

Covid-19 and the Understanding of Illnesses in Urban Korean *Musok*

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Introduction

IN JULY 2020, at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic anxiety, Yi Hae-gyŏng performed on the well-respected stage of Korea's national theatre. Yi is a *manshin*, a Korean spiritual mediator practising spirit possession, and the performance was an innovative version of *kut*, a ritual performed by *manshin* to seek blessing and healing through supernatural interventions.¹ The performance seamlessly blended traditional dance and song, accompanied by three large screens projecting images captured during the ritual. On these screens, the practitioner appeared in complete ritual attire, engaging in a song and dance sequence while beseeching the gods for the healing of individuals as the nation grappled with the Covid-19 outbreak.

The performance emerged as an artistic collaboration between a renowned photographer and a religious healer celebrated for her proficiency in executing intricate traditional rituals. Yi identifies herself as a traditional spiritual mediator and healer, indicating that she has undergone initiation and apprenticeship under a formidable mentor, or *shinŏmŏni* (spirit mother). Since the 1990s, much of her time has been dedicated to divining the future and asking gods for good health, prosperity, blessings of business ventures, new homes and marriages. Possessing the knowledge to prepare and perform various types of rituals, she is also capable of identifying and initiating novices into the Korean practice of *musok*.² Despite

¹ All translations and transliterations from Korean to English are mine. I use the McCune-Reischauer transliteration system, adding a comma between syllables of first names, and using shi instead of si to facilitate proper pronunciation.

² The term *musok* reflects a variety of spiritual practices, some including possession, while others do not. Although it has often been translated as *shamanism*, I avoid this term here as it is too inclusive and generalised. It is also worth noting that the term *musok* originated during the colonial period and thus even this common term is laden with value judgement (for more on this debate see Sarfati (2021),

her traditional roots, Yi sees no conflict in embracing the intersection of cameras and innovative ritual forms. She perceives her active participation in this fusion of performance art, video art and ritual as both efficacious and crucial during the times of the pandemic. Moreover, she used one of the photos documenting the event as her Facebook profile image.

While public performances for the common good have been documented in Korea's pre-modern monarchy and increasingly since the 1980s (Robinson 1993; Kendall 2009), the global Covid-19 pandemic incorporated more extensively the usage of digital media in covering these performances and inviting screen-mediated audiences. During 2020–2, restrictions on gatherings in enclosed spaces prevented many individuals from conducting private rituals. Yi, too, refrained from the crowded settings typical of the ceremonies she used to lead before the pandemic. This event presented an opportunity to showcase her skills on stage with a minimal number of participants while still reaching a vast audience through mediated means.

The event was streamed live on YouTube for a duration of 70 minutes under the title 'A New Kut Stage Performance' (*kut sŭt'ejŭ*). One of the primary objectives of this performance was to seek blessings from the spirit of the War General (Changgun) during the global pandemic. Throughout the ritual, various spirits and gods manifested through the performer, including Sanshin (the mountain god), renowned for his merciful and benevolent nature with healing capabilities. Additionally, spirits of deceased ancestors and ghosts, believed to require constant appeasement and veneration to ward off illnesses and disasters, were also invoked. This would be a common assemblage of venerated entities in any healing *kut* ritual, but this time it was aimed at healing the whole nation and, as an extension, the whole global population suffering from the Covid-19 outbreak. The traditional role of *musok* as a means to control pandemics such as smallpox, which was frequent in pre-modern Korea, was re-enacted as will be discussed below.

This chapter addresses two key questions. The first explores the micro level concerning the ritual participants: Why did contemporary urbanites in South Korea seek such a spiritual blessing? The second delves into the macro-level organisational aspects that facilitated this innovative ritual during times of health-related national distress: Why did a government establishment, such as the national theatre, take the initiative to sponsor this event?

These questions, alongside related inquiries, form the foundation of my ethnographic exploration.³ To unravel how *musok* intersected with hypermodernity, modern biomedicine and the state during the pandemic, I explore three facets of

introduction). Each region in the Korean peninsula boasts a distinct ritual style meticulously studied and documented by devoted folklorists over the years (for example, Ch'oe 1978, 1981, 1991).

³ I began my ethnographic observations and interviews in Korea in 2005 and have since visited there regularly and lived in Seoul for periods between weeks and years. During these fieldwork sessions I participated in many *kut* rituals, interviewed *manshin* and clients, spent time with them in their daily activities, ritual preparations and pilgrimages, and frequented several *musok* goods stores (see Sarfati 2021, 2023, 2024).

these intricate relationships. Initially, I delve into the *musok* perspective on illness and its interpretation of the surge in Covid-19 cases. Subsequently, I examine preventive methods offered by *musok*, and finally, I explore *musok*'s perception of the healing potential inherent in spiritual mediation.

These three aspects illustrate, in various ways, that in Korea the *musok* understanding of illness places it within diverse manifestations of disharmony between people and supernatural entities. In this respect it can be discussed as a vernacular religion in which healing is an important aspect or as a healing system, which has spiritual and religious bases. In conclusion, I posit that even during the Covid-19 pandemic, *musok* has been generally perceived in Korea as a distinct realm of practice, seemingly unrelated to modern medicine. However, *manshin* do not insist on exclusivity from their patients. On the contrary, they actively encourage collaborative treatment approaches, in which rituals address the spiritual causes of illness, while biomedical doctors attend to its physical manifestations. Therefore, they were advocates of vaccination and medical attention to the virus, alongside veneration activities to enhance better healing through blessings from gods and spirits. Yi, mentioned above, posted on her Facebook page direct encouragements to take the vaccines throughout the pandemic.

