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# May the Gods Strike you Dead!

## Healing through Subversion in Shamanic Narratives

### Abstract

In Chosŏn 朝鮮 dynasty Korea (1392–1910), the introduction of the repressive Neo-Confucian ideology resulted in large sectors of society—particularly women and members of the lower classes—having their lives adversely affected. Whereas in the past shamanic practices provided the worldview and belief system that these people depended upon, the Neo-Confucian rulers of Chosŏn sought to eradicate those practices they deemed as superstitious. As a consequence of this oppression, subversive shamanic narratives appeared that, at least fictionally, overturned the injustices that the people suffered. This article will demonstrate that the propagation and performance of shamanic narratives provided an important outlet for the people to vent their displeasures, thus serving an essential function in the maintenance of the psychic health of the people.

**Keywords:** shamanism—shaman songs—*muga* 巫歌—dialogism—resistance literature—psychic healing

TRADITIONS OF THE SET of practices commonly grouped under the label of shamanism (*musok* 巫俗) in Korea have historically had diverse uses and functions. We often think, and rightly so, of shamanic ceremonies as religious rites designed to petition the shamanic pantheon for intervention on behalf of humans. There is, however, another and extremely important aspect of shamanic performances, and this centers on the psychological relief and healing that shamanic performances provide audiences. This amelioration is primarily permitted through the medium of narrative shamanic songs (*sōsa muga* 敘事巫歌), which offer audience members an outlet to release pent-up frustrations resulting from the hardships and difficulties they encounter in daily life. Through these songs, both audience members and performers can live vicariously through heroic protagonists and overcome such impediments as gender discrimination, social inequities, colonization, and destruction of indigenous belief systems.<sup>1</sup>

A significant aspect of any literature, and make no mistake, shaman songs are indeed literature, is providing its audience with release or temporary respite from the pressures of daily life. By entering into a book or the performance of a fictional work, humans are able to find solitude, entertainment, or escape. In literature, we can also discover models for life, alternative world-views, and the opportunity to live vicariously through the characters of a given work. In short, fiction, while providing us with escape, also becomes a “component of the individual’s emotional, psychic, and somatic life” (BOONE 1998, 1-2). Quite simply, we are very much a part of what we read and absorb as the audience of a fictional work.

Together with the bond that we share with fictional works, is fiction’s ability to sanction us to overcome and challenge those aspects of life that we perceive as unfair. Through the characters in a written or performed work, audience members can overturn injustices, raise a critical voice, or combat the oppression that they must contend with in daily life. By using our imagination, we can escape life’s problems through our surrogates in fictional works. The release realized by subverting the restrictions that impede our

lives is a vital part of our individual and the community's collective psychic health.

There are two basic means to subvert a repressive social code: directly, or through humor. Humor, as will be further discussed below, has long been utilized as a means to subvert and upend official ideologies and social precepts. Through laughter, people of all classes are able to cast off restrictive social codes and stifling belief systems; this was the case in Chosŏn 朝鮮 dynasty Korea (1392–1910) and it also holds true for contemporary South Korean society. Entertaining literature, such as some shamanic narratives, allows an escape, albeit momentarily, from the pressures of existence. Moreover, humor can have a subversive quality and thus allows for criticism of doctrines and social codes that result in the oppression of certain classes of people and their beliefs. This is due to the special nature of laughter: It cannot create dogmas nor be authoritarian, but rather provides a feeling of strength.<sup>2</sup> And this feeling of strength and solidarity allows members of the audience (in the case of an oral performance) or the reader (in the case of a written work) a momentary escape from life's problems.

In narratives that directly criticize the ruling ideology, the anger and frustrations of the oppressed are clearly voiced. These narratives are often-times, although not always, violent and reveal people near their breaking point. Yet, by listening to and partaking of these spectacles the people are able to gain a reprieve and at least psychologically throw off the fetters restricting their lives. Hence, these more blunt narratives function in a manner similar to their humorous counterparts. They provide the audience a chance to collectively vent their dissatisfaction, thus aiding the overall psychic well-being of the community.

