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Decontextualized Colonial Narratives and Their Recontextualization into an Asian Martial Arts Film: A Case of English-Dubbed South Korean Film

Miseon Yoon[1*]
[1]*Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea*

Abstract This contribution focuses on the significant recontextualization and decontextualization of the 1974 South Korean film *Returned Single-Legged Man* in its English-dubbed version. After a thorough examination into how the translation of early films can deviate from their original, Korean martial arts boom in the 1970s is introduced in the context of worldwide kung fu craze. This article presents meticulous investigation on how the English translation alters the historical and national contexts between Korea and Japan in the dubbed film. It reveals that the dubbed version omits specific references to Korea's colonial history and erases the tragic ending. To make up for the narrative void created by the decontextualization of colonial relations, the dubbed film recontextualizes character dynamics and plot elements to appeal to wider Anglophone audiences. This shift reflects a broader industry tendency to prioritize action and choreography over historical depth, catering to Western audiences' generalized perception of "Asian martial arts films".

Keywords: *Film dubbing, Recontextualization, Decontextualization, English-dubbed Korean films, Returned Single-Legged Man (1974)*

1. Introduction

Audiovisual translation expands content accessibility by overcoming language barriers (Er-ramy et al., 2024). Film dubbing, in particular, can ease access to films from different cultures. However, the process of dubbing often involves more than just translating dialogue; it brings about important changes to the character dynamics and historical contexts of the original film. This article explores the interconnected phenomena of decontextualization and recontextualization in film dubbing to investigate how these changes reshape film narratives.

This exploration begins by focusing on the 1974 South Korean film *Returned Single-Legged Man* (dol-a-on oe-da-li; 돌아온 외다리). This gritty drama, directed by Lee Doo-Yong (1941-2024), follows the story of a man seeking redemption and justice after tragedy during the Japanese colonial period. Set against the backdrop of Korea's struggle for independence, the film presents

[*]**Corresponding Author:**
Miseon Yoon
miseon_yoon@hufs.ac.kr

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complicated characters grappling with personal and historical turmoil. In the English-dubbed version of *Returned Single-Legged Man*, sophisticated transformations occur when dialogue is translated for a new audience. Despite the absence of a full adaptation, the extensive modifications in dialogue, character relationships, plot construction, and historical background give the impression of a reimagined narrative and blur the lines between dubbing and adaptation. When substantial change is made in old films, the question that needs to be asked is in which context the original is situated and for which new contexts the translated version is intended (Díaz-Cintas & Mus, 2024).

The present article builds on the works focusing on substantial changes in the translation of earlier films (Díaz-Cintas, 2019; Díaz-Cintas & Mus, 2024; Mereu, 2012; O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019; Vandaele, 2002), although here, the research has been led by an interest in how dubbed film decontextualizes colonial narratives and recontextualizes the narrative void. From the loss of historical background to the strategic reinterpretation of character motivations, this film reveals immense alterations between the original and its dubbed version. This paper offers the context of Asian martial arts films and the distribution of their English-dubbed films in the 1970s. The main focus is to present the implications of both decontextualization and recontextualization of translated Asian martial arts films in the 1970s, using the English-dubbed film *Returned Single-Legged Man* (1974) as a case study.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Film Translation, Adaptation, and Recontextualization

From House's perspective (2006), translation is recontextualization, where parts of language are taken from their original context and placed in a new one. Indeed, translation operates as a recontextualization mechanism by transposing the text into a new language, thereby thrusting it into an entirely novel situation (Evans, 2014). According to Venuti (2007), translating involves decontextualizing and recontextualizing a source text to make it understandable as well as intriguing for the target audience by situating it in different social contexts and cultural frameworks. Recontextualization is especially apparent in journalistic translation as the translated news passes through recontextualization in a recursive manner to reach diverse readers (see also Kang, 2007; Valdeón, 2023; Zanettin, 2016).

Building on this, Venuti (2007) observes that a shared characteristic between adaptation and translation is the recontextualization process. Adaptation and translation share similarities as processes because they transfer meaning and rely on contextual factors. Furthermore, Cattrysse (2014) contends that adaptation and translation share common characteristics. First, both are situated within complex contexts involving various stakeholders, including agents, receivers, and agendas with diverse interests. Second, they are viewed as irreversible processes; a back-translation does not replicate the source text. Lastly, notions of "equivalence" are identifiable in both adaptation and translation. Recontextualization can also be a framework encompassing both adaptation and translation in film analysis. Unlike the traditional focus solely on linguistic aspects within translation studies, recontextualization facilitates a comprehensive analysis including medial, generic, cultural, and ideological elements (Greenall & Løfaldli, 2019).

Significant alterations were common in the translation of early films (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019). The translation of early films more closely resembled adaptation than is conventionally understood as translation today. For instance, Soviet audiences preferred sad endings; some film companies produced "Russian endings" (Usai, 1996) to enhance the appeal of their silent films in the Soviet market. Conversely, silent Soviet films were often re-edited and adapted for foreign markets, which should also be considered a part of the translation process in cinema (Tsivian, 1996).

Even after the advent of sound in films, re-editing foreign films for the local audience was a common practice, as rewriting intertitles was ubiquitous in the silent period. Fascist regimes understood the power of dubbing as a means of control to censor and manipulate foreign content by replacing dialogue with a sanitized version in the target language (Díaz-Cintas, 2019). As a component of this nationalistic strategy, a decree in 1933 permitted only Italian-dubbed versions produced in Italy to be released under Mussolini's fascist regime (Mereu, 2012). For similar reasons, the Francoist regime in Spain strategically employed domestic and international cinema, including foreign films, as a means of

propagating its socio-political values and reinforcing its ideological narrative (Díaz-Cintas, 2019). Films in Francoist Spain underwent substantial changes, and examining the manipulative mechanisms revealed hidden principles of dictatorship (Vandaele, 2002). Therefore, if translated early films show notable modifications to their original, recontextualization can be a useful analytical framework to examine the context of disparity.

