

***Il Mare* and *The Lake House*: a comparison from a cultural translation perspective**

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Abstract

In this paper we compare the Korean movie *Il Mare*, originally titled *Siworae* (시월애 - 時越愛) but renamed as *Il Mare* for international release, with its Hollywood remake as *The Lake House*. *Il Mare* was a popular Korean romantic drama which was released in 2000, and *The Lake House* is the American English translated remake, which was filmed and released in 2006. We discuss how these two movies have remained very much the same as a story and a romance yet have some very important differences. We approach and compare these differences by dealing with those we felt are essential to the story being translated and culturally understood in the move from the Eastern society in which it originated to the Western society where it was remade.

We will look briefly at some of the instances and circumstances which seem to translate well from one culture to the other and have been left intact within the story. Some of these may have been left unchanged for the same variety of reasons for making changes as we will list momentarily. However, the standard of remakes requires retaining enough of the original to avoid losing the connections of the first story. Furthermore, while there are a number of smaller changes which were as likely made due to cultural choices, we will be focusing here on the major changes we see as providing the major differences and impacts on the story. Those areas include location, time period covered, the houses referenced in the titles, occupations, and the relationships between the two protagonists and the people closest to them.

Introduction

I .

Remakes of movies have been occurring almost since the first films. Movies themselves were often born of the re-telling of stories from other mediums such as radio plays, plays, and novels and other already

well-known stories. This trend continues today as motivations for remaking movies have only increased. What are some of the main reasons for remaking movies? Movies today are often remade for a variety of reasons but chief among them are for money, to update a story, as a pet project of a big star or producer, or to bring a story to a new audience.

Translations of movies are also remakes in their own sense and fall into these categories as well. Since not all movies are subject to being remade, it is not surprising that not all movies are subject to translated remakes either. Commonly remade foreign films are usually dramas or romances. Mostly due to cultural situations not translating easily, comedies and romantic comedies are less frequently remade in English for western audiences (Leitch, 1990). We hold that there are a number of influences that play a part in the translations of movies, especially from an Eastern culture to a Western culture audience with many of the same difficulties and circumstantial considerations coming in to play.

We have discussed in the past about the difficulties in translations and the general obstacles met there, particularly of those from English to Korea and Korean to English when dealing with humor, and since some of those same reasons for difficulties in comprehensive translations for movie scripts also exist, it would be interesting to see how those might affect a movie being remade from Korean to English and what changes and interpretations might be necessary for the film to find popular success. Popular success here would be a more reliable factor in effectiveness as the people as viewers being entertained would be a more measurable mark of success in translation than perhaps a more academic approach through critique and in depth comparisons. Movies are still deemed a success based on their financial success. Financial success stems from the public acceptance of the films and voted on by their ticket buying.

As comedy tends to be even more culturally difficult to translate and cross international barriers of geographic region and cultural mores, the more successful candidates for these kinds of translations tend to be dramas and romances. The situations lend themselves to a more easily transplanted scene-by-scene translation and understanding for audiences without as much need to explain cultural nuances necessary for humor-based films, even when those involve romance. For our study we have chosen, *Sumire - Il Mare*, a popular Korean romantic drama released in 2000, and its American translated remake, *The Lake House* which was released six years later in 2006.

There are always going to be differences, but what makes those differences, sometimes necessary? Some things will be different based on cultural standards and expectations. Some things will be different based on artistic choices by directors and actors – some of those will also be culturally influenced however difficult that also may be to concretely determine.

The choices in these films themselves have several mitigating factors as well. We will compare the two films from a number of viewpoints and discuss their similarities and variances and the possibilities for why those have occurred. As with most translations, the choices being made are influenced by a variety of factors that include cultural choices, directorial choices, and individual actor's choices. There are always a myriad of differences in any remake, so a comparison of all of them would be a lengthy and unnecessary exercise bearing little fruit of any importance. Although a number of directorial differences and changes in the story structure itself have an impact on the telling of the particular story, for this paper, we will be focusing primarily on the choices that are most likely based on cultural significances and which have a greater impact on the overall story.

II.

