

Unveiling Koreanness in Yoon Ha Lee's *Dragon Pearl*: Cultural Representation and Translation Strategies

KANG Byoung Yoong

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

ByoungYoong.Kang@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract

The paper explores the representation of Koreanness in Yoon Ha Lee's *Dragon Pearl*, a novel that uniquely blends elements of Korean culture with the space opera genre. By examining key cultural markers such as character names, traditional food, and folklore (notably the gumiho), this study highlights how the novel portrays a diasporic sense of identity and belonging. Furthermore, the paper delves into the challenges and strategies of translating these cultural elements into Korean. Through case studies of key passages, it discusses how to maintain cultural nuance and the author's intent while adapting the work for a Korean readership. Ultimately, this paper underscores the importance of preserving cultural integrity translating science fiction works that embody cross-cultural narratives.

Keywords: Koreanness, translation strategies, diaspora, space opera, Korean mythology

Povzetek

Prispevek raziskuje zastopanost korejskosti v romanu *Zmajev biser* (ang. *Dragon Pearl*) avtorja Yoon Ha Leeja, ki na edinstven način združuje elemente korejske kulture z žanrom vesoljske opere. S preučevanjem ključnih kulturnih označevalcev, kot so imena likov, tradicionalna hrana in folklor (zlasti gumiho), članek izpostavlja upodobitve diasporičnega občutka identitete in pripadnosti v romanu in obenem obravnava izzive in strategije, povezane s prevajanjem teh kulturnih elementov v korejščino. Skozi primere ključnih odlomkov razpravlja, kako ohraniti kulturne odtenke in avtorjevo namero pri prilagajanju dela korejskemu bralstvu. Prispevek poudarja pomen ohranjanja kulturne celovitosti pri prevajanju znanstveno-fantastičnih del, ki vključujejo medkulturne pripovedi.

Ključne besede: korejskost, prevajalske strategije, diaspora, vesoljska opera, korejska mitologija



1 Introduction

1.1 Yoon Ha Lee and *Dragon Pearl*

Yoon Ha Lee (born 1979), a Korean-American author, has constructed a distinctive literary world that draws significantly upon his bicultural experiences. Born in Houston, Texas, Lee spent his formative years divided between the United States and South Korea. His family resided in both Texas and South Korea, where he attended high school at Seoul Foreign School, an English-language international school. This dual exposure to Korean and Western cultures was a significant factor in the formation of his early literary identity. Subsequently, Lee pursued studies at Cornell University, where he majored in mathematics, and subsequently obtained a master's degree in secondary mathematics education at Stanford University. In addition to his literary pursuits, he has also pursued a career in analysis for an energy market intelligence company, engaged in web design, and taught mathematics. These diverse experiences contribute to the depth and complexity of his writing, particularly his approach to blending science fiction with elements of Korean culture.

Lee's *Dragon Pearl* (2019) is a notable contribution to the young adult genre, distinguished by its innovative fusion of Korean folklore and space opera, a subgenre historically dominated by Western narratives. At the 2019 Dublin World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon), Lee was recognized as one of the most prominent authors, marking his third consecutive year as a Hugo Award nominee. Reflecting on his work, he articulated his aim to enhance cultural diversity within science fiction. Much like the contributions of 'Afrofuturism' in advancing narratives rooted in African heritage, he sought to enrich the genre by weaving elements of Korean history and cultural identity into his storytelling (Yi Young-Kyung, 2019).

The novel follows the protagonist, Min, a teenage gumiho (fox spirit), as she embarks on a journey to uncover the mystery of her brother's disappearance. In this intergalactic adventure, Lee incorporates elements of Korean mythology, character names, and traditional cultural elements, thereby imparting a distinctive Korean sensibility to the science fiction genre. The novel's distinctive cultural backdrop not only enhances the narrative but also encourages readers to engage with themes of identity, belonging, and the diasporic experience. Notwithstanding the growing interest in science fiction within the Korean literary world, there has been a noticeable absence of academic attention to Lee's work, both in Korea and in European Korean studies. This gap in the literature highlights the importance of introducing and studying works like *Dragon Pearl*, which

contain deeply embedded Korean cultural elements, in both academic and literary circles.

The Korean edition of *Dragon Pearl* was published in 2020 by Sagyejeol Publishing, a prominent South Korean publishing house renowned for producing some of the most exemplary works of young adult literature. Song Kyung-ah 송경아, the translator, is not only a proficient translator but also a highly regarded science fiction writer. Although the Korean translation of this work is of an excellent standard, it is nevertheless necessary to consider the specific challenges that arise from translating this particular novel (Baek, 2001, p. 22). The objective here is not to evaluate the quality of the translation itself, but rather to consider the broader implications of reintroducing Korean cultural content into Korea through translation. It is of the utmost importance to comprehend how cultural nuances and contexts are re-embedded into the target culture, to ensure the continued integrity and relevance of such works for Korean audiences.

1.2 Purpose and scope of the study

This study aims to examine the representation of Koreanness in *Dragon Pearl* and to evaluate how Yoon Ha Lee successfully incorporates elements of Korean culture, including mythology, traditional cuisine, and character names, within a space opera framework.¹ The aforementioned elements permit readers to experience a synthesis of two distinct worlds: the opulent traditions of Korean culture and the futuristic, expansive realm of space exploration. By analyzing these aspects of the novel, this paper aims to elucidate how Lee navigates intricate themes of identity and belonging, particularly from a diasporic perspective (Midkiff, 2023, p. 154).

Despite the growing popularity of science fiction in the Korean literary market, there has been a notable absence of significant academic attention directed towards Lee's work, both within Korea and within the field of European Korean studies. This study posits that works such as *Dragon Pearl*, which incorporate culturally significant elements, should be introduced and discussed more widely. The increasing global influence of Korean culture, evident in areas such as cuisine, fashion, and media, is now extending to literature. It is therefore vital to consider how works like *Dragon Pearl* can be effectively translated and presented to Korean readers. The translation of these cultural markers, while maintaining the integrity and depth of the

¹ For the notion and reinterpretation of Koreanness in Korean literature also see Kang (2022).

original, presents unique challenges that demand careful consideration from translators.