2.2. Korean Martial Arts Boom in the Context of the Kung Fu Craze, Dubbese Fu

The production context of *Returned Single-Legged Man* (1974) and its English dubbing can be contextualized in light of the Korean martial arts boom. This phenomenon was closely connected to the broader kung fu craze and its surge in popularity in the United States during the early 1970s. The success of films such as *Five Fingers of Death* (1972) prompted American media conglomerates to turn their focus to Asia; they sought to capitalize on the global distribution rights of kung fu films for profit maximization. Consequently, Hong Kong film producers expanded their networks to South Korea and urgently required subcontractors with significant experience in producing kung fu films and maintaining punctual delivery schedules. In response, the South Korean cinema industry entered into a frenzied competition to churn out what became known as "standardized kung fu products" (Lee, 2019, p. 335).

The influence of Hong Kong kung fu films on Korean cinema is evident in the production of remakes, exemplified by Lee Doo-Yong's *Returned Single-Legged Man* (1974). This film can be interpreted as a reimagining of *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), a smash hit not only in East Asia but also in the U.S. The film was crafted by the Shaw Brothers to embody the essence of an internationally marketable martial arts genre. The scarcity of contextual information within the film, such as specific temporal or historical references, creates a setting that is ambiguously situated in a past era of China without any identifiable historical markers. This absence of historical context made possible by the studio-based filming practices of the Shaw Brothers evokes a timeless narrative frame similar to the archetype of "once upon a time".

Within this virtual studio-based space, the narrative of *The One-Armed Swordsman* can be a template ripe for reinterpretation. The protagonist's journey of loss (of an arm), departure, and eventual return offers a narrative canvas that can make room for various permutations. This narrative structure resonates with audiences across different cultural and linguistic contexts and fosters a transnational dialogue within East Asian cinema (Korean Film Archive, 2024). Im Kwon-taek's *One-eyed Park* (1970) is a noteworthy example of Korean films that engage with themes of disability. The motif of characters with physical disabilities, contextualized within the historical specificities of each region, becomes a recurring motif in the transnational discourse of East Asian cinema (White, 2022). As for *Returned Single-Legged Man*, it was not an arm or an eye that the protagonist lost; it was a leg. Director Lee Doo-Yong produced a series of films that he called *Taekwon*, or Korean martial arts films, that feature flashy leg choreography (Korean Film Archive, 2024). This film is thus situated in the broad context of Asian kung fu films featuring impaired heroes (Yip, 2017).

English-dubbed kung fu films, referred to as "Dubbese fu" (Magnan-Park, 2021), have carved out a distinctive niche in the global cinema. These dubbed kung fu films represent a fusion of dubbed dialogue with the dynamic martial arts genre and offer audiences a unique viewing experience characterized by imperfect lip synchronization and creative dialogue adaptations. Despite initial skepticism, Dubbese fu has gained widespread recognition as a defining feature of the Hong Kong kung fu craze and has attracted audiences across Anglophone territories (Magnan-Park, 2021). The imperfection of English dubbing has long been celebrated by enthusiasts of the genre as a source of joy for fans seeking cinematic thrills and entertainment (Logan, 1996). This unique blend of audiovisual elements has enabled English-dubbed kung fu films to transcend linguistic barriers and become an accepted part of the kung fu genre.

Dubbing offers numerous advantages, including accessibility to wider audiences with varying literacy levels and the preservation of visual integrity on-screen (O'Connell, 2007). This experience has positioned dubbing as a pathway to profit maximization at the mainstream box office. Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest Studios recognized the potential of dubbing to reach larger Anglophone markets

and consequently dubbed their productions into English to further solidify the global appeal of kung fu cinema (Magnan-Park, 2021).

In the context of the dubbing process, visuals and narrative are more important than dialogue (Bordwell, 2000). Techniques such as dubbing dialogue post-production streamlined production processes and expedited the completion of multiple films within tight schedules (Bordwell, 2000). Furthermore, dubbing afforded filmmakers the flexibility to adapt films for diverse audiences without compromising visual integrity (Magnan-Park, 2021). This industry standard in Hong Kong cinema allowed for slight modifications to cater to various local audiences. Inevitably, the dubbing process entails a form of "de-odorizing" (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 27). Through this process, studios modify or remove elements deemed potentially offensive or culturally specific to conform to mainstream tastes. However, there is little research examining the mechanisms of this de-odorizing or decontextualization process and its impact on narrative recontextualization for the target audience.

3. Methodology

3.1. Materials

In 2011, the Korean Film Archive made *Returned Single-Legged Man* available on VOD without English subtitles. The film resurfaced in the archive in 2022, this time accompanied by English subtitles and presented in high definition. According to the Hong Kong Movie Database (2024), the film *Returned Single-Legged Man* is also known as *The Korean Connection* in Hong Kong and the United States, and *Billy Chang* (1975) in Italy. The fact that it was also dubbed in Italy shows the worldwide interest in kung fu films. *The Korean Connection*, dubbed both in Chinese and English, was released in Hong Kong on April 21, 1974. This English and Chinese dubbed version made its U.S. debut on DVD by Pathfinder Entertainment in 2003. The DVD release, which runs for 80 minutes, removed 8 minutes of the original footage, resulting in an altered storyline when compared to the source text film.