This investigation will focus on subversive aspects found in shamanic narratives and the healing function that these provided in traditional society. I contend that the incendiary capacity of shaman songs allowed members of a given community a means to overcome the repression that many aspects of Chosŏn society presented them. While my study will primarily focus on the role of shamanic subversiveness in the Chosŏn period, there is little doubt that this tradition is still present in some contemporary Korean literature that has assumed the mantle of shamanic subversion.<sup>3</sup>

#### SHAMANIC NARRATIVES AND SUBVERSION

Literature represents much more than just a single writer's or composer group's worldview: It also represents the environment that spawned the literature. It is a part of the greater whole and a result of a constant interaction of meanings, all of which have the potential to condition other meanings. This negotiation of meaning and the dynamic nature of literature was termed dia-

logism by Mikhail BAKHTIN (1981). Bakhtin holds that literature is not a monologue, but rather, the work in question and its audience interact, constantly creating new meanings and interpretations. This is the voice or voices that the text or performance represents. I believe that an essential component of this interaction is allowing audiences to overcome and vanquish those elements of society that create problems in their lives. Literature is the ultimate cathartic exercise: By reading or viewing a literary performance, we can find the solace and comfort that allows us to live with the inequities—real or imagined—that plague our existence.

In the context of pre-modern Korea, we can clearly find the significance of catharsis in literature. Particularly, the Chosŏn dynasty was a period that saw Korean society undergo significant changes—especially, those wrought by the introduction of the expansive and repressive Neo-Confucian ideology (*sŏngnihak* 性理學). The desire of the Chosŏn government and members of the upper classes to transform society was immense. Accordingly, various educational, legal, and institutional changes were implemented. While this process took centuries to fully realize, by the late seventeenth century Chosŏn had been transformed to a Confucian country, at least on the surface.<sup>4</sup> Resultant from this alteration of the basic fabric of Chosŏn, significant numbers and classes of people had their beliefs and lifestyles pushed aside and banished to the margins of official society. Chief among those so marginalized were women, members of the lower classes, and adherents to belief systems such as Buddhism and shamanism. We should also be cognizant of the fact that members of the upper classes also found, at times, the need to escape from the rigorous discipline of Neo-Confucianism. It is on the narratives of these people—the disenfranchised and repressed—that this discussion will center.

We can understand the situation of many of the peoples of Chosŏn as being in opposition, at least partially, to the government and its Neo-Confucian ideology. As such, the culture that was maintained or spawned in the wake of this cultural invasion can be understood in terms of a resistance culture. While the theme of resistance culture is most commonly framed against a colonial or postcolonial backdrop,<sup>5</sup> it can, I believe, be extended and applied to a situation where one culture is being subordinated, repressed, and manipulated by another. Anti-colonial literature aims at national independence and does this by incorporating features of national cultures, such as folk tales, dramas, heroes, and heroines, all aimed at formulating “expressions and emotions of pride as well as defiance” (SAID 1993, 215). Likewise, the literature and culture of the oppressed classes of Chosŏn functioned in a similar manner and sought autonomy in worldview and lifestyle. Hence, we find expressions of pride and resistance, designed to allow both the composer and audience a

respite and psychological healing from the difficulties brought about by the enforcement of a new system of hegemonic cultural values.

Closely related to the concept of a resistance culture is that of an “unofficial” culture that exists in a binary relationship with the “official” culture. Mikhail BAKHTIN has proposed this dichotomic connection for Western European culture: an official society dominated by hierarchy and etiquette and an unofficial society that operated by a much freer set of rules (1984, 154). Yet, individuals were not confined to a single sphere of society, and the interaction of different classes of people in both official and unofficial society was (and is) characterized by fluidity and change depending upon time and place. In Chosŏn, unofficial culture allowed a brief reprieve from the demands of official culture. In turn, by permitting relaxation and enjoyment, the workings of unofficial society enabled individuals to exist under the strict Neo-Confucian ideology of official society. And as Clifford GEERTZ (1973, 406) has explained, these two cultures—dominant and subordinate—are equally well-rooted in the community. In pre-modern Korea, shamanic culture served as a major component of the suppressed, secondary culture to the officially sanctioned and exalted Neo-Confucian ideology.<sup>6</sup>