In examining these translation challenges, this study draws on key translation theories to provide a framework for the preservation or adaptation of Korean cultural elements for a Korean audience. The concept of the skopos theory, which emphasizes the purpose of translation, is particularly pertinent in determining the most appropriate approach to cultural markers such as names, food, and mythology. For a Korean readership, many of these elements may already be familiar, which influences the degree of explanation required in the translation process. It is of the utmost importance to ensure that the purpose of the translation is aligned with the cultural context of the intended audience.

Furthermore, Lawrence Venuti's concepts of domestication and foreignization provide a framework for translators to consider whether to adapt cultural elements to enhance familiarity with the target audience or to retain the original cultural references to preserve the distinctiveness of the source text (Venuti, 2012). The translator's decision between these strategies will influence how the cultural and narrative depth of *Dragon Pearl* is conveyed.

Functionalist translation theory concentrates on the function of the text in the target language and culture. In the process of translation, it is of the utmost importance that the function and impact of cultural references, such as those of food, mythology, or names align with the overall narrative and thematic goals. It is of the utmost importance to strike a balance between cultural authenticity and narrative fluency to preserve the richness of Yoon Ha Lee's work while ensuring its accessibility and meaningfulness to a Korean readership.

This study aims to demonstrate how the aforementioned translation theories can be employed to highlight the intricacies and techniques that were used in translating *Dragon Pearl* and can help maintain the cultural and narrative integrity of the novel for Korean readers.

1.3 Significance of Koreanness in diasporic science fiction

The concept of Koreanness is not straightforward but for the purposes of this study, it can be defined as comprising "ideas and cultural elements that, while not exclusive to Korea, originated there or can be better understood through the lens of Korean history and culture". This definition elucidates why items such as kimchi, hanbok, and hanok are frequently regarded as emblematic of Korean identity. Such elements are typically associated with

traditional values and practices, rendering their appearance in an American science fiction novel both unexpected and noteworthy.

In *Dragon Pearl*, various manifestations of Korean cultural elements are observed, including references to the gumiho folklore, the names of characters and foods. The incorporation of these elements into a Western-dominated genre such as space opera challenges the established norms and expands the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes science fiction. Lee states that the incorporation of these Korean cultural elements was deliberate, allowing the novel to stand out for its distinct blend of global and local influences. The novel's success also indicates the growing influence of Korean culture on a global scale, as evidenced by the increasing prevalence of Korean films, music, and traditional elements in global entertainment. In essence, a deeper comprehension of Korean cultural contexts enriches the understanding of Lee's literature, enabling readers to engage with the text on a more profound level. This mirrors the way familiarity with Korean history enhances the enjoyment and appreciation of historical (popular) sageuk dramas. It seems likely that this trend will continue, which makes it essential for Korean translators to approach works like *Dragon Pearl* with extra care, ensuring that the cultural nuances are effectively conveyed to a Korean readership.

2 Cultural representation of Koreanness in *Dragon Pearl*

Despite the space opera genre's historical association with Western narratives, Yoon Ha Lee demonstrates an adept incorporation of Korean cultural elements into the narrative of the *Dragon Pearl*. This integration presents a novel literary challenge, offering a familiar yet distinctive experience to readers with an interest in Korean culture. For readers unfamiliar with these elements, the novel piques curiosity, while for those who appreciate Korean culture, it provides a deeper connection. The inclusion of Korean identity throughout the narrative enriches the story and broadens the space opera genre's scope, introducing new cultural dimensions to both longtime science fiction fans and those looking for more diverse representation.

2.1 Koreanness in the names of characters and their identities

In both Western and Eastern literature, character names often play a significant role in shaping identity. However, in Korean literature, names assume a particularly prominent role due to their inherent meanings. Each

name is imbued with particular cultural and linguistic significance, offering insight into the character's traits and origins. In *Dragon Pearl*, the protagonist Min (민, 敏) and her brother Jun (준, 俊) have distinctly Korean names, which are not only novel in the space opera context but also deeply reflective of their personalities and identities. (The Chinese characters added alongside the names were derived from the Chinese characters most frequently used by Koreans in their personal nomenclature. The interpretations were based on the intrinsic characteristics of the work.)

The name Min, which means 'agility' and 'neutrality,' is an apt representation of the protagonist's adaptability and quick-thinking nature as she navigates her journey across galaxies. The name Jun, which signifies 'obedience' and 'excellence,' reflects the character's dedication and sense of duty as a cadet in the Space Forces. These names serve to illustrate the distinctive characteristics of the characters and to indicate their Korean heritage. The significance of these names within the context of Korean culture serves to enhance the depth of characterization, offering readers a more profound understanding of the characters' identities. Those familiar with Korean naming conventions will gain a deeper cultural connection, while others will gain insight into a new aspect of character development.

Consequently, while names serve significant functions in Western literature, the Korean names in *Dragon Pearl* underscore each character's heritage and individualism, thereby marking their identities as distinctly Korean, even within a futuristic, intergalactic context. This introduces a greater complexity to the characters, reflecting the synthesis of their traditional heritage with their position within a novel socio-cultural milieu.

2.2 Korean folklore and mythology: The role of the gumiho

One of the most intriguing aspects of *Dragon Pearl* is the inclusion of the gumiho, a legendary fox spirit in Korean mythology renowned for its capacity to undergo shape shifting. Its quality resonates with the diasporic experience, wherein individuals frequently find themselves compelled to disguise aspects of their genuine nature to ensure their survival in unfamiliar surroundings. In this way, the gumiho's capacity for transformation serves as a potent metaphor for the immigrant experience (Kim, 2014, p. 14).

The protagonist, Min, is a gumiho, and her shape-shifting abilities serve to illustrate the necessity for adaptability among those who live in the diaspora. Those who live diasporic lives frequently find themselves compelled to undergo a process of transformation to fit into new societies.