The narrative revolves around Yong-Cheol, a wandering soul drowning his sorrows in alcohol. Raised by a notorious gangster after being orphaned as a child, Yong-Cheol finds himself at a crossroads when he falls in love with a woman from a different social stratum. To win her brother's approval for their relationship, Yong-Cheol must sever ties with his criminal upbringing. Yong-Cheol embarks on a final mission assigned by his adoptive father to intercept a masked courier transporting money to a Japanese bank in Harbin. Although Yong-Cheol succeeds in incapacitating the courier, his encounter takes a dark turn when the Japanese accompanying him, including Yamamoto, choose to eliminate the courier, revealing him to be Yong-Cheol's future brother-in-law. Yong-Cheol is consumed by guilt and instantly spirals into alcoholism until he learns of his former fiancé's forced marriage to the sadistic Japanese Yamamoto. Determined to rescue her, Yong-Cheol starts a journey accompanied by enigmatic antagonist Kim Seung and supportive ally Ju-Hee, who seeks vengeance for her parents, who died at the hands of Yamamoto.

3.2. Procedure

The study was conducted as follows: The author meticulously transcribed and analyzed the original Korean film dialogue of *Returned Single-Legged Man*. The English-dubbed version, *The Korean Connection*, was acquired on DVD, transcribed, and analyzed in a similar manner. The contextual analysis of both films was carried out using resources from the Korean Film Archive and the Hong Kong Film Archive.

The study employs recontextualization as its analytical framework. Film translation, especially in its early stages, includes not only linguistic transfer but also various interventions, such as editing changes, image manipulation, paratextual framing, and censorship (O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019). These interventions are closely related to decisions surrounding international film distribution aimed at meeting the preferences of the target audience. Especially with English-dubbed Korean films, the loss of the majority of Korea's early films before the 1980s due to negligence (Paquet, 2007) underscores the importance of recontextualizing surviving English-dubbed versions. These dubbed films need a thorough examination of their contexts as there are significant plot modifications compared to their originals. With this disparity in mind, recontextualization can be a critical tool for comprehensively

analyzing the context of the translated early films. By considering broader historical contexts, recontextualization can help illuminate the underlying reasons behind the changes between early films and their dubbed versions.

4. Results

In the mid-1960s, Shaw Brothers, at the heart of Hong Kong cinema's desire for international recognition, actively sought avenues to test the international viability of Hong Kong cinema. For instance, *The One-Armed Swordsman* culminated all the elements of the martial arts genre with international appeal. Korean martial arts cinema in the 1960s and 1970s was produced with similar intent. In addition, the huge box-office success of Western films, especially *Fistful of Dollars* (1964), prompted Korean filmmakers to eagerly produce Korean-style Westerns (Lee, 2019). Characters often engaged in battles against adversaries such as North Korean spies, depicted wearing attire that does not align with any recognizable historical period. These narratives frequently unfold in settings situated in Manchuria. Historically, the region north of the present-day Tumen River, known as "Manchuria", served as the frontier of China and was rebranded as "Manchukuo" in 1933 following its establishment by the Japanese army. This geographical space holds significant historical meaning, particularly in Korean martial arts cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, where it was evoked as a symbol of the struggle for independence. Manchuria has since gained recognition as a popular setting in martial arts films, and critics have retrospectively dubbed them "Manchurian Westerns" (Lee, 2019). In a similar manner, *Returned Single-Legged Man* utilizes Harbin in Manchuria as its spatial backdrop, yet features characters from Korea, Japan, and China all conversing in Korean. Harbin represented a stateless space, sparsely populated Japanese land, or forcibly resettled Korean territory. Furthermore, the temporal setting appears ambiguous, resembling the Japanese occupation era due to the presence of Korean independence fighters. However, the attire and setting exhibit modern characteristics. In this stateless place with the ambiguous temporal setting, the film goes further and strips characters of their nationality. The following dialogue shows the nationality of Japanese policemen, Yong-Cheol, and Wang Haerim in the original Korean film is all neutralized in the English-dubbed version.

Original dialogue

Japanese policeman: 조선 놈의 새끼!
Young Yong-Cheol: 닥쳐라, 이 일본 쪽바리놈아!
Wang Haerim: 무슨 일인가?
Japanese policeman: 이놈이 빵을 훔쳤습니다.
Young Yong-Cheol: 네놈들은 남의 나라도 통째로 처먹은 놈들이 빵한조각 훔쳤다고 도둑놈 취급이냐? […]
Wang Haerim: 그래, 너 왕해림이란 이름을 들어본 적이 있느냐?
Young Yong-Cheol: 물론이지, 이 거리의 두목이구 중국인의 영웅인 왕대인의 이름을 모르는 사람이 어디 있소?
Wang Haerim: 그래? 내가 바로 그 왕해림이다.
Young Yong-Cheol: 아! 왕대인! 태도가 불손해서 죄송합니다.
Wang Haerim: 너, 내 아들이 될 생각이 없느냐?
Young Yong-Cheol: 영광입니다!
Wang Haerim: 이 다음에 커서 내 곁을 떠나면, 죽음이다. 그래두 나와 같이 가겠느냐?
Young Yong-Cheol: 나라도 잃고 부모도 잃은 놈이 죽음을 무서워하겠습니까?

Back translation

Japanese policeman: You Korean bastard!
Young Yong-Cheol: Shut up, you Jap bastard!
Wang Haerim: What happened?
Japanese policeman: The kid stole the bread.