Thus, while in pre-modern Korea the main epistemic framework explaining illness and healing was based on spiritual afflictions, the advent of biomedicine in the 19th century created a sphere of competing explanations and treatments that managed to co-exist because they served different purposes. As will be explained below, the *musok* perspective detects the spiritual vulnerability of a particular person or family which allows the illness to affect them, while the biomedical explanation details the physical aspects of the patient's condition. Biomedicine has also competed with traditional herbal and mineral medicines prescribed by vernacular healers and Buddhist priests, which are still popular in contemporary Korea. These different healing practices are not viewed as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary. Both physical and spiritual aspects of the illness should be treated to reach full recovery, and ancient local healing methods can be combined with scientific ones.

Korean *musok* intersections with hypermodernity and modern biomedicine

First, it is crucial to acknowledge the active and vibrant presence of *musok* in contemporary urban South Korea. *Musok*'s mystical worldview, with an ancient cosmology and a complex belief system and associated practices, did not experience a revival solely to offer hope amid the Covid-19 health anxiety. Rather, it has sustained a broad base of followers into the 21st century (Kendall 2009; Sarfati 2021), extensively documented since the early 20th century (Akamatsu and Akiba 1938; Ch'oe 1978; Kendall 1988). *Musok*, viewed as a women's practice given

that around 80 per cent of the *manshin* are female, has survived persecution by the (mostly male) neo-Confucian monarchy in the 14th–19th centuries and disapproval by the monotheistic Christian churches that became prevalent in Korea, with around 30 per cent of the population adhering to it today. This success through decades of marginalisation has been assisted by the vernacular nature of this belief system and practice, which has allowed it to incorporate new terminologies and adjust ritual procedures to align with the hypermodern lifestyle of individuals residing in 21st-century Seoul.

Hypermodern lives have been characterised by fast communication, innovative technologies, excessive consumption and increased manifestations of spectacle in social life (Gottschalk 2018). These characteristics fit the *musok* culture as it increasingly involves digital communication; it has become a part of consumer culture through online advertising and purchase options; and has always been based on sumptuous altars, lively performances and materially laden ritual spectacles (Sarfati 2021, introduction).

The thriving of *musok* in Korea was emphasised on 28 March 2023, in the opening statement of an article published in the mainstream newspaper, *The Korea Herald*:

In [the opening scene of] episode 15 of [the] Netflix's drama series 'The Glory,' the shaman [*manshin*], who is involved in the antagonist Park Yeon-jin's shady family business, suddenly drops dead in the middle of performing a ritual, leaving viewers bewildered by the sudden plot twist involving a supernatural scene. Shamanism [spiritual mediation] may appear out of place in a modern-day revenge thriller, but superstitions and shamanistic practices are not far removed from the daily lives of many Koreans, even in their tech-savvy and fast-paced world.

(Jung 2023)

Indeed, many contemporary urbanite Koreans do not perceive a conflict between this ancient belief system and contemporaneous perspectives, and the incorporation of such scenes in Korean television programmes, dramas and in films has become commonplace. Moreover, these rituals offer a spectacle that can be captured beautifully through cinematic strategies and therefore have become a common feature in many Korean films and television programmes, fostering broad awareness of the availability of this healing method (Sarfati 2021).

Musok, literally meaning the customs of spiritual mediation, is the Korean term for a broad spectrum of spiritual practices. In these practices, communication occurs between people and supernatural entities through a specialised spiritual mediator. In cases involving spirit possession by *manshin*, the communication is bidirectional, as the mediator embodies spirits and gods, conveying their words. A hereditary version of *musok* (*sesŭpmu*), which does not involve possession by supernatural entities, has been declining in recent decades (Mills 2007). *Musok* is employed to address a wide array of issues, with healing diseases being just one aspect. Other misfortunes such as bankruptcy, family strife and accidents are also addressed through these practices.

To undergo initiation, every *manshin* must successfully engage in direct communication with gods, spirits and ancestors in a practice known as ‘opening the gate of words’ (Bruno 2002). This direct communication takes place through spirit possession, during which the *manshin* invites specific spirits into her body. While embodying the supernatural, the *manshin*’s apprentices and assistants question her about the clients and the supernatural origins of their afflictions.

Shinbyŏng is a unique illness associated with *musok*. It is caused by spirits or gods demanding that an individual becomes their venerator by becoming a *manshin*. All the *manshin* I am acquainted with have undergone *shinbyŏng*. Many of them had limited knowledge about *musok* before being identified as destined to be *manshin*. Such destiny is revealed through dreams, visions and various kinds of ailments, which are perceived as sent by supernatural entities who try to signal this destiny to the *shinbyŏng* patient. The symptoms vary, but their cause is an attempt to draw the person’s attention to the required choice of a *manshin* vocation. Typically, these patients sought out a *manshin*’s assistance after years of unsuccessful biomedical treatments for various forms of suffering like joint pains, nightmares, psychiatric disorders, depression, severe headaches and cancer. Through experienced *manshin*, they learned that their ailments were ways in which the spirits sought to communicate their demand for daily veneration and possession during rituals. These supernatural entities particularly enjoy *kut* rituals, where they can be embodied in the *manshin*, partaking in activities like eating, drinking, dancing and enjoying celebrations in ways not possible without such embodiment. Healing *shinbyŏng* is believed to occur only if patients undergo an apprenticeship process.

