symbolize his hypocrisy, and in a scene describing Kouzuki's deceit through code-switching, Japanese is used to ridicule his hypocrisy, as in Fujiwara's line, "Kouzuki asks about a specialist to create intricate forgeries, *who's pure Japanese of noble birth*, unlike him" (text in italics is in Japanese).⁸ Meanwhile, to the young, orphaned Hideko, Japanese (her mother tongue) highlights her isolation and separation in a house predominantly serviced by Korean servants, who often speak in Korean she can't understand. The failure in communication leads to a rupture in their relationship, and the young Hideko cuts herself off from anyone in the house. For instance, in one scene the young Hideko yells at the chief maid, Sasaki, while crying. "*Speak in Japanese!*" she bursts out with anger and loneliness.⁹ Here the affective load of language use is brought to the fore by the strong physical, even visceral, reaction of the characters.

Such an emotionally charged scene is more appealing because of the preceding scene, in which Kouzuki physically abuses the young Hideko defying his orders to read obscene texts in the reading room. Sasaki actively assists in such abuse by seizing the young Hideko. Hideko's intense hatred of the Japanese-naturalized Koreans, Kouzuki and Sasaki, therefore, seems rationalized by this abuse, while Kouzuki's spiteful character is further underlined.

Having been abused physically and sexually by her uncle Kouzuki for years, the grown-up Hideko may have considered that Japanese symbolizes coercion, obscenity, and repugnance, which she 'is sick of,' in association with the reading room, while Korean comforts her and offers an escape from her wretched reality. Languages are therefore connected to physical and affective states in the film: disgust, fear, shame, and anger.¹⁰ This is evident in her confession in Korean to Sook-hee in their first meeting: "I am sick [of Japanese]. The books my uncle made me read are all in Japanese." Hideko's revulsion at the Japanese language is thus entangled with her intense but justifiable anger at those who forcibly trained her to read in Japanese and perform erotic readings. The hypocritical and malicious characters of those who trained her are made visible in a reading session featuring Hideko's enactment of a sadistic scene. In the scene, Hideko simulates sexual acts described in an erotic text, swinging on a trapeze with a wooden marionette. Kouzuki and Sasaki participate in the act as a production team behind the stage. Such *mise-en-scène* orchestrates the vicious and hypocritical aspect of the Japanese-naturalized Korean characters, Kouzuki and Sasaki, and Hideko's abuse and oppression are further emphasized. In this regard, Hideko's character and use of Korean is in sharp contrast to characters of Kouzuki and of Sasaki who insist on speaking in Japanese, although they are Korean by birth.

⁸ Subtitles for the Korean version of the film translate the Japanese into Korean. The transcriptions of Japanese are our own.

⁹ Although it is not explicitly shown in the film, it seems Hideko learns Korean later, which is signaled in a scene where the young Hideko slaps a Korean servant and says, "Do you think I don't understand Korean?" in Korean.

¹⁰ This list of physical, affective states draws from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reading of Silvan Tomkins's affect theory (Sedgwick 2003: 93–121).

Watching this scene is a roomful of book collectors, including Fujiwara, who sit in a perfectly decorated Japanese-style library that resembles a theater. These rich men in Western formal attire (white tie) watch Hideko act out sadomasochistic scenes such as being choked, whipping herself, and being whipped. The scene depicts the hypocrisy of the period through the combination of formality and sexual violence. Park explained in an interview with *Aju Business Daily* that he intentionally cast the male actors for their gentle looks and capacity to wear their age well, thus emphasizing their duplicity by fostering the illusion that they are a formal academic circle, whereas, in reality, it is a gathering of “byeontae” [perverts] (Choi 2016). These aspects of the scene characterize Hideko as a victimized, sympathetic Japanese character and Kouzuki, Sasaki, and Fujiwara as vicious, hypocritical Japanese (but Korean) characters, inverting the positions of Koreans and Japanese in the colonial order.

Moreover, the interplay of the two languages plays a central role in not only characterization but also developing the relationships between characters, as shown in Fig. 1.