For a general understanding of the overall story and to see the basic similarities which hold through both versions of the movie, here are short summaries of the two movies:

Il Mare: 2000

The movie begins as Eunju moves out of her house "Il Mare", leaving behind a Christmas card for whoever will be the new owner of the house. The year is 1999. In the letter she asks the new tenant to watch for any mail intended for her that comes to this address and to forward it to her new address in the city. Then Seonghyun, the first owner of "Il Mare" is seen moving in and finds in his mailbox the Christmas card from Eunju. The year is shown to be 2 years earlier, 1997. He thinks this was a joke, so he leaves her a letter telling her that it is actually 1997 not 1999. Eventually the two realize that they are separated by two years of time but can somehow communicate through the mailbox and begin to form a friendship through their letters. This friendship grows to be love, but of course it is a love complicated by both the time difference and the fact that Eunju is still emotionally, if not physically, involved with her former boyfriend who she still holds out hope she will reunite with at some point. Even though Seonghyun realizes he is love with Eunju, he tries to help her patch up her relationship though they eventually both realize their shared love and try to meet. This attempt fails for a reason not clear to Eunju, but it is in fact because Seonghyun is killed on the way to their meeting. She learns of this, and being 2 years ahead, she sends a note to warn him. Then he instead takes the letters and goes to the house on the day she would have been moving out of Il Mare.

The Lake House: 2006

In Chicago, the lonely architect Alex Wyler has a troubled relationship with his father Simon Wyler. In 2004, he buys an old glass house in a lake, designed and built by his father, and he finds a message in his

mailbox from the former tenant, the also lonely Dr. Kate Forster, asking to deliver her correspondence to an address downtown. Alex meets his brother Henry in Chicago and when they go to the address with Dr. Forster's correspondence, they find a building of luxury apartments under construction to be completed eighteen months later. After some messages, Alex and Kate disclose that she is living in 2006 and Alex in 2004, they fall in love with each other and they try to find the means to meet.

The key story arch is fundamentally the same as with many remakes, but those points will not be the focus of the discussion in this paper. In this paper we will be discussing the specific differences we feel were made due to culturally based instances and situations. While there are a number of smaller changes which were as likely made due to cultural choices, we will be focusing here on the major changes providing the biggest differences and impacts on the story. Those areas include location, time period covered, the houses referenced in the titles, occupations, and the relationships between the two protagonists and the people closest to them.

Section I: Location

Changing a title on a remake is not uncommon, even when a movie is remade in its original language, but from the start with these two movies a title change was made and was perhaps necessary in order to convey a clearer meaning. The purpose of the house to which the title refers in both movies is an attempt by an estranged father to build a bridge, to cross a gap in the relationship between him and his son. The original Korean title *Siworae* (시월애 - 時越愛) means “time-transcending love” and was intentionally retitled “*Il Mare*” from the name of the house for the English title for international release to bring the focus of the story to the house and to the place where the magic exists. “*Il Mare*” is Italian for “the sea”. Culturally the sea is seen as a much more likely place of loneliness and separation in Korea than it is in the west, especially in the United States, where a house situated on the sea might mean ‘separation’ but usually one of choice and status. To be near the sea in Korea is to put oneself at risk as well as creating a separation between the tenants and the community or people around them. Since it was built as an attempt to draw him and his wife closer together, it shows the father and builder has a strong and personal desire to rebuild his relationship with his wife but lacks the understanding of this choice also in only creating more separation. South Korea being a peninsular country, the sea is an idea, and an image, that is part of nearly every area though homes are seldom built on the shores. Lakes, specifically lakes with individually owned housing properties, are a rarity.

The English language remake is titled *The Lake House* which comes with its own built in set of ideals most people will have a predisposition towards. Living by the sea is a dangerous and expensive

proposition in the United States. It is also very uncommon for any land by the sea to be separated from other inhabited properties by more than a few feet much less the space necessary to convey the isolation of neither the house's initial occupants nor the main characters in our time-traveling love story. The home needs to be off the beaten path, but the tenant is still spending their days in the city, amongst a bustling crowd. Stereotypical images of lake houses run from rustic cabins to elaborate weekend getaway locations for the more affluent. Lake homes do have the image of being a second home, a place for respite, and a place for families to gather. They could be seen as romantic getaways, but the setting would be less desolate and more wooded.

Section II: Time Period

Beyond the initial change of titles, the time and season are also different for both movies. While both movies have their male and female counterparts living and communicating at an interval of two years, the beginning of the movies are set at different times. Both begin around a holiday with *Il Mare* being set around Christmas time at the beginning of the story and *The Lake House* being set around Valentine's Day.