Severe illness and near-death experiences consistently emerge as commonly cited signs of a shamanic calling across various cultures. In 1951, Mircea Eliade elucidated the significance of such experiences in the shamanic cultures he compared in his seminal work, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. He conveyed that the illness is typically severe, ‘but the future shaman is cured in the end, with the help of the same spirits that will later become his tutelaries and helpers’ (Eliade 2004: 28). While debates surround many aspects of his book, and some argue that its generalisations are overly broad, Korean scholars of *musok* have often cited it (for example, Ch’oe 1999). The notion of initiatory illness, and the idea that ‘the initiation of the candidate is equivalent to a cure’ (ibid.: 27), persists in contemporary ethnographies about shamans. Examples include Buryat culture (see Quijada 2011), Taiwan (see Liu 2021) and even Neo-shamanism in the UK (see Ivanescu and Berentzen 2020).

In Korea, a unique set of healing rituals is necessary when the patient has *shinbyŏng*. Healing this spirit-inflicted illness can only be achieved if the patient agrees to become a *manshin*. Several *kut* performed for this specific type of illness mark the gradual progress of the apprentice from being ill to becoming a healer. The peak of these rituals is the initiation ritual (*shin naerim kut*), after which the apprentice is declared a full-fledged *manshin*. *Shinbyŏng* occurs without the person’s desire to become a *manshin* (Sarfati 2020).

The ritual style practised in the screen-mediated ritual described above originated in the northern part of the Korean peninsula, specifically in the Hwanghae-do region, which is now located within the borders of the North Korean state (for more on this regional style, see Hong 2006). During the Korean War in 1951–3, many practitioners of this spirit mediation practice fled to the South due to concerns that the Northern communist regime might suppress their faith and venerational practices. In the South, they have flourished to the extent that they were showcased at the national theatre in 2020 during a period of national uncertainty.

The screen-mediated ritual by Yi Hae-gyŏng in 2020 shows how *musok* practitioners can opt to create an innovative form of ritual while keeping certain aspects of their traditional practices. In the Hwanghae-do *kut* that Yi performs, various spirits and gods are invited to enter the practitioner's body. A tangible manner to invite them and to symbolise their embodiment in the *manshin* is the *shinbok*, a unique outfit prepared for each deity. In the screen-staged ritual, Yi changed more than five *shinbok*, symbolising each time the current venerated deity. The outfits were very elaborate, colourful and uniquely Korean, serving also as a marker of heritage and national culture. Another aspect that the filmed ritual maintained was the unique *kut* music, which required several musicians to be on stage. On the innovative side, the photographer Kang Yŏng-ho was an active performer. Seated on a wheeled chair, he moved around Yi, photographing her from various angles and dancing with her. This video was portrayed on the huge screens behind, and the stage was filmed and broadcast live on YouTube, as well as being documented in the photographer's blog (Kang 2020). Yi insists that these innovations did not diminish the focus on the stated ritual intention to alleviate the pandemic's spread in Korea and neither did its efficacy decrease. This insistence stems from the *musok* perspective on illness and healing.

What constitutes illness in the *musok* perspective?

Musok practitioners in 21st-century Seoul embrace the foundational paradigms of modern medicine. They do not dispute the existence of germs and viruses, nor do they overlook the significance of biological genes and behavioural influences on health and sickness. All of these factors are collectively considered as reasons for the apparent symptoms of illness and disease, and they can be addressed through modern biomedical interventions.

However, a distinction arises in understanding why a specific individual succumbs to a particular disease, while another, with similar preconditions, remains unaffected. This distinction is attributed to the spiritual realm. In other words, the harmony or disharmony in the human–spirit relationship plays a crucial role. What a biomedical doctor might categorise as misfortune or mere coincidence finds a supernatural explanation in *musok*.

This episteme has remained pertinent in Korea and is accepted by the *manshin*'s patients. It has survived the urbanisation and modernisation processes by bridging the gaps in the biomedical explanation of illness. In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, *musok* explained cases where contemporary biomedicine could not account for why a certain patient became severely ill while others exposed to the same conditions did not. It was offered as a causal explanation where biomedicine had little assurance, and many accepted it. It is difficult to estimate the extent of belief in this tradition, but we know that more than 300,000 registered practitioners are listed in the largest professional association of *musok* in South Korea. Similarly, a *manshin* can attribute a car accident to the manipulation of a grudging spirit while acknowledging the driver's mistake. The *manshin*'s insight answers questions like why the driver made that specific mistake and why the accident resulted in severe injury or not. These are aspects perceived as outcomes influenced by the agency of spirits. Since such explanations do not delve into the actual symptoms but rather focus on the reasons for the spiritual weakness that allowed symptoms into the patient's body, these explanations do not compete with the biomedical account of the mechanism causing the physical damage to the body.

An example can help elucidate this relationship and its impact on a person's health. In a ritual I observed in July 2015 for a 65-year-old woman grappling with chronic muscle weakness, she sought the *manshin*'s assistance after multiple doctors informed her that there was no treatment available except for painkillers. During the ritual, the *manshin* became possessed by the spirit of a middle-aged woman who proclaimed herself as the biological mother of the patient. Despite the patient's protest, stating that her actual mother was still alive, albeit old and suffering from dementia, the woman possessing the *manshin*'s body insisted on being recognised as the mother.