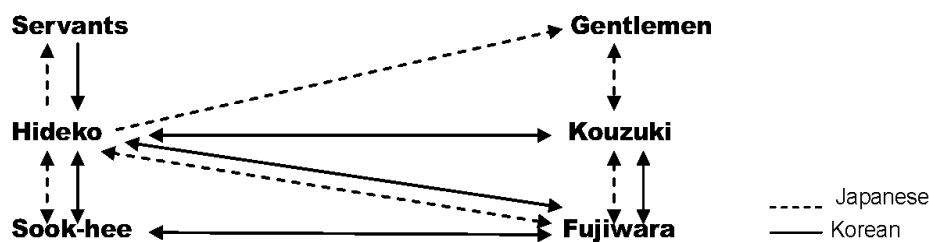


Figure 1. The mix of languages between characters

In the early part of the film, Japanese is used between Hideko and Sook-hee, but Hideko uses Korean as their relationship becomes intimate and social distance decreases. Similarly, Hideko and Fujiwara use Japanese before the film reveals their conspiracy, but once their plan is disclosed to the audience in part two, both use Korean, signaling their solidarity. Kouzuki speaks in Japanese in a meeting with Fujiwara and invited guests. However, as his hypocritical identity is revealed to Fujiwara (and the audience), and Fujiwara’s plan to steal Hideko fails and is disclosed, Kouzuki and Fujiwara speak in Korean.

Psychological solidarity between Hideko and Sook-hee and between Kouzuki and Fujiwara is constructed through conspiracy and the use of the same language as a conduit. This is clearly shown at the end of the film, when victim and perpetrator roles have shifted.¹¹ Hideko, now the victim-turned-avenger, tells Sook-hee about her suffering and nightmarish time, leading Sook-hee to take revenge on the perpetrators. However, their retaliation is directed not at the agents but the objects such as obscene texts, as in the scene when Sook-hee destroys Kouzuki’s collection of erotica, which he “cares for like his own flesh,” before they escape the house, unlike the original novel (Maud alone destroys them in the novel). The indirect revenge on Kouzuki through his books could be construed as a narrative emphasis on the two women’s solidarity, “doing something together,” more than vengeance on the male characters.¹² The most extreme revenge on Kouzuki was instead taken by Fujiwara, although

¹¹ The unity between Hideko and Sook-hee in Park’s adaptation is also saliently represented in their conspiracy to deceive Fujiwara. Sook-hee knew of the plan that Hideko and Fujiwara had to incarcerate Sook-hee in an asylum, unlike Sue in *Fingersmith*.

¹² As noted earlier, before Sook-hee and Hideko reunite and flee to Shanghai, Hideko poisons Fujiwara’s wine to take his money and escape. Such narrative development, however, does not seem to aim at avenging her grudge on him but rather extricating her from his capture.

it killed Fujiwara, too. As Kouzuki recognizes that his hypocritical identity is disclosed to Fujiwara and Fujiwara's plan to possess Hideko is revealed to Kouzuki, they converse in Korean.

This speaking of Korean by all main characters rejects the simple assumption that Korean is the language of the colonized and Japanese is the language of the colonizers. As Michael O'Sullivan argues in *The Washington Post*, "the fact that these characters, both Japanese and Korean, are played by Koreans, adds a thin layer of irony, reinforced by the film's implicit critique of colonialism" (O'Sullivan 2016). As reflected in the basement scene when Kouzuki mixes Japanese words into Korean when speaking to Fujiwara, the film seems to take the irony further, while, according to S. Lee (2016b), the director and actors' intent was to reflect the habitual practices of Koreans living abroad, who unwittingly tend to mix languages. This interplay of languages culminates near the end of the film in Hideko's letter to Kouzuki. The letter is delivered in Hideko's voiceover, and she switches codes from Japanese to Korean:

(2) *Respected Uncle. Seeing you try very hard to speak flawless Japanese before the Count from Nagoya, and even to quiver your voice like a nobleman, has always been painful for me. So I am happy to inform you that you no longer need to do so [...]. Oh, did my gift arrive safely? Please tell this to my gift, in Korean. I am afraid that in real life no woman feels pleasure at being taken by force. But for sending me Sook-hee among all other girls in the world, I feel 'slightly' grateful.*

(Japanese in Italics, Korean in Roman).

The use of the two languages in this filmic adaptation is therefore a carefully devised tool to structure and signify the developing relationships among the characters (T. Lee 2016).