Why, then, did shamanic narratives need to subvert the official ideologies of Chosŏn? Clearly, one aspect of the indigenous culture that Neo-Confucian elites focused on controlling was shamanic practices. Numerous studies that detail the attempts by the Chosŏn government to eradicate shamanic practices leave little doubt that those who held this worldview were persecuted.<sup>7</sup> Yet, despite such efforts shamanism survived and even thrived at times during the late Chosŏn period. The success of the unofficial shamanic culture is found in several elements. First, it represented an important part of the people’s lives. Whether consciously or not, it was *the* tradition of the people. They learned it from their mothers and fathers, and passed it on to their children; as such, it was intricately bound to their lives. Second, it provided entertainment and relaxation. Listening to an oral narrative or watching a shamanic ritual was a communal and joyful event. Third, this culture allowed for the venting of frustrations and, at least vicariously, the overturning of unjust and repressive aspects of society. Fourth, shamanism also provided for the religious needs of the people.

In my examination I will first investigate the use of humor in some subversive narratives. I will then analyze narratives that directly criticize and attack the ruling powers. Narratives in the first category are far more common than the second, which is perhaps inevitable as direct condemnation of an authoritarian or despotic government is inherently dangerous. The manner in which shamanic songs aided psychic relief was by subverting the

official Neo-Confucian ideology. This was done by demonstrating the absurdity of Confucian concepts such as gender discrimination and inherent class superiority. Also, the creation of heroic protagonists allowed audience members an outlet for their frustrations or provided a voice to rail against the ruling ideology, thus allowing for a less contentious existence with the hegemonic social forces. By empowering the people, at least temporarily, these narratives, as the following will reveal, performed diverse functions and permitted healing of the collective psyche of the people.

#### SHAMANS AND SHAMAN SONGS

Before examining some specific narratives, it will be helpful to briefly examine both those who perform shamanic rituals and the ritual songs that are the focus of this paper.<sup>8</sup> The existence of what we can label as shamanic practices dates back to the earliest historical records concerning the ancient kingdoms on and around the Korean peninsula. From such accounts, we can posit that the earliest kings were akin to shaman-kings, responsible not only for the secular affairs of their domain, but also control of supernatural phenomena, such as assuring an abundant harvest and controlling the weather, and even purging the community of sickness.<sup>9</sup> Yet from this lofty and prestigious position the status of the shamanic worldview and its adherents would tumble to the lowest echelons of society. While this process would take centuries to complete, by the late Chosŏn period the upper class rulers held shamans and their rituals and religion in utter contempt. Nonetheless, the shamanic worldview continued to wield significant authority among members of the lower classes and women of all classes.

There are both hereditary and destined shamans in Korea. Up until the early part of the twentieth century, the shamans found in the southern half of the peninsula were largely of the hereditary variety and known as *sesŭp mudang* 世襲巫. Each shaman presided over a parish (*tan'gol p'an*) where they had exclusive right to practice. These shamans were mostly lowborn females who learned their trade from both their mother and, after marriage, mother-in-law.<sup>10</sup> The learning process would begin at a very young age at the girl's natal home and would continue after marriage at her husband's home. There she would learn the ritual processes and songs from her mother-in-law, and act as her assistant at the rituals. After a number of years serving as an apprentice, the daughter-in-law would gradually assume her mother-in-law's practice, first conducting the simpler rituals on her own before progressively undertaking the larger, major rituals.

Destined shamans (*kangsin mudang* 降神巫) are selected for their profession by gods of the shamanic pantheon through a sickness known as either *sinbyŏng* 神病 or *mubyŏng* 巫病. This condition results in symptoms

such as mysterious dreams, visual and auditory hallucinations, and abnormal behavior; after the onset of this condition, the only cure is believed to be conducting an initiation ritual (*naerim kut*), which inaugurates the one so afflicted into the ranks of the shamans.<sup>11</sup> Destined shamans, unlike their hereditary counterparts, are vested with direct power bestowed upon them by the gods. As such, they have certain innate abilities and knowledge concerning shamanic rituals, dances, and songs (KIM T'aegon 1983, 212-13). Nonetheless, the novice initiate still serves an apprenticeship under a senior shaman who further indoctrinates the fledgling shaman.