Among Asian countries observing Christmas, the holiday is celebrated more widely in South Korea than most other countries. While the widespread observance of the holiday is due to the larger than average number of Christians, 29% of the overall population in South Korea is Christian as of 2010 according to the Pew Research Center (Connor, 2014), the holiday is not celebrated in the same way as it is in the West. In the west, Christmas even outside of its religious settings is seen as a time for families both immediate and extended. Although the Christian members of the population brought this holiday to prominence, the remaining 70% of the population see this holiday as a chance to celebrate in an entirely different manner. This is the biggest romantic holiday for couples in South Korea. And as such, it is seen as the single most special date day for any couple (Hurt, 2014). When *Il Mare* opens, we see, EunJu, the main female character, alone and waiting for a letter at Christmas time. For a person in a relationship, there could be no worse a time to be alone, and out of contact with their partner, than on Christmas.

The Lake House chooses instead for its holiday Valentine's Day, which is seen in America as the number one day for couples, particularly young couples, and the most important time to be with the one you love. Christmas in the US is a time for family with an increase in travel of 23% over normal travel during the season and the average distance traveled rises to 275 miles. Christmas is not a time for couples in America. That time is reserved for Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day in Korea has been a day of women giving chocolate to men as a sign of affection. The men who received these would then reciprocate in the

following month on the 14th by giving a gift. This tradition is changing now as marketing is targeted at both males and females, but at the time of this movie's release in Korea, the norm was still to celebrate this day with a woman giving chocolate. This is also not restricted to romantic relations in Korea, so it would not be as symbolic of a lost, or longed for, love.

Valentine's Day in the US has a much stronger tie to romantically involved couples, so this makes it the stronger image choice for the US version of the story. Valentine's gifts account for nearly 20 billion dollars in sales in 2016 in the US. It is the number one holiday for couples, and again, the worse time to be alone when it comes to love in America. There is also a tradition of sending cards, 85% of which are sent by women as in *The Lake House*, to romantic partners on this holiday.

Section III: The House

The titular character of both movies is the house itself. Symbolism comes into play very strongly here and both versions of the movie follow and build this theme in much the same way with only a few slight variations.

When it comes to the house, and how the house came to be built we have a major part of both stories that holds along the same lines. The house in both movies was designed and built by the male lead's father. The purpose for building the house is the same for both movies: an attempt to show love by someone who was very inept and lacking in that area of skills though brilliant and at the top of the field of architecture and design. While both designers were commercial designers with a flair for the artistic and their own uniqueness, the house was designed in such a way and then constructed in an area that made the house uninviting to others. This is a symbol of how both fathers lacked the ability to understand the needs of their respective family members with whom they are trying to build a stronger relationship. Seonghyun's father designed buildings, usually corporate and commercial buildings, but his designs were said to have a theme of loneliness. He stated that the first themes of his work in architecture were 'to be on a large scale', and then the second half of his design career was focused on humans and people and still loneliness. Seonghyun finds out through a book published about his father and his father's work that the concept of *Il Mare* is in fact "loneliness". Seonghyun also discovers after his father's death that the house was built by his father as a gift to him, his estranged son.

Eunju tells Seonghyun she felt the house was lonely, but once she knew about the dad's purpose in building it she feels it is not lonely.

Il Mare is the father's final work.

The Lake House was built by Alex's father as a gift to Alex's mother. This was done before the father became famous. The house was literally built by Alex's father with his own hands. This is also a very western ideal, to show dedication and commitment to some things, even things that might be better done by someone else; you take on the task of doing it yourself. This is seen as a symbol of your commitment or level of your caring for the one you are doing the work. Alex's father though became caught up in his work, a more universal theme for families and relationships that fits both US and Korean culture. We will see later how this work relationship is put forth as at least the partial cause of the situations for both the Eunju and Kate.

Alex's mother however became tired of the struggle to keep their family together without receiving the attention and love she desired from her husband, so she eventually left the home and family. However, she became seriously ill and died about one year later. The Lake House then is a symbol to Alex of the loneliness his mother felt even though it was meant as a symbol of love.

Alex's father is still very active in his own work though, and the Lake House is not his final building. In fact he has moved on to designing and building a new museum. The new theme of his work is based on light. Light has a very significant symbolism in western literature and culture as a representative of knowledge, understanding, and even love. Alex's father seemed, at least at some level, to be aware of his shortcomings and like many western men was trying to find a way to overcome them through his work.

Section IV: Occupations

It is often the case that a movie cannot be translated and remade into another language because the situation it is based on is just not one that would be understandable in the same context as the original whether it be in English and translated to Korean or vice versa (Bellos, 2011).

For example, *The Game Plan* is another 2007 movie released about the same time as *The Lake House*. It was an above average box office, streaming, and video sales success at the time for an actor who is now one of the major box office draws around the world. It continues to do well as a streaming movie release, yet was never released in theaters in Asia even though the movie starred Dwayne Johnson who is also a popular actor in much of Asia due to his participation in the wildly popular *Fast and Furious* (titled *Wild Speed* in Asia) franchise.