This treatment of the two languages and characterization seems to have appealed to the feelings of the Korean audience by successfully highlighting the conflict structure between Hideko and Kouzuki, and between Hideko and Fujiwara. At the same time, establishing psychological solidarity between Hideko and Sook-hee induces Korean audiences' empathy for the female characters and their unity. This is in sharp contrast to some common stories of the Independence Movement and Korean anger, in which Japanese characters are only portrayed as plunderers and afflictors, as is the case with many Korean movies set during the same period (Choi and Jo 2017: 418). Choi and Jo (2017) attribute the success of the film to the socio-temporal fit of such women's unity and success at a time when feminist discourses, such as the hashtag movement of "I am a feminist," were hotly contested. Misogyny also figured in a hate crime against a female college student at Gangnam station in Seoul, committed just two weeks before the film's release.

In line with Choi and Jo's comments, the solidarity highlighted by the treatment of languages drew Korean film critics' attention to Sook-hee and Hideko's success, despite their different classes, as Park originally intended. Their collaboration negates the differences in gender and class and the common expectation of male heroism in Korean films. The psychological solidarity between the two female characters constructed in the film was so great that some Korean reviews highlight this aspect, as in 'the most heartrending and touching solidarity between two ladies in the history of Korean movies,' noted by Kim Seong-hoon, and 'ambitious and beautiful solidarity' by Lee Hwa-jeong (*Cine21* 2016).

Likewise, some cinephile blogs, such as moonsoyoung.com (2016), a Korean art journalist's blog, discuss the postnationalism featured in the film in terms of the solidarity and the use of two languages. Similarly, Duna (2016), another well-known Korean film blogger, also notes in the review published in *Cine21* that the nationalistic structure (i.e., evil Japanese vs. good Koreans, or Korean victims vs. Japanese victimizer) is challenged in this film, and points out

the rather complex translation layers featured, explaining that first the characters were ‘translated’ in terms of the colonization setting and another ‘translation’ was carried out for the substantial number of lines delivered in Japanese.

Code-switching in English subtitles and British audiences’ affective experiences

While *The Handmaiden* is set in colonial Korea and uses the Japanese and Korean languages, to view it as solely a Korean film made for a Korean public is somewhat problematic. Although Park Heebon, Julie Sanders, and Chung Moonyoung (2019: 181) claim that the Korean audience was the primary audience for this film and that the film “suggests a confident resistance to simplistic facilitation for international audiences,” this Korean adaptation was internationally distributed by Amazon Studios, an American company that distributes films to over 200 countries (Amazon Studios 2019). Given Park’s status as an internationally known auteur director and Amazon’s global distribution network, it can be argued that the film was made not only targeting the Korean audience but an international audience as well, and was expected to be distributed internationally. This also suggests that the issue of language and translation must have been considered for the distribution and reception of the film. With this in mind, we carry out a comparative analysis of subtitles in the Korean version and the DVD version distributed in the UK to identify the extent to which Park’s code-switching and proximation in the Korean adaptation is realized in English subtitles.

The translation follows conventional patterns of subtitling, which tend to favor normative language use. Despite some success in replicating the effects of stutters and other idiosyncrasies, the employment of standard English for the translations of Japanese and Korean does not clearly render the sharp affective conflict between the two nationalities and the impact of code-switching between the two languages. For example, emotive language such as Korean swear words, which are used to refer to Japanese characters, is often omitted in the English subtitles, which may limit British viewers’ ability to access the scornful sentiment toward being Japanese.

A case in point is the use of “waenom” [Jap jerk] or “waenyeon” [Jap bitch]. ‘Nyeon’ is a bound noun, referring to a woman offensively, while ‘nom’ refers to a man. These words are certainly derogatory terms used to degrade the woman and the man in context, together with the word ‘wae,’ a contemptuous reference to being Japanese. Therefore, the compound noun, ‘waenyeon,’ means a Japanese woman and expresses a strongly negative affect, but the subtitle, ‘Japanese wife’ or ‘her,’ elides the negative attitudes toward Japaneseness, which blunts the tension and reduces the effect that the colonial proximation induces. So does just ‘Japanese’ for ‘waenom’ in the context where Kouzuki’s hypocritical identity is ridiculed.