Simply put, shaman songs (*muga* 巫歌) are those songs performed by shamans in the course of conducting a shamanic ritual and designed for gaining the attention or favor of the gods. The songs address a broad gamut of human needs and wants, including petitioning the gods for longevity, abundance, fertility, health, expulsion of evil spirits, and rituals for the dead among many other purposes. Shaman songs are an essential part of every major shamanic ceremony (*kut*) and are present from the opening rites for purifying the ritual space to the closing rites purging the area of any lingering spirits that might have wandered into the environs during the ceremony.

While there are differences between the narrative songs performed by hereditary and destined shamans, a common element is the emphasis on regaling the gods. Rather than staid ceremony and solemn supplication, shamanic ceremonies are designed to entertain the supernatural realm and in this way move the gods to aid humans. A shamanic ceremony is a communal and joyful happening—complete with abundant food and drink—with much emphasis on laughter, playful jesting, and intercourse between the gods, shamans, and audience members. Shaman songs, while retaining an inherent religiosity, aid the overall jovial atmosphere of the ceremony by retelling entertaining tales which allow the audience members a chance to relax with one another.

A final point pertaining to shamans and their performances is the important function they filled among the folk of past times. While shamans may have been, for the most part, unlettered and perhaps ignorant of higher learning, they were considered important and knowledgeable among the common folk. Shamans could explain sickness, poor harvests, and bad luck in a manner that was accessible and understandable to others in their community. They functioned as not only spiritual leaders, but also as doctors, psychologists, counselors, and confidants.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, they suffered from the same afflictions and oppression that plagued others of the lower classes. Thus, the concerns of their clients were their concerns—the songs created, embellished, and transmitted by shamans reflect empathy and knowledge of the difficulties and worries of the common folk.

## HUMOROUS SUBVERSION IN SHAMANIC NARRATIVES

Various scholars have noted the process of shaman songs transforming from purely religious rites to entertaining works.<sup>13</sup> A few aspects of this evolution are pertinent to this paper. First, many scholars contend that this transformation initially took place in Chölla province 全羅道, where hereditary shamans were the rule. As these shamans were not endowed with charismatic power directly from the gods, they needed to perform rituals that were entertaining to the supernatural realm, for this is how they induced the gods to answer their petitions. Additionally, these songs needed to be entertaining to their secular audience because the shamans had to earn a living from their performances. Hence, while religiosity was inherent in these performances, so too was the need to entertain both sacred and secular audiences.

Second, the communal nature of shaman songs is noteworthy to our discussion. Similar to genres such as folksongs, legends, and tales retold by professional storytellers, the authorship of *muga* is not ascertainable and accordingly I use the term “composer group” to refer to the creative forces behind a given song. Songs were memorized and passed to the next generation, with audience interest weighing heavily in a song’s survivability. That is, songs culturally relevant to audiences were much more likely to be transmitted to subsequent generations than those songs not well received. This is not to say, however, that all performances of the same *muga* would be alike, as, aptly put by Boudewijn WALRAVEN (1998, 142), audiences would judge the performance of a given song like seasoned opera-goers appraising the merits of a singer. Individual performers would also modify songs to match the needs or interests of a given audience. Thus, while the basic plots of these narratives were passed from generation to generation, embellishment and performance theatrics would differ from performer to performer.