The problem for *The Game Plan* is not related to star power or storyline, but instead the specifics of the situation established are problematic. A popular professional athlete discovers that he has a daughter from an earlier failed relationship, and due to the death of the girl's mother the child is presented to the male lead to take and raise. While the general idea of the story might not be so difficult for Eastern cultures to grasp and enjoy, the stereotypes on which it draws its source for the humor and conflict in the story are not so readily understood. The male lead is the quarterback of a popular American football team. That is a sport and a stereotype that is just not understood in Korea where the sport has little following and its athletes are held to higher, at least in public, moral standards. It would take more than a simple change in sport for the story to work and fully be understood. All too often, radical changes are necessary before a movie can be remade for another language and culture (Eagly, 1987). Such changes can be to such an extent the original is no longer recognizable in the newer version.

Perhaps the biggest box office hit for a romantic comedy in Korea, *My Sassy Girl*, was remade in English and ended up being a direct to DVD release never getting its chance to see the inside of a theater. The situation just did not translate into one that American and other western audiences could believe possible.

Il Mare however in the general story and situation lends itself well to being translatable with only minor changes in setting and character backgrounds. Chief among those are the occupations of the main characters (Matthews, 2007).

For the male leads for both versions of the movie, the occupation of architect is kept the same. This is an interesting cultural choice in itself. Being an architect in Korea is seen as a highly desirable position. While it is seen as an artistic or creative job, it is also seen as practical and desirable in a country where the priority is still to get a college degree and then find employment for life with a company. Seoul National University boasts a top rated, 31st in the world, architectural design department and other South Korean universities fall into the top 75 of schools worldwide. The university currently ranked number one in the world is located in the United States at Massachusetts Institute of Technology with two more schools in the top 5 and twenty more in the top 100 in the world (*ArchDaily*, 2016).

With the architectural field being so popular and widely accepted in the United States, it is easy to see how this occupation was one that translated easily. It is an occupation close enough to an artist to carry the romanticism but still sensible enough. Students from Korea even travel abroad for studying architecture and design, and with the University of Tokyo currently ranked in the top 10 worldwide, it draws a large number of students (ICEF Monitor, 2014).

The female counterparts however do not share the same occupations in both movies. In *Il Mare*, Eunju works as a voiceover artist. Her character's choice of work plays an important part in bringing about the breakup of her relationship which is the catalyst for her leaving behind the message to the next tenant of the house asking for any mail to be forwarded to her. She allows Jihoon, her old boyfriend, to go abroad for study without her because she feels she has to stay and keep her present job. Voiceover actor is an interesting choice for her character in the Korean version. There are images this immediately brings to mind: those of not needing to be a person in the light, or even necessarily attractive, as well as a sense of it being a special occupation.

Finding work as a voiceover artist is not easy in South Korea. Keeping a job in voice over is also no simple task. The field has grown in recent years with work being created beyond movies and television with the need brought about by the large video game industry located in South Korea. She was already working and apparently this was her dream job and the one she had trained in order to get. It would not be easy to replace that job, nor to get this job back had she left for even a short length of time. Eunju did not want Jihoon to leave without her, but she felt her job was important. She also had assurances from him that he would return for her. Not putting everything else aside and following your man is a very modern Korean woman thing to do. While males have traditionally left their families, even a wife and young children, behind in order to further their careers, the family staying behind was usually necessitated by the difficulties and expenses of travelling together (Rudy, 2010).

This movie was made nearly 10 years ago, but gender equality and the harsh reality of high expectations for women employees is still an ongoing problem. As recently as July of 2016 Jayeon Kim, a young woman voice over artist in South Korea, was fired merely for posting on a social media site a picture of herself wearing a t-shirt with a feminist message printed on it (Jusino, 2016). Eunju was in no position to leave her job and follow Jihoon if she had any hope of continuing her career. While most Korean women are expected to do this, Eunju not doing it, and having a solid reason for not doing so, resonated with younger audiences in South Korea.

In *The Lake House*, Kate's profession is in the medical field as a doctor. Although she did not stay behind and lose the man she was involved with at the time, being a doctor is a very demanding job. Doctors are held in much higher esteem in the west, particularly in the United States (Beauvoir, 1949). The study necessary is lengthy, and the training and hours grueling. It is not for the normal person, man or woman. For a woman to succeed, and excel, as Kate had is seen as a source of pride.