This often entails concealing one's true cultural identity, a strategy employed to survive or thrive. This concept of transformation is fundamental to an understanding of the diasporic experience, in which individuals are required to adapt continuously to new cultural and social environments. Min's status as a *gumiho* not only adds an element of excitement to the narrative but also serves to underscore the central theme of survival and transformation in unfamiliar environments.

The author's decision to cast Min as a *gumiho* introduces a new dimension to the narrative, illustrating that survival in an alien environment frequently necessitates transformation. For those with diasporic experiences, this metaphor is particularly resonant, as it mirrors the experience of navigating multiple identities in different social contexts. For those unacquainted with the *gumiho* myth, Min's transformation introduces a fascinating aspect of Korean mythology, enriching the narrative with a culturally unique symbol while reflecting the broader challenges of living between cultures.

2.3 Korean culinary references: Food as a cultural anchor

Culture, race, and ethnicity are inextricably linked and form an integral part of the study of food and food practices. The preparation and consumption of food are frequently not only symbolic but also tangible and concrete means by which migrants in multicultural societies maintain their ethnic identities (Reddy & van Dam, 2020). One of the most striking manifestations of cultural identity in any diaspora is food. Food represents a powerful anchor to one's heritage, particularly in foreign lands, where cooking and consuming traditional dishes become a means of preserving one's identity. In *Dragon Pearl*, food is not merely a source of nourishment; rather, it serves as a conduit for cultural preservation and a means of maintaining identity.

A variety of traditional Korean dishes, including 'kimchi', 'ssalbap' (rice), 'nokdu namul' (mung bean sprouts), and 'jeon' (vegetable fritters), are featured throughout the novel, serving to anchor the characters in their cultural roots. For Min, these foods are more than a source of sustenance; they serve as a conduit to her familial roots, her hometown of Jinju, and her Korean heritage. By including these traditional dishes, Lee not only emphasizes Min's identity but also reflects his cultural background. The role of food in the novel is to serve as a conduit between disparate realms, enabling both Min and the readers to maintain a connection to Korean culture, even when situated in the far reaches of space.

The function of food in *Dragon Pearl* is analogous to its role in actual diasporic communities, where traditional dishes serve as concrete manifestations of cultural identity. By utilizing food as a symbol, Lee underscores the notion that identity is not solely preserved through linguistic or traditional practices, but also through the mundane act of nourishment. Consequently, the appearance of Korean cuisine in the novel serves not only to reinforce the protagonist's identity but also to highlight the author's cultural heritage, offering readers an insight into how cultural traditions are preserved and maintained.

2.4 Diasporic themes: Home, identity, and belonging

Yoon Ha Lee incorporates a variety of elements that pertain to Korean culture throughout the narrative of *Dragon Pearl*, thereby enriching the text and offering readers a novel perspective. The incorporation of these Korean cultural references serves to enhance the narrative's dynamism and engagement, while simultaneously elucidating Lee's personal Korean heritage. The themes of home, identity, and belonging are central to the novel and resonate with the experiences of many in the Korean diaspora.

Min's journey through space is not merely a quest to locate her brother; it is also an endeavor to ascertain her true place of belonging. The search for identity is a common theme in diasporic literature, where the concept of home is often presented as fluid and complex. For Min, the concept of home is both a physical location, *Jinju* 진주, and a sense of belonging, which she carries with her as she navigates different worlds. The novel reflects the broader diasporic experience of balancing multiple identities, finding new homes in foreign lands, and maintaining a connection to one's roots.

Lee's portrayal of these diasporic themes is both nuanced and universal in scope. By incorporating Korean cultural elements throughout the novel, the author demonstrates that identity is not a concept that can be readily relinquished, even in the vast expanse of space. The integration of these elements within the space opera genre challenges conventional science fiction narratives and offers a fresh, culturally enriched perspective to the field.

3 Space opera meets Korean culture: A transcultural analysis

Yoon Ha Lee's *Dragon Pearl* represents a transcultural work that blends the elements of space opera with Korean cultural motifs, offering a narrative that transcends the boundaries of traditional science fiction. This chapter

examines how *Dragon Pearl* incorporates tropes characteristic of space opera, combining them with themes that pertain to Korean identity and diaspora. This distinctive combination, which I term Space Diaspora, refers to a genre that employs space as a metaphorical backdrop to represent the human experience of displacement on Earth. It highlights the struggles of individuals who, much like diasporic individuals, wander through space in search of belonging. This genre reflects the broader phenomenon of human migration, demonstrating how individuals, whether on Earth or in space, must negotiate their identity and sense of community in unfamiliar environments.

3.1 Space opera tropes and their cultural translation

The space opera genre is typically defined by several characteristics, including the portrayal of grand intergalactic adventures, the use of advanced technology, and the depiction of epic battles. *Dragon Pearl* incorporates numerous elements of the space opera genre, including space battles and futuristic spaceships. However, it does so through a distinctly Korean cultural lens, offering a unique interpretation of these tropes. One notable aspect of this cultural translation is the emphasis placed on the role of family, which holds a central position in Korean society.

Min's dedication to her family, particularly her pursuit of her missing brother Jun, exemplifies a fundamental aspect of Korean culture: the importance of familial loyalty and cohesion. Rooted in Korea's longstanding Confucian tradition, this concept emphasizes the family as the foundational unit of society (Geum, 2004, p. 122). In Korean culture, there is a profound sense of collective identity, whereby family members perceive themselves as part of a unified entity rather than as isolated individuals. This familial loyalty serves as a pivotal motivating factor in Min's actions throughout the novel, underscoring her Korean identity within a futuristic, interstellar context.

Unlike the archetypal space opera hero, often defined by physical strength or technological expertise, Min's strength derives from her heritage as a *gumiho*, a fox spirit from Korean mythology. Her capacity for shape-shifting and the utilization of magic, abilities that are deeply entrenched in Korean folklore, serve as a pivotal means of overcoming adversity within the galaxy. This cultural translation of space opera tropes – where mystical abilities derived from folklore take precedence over technology – demonstrates a uniquely Korean approach to heroism and personal identity. In contrast to the typical space opera hero, who is often defined by

physical strength or technological prowess, the protagonist of *Dragon Pearl* is shaped by her cultural heritage, particularly her status as a gumiho, a fox spirit from Korean mythology. This emphasis on cultural heritage as a driving force in the protagonist's journey is a distinctive aspect of the series.