According to the narrative unfolded by the spirit, she was the secret lover of the patient's father, both of them being married to other individuals. When she became pregnant, the patient's father insisted that the baby be raised in his official family with his wife registered as the mother. The biological mother agreed to this arrangement out of fear that the baby might appear markedly different from her actual husband, with whom she had been unable to conceive for several years. She informed her husband that the baby had died shortly after birth, received a lump sum of money, and agreed to sever ties with the lover and his family. During the ritual, the spirit expressed that her heart was shattered after leaving her newborn from the love affair. She passed away a few years later without having any other children. Now, she had returned as a ghost to visit her only child after feeling neglected and unacknowledged for many years.

The possessed *manshin* negotiated with the patient through the mediation of the younger apprentices present, and an agreement was reached. The patient committed to creating a small altar for the spirit of her purported biological mother and acquiring a special princess costume for the *manshin*'s collection. The costume would bear the embroidered name of the deceased ancestor. Whenever the *manshin*

danced in this costume, it would serve as an acknowledgement and appeasement for the spirit of the biological mother. The ritual concluded with the ceremonial departure of the ancestral spirit, separating her from her living daughter. The patient pledged to light incense for her every year at a mountain altar during the lunar harvest moon holiday (*Chusŏk*).

Did the patient truly believe that the woman she thought was her mother was, in fact, only her father's wife? Several friends who observed the ritual, seated on floor cushions beside me, speculated that she had always sensed resentment from her mother, potentially explaining their tense relationship since a young age. Given the mother's dementia and the deceased status of the father and his sisters, uncovering facts leading to the complete truth would prove challenging. Moreover, further investigation into the scandal might create strife in the family and eventually harm the woman who was so far considered a full-fledged daughter. Had the mother been alive or born other children, it might have some benefits to find the biological family, but given Korea's conservative society, more harm than benefit could be expected. After the ritual concluded, and the patient rejoined her friends, they embraced her, expressing hope that she felt better. While the patient expressed a similar sentiment, she did not sound entirely convinced. In subsequent meetings with the *manshin*, I learned that the patient had become a regular client, seeking divination and consultation every few months. According to the *manshin*, the woman experienced less pain since the ritual.

We could interpret this case through psychological explanations that focus on the problematic relationship between the client and her mother. However, for the suffering woman, the spiritual explanation played a role, and she was not obligated to fully embrace it in her thinking and feelings. For the *manshin*, proof of the ritual's success was reaching an agreement with the spirit rather than the daughter's acceptance of the story. The *manshin* express their devotion to the supernatural as central to their work more than satisfying their human clients. Thus, a typical *musok* diagnosis in a consultation with a *manshin* might attribute an illness to an angered ancestral spirit lingering around the person, seeking attention even in cases where the clients are reluctant to accept it. When ignored, the spirit might resort to extreme measures, such as causing illness or disasters like car crashes or fires, in an effort to gain recognition. Other potentially harmful spirits include those of the house or gods of natural elements attempting to convey a message. The *manshin* asserts that appeasing such spirits does not necessitate clients believing in their existence; performing veneration acts is deemed sufficient. Similarly, the *manshin* in Seoul offered their clients various veneration practices that could presumably prevent a severe Covid-19 infection, mostly performed without a face-to-face meeting. Some even created special online promotion campaigns for this purpose.

Acceptance of a modern biomedical perspective on illness does not contradict the *musok* viewpoint and therefore both beliefs can co-exist in one person's understanding of illness. It is more difficult for Christian Koreans to accept *musok* healers than for non-Christians to be clients of *manshin* and biomedical doctors

at the same time because the basic worldview of *musok* contradicts monotheism. Healing in *musok* is entwined in a religious belief system. The *manshin* often inquire whether their patients are undergoing modern medical treatment and, if not, encourage them to consult with a doctor. For example, an acquaintance who is a doctor asked me to connect a *manshin* with a cancer patient in the advanced stages of the illness seeking spiritual guidance, which the doctor did not deem potentially harmful.⁴ When I approached a *manshin* I knew and asked if she was willing to meet the cancer patient, she responded that he must first see a doctor. Only after she ensured serious medical treatment was in progress did she agree to provide spiritual consultation. She explained that when the body is severely afflicted, appeasing angry spirits may not suffice to reverse the damage already done, and biomedical treatment becomes necessary. Moreover, as explained above, it is believed that even with the most elaborate biomedical treatments the initiatory illness cannot be cured if one does not become a *manshin*.

In cases where illness is not considered initiatory, the ancient *musok* episteme perceives it as an uninvited guest (*sonnim*). The 'visit' can be concluded through rituals in which the spirit of the disease is invited to partake in a feast, ultimately persuading it to leave the patient's body. This perspective was also notable in the context of Covid-19, where the severity of illness among those infected was linked to their level of harmony with the world of spirits and gods. There is no reason to avoid biomedicine because if the angry spirits are appeased, they should support the healing of the body with any measure possible, including modern ones. The *manshin* believe that restoring harmony with the supernatural and also the blessing of biomedical procedures can both help mitigate the dangers of the illness. Consequently, traditional healing rituals (*pyŏng kut*) were extensively performed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

On 7 December 2022, when she endured a severe Covid-19 infection for two weeks, one of my *manshin* acquaintances shared photos of her positive Covid-19 test on Facebook and wrote, 'I was sick for six days, even though I took the booster shot. Omicron symptoms all began ... I was always proud of being with the gods, but maybe I did not pray enough.' She explained that she contracted the virus from one of her apprentices, but the question of supernatural protection was tied to the intensity of the symptoms she experienced. She believed these symptoms were the result of her insufficient veneration activity. Furthermore, several *manshin* told me in the summer of 2022 that the global pandemic is a distress signal expressed by the gods of nature due to immoral norms associated with neoliberalism, extreme capitalism and excessive consumption that disregard ecosystems. I have not heard *manshin* criticise biomedicine as part of the problem, but in several cases they expressed hopes for collaboration with doctors in the initial stages of the illnesses,