Who Kate is as a person, how she views herself, is anchored in the identity provided by her profession.

This is not dissimilar to Eunju, but the view of a voiceover artist is not as lofty. It is seen as an interesting, and desirable, job by some, but it is not one that requires physical presence in the United States. Voiceover artists often keep strange hours, work from home, or do massive amounts of work in a short time and then wait for the next jobs to come in much the same way as regular actors do.

Being a doctor is still seen as one of the most prestigious and self-less occupations in the United States. In 2016, 18 of the top 25 most desirable jobs in the US were in the medical field (Snider, 2016). Being a doctor is seen as both respectable and profitable without being a selfish choice. Had Kate had a job in a lower level of medicine or medical care, it might have been difficult for her to place her career above her relationship in the eyes of movie goers. Being a doctor puts her above that reproach as does her reason for becoming one: because her father had died while she was young, she had wanted to be a doctor to help save lives.

Section V: Relationships

In *The Lake House* both Kate and Alex are without their fathers, but their relationships with their respective fathers are very different. However, both are motivated to do what they do in and with their lives by those relationships. Kate's father's illness inspired her to be a doctor and drove her to be dedicated more to her work than her own personal life and happiness. She in fact derived much of her happiness and feelings of fulfillment through doing her work as a doctor. Alex, as did Seonghyun, had a difficult and strained relationship with his father. This does not lessen the attempt to find a way to overcome this through their work though. This is one cultural event that translates well: sons are often struggling due to their shortcomings or perceived shortcomings as seen by themselves or fathers.

The relationships and portrayals of the minor characters are decidedly different in both versions of the movie. In *Il Mare* we see Eunju seeking out the counsel of her friend, another young and single woman, who she had been friends with since childhood. This friend was also employed in an industry outside of the stereotypical roles for women employment in Korea as she was a shop worker in a manga shop. It is unclear if this is a family business, but it is clear that it is a job she chose and is dedicated to. Kate's confidant role is filled by her mother. While Korean women might look to their mothers for advice, it is unlikely they would do so over a relationship. Kate's mother is also a doctor. This provides them an even stronger basis for understanding each other and being important though not overwhelming parts of each other's lives.

Seonghyun is perhaps the most isolated and lonely character in either of the movies. His relationships are

only seen through his attempts to understand and reconcile with his father with no one person with which to seek counsel. Particularly in *The Lake House*, the characters are older, mature professional adults portrayed as at least around 40 years of age, who are very isolated due to their careers and life choices. Still, they have relationships that connect them to other people and those are real relationships. Seonghyun is depicted as essentially being totally alone. This provides a basis for better understanding and accepting his character.

Alex on the other hand has as his supporting character his younger brother. This is an interesting choice for a number of reasons. Korean males are much more likely to have an older brother as their mentor and advisor. It would not be seen as acceptable to seek advice from a younger brother. Alex and his relationship with his younger brother is not one of counsel, but the younger brother is in a position to offer commentary and advice, whether his older brother accepts or acts upon it, because of their closeness and his firsthand understanding of Alex's situation.

Conclusion

So we can see that while both movies kept several key points and elements of the story in place, there are some important differences. These differences are essential in whether the new audience and culture will both understand and accept these premises, time travelling mail messages aside.

The changes of location and relationships of minor supporting characters though seemingly small are essential to the movie being translatable to a western audience. They are the small things that might bother an audience without their ever quite knowing at a conscious level what that problem might be. These are very subtle, but astute, changes which were necessary to the success of the movie.

The time change of moving from Christmas to Valentine's Day might seem unnecessary, and perhaps would have been acceptable to the western audience though surely the reverse would not have been understood had *Il Mare* chose Valentine's Day.

Although they are quite different and noticeable, the roles of Eunju and Kate and their occupations are the most important changes made and essential to whether this movie's story would be acceptable to a western audience. The role of a voiceover artist would never have been acceptable as a reason to not follow a partner if one were committed to a relationship. This would have clearly shown that both Kate and Morgan were just not meant for each other and both should move on with their lives. In both movies, their respective audiences quickly grasped the difficulties facing both couples, and this was very heavily

influenced by their chosen occupations.

Neither movie ever makes even the remotest attempt to explain the magic of the mailbox. It is, in the end, of no real importance. Both movies share and convey their main theme well: true love will not be restricted even by the greatest force of nature, time. This is an accepted trope in western Hollywood, but it is a sign of a new romantic theme for Korea and the future of Korean romantic dramas.

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