3.2 Blending American sci-fi traditions with Korean motifs

Dragon Pearl represents a fusion of traditional American science fiction conventions with Korean cultural elements, creating a new form of storytelling that bridges two distinct cultural perspectives. The novel incorporates familiar American science fiction tropes, including futuristic technologies, intricate political systems, and interstellar travel. However, it also incorporates distinctly Korean motifs, such as folklore, cuisine, and cultural values, which are superimposed upon these elements.

One of the most striking examples of this blending is the juxtaposition of advanced technology with Korean mythology. The capacity of Min to transform into a gumiho, a creature from ancient Korean legends, stands in stark contrast to the high-tech spaceships and futuristic worlds in which she navigates. However, rather than being in conflict, these elements coexist harmoniously, symbolizing the intersection of the traditional and the futuristic, where traditional Korean culture can flourish even in a space opera setting. This harmonious blend reflects the continued importance of cultural identity, even in the context of highly advanced technological environments.

Furthermore, the novel reflects the experience of the Korean diaspora, particularly the challenge of reconciling one's cultural heritage with the demands of living in a foreign society. The internal conflict experienced by Min, as a result of her dual identity as both a human and a gumiho, and her subsequent need to adapt to an intergalactic society, serves to illustrate the challenges faced by many individuals belonging to a diaspora, who are required to maintain a balance between their cultural roots and the pressures to assimilate. This fusion of American science fiction traditions with Korean cultural motifs provides a transcultural narrative that speaks to the universality of these experiences and the specific challenges faced by those in the diaspora (Park, 2003, p. 289).

3.3 Korean diaspora reflected in an intergalactic setting

The theme of diaspora is a fundamental element of *Dragon Pearl*, manifesting not only in the characters but also in the setting. The vastness of space serves as a metaphor for the displacement experienced by those in the diaspora. Similarly to diasporic individuals, who are frequently separated from their homeland both physically and culturally, the characters in *Dragon Pearl* must negotiate unfamiliar and often hostile environments in their pursuit of a sense of belonging.

Min's journey through the galaxy reflects the experiences of individuals from diasporic communities who must adapt to new social and cultural norms while maintaining a connection to their heritage. Her capacity to assume a different form as a gumiho represents the necessity to 'wear a mask' or adopt new identities to survive in unfamiliar environments. This metaphor can be understood as analogous to the concept of a 'persona' employed by immigrants or those living in a diaspora, who frequently find themselves compelled to adapt their behavior or appearance to integrate into new societies. This often involves suppressing certain aspects of their genuine identity (Yi Young-Ok, 2019, p. 316).

In this way, Min's utilization of her gumiho abilities in an extraterrestrial setting exemplifies the universal challenge of negotiating multiple identities in unfamiliar environments. The novel posits that survival in an alien environment necessitates adaptation and, at times, transformation, a concept that resonates with the experiences of those displaced from their homeland. The narrative of *Dragon Pearl* illustrates that the tension between adaptation and cultural preservation is not exclusive to Earth; rather, it is a universal experience that can be reflected in an intergalactic context.

The Space Diaspora genre examines the parallels between humanity's displacement in space and the terrestrial experiences of migration and adaptation. The genre employs the metaphorical backdrop of space to depict the challenges of cultural displacement, identity, and the search for belonging, which are central to the diasporic experience.

In essence, *Dragon Pearl* is a narrative that explores the concepts of identity and belonging, situated within the context of space opera but imbued with diasporic and Korean cultural elements. The novel follows the protagonist, Min, as she embarks on a journey to locate her brother and simultaneously ascertain her sense of identity and her connection to her heritage. Her quest reflects the broader struggles faced by individuals in the diaspora, namely the challenge of balancing cultural roots with the demands of living in a foreign or unfamiliar society. The Korean elements woven

throughout the novel, such as the significance of family, loyalty, and reverence for tradition, are pivotal to Min's journey. The concept of "We-ism," which prioritizes the collective unity of family over individualism, is a pervasive theme that resonates throughout the narrative (Shim, 2008, p. 68). In search for her brother, Min is not only seeking to locate a missing family member but is also engaged in the process of reaffirming her connection to her cultural identity and her place within her family and community.

In conclusion, *Dragon Pearl* represents a distinctive contribution to space opera and diasporic literature genres. The protagonist's journey through space is as much about locating a collective identity as individual self-discovery. To fully comprehend the intricacies of this literary work, it is imperative to gain an understanding of the cultural elements that are intrinsic to the narrative, as shaped by the Korean cultural context. It is of the utmost importance to pay special attention to the translation of these cultural nuances when introducing this English-language novel to Korean readers to ensure that the depth of the Korean identity within the work is preserved. It is therefore imperative that the translator pay close attention to detail to convey the novel's full meaning to a Korean audience.

4 Translation considerations for *Dragon Pearl*

Reading is an activity in which others can hardly observe what is happening inside the reader (Moritoki Škof 2023, p. 36). Reading translations, especially those that cross cultural boundaries, is made more challenging by the natural complexities of language. While the novel's transcultural themes of identity, diaspora, and belonging are fundamental to its essence, translating these elements into a Korean context presents a unique set of challenges. Korean readers may be more familiar with the cultural elements of the novel, yet it is essential to handle the linguistic and contextual differences between English and Korean thoughtfully.

This chapter examines the principal considerations involved in translating *Dragon Pearl* into Korean, including the treatment of names, cultural allusions, culinary references, and tone. It is essential to address these translation challenges in a manner that preserves the novel's integrity while ensuring it resonates with Korean readers. It is crucial to highlight that although the novel incorporates numerous references to Korean culture, it fundamentally remains a space opera. Consequently, it is essential to ensure that this genre element is accurately represented in the translated version.