⁴ I was asked to keep this in full discretion since the patient was a well-known figure in the business world and someone perceived as rational science-oriented person. Thus, no further details can be supplied.

in a manner that might prevent the physical damage that usually happens during the extended periods that pass until clients come to see them. For most Koreans the *musok* treatment is viewed as the last resort, after biomedicine options have been explored. In the summers of 2023 and 2024, several *manshin* that I interviewed asserted that we have not achieved global harmony with the supernatural, and the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East were discussed as proof that much spiritual work is still needed. The engagements of *manshin* with current global concerns over human morality and responsibility have become widespread. Such discourses serve to demonstrate how *manshin* have adapted to hypermodern conditions, in contrast with those in Korea who view them as irrelevant remnants of ancient cultural trends.

How can illness be prevented in the *musok* perspective?

If illness arises from problematic relations with spirits of ancestors or gods of nature that created disharmony with the supernatural, then prevention can be achieved by appeasing these entities, hoping that they will not feel the need to make an uninvited ‘visit’ to the ritual sponsors. This does not imply that *manshin* avoid advising their patients to maintain a healthy lifestyle, make informed food choices and engage in regular exercise. All the *manshin* I have encountered view preventive modern biomedicine as a way to keep the body strong. They were not among the groups strongly opposing Covid-19 gathering restrictions, in contrast to several Christian denominations and new religious groups in Korea (Kin and Noh 2022).

In the *musok* worldview, when the body is weak, an angry spirit might easily inflict illness. Angry spirits can cause harm in various ways, not just through illness, and people need to be cautious in their daily interactions, even when making efforts to appease such harm-causing supernatural entities. For *manshin*, preventing illness is akin to averting other calamities. One must strive to maintain a safe environment both within the body and in the surrounding world. Additionally, ensuring that the spiritual aspects are secure can be achieved by consulting a *manshin*.

During a typical preventive consultation, the client usually meets the *manshin* either in her home shrine or downtown office. If the spirits are regularly appeased, there might not be a need for an elaborate full *kut* ritual, making the difference between a brief consultation costing a few hundred euros and a full-scale event costing thousands. In brief consultations, the central feature of the office is a large altar adorned with various depictions of gods and spirits in paintings and statues, alongside offerings ranging from durable jade candlesticks and paper flowers to biodegradable fruits, candies and hard liquor. For the *manshin*, these offerings constitute a daily preventive practice that safeguards both them and their clients.

Each morning, the *manshin* places fresh water on the altar, lights incense and offers prayers. If there are angry entities present, they might communicate their grievances through her, providing an opportunity for discussion on how to appease

them. The Covid-19 pandemic was a time of special caution for many of the *manshin* I know. They conducted their daily reverence with prayers for national and global health improvement and went on pilgrimages to the mountain to plead with Sanshin, the mountain god known for healing. The common perspective is that ‘the ancestors never kill a person outright, though they might send an illness that can result in death if not properly treated’ (Janelli and Janelli 1982: 161). Therefore, where calamities, such as a severe Covid-19 infection, occur, the *manshin* see their role as crucial in preventing the death of their clients.

Certain patients are deemed to be at special risk. These individuals are often those whose families have endured the loss of a child or a young unmarried person, particularly if the death resulted from violence. The spirits of those who passed away prematurely, without having the opportunity to leave offspring, are perceived as hungry and neglected (Janelli and Janelli 1982: 154). Unlike spirits whose descendants perform the traditional Confucian ancestor rites during major holidays, those without offspring are excluded from these customary rituals, as in Korea such veneration is typically the responsibility of the deceased’s sons. Consequently, spirits without children may feel hungry and linger around their siblings or parents, sensing exclusion from the festive observances.

If the *manshin* discovers that there has been a premature death in her client’s family, she may propose regular veneration of the spirit at her home shrine to mitigate any potential harm to the family. The client might contribute children’s clothes and toys to place on the *manshin*’s altar, attaching the name of the deceased to demonstrate to the spirit that it has not been forgotten. Some *manshin* engage in venerating the spirits of children during extended *kut* rituals, adopting childish voices and inviting audience members to participate in games. This form of veneration aims to pacify potential illnesses caused by spiritual unrest. Additionally, certain regional styles incorporate spirit weddings into their practices. In these ceremonies, they symbolically marry a deceased boy and girl to alleviate their loneliness, thus reducing the likelihood of frequent ‘visits’ to their living relatives.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, my *manshin* acquaintances reported that their workload did not decrease as might have been expected with people’s tendency to reduce their number of outings and their strong trust in the biomedical solutions to the pandemic; on the contrary, the general anxiety increased their workload, attesting to the prevailing perception that *musok* is efficacious in ontological aspects, that is, that *manshin* can really heal. To adapt to the circumstances, most *manshin* expanded their online divination methods, utilising platforms such as the KakaoTalk chat app and YouTube live video streaming. When Covid-19 restrictions were enforced, they conducted rituals without a live audience, broadcasting them to the sponsoring clients. Many sought assistance to cleanse their homes of restless spirits, fearing these spirits might be linked to severe Covid-19 cases. Others requested rituals to appease ancestors who might be upset due to the absence of customary gravesite visits and holiday festivities.