Similarly, the Japanese expression “chōsenjin” [the chōsen jerk¹³] is a derogatory reference to a Korean. Its plain translation, ‘Korean,’ removes the negative implication in the original, as in a scene when Fujiwara contemptuously describes Sook-hee’s appearance, touching and turning her face with a folded hand fan, “*A decent bone structure for a Korean*” (Japanese in italics). Although Fujiwara’s performance shows contempt, subtitles are important because they give audiences with no knowledge of Japanese access to the meaning of the utterance. The use of “chōsenjin” in the colonial time may not have had a negative connotation, but in contemporary Korea, it certainly evokes a distinct aversion to Japan, in association with the Japanese colonization period. The delivery of such contemptuous meaning in the subtitles is necessary for the affective understanding of the contemporary English-language audience.

¹³ Chōsen refers to pre-modern Korea.

Another significant difference in the English subtitles is the representation of class and hierarchy in the colonial context, which was marked by formal or informal speech style in Korean. As is widely acknowledged, speech style is often key to interpersonal pragmatics and characterization (Remael 2003: 236), but standardized subtitles that conform to dominant conventions and expectations in the target culture often iron out subtleties and change characterization. This holds true for *The Handmaiden*. While Fujiwara and Sook-hee generally converse in an informal style where no honorific marker is added, using the ‘-hae’ ending (informal style between people in the same rank or in a close relationship such as friends), Fujiwara speaks formally to Sook-hee, using the ‘-haera’ ending (formal style to a person in a lower rank). Honorifics are also added in Sook-hee’s utterances to him, when others are present, to disguise their relationship. The interpersonal relation signaled in the speech style is pivotal to the plot and characterization, because the Korean servant Sook-hee’s speech style, without honorifics, to the Japanese nobleman Fujiwara signifies their working together on the conspiracy. Her way of speaking lowers all other noblemen and noblewomen in her monologues, and conversations with Fujiwara unequivocally represent her bold, ambitious, and strong personality. Admittedly, honorifics are seldom translated in audiovisual translation, but compensating strategies could have been used to highlight their affective value.

The same pattern can be found in the Japanese language used in this film, which shows the power relations among the characters. It also functions as a language that characters use “to disguise their true colors/real intention” (Y. Lee 2016). In her interview (Y. Lee 2016), Izumi Chiharu, who translated lines in the script into Japanese and coached the actors on Japanese pronunciation, explains that Hideko tends to use *ね* (ne) and *の* (no) sentence endings to construct her feminine, tender, and soft image; Sook-hee uses a formal ending *です* (desu) for the characters in a higher position. Kouzuki tends to use the first-person pronoun *わし* (washi), usually used by middle-aged authoritative males to build an ‘experienced’ image.¹⁴ The Count uses the first-person pronoun *わたくし* (watakushi) when speaking to Hideko to signal excessive formality, but he uses the first-person pronoun *おれ* (ore), used in a casual setting, together with the “wild male accent”¹⁵ when he speaks to Sook-hee. As this kind of difference could only be appreciated by Japanese speakers, it supports our argument that the film considered international audiences, including Japanese viewers. However, such stylistic differences were not preserved in the standard English subtitles.

A further strategy in the English translation is the reduction of class-based insults, which again masks structures of affect in the film. Here are some examples:

(3) *Source*

Sook-hee (in Korean): Michigin, cheonmane. Han mitcheon jabaseo Joseon ttang tteunda. Jogeumman chamja. I sigoltteugi *jongnyeondeul* [Crazy? No way. I will take a fortune and leave this Joseon land. Let’s endure these *country slavebitches* a bit longer].

¹⁴ The use of older and more formal Japanese is a linguistic tool carefully devised by the director Park. In this interview, Chiharu explains that Park specifically requested the formal and elegant Japanese language style used in the 1930s, and that she discussed extensively with other Japanese speakers to come up with corresponding Japanese translations that were literal and archaic but that modern-day Japanese speakers could still follow.

¹⁵ Its Korean ST reads “□□ □□□ □□” (Y. Lee 2016).

Subtitle

Crazy? Not a bit. I'll take my fortune and flee this country. Endure these *country yokels* a bit longer.

(4) *Source*

Fujiwara (in Korean): Mag ireoke mareul deodeumeumyeonseo saljjag eolgulkkaji bulkyeojwoya geu gadjjanheun *gwijognomdeuri* uwolgameul gajigo neohante maeumeul junda igeoya. Arasseo? [You stutter like this and make your face go red and then those *uppity noblebitches* will feel superior and open up to you, all right?]