Young Yong-Cheol: You stole an entire country, yet you call someone who steals bread a thief? […]
Wang Haerim: Alright, have you ever heard the name Wang Haerim?
Young Yong-Cheol: Of course, who in this street wouldn't know the name of Wang Haerim, the leader of this area and the hero of the Chinese?
Wang Haerim: Is that so? I am Wang Haerim.
Young Yong-Cheol: Oh! Wang Haerim! I apologize for my rudeness.
Wang Haerim: Do you not want to become my son?
Young Yong-Cheol: It would be an honor!
Wang Haerim: If you leave my side when you grow up, you are going to die. Still, will you go with me?
Young Yong-Cheol: I lost my country and my parents. What else could I fear?

English-dubbed dialogue

Japanese policeman: I saw you take that bread!
Young Yong-Cheol: No, no! I didn't do it! I didn't do it!
Wang Haerim: What have you done?
Japanese policeman: Well, the kid is a thief.
Young Yong-Cheol: I'm not. Please stop, please! Please don't hit me anymore. My father was dead, and I was very hungry. I didn't do any wrong. Please don't hit me, please don't! […]
Wang Haerim: Stop! What is your name?
Yong: Yong-Cheol, sir. They call me Tiger.
Wang Haerim: Tiger? My name is Wang Haerim. Where do you come from, Tiger?
Young Yong-Cheol: You are Wang Haerim, the one my father said that I should find. Will you take care of me?
Wang Haerim: Yes, I am Wang Haerim.
Young Yong-Cheol: Oh, honourable Wang! I have found you at last.
Wang Haerim: Your father was a good friend of mine.
Young Yong-Cheol: Oh, yes, he was!

In the original Korean film, the dialogue between Yong-Cheol and the Japanese policeman is charged with hostility. Yong-Cheol's remark about Japan "stealing" his country reflects a deep-seated resentment towards Japanese colonialism and the loss of Korean sovereignty. By juxtaposing the act of stealing bread with the larger-scale theft of a country, Yong-Cheol criticizes the hypocrisy of labeling petty theft and ignoring the systemic oppression and exploitation imposed by colonial powers. Additionally, Yong-Cheol's underlined statement, "I lost my country and my parents. What else could I fear?" further emphasizes his defiance against the colonizer, and thus portrays a character deeply affected by the trauma of colonial rule.

However, in the English-dubbed version, the political and ethnic dimensions are altogether removed. The dialogue focuses more on Yong-Cheol's personal circumstances, describing him as a sympathetic orphan character driven by desperation rather than defiance. The omission of explicit references to Japan as the colonizer and Korea as the colonized dilutes the historical context of the original film.

To compensate for the lack of ethnic and political themes, the English-dubbed version introduces a new subplot involving Wang Haerim and Young Yong-Cheol's deceased father. This narrative shift serves to humanize the characters and create a bond between Wang and Yong-Cheol. However, it also deviates significantly from the original storyline and changes the dynamics and themes of the film. While the English-dubbed version may aim to appeal to a broader audience by downplaying political tensions and emphasizing personal relationships, it sacrifices the historical context present in the original Korean film.

In the English-dubbed *Returned Single-Legged Man*, the colonial relationship between Korea and Japan is decontextualized, and the nationality of the Korean protagonist and his Chinese stepfather Wang is erased. However, the dubbed film recontextualizes its character dynamics and plot construction to make up for the narrative void that decontextualization of the colonial past creates. Significant modifications

are observed in three key sets of relationships: Yamamoto and Yong-Cheol, Ju-Hee and Yong-Cheol, and Kim Seung and Yong-Cheol. Firstly, the relationship between Yong-Cheol and Yamamoto is altered. Unlike the original film, where Yong-Cheol's introduction to Yamamoto is mediated by Wang and Yong-Cheol, and Yamamoto lacks any prior relationship, the dubbed version portrays them as brothers.

Original dialogue

> Wang: 오늘밤 하르빈 주재 일본은행의 현금취급처가 비밀은행에 현금을 수송한다는 밀고가 들어와 있어. 그 현금을 털어다오. 밀고자인 이 일본인들과 말이야.

Back translation

> Wang: We received an intel that the Harbin branch of the Japanese Bank is transporting cash to a secret bank. Get your hands on that cash with these Japanese. These guys are confidential informants behind it.

English-dubbed dialogue

> Wang: Bring money and secret paper from the North. I need you to stop him. Your brother and Dakasita know my plan. Follow their order. And you may go if you are still alive.

The divergence between the original Korean film and its English-dubbed version significantly transforms the dynamics and relationships between characters, particularly in the introduction of Yamamoto. In the original dialogue, Yamamoto is described as a Japanese informant, collaborating with Wang and his gang to intercept cash being transported by the Harbin branch of the Japanese Bank. This establishes Yamamoto as an antagonist associated with the colonial powers, which ultimately contributes to the film's themes of resistance against oppression.

However, in the English-dubbed version, Yamamoto is introduced as Yong-Cheol's brother, completely changing the nature of his character and the dynamics of the storyline. This change not only deviates from the original plot but also obscures the strain between Koreans and Japanese during the colonial era. By transforming Yamamoto into Yong-Cheol's brother, the English-dubbed version downplays the historical context of the original narrative.

Furthermore, the inclusion of the line "Bring money and secret paper from the North" (underlined) in the English-dubbed dialogue introduces further ambiguity. Without any context or prior explanation, it is unclear what "the North" refers to, leaving the audience to speculate on its meaning. As in the previous interaction between Yong-Cheol and Wang, the nationality of the characters is obliterated. Whereas it could be interpreted as a reference to North Korea, the lack of explicit clues or background information makes it difficult for the Anglophone audience to fully understand the meaning of this line. Next, the following dialogue in its original and dubbed film highlights the changed dynamics between Ju-Hee and Yong-Cheol.