The new *kut* stage performance in the national theatre, discussed in the opening of the chapter, served as a preventive ritual for general blessing and protection. It was the responsibility of *musok* practitioners to maintain the spirits' contentment, preventing them from causing illnesses and other calamities. All the religious activities of the *manshin* are perceived as efforts to prevent illnesses of different kinds, some bodily, some mental and some social. *Manshin* describe their daily commitment to appeasing spirits as a constant endeavour. They engage in short prayers and offerings multiple times each day and remain vigilant for any irregularities in their surroundings, which may indicate spirits' dissatisfaction. Additionally, most *manshin* undertake pilgrimages to holy sites like mountains and seashores, where they regularly venerate their guardian spirits.

How is healing believed to be attained according to *musok*?

If illness is rooted in disharmony with the supernatural, and the gods of nature and spirits of ancestors are perceived as causal factors of illness, then when it strikes severely, this supernatural disharmony must be rectified. The supernatural entities are depicted anthropomorphically in sacred painting (*mushindo*) in the shrines and are also portrayed in statues. Communication and prayers are held daily in front of these depictions and the *manshin* attest that they also see them in dreams and visions. This visualisation helps when the healer needs to diagnose which entities have been aggravated, by whom and why. Subsequently, negotiations with the entities commence until an agreement is reached, and they promise to cease causing harm. All of this is accomplished through direct communication and embodiment of the entities.

The process begins with short consultation meetings where the cause of the problem is revealed. These consultations differ from preventive consultations as they are conducted with a clear problem at hand. The illness or disaster has already occurred, and the patient's condition requires repair. Patients would usually not visit a *manshin* unless they experienced severe afflictions, but during the Covid-19 pandemic, many sought the *manshin*'s help right when they were diagnosed, in line with the general feeling of despair and fear.

If there is a straightforward solution, such as resuming ancestral veneration rites neglected for several years, the *manshin*'s involvement in the process might conclude, and the treatment of physical symptoms can be left to biomedicine. However, if the *manshin* cannot identify the source of the problem in a brief meeting, she might prescribe an extensive *kut* ritual. *Kut* events used to extend over several days and nights until the 1980s, but due to Korea's rapid urbanisation, they are now typically condensed to a single day (Kendall 2009: 108, 113, 125). The sequence of each ritual is meticulously planned based on the specific issue at hand. In the aforementioned *pyŏng kut* for healing, the *manshin* calls upon gods known for their benevolence and mercifulness, such as Sanshin (the mountain god)

and Ch'ilsŏng (the spirit of the constellation Ursa Major). Conversely, a ritual for economic prosperity venerates more extensively spirits of historical generals and government officials recognised for their courage and manipulateness.

Rituals aimed at peacefully guiding the deceased to the afterworld specifically invoke the spirits they intend to aid, along with the spirits of deceased *manshin*, historical kings and government officials, and warrior generals. All these spirits play a role in persuading the departed to sever their connections with their living relatives. The ritual for sending the dead varies in name across regions; for instance, *tari kut* is the term used in P'yŏngan pukdo, an area now situated in the North Korean state. The distinctions in the ritual's purpose are evident in its structure, texts and offerings. When the reason for the illness is diagnosed as an ancestor who has not passed peacefully to the afterworld, the healing *kut* is combined with sending off the dead.

Each *kut* is divided into several parts (*kori*), each associated with a different kind of possession sequence. Every *kut* commences with cleansing the space of any harmful influences and arranging small altars around the ritual area for hungry spirits who might arrive uninvited upon hearing the music and song. On these altars, the *manshin* places small amounts of rice cakes, fruit, water, meat, rice wine (*makkŏlli*) and other delicacies. This spirit-nourishing aspect plays a crucial role in the efficacy of the ritual and is conducted with utmost seriousness, typically before the arrival of patients, clients, musicians and other participants. Within the primary shrine, there stands a large altar adorned with additional delicacies, along with paper-cut decorations and flowers. These serve as offerings for the gods and spirits who will be summoned to partake in the festivities together with humans, and are a reflection of their anthropomorphous nature.

Most *kori* in the possession-centred *kut* rituals involve the recitation of myths, the invitation of spirits to possess the *manshin*, and a possession trance where divination, negotiation and blessings are exchanged between supernatural entities and the *manshin*. Some scholars have debated whether these performances include a real embodiment of supernatural entities and trance (Kendall 2009: 207 n.3). I use *possession trance* here as the emic meaning conveyed by my *manshin* interlocutors. They are always cautious when angry spirits are reluctant to leave and offer further promises and entertainment. Therefore, the final stage of the rituals is crucial because when the spirits bid farewell, it means having accomplished the intended goal. This does not necessarily imply that the patient is fully healed; rather, it indicates that the spiritual reasons for the affliction and the severity of the disease have been addressed. Physical symptoms might take a while to heal.

According to modern biomedicine, symptoms are linked to the body, and healing can only be achieved when the body undergoes specific manipulations, either through physical interventions or the introduction of chemical substances. In contemporary *musok*, the healing process can sometimes be conducted without the physical presence of the client because it does not exclusively target the body. While many patients personally meet the *manshin*, communication can also occur

through phone calls, online platforms or even through personal artefacts like undergarments. The *manshin* utilises these methods to inform the spirits and gods about the identity of the patient she is treating. The supernatural entities can provide information about the issue that led to the ailment even without the person being physically present in the ritual space.