4.1 Adapting cultural and mythological references

Korean mythology plays a pivotal role in *Dragon Pearl*, with the gumiho, a nine-tailed fox spirit, occupying a particularly prominent position. As discussed in Chapter 3, the gumiho is not merely a traditional mythological figure; it also serves as a metaphor for adaptation and survival in the novel, reflecting the diasporic experience. For readers unfamiliar with Korean folklore, additional explanation may be required to understand the significance of the gumiho. Nevertheless, in the Korean language, the translator must exercise caution in determining the extent of contextualization to be provided, ensuring that the mythological depth is conveyed with clarity while avoiding undue elaboration on elements that would be easily understood by Korean readers.

In addition to the gumiho, the novel features another prominent figure from Korean mythology: the tiger. In traditional Korean folklore, the tiger is frequently portrayed as a formidable yet occasionally misguided figure, lacking the astute qualities of the protagonist. This pattern is sustained in *Dragon Pearl*, where the tiger is depicted as a formidable yet somewhat inept figure, thereby reinforcing the character's archetypal role within the context of Korean storytelling. It is the translator's responsibility to ensure that this culturally resonant portrayal of the tiger is acknowledged and preserved by Korean readers.

Additionally, the novel examines the function of cultural values such as family loyalty and respect for ancestors, which are of considerable consequence in Korean society. While these values are firmly established in Korean society, the translator must nevertheless contextualize them within the futuristic, intergalactic setting of the novel. The challenge is to maintain the cultural relevance of these elements without making the story feel excessively anchored in the past, ensuring that they integrate seamlessly into the space opera narrative.

Furthermore, the novel explores the role of cultural values such as family loyalty and respect for ancestors, which are of significant importance in Korean society. While these values are deeply entrenched in Korean society, the translator must nevertheless contextualize them within the futuristic, intergalactic setting of the novel. The challenge is to maintain the cultural relevance of these elements without making the story feel too anchored in the past, ensuring that they integrate seamlessly into the space opera narrative.

I believe the current translation effectively conveys the nuances of the text. However, I want to emphasize that this is an important quality that

should always be prioritized when translating Lee's work, regardless of how successful the existing translation may be.

4.2 Localizing food and tradition for Korean audiences

As previously discussed, food plays a significant role in *Dragon Pearl*, functioning as both a cultural marker and a means of facilitating connections between characters and their Korean heritage, even within the context of an intergalactic setting. The consumption of traditional Korean foods, such as 'kimchi', 'ssalbab' (rice), and 'jeon' (vegetable fritters), is referenced throughout the novel, thereby reinforcing the cultural identity of the characters. Nevertheless, the difficulty of translating these culinary references into Korean lies in the fact that they are already well-known to Korean readers.

In the English version, the author occasionally provides detailed descriptions of these foods, particularly when introducing unfamiliar ingredients or dishes to English-speaking readers. To illustrate, kimchi may be described not only by its name but also by its ingredients, such as fermented cabbage and spices, in order to provide non-Korean readers with an understanding of its composition. However, in the context of Korean translation, such descriptions would be superfluous, given that kimchi is a ubiquitous ingredient in Korean cuisine. It is incumbent upon the translator to exercise discernment in determining the circumstances under which such explanations should be omitted or adjusted. In the extant translation, no supplementary clarification is provided, and the text remains comprehensible to the reader. However, this is one of the aspects that translators should consider when translating foreign works with Korean characteristics into Korean in the future.

This aspect of translation should be approached on a case-by-case basis, contingent on how the food is presented in the original text. When food is referred to by name only, the Korean translation should be done in a similar manner without unnecessary details. However, if the food is described with its ingredients or preparation methods, the translator must determine whether to simplify the description or omit it entirely to avoid redundancy for Korean readers.

4.3 Retaining authorial tone and cultural nuance in Korean

Although *Dragon Pearl* incorporates numerous elements of Korean culture, it is, in essence, a space opera. The translator must ensure that the science

fiction elements of the narrative, including intergalactic travel, futuristic technology, and epic space battles, are not eclipsed by cultural references. While Korean cultural elements are central to the characters and themes, the translation must also maintain the fast-paced, action-driven narrative typical of the space opera genre. It is essential for the translator to find a balance between these two aspects, ensuring that the novel appeals to the science fiction audience while still resonating with those who appreciate the cultural depth of the story.

Furthermore, while Korean cultural elements, including names, food, and mythology, play a significant role in the narrative, it is essential for the translator to maintain a clear understanding of the novel's fundamental nature as a space opera. The genre conventions associated with this type of literature, such as intergalactic conflict, political intrigue, and space exploration, must be upheld in the translation to ensure that the science fiction elements remain engaging for the reader.

The translation of *Dragon Pearl* into Korean carefully balances the preservation of the novel's cultural and mythological depth with its fast-paced space opera elements. While certain elements, such as names, food, and mythology, are deeply rooted in Korean culture, it is also essential that the novel's genre conventions and action-driven narrative resonate with Korean readers. By addressing the use of honorifics, cultural references, food descriptions, and the author's tone with precision, the translation can effectively disseminate *Dragon Pearl* to a new audience, allowing the novel's transcultural themes and genre-blending style to be fully appreciated.²

5 Case studies: Key passages and their translations

The process of translating *Dragon Pearl* from English to Korean presents several significant challenges, particularly those regarding the conveyance of cultural elements rooted in Korean tradition to an audience already familiar with these elements. It is the responsibility of the translator to ensure that the cultural integrity of the source material is preserved while simultaneously ensuring that the translated text resonates naturally with Korean readers. This chapter examines pivotal translation concerns, including the treatment of traditional Korean elements, proper nouns, and culinary references, and proposes methodologies to reconcile cultural accuracy with comprehensibility.

² For a deeper understanding of the significance of honorifics in Korean society, see Vučkovič (2025) in the same issue.