Original dialogue

> Ju-Hee: 누…누구시죠?
>
> Yong-Cheol: 난 이 거리의 거렁뱅이올시다. 그럼, 인연이 있으면 또…
>
> Ju-Hee: 아… 잠깐만! 선생님이 하르빈에 옛날의 그 유명한 호랑이시죠?
>
> Yong-Cheol: 무슨 말씀을… 보시다시피, 전…
>
> Ju-Hee: 전 선생님을 잘 알고 있어요. 하르빈의 여자치고 선생님을 흠모하지 않은 여자가 없었어요. 저도 그 중의 한 여자예요. 자, 앉으세요! 이렇게 만나봬서 정말 기뻐요.
>
> Yong-Cheol: 기쁠게 뭐 있겠어. 꼬락서니가 이러니… […]
>
> Ju-Hee: 좋아요. 말씀 안해주셔두… 저도 방황하는 신세니까요.
>
> Yong-Cheol: 그건 또 왜?
>
> Ju-Hee: 집과 부모를 잃었죠. 일본 깡패에게 말이예요.

Yong-Cheol: 깡패? 누군데?
Ju-Hee: 야마모토란 작자예요. 그 작자가 날 주지 않는다구 아버지를 살해하구 집을 빼앗았어요. 난 몸만 간신히 상해로 빠져나온 거예요. 그러니 선생님, 제 부탁을 들어주세요. 옛날에 선생님의 그 유명한 태권으루 야마모토를 물리쳐주세요. 원하시는 것은 모든 것을 다 드리겠어요.
Yong-chel: 난 아니야.
Ju-Hee: 아니, 왜요?
Yong-Cheol: 술맛이 떨어져. 싸움 얘기하면.
Ju-Hee: 아니, 선생! 선생님!
Yong-Cheol: 아… 아무 얘기 맙시다. 난 쓸모없는 몸뚱이요.

Back translation

Ju-Hee: Who… who are you?
Yong-Cheol: I'm a wanderer of these streets. Well, if fate allows it, maybe I'll come around again...
Ju-Hee: Oh... Wait a minute! You're the famous tiger in Harbin, aren't you, sir?
Yong-Cheol: What are you talking about... As you can see, I am just…
Ju-Hee: I know you very well. Among the women of Harbin, there wasn't one who didn't admire you. I'm one of them. Come, have a seat! I'm really glad to meet you like this.
Yong-Cheol: What's there to be glad about. I look miserable. […]
Ju-Hee: Alright. If you won't tell me... I'm also wandering, you see.
Yong-Cheol: And why is that?
Ju-Hee: I lost my home and parents. By the Japanese thugs.
Yong-Cheol: Thugs? Who are they?
Ju-Hee: Their leader is called Yamamoto. That man killed my father and took our house because my father refused to hand me over to him. I barely escaped with my life. So, sir, please help me. Use your famous Taekwondo to defeat Yamamoto. I'll give you everything you want.
Yong-cheol: Not me.
Ju-Hee: No, why not?
Yong-Cheol: The mention of fighting makes me lose my desire for alcohol.
Ju-Hee: No, sir! Please!
Yong-Cheol: Oh... Let's not talk about it. I'm just a useless body.

English-dubbed dialogue

Ju-Hee: Tiger, it's you!
Yong-Cheol: Please forgive me. I had nowhere to go. I will leave you alone now.
Ju-Hee: No, don't go! Tiger, they are still out there. We've been looking all over for you. Please don't go!
Yong-Cheol: Why? Why look for me? Why?
Ju-Hee: My cousin is a secret agent. Tiger, you can help him. You're a great man. I know it. Wait, he'll be right back. Would you like a glass of wine?
Yong-Cheol: I can't help you. I can't help anyone anymore.
Ju-Hee: Oh, don't say that, Tiger. You must help us!
Yong-Cheol: No, not me.
Ju-Hee: But, why?
Yong-Cheol: I can't help you.
Ju-Hee: You know, Kim Seung told me who tried to kill you. Don't you want to know?
Yong-Cheol: Who would bother?
Ju-Hee: Obviously, somebody does. You won't believe what Kim Seung told me.
Yong-Cheol: Believe what? Why?
Ju-Hee: Yamamoto, your brother. Some secret government paper was stolen when Harbin Kim was killed. Help us, help us. You can get them back. Our government needs them.

> Kim Seung knew you were forced. It was your father who ordered you to do it. Yamamoto was the one who planned it all. He is to blame. Please stay and help us.
> Yong-Cheol: Not me!
> Ju-Hee: Stay! Please!
> Yong-Cheol: I am sorry. I must go now. What they say is all true. I committed that robbery. It's all over now, Ju-Hee. I am a dead man. I'm sorry.

In the original film, the encounter between Ju-Hee and Yong-Cheol unfolds with an element of surprise as Ju-Hee initially fails to recognize Yong-Cheol, only to later identify him as the famed fighter "Tiger" from Harbin. This revelation sets off a conversation where Ju-Hee pleads with Yong-Cheol to assist her in confronting Yamamoto, who has inflicted considerable suffering upon her family as a Japanese colonizer. However, Yong-Cheol, still burdened by guilt and despair, rejects her plea.