The increasingly prevalent use of screen-mediated rituals in Seoul is facilitated by the understanding in *musok* cosmology that there is no specific permanent location where a spirit or god resides, enabling their influence to extend everywhere. The *manshin* attest that pilgrimages to places of special supernatural connection, such as mountain tops and gravesites, are not necessary in every case, since the entities communicate with the *manshin* everywhere, even when the practitioners travel abroad. The ritual's purpose and the patient's condition determine the proper spiritual handling of the situation. This characteristic of *musok* belief has enabled the continuity of *kut* performances even during the most stringent stages of Covid-19 restrictions, with small-scale *kut* in sacred outdoor sites or a video conference meeting. Patients were not obligated to leave their homes, and large gatherings were not a prerequisite for conducting the healing spiritual mediation.

Sometimes the conclusion of a ritual was that the client had to perform acts of veneration in person, but these could be carried out in various open-air places, such as mountains, ancestral gravesites or beaches. The essential ritual guests, without whom no healing can be achieved, are supernatural entities, and they were not regulated by the Covid-19 restrictions of the Korean Ministry of Health.

During the ritual, several procedures are performed to check the efficacy of the veneration acts and to verify that certain spirits have been appeased. The most common one seen in Seoul involves throwing a pair of knives near the shrine's door. When both knives point outwards, it means that the spirits have been pleased. Otherwise, more rites are performed, and then the knives are thrown again. This process can be repeated as long as needed until the *manshin* is sure that the offerings have been accepted. These acts were common in rituals before the pandemic and continued to be practised as a means to verify supernatural satisfaction and promise of healing. The main difference was the absence of the clients in the actual ritual space.

Another common method of assessing the success of the ritual involves sacrificial animals, such as pigs and cows. These animals are often balanced on a large trident stuck in a small bag of uncooked rice. Balancing the entire pig's carcass can take several attempts, accompanied by song, chanting and prayers. If the process takes too long, the *manshin* encourages the clients to make promises to the spirits, which may involve buying more food or ritual goods. To fulfil these promises, clients place money bills on the pig's skin or in its mouth, rub their hands in supplication and bow. Balancing the pig should be achieved within 15 minutes or half an hour. The *manshin* leaves the pig on the trident without touching it for a few minutes to ensure it works and then hits it with a stick until it falls.

Post-Covid-19 *musok*

The explanations provided by the *manshin* for the Covid-19 pandemic are reminiscent of pre-modern interpretations of smallpox, known as *hogu pyölsöng* (spirit of illness) for male spirits and *hogu aegisshi* (girl spirit of illness) for female spirits. The disease was colloquially referred to as *sonnim* (the guest) and was traditionally expelled through exorcism and celebratory rituals. These spirits were often associated with young individuals who had succumbed to illness (Kim 1993). Similarly, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, many *manshin* engaged in preventive purification rituals and sought to pacify potentially irate spirits that posed increased risks to individuals exposed to the virus.

State-sponsored rituals intertwined traditional arts and religious practices, with museums and theatres accentuating the artistic value of Korean heritage, while *manshin* placed precedence on their spiritual beliefs. Since the 1990s, being sponsored by the government or local council through the intangible human asset system has become a sought-after nomination by successful *manshin* since it boosts their potential client base and increases their public legitimacy (Howard 1998). The sponsoring organisations relied on the recognised definition of *musok* as a national heritage. This classification has been prevalent since the 1960s for several traditional arts, and from the 1980s the government started designating *manshin* as Intangible National Heritage Holders (*ingan munhwajae*). This title mandated them to train younger performers in *musok* song and dance. However, inclusion in the sponsored folk arts repertoire of Korea does not necessarily imply official acceptance of the religious episteme related to illness. Innovative technology has allowed many *manshin* who are not designated officially as ‘human assets’ to achieve fame and success. Online live broadcasts allowed audiences to participate for various reasons, and for laypeople, there was no obligation to subscribe to beliefs in the appeased spirits.

Tensions between the national health system and privately sought spiritual healing in Korea have antecedents in pre-modern conflicts between the ruling male neo-Confucian scholars and the mostly female *manshin*. While Confucianism emphasises order and hierarchy, *musok* veneration is vernacular, and therefore less regulated. Each *manshin* has a different pantheon that derives from her initiatory process, her family history and place of residence and worship. The series of gods and spirits that she venerates do not adhere to a fixed hierarchy; rather, for each case, the relative importance of certain entities is determined according to healing needs. In the early 20th century, this characteristic of *musok* was called *parallelism* by the famous folklorist Yim Sök-jae, and this terminology has recently returned to research elaborations on this belief system (Kwön 2023). *Manshin* have been viewed by the male elites as subversive both in their epistemology and their practices because of their flexible interpretations of serious life-related issues. For Christian Koreans, the polytheistic nature of *musok* is unacceptable.

Similar disdain has been expressed by biomedical doctors who prefer a clear definition of illness, one that does not change according to each client's spiritual condition. This stigma against *manshin* began during early encounters of Koreans with Western medicine in the early 20th century when politicians and newspapers claimed that *manshin* did not understand science. 'Indigenous female health practices were de-legitimized through a modernizing discourse to advocate newly institutionalized practices and products' (Hwang 2012: 49–50). Thus, the conflicts then and now do not stem from a clear-cut distinction between the efficacy of different healing methods but more from the subversive nature of *musok*. The practitioners are mostly independent in their decision-making process, and their acts cannot be verified in a generalisable scientific manner. Moreover, their education to be healers does not have an official script or fixed stages; rather, it is achieved through another inspired healer, the spirit mother, who is also independent of regulations and institutions. For some scientific-oriented Koreans, such individualised healing treatments seemed especially dangerous amid the general anxiety of the pandemic. Others embraced it as a reassuring tradition.