Third are the subversive qualities of *muga* that have permitted their performers and audiences to overcome what they viewed as oppression.<sup>14</sup> Especially salient are those types of oppression experienced by women, the primary audience of these narratives in past times; this is a manifestation of the dialogic nature of these songs and the interplay of the discourse between composer group and audience. Female audience members positively supported those songs that featured strong female protagonists. Thus, numerous *muga* tell, in part, of heroines that battle gender discrimination or sexual repression: *Pari kongju* (The Abandoned Princess)<sup>15</sup> and *Ch’iwöndaek Yangsanbok* (Ch’iwöndaek and Yangsanbok)<sup>16</sup> both feature strong female leads that grapple with the discriminatory practices of the Chosön period. The plot of *Chesök ponp’uri* (The Origin Song of Chesök)<sup>17</sup> revolves in part around systematic attempts to regulate the sexuality of the female protagonist by various males and her attempts to overcome these obstacles. Other narratives,



however, deal with issues that all members of the ruled classes suffered from, such as the abuses of the upper class described in *Changja p'uri* (The Tale of Mr. Chang).<sup>18</sup> Finally, many *muga* of Cheju Island 濟州島 address the people's disenchantment with the suppression and domination of their indigenous culture by that from the mainland. These songs seem a form of colonial literature and include narratives such as *Kwoenwoegit-dang ponp'uri* (The Origin Myth of the Iron-Box Baby), *Yech'on ponhyang-dang* 禮村本鄉堂 (The Shrine Myth of Yech'on) and *Kwangjǒng-dang* 廣靜堂 (The Myth of Kwangjǒng Shrine) among many others.<sup>19</sup> As we can see, there is a wide array of shamanic narratives that can be understood as a form of social criticism.

The combination of entertainment and criticism found in shamanic narratives is of primary interest in this section. While this humorous subversiveness is not only found in these songs, it is very prominent in this genre.<sup>20</sup> These songs are very much representative of the unofficial culture of Chosŏn and its struggle for hegemony with the official culture. Despite its marginalized and unofficial status, shamanic culture played an integral role in the daily workings of Chosŏn society. As such, we cannot pretend to examine or explain Chosŏn society without accounting for the impact and importance of shamanic tradition.

How was humorous subversiveness presented in these narratives? First, I will examine the abuses of the upper classes as described in *Changja p'uri*. The misdeeds of the corrupt and dissolute protagonist, Mr. Chang, are presented to the audience in a comic description:

In conducting ancestral rites for his deceased parents, he used money rather than buying goods;<sup>21</sup>  
 When loaning grain to others, he loaned with a small measure and received with a large measure;  
 He would loan money in the morning and demand repayment in the evening;  
 He sold rice mixed with sand, and water in place of soy sauce;  
 He gave only the outer leaves of kimchi to others;  
 He kicked pregnant dogs in their sides and threw the dredges of sesame seeds in drainage ditches;<sup>22</sup>  
 He put gourds on the kitchen table and sharpened knives on the kitchen hearth;<sup>23</sup>  
 He gave false information, causing local officials to chase after empty errands;  
 He would have a large ox brought to his field and then drive it off like a dog without even using it;<sup>24</sup>  
 He had so many sins that one cannot speak of them all.<sup>25</sup>

The above account describes serious complaints including usury and misuse of one's social position that undoubtedly caused the people great

difficulties. Along with these consequential protests, however, are comic offenses such as kicking pregnant dogs and sending government officials on wild goose chases. In this brief excerpt, we can see how humor was interspersed with gravity, creating a comic yet very serious list of protests. This farcical contempt is echoed in the nonsensical curses that the underworld messengers shower on Chang after being tricked by him:

You evil enemy! Bastard! Cold-hearted fiend! Scalded scoundrel!  
What kind of sins have you committed that we should receive such  
punishment?<sup>26</sup>

Notable here is that the unacceptable and abusive behavior of Chang did not go unnoticed by the gods. Ultimately, Chang was punished, doomed as a wandering ghost for all eternity. He managed to escape an immediate death, however, and dedicated the remainder of his mortal life to helping his fellow humans. This outcome reflects the wish of the lower classes for relief from the grief they endured in daily life.

There are two main themes in this narrative: First, that the abuses of the wealthy against the poor were innumerable; and second, that this type of exploitation would not be rectified by secular justice. The people's only hope was in supernatural intervention as demonstrated in *Changja p'uri*. The composer group of this narrative conveyed a reassuring message to their audience: The gods know of your troubles and in the end will redress your grievances. At the same time, humor allowed criticism of the ruling classes that might otherwise have been difficult or even dangerous to directly communicate. Listening to this narrative would have provided audience members and performers alike, a chance to release the anger that they may have experienced in the hardships they suffered at the hands of their upper-class tormentors.