The English-dubbed version presents a clear departure from this dynamic. Here, Ju-Hee and Yong-Cheol are already familiar with each other, and Ju-Hee seeks Yong-Cheol's aid not for personal retribution against Yamamoto but to recover secret documents of national importance. Additionally, for Ju-Hee, Yamamoto is portrayed as Yong-Cheol's brother rather than an external adversary. This change recontextualizes Ju-Hee's appeal and indicates a broader mission beyond individual vendettas. The alteration of Yamamoto's character and the relationship between Ju-Hee and Yong-Cheol renders the narrative serious, as Ju-Hee's request for assistance now carries national significance rather than solely seeking retaliation for personal losses. Nevertheless, Yong-Cheol's refusal remains unwavering across both versions, induced by his internal turmoil.

Moreover, the English-dubbed version introduces the theme of redemption. Ju-Hee urges Yong-Cheol to confront his past actions and stand against Yamamoto for the greater good. These lines depict her as someone motivated by patriotism and a quest for justice rather than solely driven by personal grievances. However, without historical context, it is unclear which country her patriotism is intended for. This changed character dynamics also affect the relationship between Yong-Cheol and Kim Seung. Ju-Hee. She mentions that her cousin is a secret agent; Kim Seung knew what happened with the secret government paper, and who behind all of this is not Yong-Cheol, but his "brother" Yamamoto and his stepfather Wang. Now that Ju-Hee and Kim Seung are related, which is not true in the original, it needs to be examined how the relationship between Kim Seung and Yong-Cheol alters:

Original dialogue

> Ju-Hee: 선생님, 선생님에게 무슨 일이 일어날 것 같아서 뒤를 따라오다가 저분을 만나서 구원을 청했어요.
> Yong-Cheol: 뉘신지? 정말 감사합니다.
> Kim Seung: 감사할 것 없소. 난 당신 적이니까.
> Yong-Cheol: 적? 적이 왜 날 구해주지?
> Kim Seung: 한 여자가 불쌍해서.
> Yong-Cheol: 한 여자? 한 여자가 누구지?
> Kim Seung: 향숙.
> Yong-Cheol: 향숙? 아니, 향숙이 어떻게 됐어? 자세하게 얘기 좀 해주시오.
> Kim Seung: 야마모토의 처가 됐어.
> Yong-Cheol: 뭐라구?
> Kim Seung: 쪽바리인 야마모토가 왕대인을 죽이구 향숙이를 처로 만들었단 말이오. 그리고 아직도 목매이게 당신을 기다리는 향숙에게 질투를 느끼고 당신을 죽이려 하는 거요. 이 얼간이 양반아, 세상 도는 거나 좀 아시오. 그리고 왜! 내가 당신을 노리는가를.

Back translation

> Ju-Hee: Sir, I followed you because I felt something might happen to you, and I met that person and begged for salvation.
> Yong-Cheol: Who are you? Anyway, thank you very much.

Kim Seung: There's no need to thank me. Because I'm your enemy.
Yong-Cheol: Enemy? Why would my enemy save me?
Kim Seung: Because of a pitiful woman.
Yong-Cheol: A woman? Who is she?
Kim Seung: Hyang-sook.
Yong-Cheol: Hyang-sook? No, what happened to Hyang-sook? Please tell me in detail.
Kim Seung: She became Yamamoto's wife.
Yong-Cheol: What did you just say?
Kim Seung: That bastard Jab killed Wang and made Hyang-sook his wife. And she's still desperately waiting for you, which makes Yamamoto feel jealous and want to kill you. You fool, know a bit about the world. And you should think about why I'm targeting you.

English-dubbed dialogue

Ju-Hee: I brought Kim Seung with me because we need your help!
Yong-Cheol: Kim Seung, what can I do?
Kim Seung: I know that Yamamoto killed Harbin Kim.
Yong-Cheol: You know about Yamamoto?
Kim Seung: And now he has Hyang-sook!
Yong-Cheol: Help me, Kim Seung! I have to get her back! Please, Kim Seung!
Kim Seung: Yamamoto wants to marry Hyang-sook. That's why Yamamoto wants you dead. I'll help you get Hyang-sook back if you help us find our money and papers. Ju-Hee thinks you got guts, but I still think you're a drunken paper tiger. And Yamamoto will cut you through with some gutter. Good-bye.

In the original Korean film dialogue, Ju-Hee accidentally encounters Kim Seung and brings him to assist Yong-Cheol, thereby setting off a chain of events that reveals crucial information about Yamamoto's actions and motivations. Kim Seung introduces himself as Yong-Cheol's enemy and emphasizes the intrigue surrounding Hyang-sook's involvement with Yamamoto. However, in the English-dubbed dialogue, the dynamic between Ju-Hee, Kim Seung, and Yong-Cheol differs significantly. They already know each other, and Ju-Hee deliberately brings Kim Seung to seek Yong-Cheol's help. The revelation about Yamamoto's actions and Hyang-sook's situation is condensed. In the dubbed film, the duration of the scene is shortened, and several shots and lines are deleted. Kim Seung also discloses Yamamoto's involvement in Harbin Kim's death, reframing Yong-Cheol's predicament and introducing the quest to retrieve money and secret papers. In the original film, Yong-Cheol was unaware of the existence of Kim Seung and Ju-Hee until their encounter. In contrast, the dubbed version portrays the trio uniting against Yamamoto.

With their nationalities left unspecified, the trio faces an undefined, imagined adversary. The dubbed version introduces a plot twist, centering on their scheme against Yamamoto to retrieve secret documents and money. This alteration in the narrative dynamics shifts the focus to action and plot progression, streamlining the storyline for a potentially different audience or cultural context. The ensuing dialogue highlights the altered plot crafted by Yong-Cheol and Kim Seung.