Subtitle

If you stutter like that and make your face go red, those *uppity bitches* will feel superior and then they'll open up to you, all right?

Fujiwara and Sook-hee long to achieve wealth and status, but their longings are often ironically represented in an intense hatred of other 'slaves,' as in passage 3, and a mockery of the noble class, as in passage 4. In both instances, there is no extralinguistic signal of class difference (e.g., gestures) when the utterance is performed, so while the insult remains, it is not precisely clear who it refers to. One reason for this omission or condensation in subtitles may be shortage of screen space and lack of time (de Linde and Kay 1999: 51), but the omissions of class above, as in *jongnyeondeul* (slavebitches) and *gwijognomdeuri* (noblebitches), certainly flatten the dynamics and conflicts between characters in different classes.

As mentioned, the UK DVD version of *The Handmaiden* employs different colors to distinguish the two languages in the original: white for Korean and yellow for Japanese. It is clearly stated in the beginning of the film that "Japanese dialogue is subtitled in yellow. All other subtitled dialogue is Korean." However, the use of these colors is inconsistent, even when the interplay of the two languages functions as key to the development of story and characterization in the narrative. For example, in a scene where Fujiwara confesses Hideko that he is not a Japanese nobleman and proposes a conspiracy with her, speaking initially in Japanese but later in Korean, but all subtitles are colored yellow. After this scene, Korean is used between Fujiwara and Hideko throughout the film, representing their solidarity and partnership. In another scene, Hideko holds a letter from Fujiwara in front of Sook-hee, written in Japanese but read out by Fujiwara in Korean. In this letter, Fujiwara advises Hideko how to understand Sook-hee and stimulate Sook-hee's material greed, but the subtitles are colored yellow (when they should be white), which negates the implication of their conspiracy to the audience. Such failure in the effective and systematic use of colored subtitles may not have been intended, but this kind of mistake occurs several times throughout the film, even when the use of language is crucial in the progression of the narrative. For instance, in part two, when Hideko confesses to Sook-hee her plan to send Sook-hee to the asylum, Hideko's line is Korean, representing solidarity between her and Sook-hee, but in the film, it is colored yellow.

These translation strategies appear to have influenced the British reception of *The Handmaiden*, as seen in newspaper, magazine, and online reviews, which tend to mention the sex scenes in the film without focusing on the colonial or linguistic context. Some of this may be due to the well-known tendency to ignore translation in reviews (Venuti 1995: 2–5), but it also suggests that some reviewers may not have picked up the affective loads connected to each language and to their use in the Korean colonial context. However, the issue of shifting names—an obvious indicator of the colonial issues that English-language viewers may not have clear knowledge of—is mentioned by Mark Kermode (2017) and Andrew Lowry

(2017). More in-depth discussion of the colonial period and its importance for the film appears in reviews by Charlotte Richardson Andrews (2017), Tara Brady (2017), and Abbey Bender (2017). It seems beyond coincidence that female reviewers are more attuned to the power relationships in the film, although only Richardson Andrews is writing for an explicitly feminist publication, the website *Another Gaze*. Yet it is *The Independent's* (male) reviewer, Geoffrey Macnab (2017), who gives more information about the colonial period and discusses the fact that the subtitles are in yellow and white, drawing attention to the actual translation of the text in a way that none of the other reviewers do. Indeed, some reviewers seem more interested in the house than the linguistic environment of the film (e.g., Bradshaw 2017; Romney 2017). While the house does give some indication of class and ethnic privilege, it does not evoke the multiple layers of characterization and conspiracy that we have discussed. As such, despite some reviews being attentive to the colonial situation of the narrative, especially in terms of names and how they are changed throughout the film, only Macnab makes a clear connection between the languages used in the film and the power relations between the Korean and Japanese speakers. The subtitles' reduction of the affective load in the colonial contexts, e.g., their reduction of feelings of hatred, may have led to British film critics' lack of focus on (or appreciation of) language issues.