5.1 Translating elements of Korean tradition: Challenges and strategies

One of the principal difficulties encountered in translating *Dragon Pearl* into Korean is that of negotiating cultural elements that are intrinsic to the narrative, many of which are already familiar to Korean readers. In the English version, concepts such as family loyalty, ancestral rituals, and respect for elders are often elucidated for the benefit of a non-Korean audience. However, in the Korean translation, these elements require a more sophisticated approach, given that the target audience is likely to be already intimately familiar with these concepts. Providing excessive explanations of such traditions may alienate readers, whereas omitting context entirely may diminish their significance within the narrative.

A particularly illustrative example is the translation of terms associated with Korean folktales. To illustrate, the term 'charm' is translated as *holigi* 홀리기, which refers to the gumiho's capacity to enchant or bewitch others. While the literal translation of 'charm' *maeryeok* 매력 suggests a benign or attractive quality, the term *holigi* 홀리기 evokes a more magical and mystical atmosphere, which aligns with the supernatural elements of the gumiho's powers. This lexical choice is significant in that it reflects the translator's effort to enhance the fantastical elements of the narrative in a way that remains faithful to the cultural and mythological context.

Similarly, the translation of 'fox spirit' as *yeouryeong* 여우령 exemplifies a strategic deployment of classical Korean vocabulary. In lieu of a more contemporary or direct translation, such as *yeouui yeonghon* 여우의 영혼 (fox's soul) or *yeouui jeongsin* 여우의 정신 (fox's spirit), the utilization of the term *yeong* 령 evokes a more archaic and conventional association, thereby establishing a profound historical and cultural context for the narrative. This deliberate choice serves to enhance the mythological resonance of the character and adds a layer of authenticity to the narrative.

The translation of the title *Dragon Pearl* presents a further distinctive challenge. Rather than translating the title directly as *Yongeui Jinju* 용의 진주, it was decided that the transliteration *Dragon Peol* 드래곤 펄 should be retained. This decision likely serves two purposes. Primarily, it maintains consistency with the original English title. Secondly, it avoids confusion with the word *Jinju* 진주, which in the novel refers to a specific location. The name Jinju is also that of a real city in South Korea, which introduces an additional layer of cultural meaning for Korean readers. A direct translation of the title as *Jinju* 진주 could potentially lead to ambiguity. Therefore, the decision was taken to maintain the transliterated form, which ensures clarity while preserving the original's intent.

In all of these cases, the translator must tread a fine line between cultural transparency and linguistic fidelity, ensuring that the nuances of Korean tradition are retained without disrupting the natural flow of the narrative. This necessitates not only a profound comprehension of the cultural and mythological allusions but also an appreciation for their integration into the broader narrative.

5.2 Handling Korean proper nouns: Standardization and cultural fidelity

In the case of *Dragon Pearl*, handling Korean proper nouns, character names in particular, does not present a significant challenge. As previously stated, the characters in the novel are given distinctly Korean names, which will be rendered in the Korean alphabet (Hangeul) for the Korean translation. However, one significant issue arises from the fact that the author does not adhere strictly to the Romanization guidelines established by the National Institute of the Korean Language (*Gungnipgugeowon* 국립국어원). It is therefore recommended that the original intent of the author be respected in the transliteration of these names into Korean.

Fortunately, the author has provided a pronunciation guide at the conclusion of the text, which offers readers insight into the intended pronunciation of the names. This inclusion suggests that the author's transliterations were intentional, designed to correspond with a particular phonetic interpretation suited to an English-speaking audience. It is imperative that the names in the Korean translation adhere as closely as possible to the original intent while being converted into Hangeul. It would be beneficial to include a table listing the proper pronunciation guidelines, as presented in the original book, as a reference to ensure consistency throughout the text. This approach not only honors the author's original intent but also provides clarity for Korean readers who may be familiar with the names in their Romanized forms.

As observed in the table below, there is a lack of clarity with regard to the transcription of Korean names. The Korean sound sequence /jʌ/ ㅏ, is sometimes Romanized as 'yeo' (e.g. Seo-hyeon /sɛ.hjɛn/ 서현) and at other times as 'yu' (e.g. Myung /mjɛŋ/ 명). Additionally, the Korean consonant ㄱ is occasionally represented as 'g' (e.g. Gi /ki/ 기, Gimchi /kim.tɕhi/ 김치) and at other times as 'k' (e.g. Kim /kim/ 김).³ This is not merely an issue for a writer;

³ The Korean consonant ㄱ is pronounced as /k/ when positioned at the beginning of a word or syllable; /g/ when occurring between voiced sounds, such as vowels; and /kʰ/ at

it is a challenge faced by the majority of individuals with knowledge of the Korean language. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon the translator to monitor this matter. This is particularly pertinent when translating into Korean, where nuances can have a significant impact on the intended meaning.

Table 1: Pronunciation guide ([Lee 2019, p. 311](#))

Name	Pronunciation	Name 2	Pronunciation
Areum	ah-room	Hye	Hyeh
Baduk	bah-dook	Hyosu	hyoh-soo
Bae	beh	Hyun-Joo	hyuhn-joo
banchan	bahn-chahn	Jaebi	jeh-bee
Bora	boh-rah	Jaebo	jeh-boh
Byung-Ho	byuhng-hoh	Jang	Jahng
Chae-Won	cheh-wuhn	Janggi	jahng-ghee
cheongju	chung-joo	Jeonbok	juhn-bohk
Cheongok	chuhng-ohk	Ji-Eun	jee-yoon
Chul	chool	Jinju	jeen-joo
dokkaebi	do-geh-bee	Jun	Joon
Eui	oo-ee	Ju-Won	joo-wuhn
Eunhee	yooh-hee	Kim	geem
geomdo	guh-m-doh	Madang	mah-dahng
Gi	ghee	Manshik	mahn-sheek
gimchi	geen-chee	Min	meen
gukhwaju	gook-hwah-joo	Myung	myuhng
gumiho	goo-mee-hoh	Nari	nah-ree
Gyeong-Ja	gyuhng-jah	Seo-Hyeon	suh-hyuhn
Hae	heh	Seok	suhk
haetae	heh-teh	Seonmi	suhn-mee
Haneul	hah-nool	Sujin	soo-jeen
Hongok	hohng-ohk	Woo-Jin	ooh-jeen
Hwan	hwahn	Yong	yohng

It is crucial to acknowledge that the issue of Romanization is not exclusive to *Dragon Pearl* but rather pertains to all translations encompassing the Korean language. The inconsistency among

the syllable-final position. The Romanization issue is demonstrated only for the word initial position.