For the *manshin*, the pandemic became a defining moment in their profession, despite scepticism in parts of the medical community. Additionally, it facilitated more integration of screen technology as a substitute for face-to-face meetings. This shift proved convenient for clients who preferred to keep their consultations with the *manshin* confidential, such as professed Christians, and for those residing far from their preferred healer. Some *manshin* with young children mentioned that it was particularly advantageous, as maintaining an orderly home shrine for clients to visit was challenging. A brief Zoom session could be more manageable in a crowded home. While screen-mediated consultations and rituals had been utilised for several years prior to the pandemic, they were not favoured by all practitioners and were less commonly used for elderly clients. However, with the perception of the Covid-19 virus as particularly dangerous for the elderly, these clients began to accept screen-mediated *musok* healing and divination out of fear of encountering many people outside their homes.

The Covid-19 restrictions served as a catalyst for obtaining ritual artefacts through telephone orders from *musok* goods stores. Even before the pandemic restrictions, the dense traffic in Seoul had compelled *manshin* to rely on telephone orders for costumes, *pujök* amulets, decorations, brass bells and paintings of gods. However, each *manshin* has a preferred store where she has established a trusted relationship with the owner and can stay informed about the latest gossip in the field. These store owners are aware, for instance, when a spirit mother quarrels with apprentices to the extent that they leave her group, or when a *manshin* receives a special honour such as a government title as an Intangible Culture Holder. I have spent many days in such stores, learning a great deal about the politics of various performance teams. Nevertheless, when face-to-face meetings with the store owner were not possible, the *manshin* were confident that by explaining what they needed, the ritual props would safely arrive at their shrine through a delivery service.

The pandemic did not significantly integrate marginalised knowledge and the *musok* epistemology of illness into national health strategies, and biomedicine is still the most practised healing method in contemporary Korea. Instead, *musok* was utilised to comfort people by performing a celebrated uniting heritage, and perhaps, for the genuine believers, by appeasing angry spirits and gods to achieve harmony with the supernatural. The *manshin* who perform on stages and broadcast their rituals on television or YouTube channels assert that gods and spirits are pleased with these innovations because they appreciate human attention in various forms. The most noteworthy innovation that the post-Covid-19 *musok* world is experiencing is a greater reliance on screen-mediated divination, rituals and performances without an on-site audience.

Conclusion

In contrast to the biomedical understanding of illness, which centres on exploring the patient's body during diagnosis, the *musok* perspective focuses on the spirits and gods outside the patient's body that cause suffering. According to *musok* beliefs, illness shares similar causes with accidents and other problems, and healing occurs when the spirits and gods are appeased, restoring harmony. Bodily aches are considered symptoms of spiritual weakness.

This paradigmatic contrast leads university-trained doctors to criticise *manshin*, often dismissing their beliefs as superstitions. However, some patients assert that *manshin* treatments saved their lives, a sentiment shared by most *manshin* who found relief from spirit-inflicted illnesses that biomedical experts could not cure. *Manshin* apprenticeship and initiation were the only effective cures, according to their life narratives.

Thus, the two questions posed at the beginning of this chapter have been addressed. At the micro level, I demonstrated that contemporary urbanites in South Korea seek spiritual blessing and healing when biomedicine fails to help, and during times of anxiety, resorting to traditional beliefs becomes even more reassuring than in normal times. The *manshin* facilitate the maintenance of spiritual practices by adapting them to current concerns, such as avoiding large crowds during an infectious pandemic. At the macro level, the data has shown that organisations such as museums and theatres have embraced innovative screen-mediated ritual performances to assert national unity through artistic heritage displayed by the *manshin* while sidestepping the religious and spiritual implications of the ritual's healing capacities. Such acceptance by mainstream institutions decreased the public's fear of *manshin*, which has stemmed from their daily interactions with spirits of the dead. In several interviews I held in summer 2024 I learned that young people view *musok* as a fun practice, compared to its perception as scary by people over 50. This shift has also been visible in the recent media depictions of *manshin* as cute professionals who wish to help people in contrast with the scary mean

characters portrayed in the 1970s films (for a discussion of these image shifts see Sarfati 2021, chapter 3).

The success and expansion of *musok* healing practices in Korea should not be dismissed as superstition born of ignorance. In many cases, prioritising biomedical science may not be automatic; instead, biomedical doctors could consider collaborations, as seen in other cases discussed in the book, particularly in Brazil. In Seoul, where the biomedical system has been long established and is mostly government sponsored, it might be more problematic to combine traditional and scientific treatment, but other cases have shown this to be possible, for example, in the Navajo reserves in the US (Kunitz and Levy 1997: 119–20). Settling spiritual and familial unresolved grudges of the deceased can be crucial for patients' wellbeing, even if not provable through scientific tools. Diversifying healing options to include a broader range of choices could prove beneficial. For example, the healthcare system could enhance patients' ability to make personal healing choices by allocating funding to non-scientific treatments of their preference. Complementary epistemes of healing can exist side by side as seen in the Korean case. It should be beneficial to embrace such diversity when assessing the relative contribution of treatments to the wellbeing of patients and societies in times of health-related anxieties.

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