Next, I will examine the gender discrimination and control of female sexuality as portrayed in *Ch'iwöndaek Yangsanbok*.<sup>27</sup> The "fact" of male superiority was an inherent and prominent aspect of the Neo-Confucian ideology that dominated the late Chosön period. Concepts such as *namjon yöbi* 男尊女卑 (men are exalted and women base) and the *ch'ilgö chiaḥ* 七去之惡 (seven grounds for the expulsion of a wife)<sup>28</sup> became highly important social codes used to maintain the strong patriarchal society of Chosön and degrade the status of women. It should be no surprise, then, that narratives propagated by women sought to overturn the misogynistic discourse promoted by the Neo-Confucian ideology.

Along with gender discrimination in Chosön were the many attempts—both legal and social—to control the sexuality of women. A chief factor in the need to regulate the sexuality of women in a patriarchal society

concerns the fact that male procreation is always in doubt, unlike that of a woman (MORRIS 1993, 20). Hence, we can characterize patriarchal societies such as Chosŏn by the vigilant controls on female sexuality. The desire to control the sexuality of another—in the case of *Ch'iwŏndae Yangsanbok* to separate the sexes—has been described by Michel FOUCAULT as resulting from “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” (1990, 45). The power exerted in controlling another’s sexuality is proportionate to the pleasure that is derived from doing so. Accordingly, the strict controls on sexuality in Chosŏn resulted in a tremendous amount of pleasure for those who were empowered to dominate the sexuality of others. There was, however, a natural aversion to conforming to unnatural restrictions on pleasure and this was manifested in various spheres including oral narratives.

Gender discrimination is quite evident in *Ch'iwŏndae Yangsanbok* as the mother of Ch'iwŏndae does not admit she gave birth to a girl, “but instead said that she had a son and had the child wear boy’s clothing and raised her as a boy.” Ch'iwŏndae is not suspected of being a girl until she reaches puberty and her body begins to change. Her playmate, Yangsanbok—a boy—surmises she is a girl and comes up with a series of comic tests to discover her true identity. The most humorous follows:

“Hey Ch'iwŏndae, let’s go to that wall, And bet on which of us can pee over it.”  
They did, but her stream of piss was so powerful that it easily went over the wall.

He could not discover if she was a boy or girl in this contest.

This scene proves Ch'iwŏndae to be an equal and worthy playmate of Yangsanbok. Furthermore, the amusing depiction of a urination contest is much in accord with the notion proposed by BAKHTIN (1984, 152–59) that links images of the lower body and its functions with the “language of the marketplace” (that is, the language of the common people). This language allowed a bypassing or overturning of the official discourse. Here, by holding up the image of a girl and boy engaging in a “peeing” contest, not only has the equality of the girl been established, but this also breached the prohibition on bringing matters concerning bodily functions into the public discourse (especially a discourse shared by the sexes). Moreover, the sexual nature of an urination contest cannot be denied either, and this aspect of the narrative also runs contrary to the Neo-Confucian ideal of separation of the sexes.<sup>30</sup>

The dialogic discourse in the above narrative demonstrates, however, that the composer group and audience desired to overcome these stifling controls and sought to admit the sexual nature of all humans. Moreover, the

naturalness of the relationship between Ch'iwöndae and Yangsanbok also indicates a keen understanding of the actualities of male-female relations by the composer group: Undoubtedly—despite an official discourse to the contrary—young boys and girls associated in a sexual manner.

At the close of the narrative, Yangsanbok falls in love with Ch'iwöndae and dies of lovesickness when separated from her (after her true gender is finally revealed). Her family then sends her off for an arranged marriage, but she only wants to be reunited with her love, Yangsanbok. On her way to the bridegroom's house—at a spot near the grave of Yangsanbok—she asks that her palanquin be stopped so she can urinate; she then cleaves Yangsanbok's burial mound with her hairpin and opens it, escapes from her bridegroom into the mound, and eventually ascends to the heavens together with her love on a rainbow.