Romanization systems – both the official standards set by the National Institute of the Korean Language and personal phonetic rendering by authors – can create confusion during the translation process. In the case of *Dragon Pearl*, as the author's chosen Romanization does not follow the official guidelines. Therefore, the translator is required to make a deliberate choice: either to localize the names in accordance with standard Korean usage or to maintain the author's unique approach.

While standardizing proper nouns is often necessary to maintain cultural fidelity, in this case, the translator's role is to ensure that the author's unique transliterations are respected, particularly in cases where they deviate from formal Romanization rules. It is essential for the translator to balance between preserving the original text's integrity and ensuring that Korean readers can engage with the narrative in a natural and culturally relevant way.

5.3 Translating Korean food: Level of detail and cultural relevance

One of the most significant challenges when translating Korean culture, particularly food, into a foreign language is to determine the level of detail that is required. The translator must determine whether to leave certain terms, such as 'kimchi,' untranslated or else to provide supplementary context, such as providing an explanation that kimchi is a dish made from salted and fermented cabbage, often consumed with rice by Koreans. This decision is critical for balancing cultural fidelity with textual accessibility and comprehensibility. The dilemma of how the author handles the translation and explanation of Korean food is evident throughout *Dragon Pearl*.

To illustrate, the term 'mung bean sprouts' is elucidated in the text rather than simply employing the Korean term *sukju namul* 숙주 나물. The author elected to elucidate the concept for non-Korean readers, thereby rendering the food more accessible by describing it in lieu of relying on direct translation. This decision reflects the broader challenge of how to strike a balance between cultural specificity and accessibility for an international audience with no prior familiarity with Korean cuisine.

Another noteworthy example is the term 'cinnamon-ginger punch,' which refers to the Korean beverage *sujeonggwa* 수정과. In lieu of utilizing the original Korean terminology, the author elected to employ a descriptive methodology, referencing the beverage by its constituent components. This decision raises a significant issue when translating the work into Korean: should the term 'cinnamon-ginger punch' be translated back to the original Korean, *sujeonggwa* 수정과, or should it remain a descriptive phrase in the

target language, such as *gyepiwa saenggangeuro mandeun eumnyo* 계피와 생강으로 만든 음료? The decision to utilize a single culturally specific term or to provide a detailed explanation has significant implications for the way in which the text is perceived by Korean readers.

For readers of the Korean language, food items such as *kimchi* 김치 or *sujeonggwa* 수정과 possess a profound cultural significance within a single word. Explanation that breaks down the ingredients may be perceived as superfluous or reductionist, particularly for those who possess an intimate understanding of the cultural context. However, the issue is becoming more complex as Korean culture and cuisine are gaining greater exposure and recognition in global contexts and the need to balance authenticity with clarity for readers unfamiliar with the cultural nuances presents a significant challenge in translation.

It is therefore imperative that translators give these aspects their full consideration during the translation process. The question of whether to maintain the integrity of Korean terms or provide additional context for the reader must be addressed in a consistent and thoughtful manner. In the case of *Dragon Pearl*, the translator must determine whether to embrace the concise cultural significance of terms like *sujeonggwa* 수정과 or to offer a more detailed explanation to accommodate the varying levels of cultural knowledge among Korean readers.

In conclusion, the process of translating *Dragon Pearl* into Korean presents a series of intricate challenges, particularly with regard to the elements of Korean tradition, the rendering of proper nouns, and the portrayal of food. Each of these aspects requires careful consideration of the amount of the necessary explanation to achieving a good balance between cultural fidelity and comprehensibility for Korean audience already familiar with these elements. The translator must determine whether to maintain the author's original transliterations, provide comprehensive explanations, or retain the cultural nuances embedded in terms like *sujeonggwa* 수정과 and *sukju namul* 숙주 나물. These decisions have broader implications for the presentation of Korean culture globally, as the novel continues to be introduced to a wider international audience. The translation of *Dragon Pearl* must respect the author's original intention and the cultural resonance of the source material. Therefore, it must ensure that Korean readers experience the novel in a way that feels authentic and engaging, while also addressing the unique demands of the text's speculative and diasporic nature.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Koreanness and cultural preservation in *Dragon Pearl*

This study has demonstrated how Yoon Ha Lee's *Dragon Pearl* integrates elements of Korean culture within the space opera genre. By incorporating elements of Korean mythology, cuisine, and nomenclature into a futuristic narrative, Lee presents a Space Diaspora where cultural heritage coexists with space exploration. This distinctive fusion elucidates the pivotal themes of identity and belonging, central to the discourse of diasporic literature, while simultaneously extending the frontiers of science fiction. The novel not only introduces Korean culture to a global audience but also creates platform for readers to explore the challenges of cultural preservation in the context of speculative fiction. Nevertheless, translating *Dragon Pearl* into Korean gives rise to significant considerations about how cultural markers should be handled. As Korean culture is becoming increasingly recognized on the global stage, reintroducing culturally significant works to a Korean audience requires careful attention to how these elements are treated. It is incumbent upon translators to strike a balance between fidelity to the original text and the cultural context of the target audience. This study underscores the crucial importance of preserving the integrity of Korean cultural elements in translation, particularly in an era marked by a rapid expansion of global interest in Korean media. The translation of *Dragon Pearl* illustrates the necessity of exercising due consideration to cultural nuances to maintain the richness and depth of the source material.

6.2 The future of translating Korean content written in English into Korean

As translation technology continues to evolve, there are ongoing discussions about the future role of human translators. While technological advances have made significant progress in facilitating translation processes, *Dragon Pearl* illustrates the constraints of technology in handling works of a culturally intricate nature. The novel's fusion of Korean cultural elements and space opera themes necessitates a translator's profound cultural and literary expertise, a nuance that automated tools alone cannot replicate.