Original dialogue

Yong-Cheol: 네 정체가 뭐냐?
Kim Seung: 적이라고 했다.
Yong-Cheol: 여기 나온 이유는?
Kim Seung: 널 잡으러.
Yong-Cheol: 날 잡으려는 이유가 뭐냐?
Kim Seung: I was tasked by Yamamoto.

Back translation

Yong-Cheol: Identify who you are.

Kim Seung: I said I'm your enemy.
Yong-Cheol: What's the reason for showing up here?
Kim Seung: To capture you.
Yong-Cheol: What's the reason for trying to capture me?
Kim Seung: I was tasked by Yamamoto.

English-dubbed dialogue

Yong-Cheol: What are you doing here?
Kim Seung: We have to fight!
Yong-Cheol: Do you think that they suspect us?
Kim Seung: Yamamoto is scared to death.

In the original dialogue, the confrontation between Yong-Cheol and Kim Seung is characterized by directness and clarity. Kim Seung explicitly states that he is Yong-Cheol's enemy and reveals that he has been tasked by Yamamoto to capture him. Conversely, in the dubbed dialogue, Yong-Cheol and Kim Seung engage in a pretense of fighting and suggest clandestine cooperation. Their concern about Yamamoto suspecting their collaboration leavens the narrative with a subterfuge. This scene in the dubbed film was also abbreviated, which effaced several shots from the original.

Consequently, the dialogue in the dubbed version requires revision, given that they collaborate throughout its narrative. Kim Seung's identity and why he loathes Yong-Cheol come into view in the latter part of the original film. As a result, the climax below, where Kim Seung's identity is unveiled, appears somewhat redundant, reiterating information already known to the audience.

Original dialogue

Yong-Cheol: 넌 대체 뭐지? 뭔데 또 나와 적이 됐다가 야마모토와 적이 되었는가?
Kim Seung: 아, 이 친구 말귀 되게 어둡네. 이봐, 똑똑한 사람은 원래 적이 많게 마련 아닌가!
Yong-Cheol: 그래, 당신 말대로 당신이 똑똑하다면은 어떡하다가 똑똑한 양반이 이 꼴이 됐지?
Kim Seung: 도둑질하다가.
Yong-Cheol: 무엇을?
Kim Seung: 이거. [태극기를 두손으로 들어올린다] 내 조국에 불리한 조선 독립군 배치도를 훔치다가 이렇게 됐네. 야마모토는 단순한 잡놈이 아니야. 조선 독립군을 잡아들이는 밀정의 두목이야!
Yong-Cheol: 그럼, 나하고 적이 된 이유는?
Kim Seung: 니가 미웠다. 넌 조국의 아들이면서도 조국을 위해서 아무것도 한 것이 없다. 술과 여자와 방탕뿐. 니가 조국을 위해서 한 게 뭐냐! 그래서 난 조국의 수치인 너를 죽이려고 했다. 니가 지금 이럴 때냐!
Yong-Cheol: 미안합니다. 정말 죄송합니다. 이제부터는…

Back translation

Yong-Cheol: What are you exactly? How did you go from being my enemy to becoming Yamamoto's enemy?
Kim Seung: Oh, you are quite slow on the uptake. Listen, smart people usually have many enemies, don't they?
Yong-Cheol: Yeah, if you're so smart, how did a smart guy like you end up like this?
Kim Seung: I stole something.
Yong-Cheol: Stole what?
Kim Seung: This. [raising Taegeukgi with both hands] I ended up like this while trying to steal a map of the deployment of the Korean Independence army that was unfavorable to my homeland. Yamamoto is not just a simple thug. He's the head of the spies who captured the Korean Independence army!
Yong-Cheol: Then, why did you become enemies with me?

Kim Seung: I despised you. You're a son of the nation but you've done nothing for the nation. Just drinking, women, and debauchery. What have you done for the nation? That's why I tried to kill you, a disgrace to the nation. What are you doing at a time like this?
Yong-Cheol: I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. From now on...

English-dubbed dialogue

Yong-Cheol: You know what Yamamoto is planning for us tomorrow. You should have been more careful.
Kim Seung: How lucky you have survived. But I found the flag and secret papers in his safe tonight.
Yong-Cheol: Are you sure it's the stolen papers? With the country flag and a bunch of money with it?
Kim Seung: Of course, I'm certain.
Yong-Cheol: How?
Kim Seung: Look here. [raising Taegeukgi with both hands] Here's the flag. You should recognize it. You were there when it was stolen. The night Yamamoto killed Harbin Kim. Yamamoto killed Harbin Kim, and you and your murdery father took part in it as well.
Yong-Cheol: Yes. But I didn't know.
Kim Seung: You knew them. You knew your family! Your father was always corrupt. And now your brother has gone mad with power. You helped him and just let him marry Hyang-sook. You forgot the country needed you, but all that you think about was yourself!
Yong-Cheol: I'm sorry. I will try to make it up if we get out of here.

In the original film dialogue, the interaction between Yong-Cheol and Kim Seung is mainly about Kim Seung's mysterious past and motives. Yong-Cheol's question, "What are you exactly? How did you go from being my enemy to becoming Yamamoto's enemy?" shows his confusion and desire for clarity regarding Kim Seung's actions. Kim Seung's response unveils a crucial piece of information: his involvement in stealing the *Taegukgi* (the national flag of South Korea) and the map of the Korean Independence Army's deployment. This disclosure portrays him not just as a mere enemy but as someone propelled by a sense of patriotism and duty to his homeland. He explains that his attempt to steal these items led to his current plight, where he is now chased by Yamamoto. Furthermore, Kim Seung criticizes Yong-Cheol for his lack of contribution to the nation. This accusation hints at his disdain for those who fail to serve their country.