However, film bloggers paid more attention to questions of language and translation. This is possibly due to the fact that blogging allows for longer word counts but also the fact that some of the blogs were far more specific in their target audiences and therefore targeting different interpretive communities (Fish 1980). The Inspire Me Korea! (2017) blog, for instance, is dedicated to Korean culture and film, so discussion of subtitles there seems more appropriate for an audience used to watching translated film. However, the British TheFilm.blog (2017), which does not focus on Korean film but is aimed at a cinephile audience, also discussed the colonial situation and the languages on screen, pointing out their importance for the characters. Knowledge of the setting and its power relations, then, could compensate for the reduced affective intensity of the subtitles. This is even more apparent in comparison with reviews on Amazon.co.uk and Twitter (searching for 'The Handmaiden'), which generally focused on the lesbian content but not the language, and where reviewers generally exhibited less knowledge of the historical background.

Conclusion

The case study of *The Handmaiden* has revealed that the code-switching between the two languages (Korean and Japanese) is key to the development of the plot and characters. The mix of two languages successfully highlights the conflict structures between the female character (Hideko) and the male characters (Kouzuki and Fujiwara), while establishing psychological solidarity between the female characters (Hideko and Sook-hee). This induces Korean audiences' empathy for the female characters, particularly their unity and success. By contrast, in the English subtitles, such important characterization was not explicitly reproduced. Other textual shifts identified in the comparative analysis of the subtitles, such as some mitigated derogative terms referring to Japanese and Koreans, speech style, and some expressions denoting different class, also suggest that the tension and unity between the Korean and Japanese characters, which has to be understood with reference to the specific historical period, were leveled out in the English subtitles—all of which has influenced the film's reception among British reviewers, who often pay little or no attention to the role of language in the film. While various aspects of the position of Koreans and Japanese are represented visually in the film—Kouzuki's house, for instance, and the position of Koreans as servants within it—these do not make clear the complexity of the relationships between

characters that are portrayed in language. No wonder, then, that viewers with a greater interest in Korean culture and history, as discussed, were more likely to pay attention to this aspect of the film, as they were already aware of the context and historical relationships. Different audiences, as the notion of ‘interpretive communities’ (Fish 1980) makes clear, place value in different aspects of the film. Feminist audiences, as we saw, also focused on different aspects of the film than mainstream and casual reviewers. Yet subtitles, like translation more generally, are expected to give access to the film in a single way, for all audiences. But not all audiences are the same. Would it be better to offer different versions of the subtitles, just as there are different cuts of a film? (e.g., the extended cut of *The Handmaiden*). There is no technical impediment to this for home-viewing formats (e.g., Blu-ray or streaming), and it would offer different levels of engagement for different audiences. It would therefore be possible to have a more detailed, linguistically nuanced version for audiences who wanted it, allowing them to engage with the linguistic complexity of a film like *The Handmaiden*. There is no reason why translation for digital formats has to follow the rules of analog formats like print or film. But would viewers take up these opportunities? This lies beyond the scope of this article but is a fruitful avenue for future research.

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Address for correspondence

Jinsil Choi, Tabula Rasa College, Keimyung University, 1095 Dalguboel-daero, Dalseo-gu, Daegu, South Korea, 42601.

diane45@kmu.ac.kr. ORCID:0000-0003-3009-9550

Kyung Hye Kim, School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Minhang, Shanghai, China, 200240.

kyunghye.kim@sjtu.edu.cn. ORCID: [0000-0001-6529-7050](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6529-7050)

Jonathan Evans, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Hetherington Building, Bute Gardens, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8RS, UK.

Jonathan.e.evans@glasgow.ac.uk. ORCID: [0000-0002-9913-8207](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9913-8207)

Bionote

Jinsil Choi is Assistant Professor at Tabula Rasa College, Keimyung University, South Korea. She translated *Discourse and the Translator* by B. Hatim and I. Mason and *Linguistics and the Language of Translation* by K. Malmkjær into Korean. She is working on a monograph, entitled *Government Translation in South Korea: A Corpus Based Study*, to be published by Routledge in 2020.

Kyung Hye Kim is Lecturer in Translation Studies at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China. She is the co-editor of *Researching Translation in the Age of Technology and Global Conflict* (2020).

Jonathan Evans is Senior Lecturer in Translation Studies at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK. He is the author of *The Many Voice of Lydia Davis* (2016) and co-editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Politics* (2018). He is deputy editor of *The Journal of Specialised Translation* and reviews editor of *Translation and Literature*.