The advent of new genres and hybrid works, exemplified by *Dragon Pearl*, underscores the pivotal role of human translators in navigating the intricate nuances of both source and target cultures. In an increasingly globalized literary landscape, the role of human expertise in translation is paramount. It is essential to ensure that translations retain cultural

authenticity and resonate with diverse audiences in a meaningful way. The maintenance of cultural depth and literary nuance through the medium of skilled translation is of paramount importance in ensuring the continued integrity of works such as *Dragon Pearl* across languages and cultures.

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that a comprehensive grasp of cultural nuances is a prerequisite for a successful translation. In certain instances, content that incorporates Korean elements and is interpreted through a non-Korean lens may be reintroduced into Korean through translation. Given these circumstances, translators must approach presenting such content to Korean readers with particular care. They must ensure that cultural authenticity is preserved while also accounting for shifts in context that may have occurred during the initial adaptation. The translation of content that has undergone this process requires not only linguistic proficiency but also a profound understanding of how cultural nuances have been reinterpreted. This enables Korean audiences to experience their heritage in an authentic yet refined manner.

Translating Korean content originally written in English requires a meticulous and culturally sensitive approach. Above all, it is crucial to accurately identify and understand the Korean cultural elements within the work to ensure they are faithfully conveyed to Korean readers. Translators must approach these elements with depth and precision, capturing the essence of the original while preserving the cultural integrity of the work. Beyond simply recognizing these elements, translators face the challenge of interpreting them within the context of a Korean readership. This involves reflecting on how Korean cultural aspects may have been understood or reshaped through a Western lens, then thoughtfully determining how to present them to resonate with Korean audiences. By considering these cultural differences, translators can offer a more meaningful reading experience that is both authentic and accessible. Moreover, translators must decide whether to incorporate annotations or additional explanations to enhance the reader's comprehension of culturally nuanced elements. While some aspects may be self-evident to Korean readers, others may benefit from subtle contextualization to bridge cultural gaps created during the initial adaptation. This strategic approach allows the work to maintain depth and comprehensibility, respecting the reader's familiarity with the cultural background.

Taken together, these considerations highlight the importance of engaging with evolving cultural trends in translation. The era of merely introducing Korean culture to the West has shifted; we are now entering a phase where Western interpretations of Korean culture are returning to

Korea. This new dynamic calls for a thoughtful reassessment of the translator's role. Translators must now embrace the responsibility of reintroducing Korea's cultural elements with clarity and integrity, adapting to this complex cultural landscape, and fostering cross-cultural dialogue that resonates meaningfully within Korea.

Acknowledgment

This work was supported by the Seed Program for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2022-INC-2250001). The author also gratefully acknowledges the financial support from the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS) in the framework of the research project (J6-50202) "The Confucian Revival and its Impact on Contemporary East Asian Societies through the Lens of the Relation between the Individual and Society."

References

- Baek, J. 백지연 (2001). *Milo sogeul jiljuhaneun munhag* 미로 속을 질주하는 문학. Paju: Changbi.
- Geum, J. 금장태 (2004). *Yugyo sasanggwa jonggyojeog segye* 유교 사상과 종교적 세계. Paju: Hangughagsuljeongbo.
- Kang, B. Y. (2022). The Role of Translation in Understanding the Literature of the Korean Minority in the United States: Analysis of the Translation of Chang-rae Lee's Novel *Native Speaker*. *Acta Linguistica Asiatica*, 12(1), 131-146.
<https://doi.org/10.4312/ala.12.1.131-146>
- Kim, J. 김정희 (2014). *Seutolitellingilan mueosinga* 스토리텔링이란 무엇인가. Seoul: Keomyunikeisyeonbugseu.
- Lee, Y. H. (2019). *Dragon Pearl*. Los Angeles: Disney-Hyperion.
- Lee, Y. H. (2020). *Dregon pyeol* 드래곤 펄 (Song, Kyung-ah 송경아, Trans.). Paju: Sagyejeol Publishing 사계절.
- Moritoki Škof, N. (2023). Understanding Vocabulary of L2 Learners of Japanese. *Acta Linguistica Asiatica*, 13(1), 35-52.
- Midkiff, E. (2023). Not Just Boys and Toys: Gender Intersexuality in SF for Children. In L. Yaszek (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction* (pp. 153-159). London: Routledge.
- Park, N. 박노자 (2003). *Hayan gamyeon-ui jegug* 하얀 가면의 제국. Seoul: Hankoreh.

- Reddy, G., & van Dam, R. M. (2020). Food, culture, and identity in multicultural societies: Insights from Singapore, *Appetite*, 149: 104633.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0195666319311602?via%3Dihub>
- Shim, T. Y. (2008). *Changing Korea Understanding Culture and Communication*. Lausanne: Peter Lang.
- Venuti, L. (2012). *The Translator's Invisibility*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Vučković, E. (2025). Workplace Discourse and Expression of Hierarchy in Yoon Tae-ho's Webtoon Misaeng. *Acta Linguistica Asiatica*, 15(1), 125-152.
<https://doi.org/10.4312/ala.15.1.125-152>
- Yi, Young-Kyung 이영경 (2019). Gumiho-e yeouiju, hangugjeog SFlo segyejeog jumog badneun iyunha da-eum jagpum-eun ilje sigmin jibaegeul geulin SF 구미호에 여의주, 한국적 SF 로 세계적 주목 받는 이윤하 다음 작품은 일제 식민 지배를 그린 SF (Lee Yoon-ha, who drew global attention for her Korean-style science fiction in Gumiho, next work is a science fiction story about Japanese colonial rule). *Kyunghang Shinmun* 경향신문, August 19, 2019.
<https://www.khan.co.kr/culture/culture-general/article/201908191124001>
- Yi, Young-Ok 이영옥 (2019). *Migugsoseolgwa gongdongche uisig 미국소설과 공동체 의식*. Seoul: Sechang.