However, in the English-dubbed dialogue, the focus shifts away from Kim Seung's backstory and motives. Instead, the dialogue centers more on the immediate plot developments, such as the discovery of the stolen papers and Yong-Cheol's confrontation with his past actions. This results in a loss of the exploration of character motivations present in the original dialogue.

Kim's accusation towards Yong-Cheol regarding Harbin Kim's death appears dispensable and misplaced in the dubbed version. This is because earlier in the film, Ju-Hee informs Yong-Cheol that Kim Seung was aware of his forced involvement, stressing that it was Yong-Cheol's stepfather who gave the orders and that Yamamoto was the mastermind behind the scheme. Thus, Kim Seung's accusation against Yong-Cheol lacks relevance, as he already knows that Yamamoto is the true culprit, not Yong-Cheol. The sudden introduction of Harbin Kim into the conversation seems more like an attempt to fill narrative gaps rather than a logical progression of the plot, seemingly timed to coincide with Kim Seung's serious facial expression.

Furthermore, the dubbed version of the film has omitted over 5 minutes of content. This intentional editing seems to serve the purpose of recontextualizing the film to compensate for the decon-textualization of colonial relations. Consequently, this has led to significant changes in the film's dramaturgy, especially in the film's conclusion. The English-dubbed version presents a more optimistic ending where the hero rescues the girl and defeats the antagonist.

Figure 1
The Original Film Ends with Hyang-Sook's Death and Yong-Cheol's Roaring



In contrast, the original Korean film features a confrontation between Yong-Cheol and thugs, including Yamamoto, followed by Hyan-sook's honorable suicide. The decision to exclude the scene depicting Hyang-sook's suicide in the dubbed version appears to be in line with the typical Hollywood tendency to favor happy endings (Ortner, 2012). In addition, this tragic and abrupt ending may not be understood among Anglophone audiences due to the decontextualization of colonial narratives. Harassed by the despicable Japanese, she chooses death over humiliation, a tragedy that can resonate with Korean viewers who went through the traumatizing period of Japanese occupation.

5. Discussion

The objective of the study is to present the implications of both decontextualization and recontextualization of translated Asian martial arts films in the 1970s, using the English-dubbed film *Returned Single-Legged Man* (1974) as a case study. In examining the dubbed version of *Returned Single-Legged Man*, salient changes emerge through the dubbing process (Díaz-Cintas, 2019; Díaz-Cintas & Mus, 2024; Mereu, 2012; O'Sullivan & Cornu, 2019; Vandaele, 2002). This reworking of the original film's narrative elements, especially in character relationships and plot dynamics, serves to cater to a different cultural and linguistic audience. The English-dubbed version of the film opted to decontextualize significant historical aspects of Japanese colonization of Korea and the ethnic differences among the protagonists and antagonists. The transformed relationships between characters, such as Yong-Cheol and Yamamoto becoming "brothers" or Yong-Cheol and Kim Seung collaborating against a vague antagonist, illustrate this recontextualization. These changes aim to simplify complex historical and national tensions for an international audience unfamiliar with Korean and Japanese colonial history.

While recontextualization can engage a broader audience, it also poses risks (Greenall & Løfaldli, 2019). The transformation of Yong-Cheol and Yamamoto's relationship from enemies to brothers may resonate more with some viewers, but it undermines the historical significance of Yamamoto's actions as a Japanese antagonist in the context of Korean independence. Similarly, the change in Kim Seung's characterization from a mysterious figure with deep-seated nationalist motivations to a mere collaborator with Yong-Cheol diminishes the impact of his actions and motivations. Furthermore, the redundancy observed in the climax of the dubbed version, where Kim Seung's identity is revealed, shows that recontextualization can sometimes lead to narrative repetition or boredom.

These alterations may serve to make the narrative more action-driven and to thicken the plot with secrecy, but they also result in narrative loopholes and a loss of thematic depth. In particular, the failure to reveal the contents of the secret papers at the end of the film renders the characters' espionage efforts meaningless, and the omission of their nationality or ethnicity leaves their patriotism feeling hollow. The dubbed version may offer a more accessible viewing experience for some audiences (O'Connell, 2007; Magnan-Park, 2021). Yet, the results show that it comes at the cost of sacrificing the historical

context of the original film. As such, viewers may find themselves missing out on the richness of the narrative.

The kung fu craze of the era, largely devoid of specific national or historical context, led Western audiences to categorize all Asian martial arts films under a generic umbrella of "Asian martial arts", prioritizing action and choreography over cultural and historical context. This generalization has profound implications for how kung fu films were received and adapted for international audiences. By erasing the historical context and changing the character dynamics and narrative, the English-dubbed Korean kung fu film aligns more closely with Western preferences for clear-cut narratives and happy endings (Ortner, 2012; Tsivian, 1996), potentially at the expense of the film's original historical abundance.

Despite the contributions of this study, many Korean martial arts films and their translations remain underexplored. Further studies could examine other works by Lee Doo-yong and their translations. For instance, *Visitor of America* (a-me-li-ka bang-mun-gaeg; 아메리카 방문객), dubbed into English as *Bruce Lee Fights Back from the Grave* (1976), presents an intriguing case. Although Bruce Lee did not star in the film, it was re-edited and recontextualized to attract his global fan base. Understanding such translations of Asian martial arts films can provide insights into the recontextualization behind these changes and their impact on international reception.

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