The conclusion of the narrative seems to articulate the desire of the Chosŏn people for the freedom to follow one's heart in marriage or love. Doubtlessly, many of the women, and perhaps the men too, who either performed or attended this particular ritual were trapped in marriages of economics or necessity rather than love; this narrative seems to be an appeal for release from the domination that women suffered in terms of sexuality in Chosŏn. Yet the comic elements in the narrative create a story that would have been easier to share and less likely to have been censored by those in power. Additionally, the prominent role of urination in the narrative conjures forth the “unofficial” language of the common people, which is replete with rejection of the ruling ideology.

The narratives examined here are from diverse shamanic ceremonies performed for various religious reasons. Nonetheless, they share a strong criticism of some aspect of Chosŏn society, which has been masked with humor. I believe this is a primary function of shamanic narratives, as this dialogic engagement allowed the audience and composer-performers alike a temporary respite from the demands and inequities of daily life. The essential element that made this possible was the use of humorous subversiveness. It is also important to note that despite the fact that the narratives are critical of the upper class Neo-Confucian ideology, the audience would not have constituted only members of the lower classes. The need to escape the repressive aspects of Chosŏn society would have been felt by all its members at various times, and shamanic narratives would have provided one such outlet for relief.

#### VIOLENT SUBVERSION IN SHAMANIC NARRATIVES

There are also those narratives that do not use humor to subvert the ruling ideology and rather use direct criticism and intervention by supernatural

forces to rectify the wrongs and inequities of society. The dialogic discourse in these narratives appears to reflect the desperateness and helplessness of the people under the repression and burdens inflicted upon them by the ruling classes. Perhaps not surprisingly, these narratives seem to be chiefly found on Cheju Island and can be said to reflect the unique situation of the people there vis-à-vis the Korean peninsula.<sup>31</sup>

Let us briefly reexamine the qualities of resistance literature that serve to advocate, at least textually, violent means for again taking control of one's own destiny. Resistance literature, at least in one aspect, seeks to restore or revive the community that has been destroyed or is being fundamentally altered by a colonial power. Michael RYAN describes this process as to "confront the ghosts of one's culture, the ghost of the overseer and the ghost of the slave, as well as to remember what shouldn't be forgotten" (1999, 148). The process, however, can be much more than a simple confrontation of the master by the slave, as we will see in some shamanic narratives of Cheju Island. Consider, for example, the following narrative that tells of an arrogant government official (Hō Chwasu 許座首) who rides his horse through a funeral ritual, thus disrespecting both the gods and the spirit of the dead. Three shamanic shrine gods hunt down Hō:

"Are you Hō Chwasu? Don't you know me? I am the god of Kimnyōng Village!"

"And I am the god of Kwangjōng Shrine!"

"And I am the god of Yech'on. What kind of dishonor did you do to us?"

"Jail and punish him!"

After the order was given and the punishment meted out, Hō lost his senses.

Later the villagers came by and marveled at Hō's blood spread all about, exclaiming, "What is all this?"; there was no more military camp and no more governor. Hō's descendents all died off and his fortune was lost.<sup>32</sup>

The above narrative graphically demonstrates the people's desire to have their previous way of life restored and the repressive ideology and governing of Chosōn purged. While the people did not have the power to overthrow the government in reality, the resistant dialogic engagement allowed at least empathetic relief from the oppressiveness of official society. The deep-seated hatred of the people for the Chosōn overlords is seen in the violent and brutal punishments doled out in this narrative; the final lines describe how the grandchild of Hō was eaten by a snake, thus killing off all of his "seed."

Other shamanic narratives of Cheju demonstrate a similar desire for cessation from the persecution that the islanders suffered at the hands of the

Chosŏn overlords. Particularly, a common theme is the advent of a guardian deity leading a large contingent of divine troops to protect the island and its people.<sup>33</sup> The reoccurring motif of a guardian or protector for the island is indicative of the insecurity and vulnerability of the people's psyche; by honoring such a deity in a shamanic ritual, the people would have gained psychological security and relief.

A further example of the use of a more direct subversiveness is found in the Cheju Island narrative *Kodaejŏng ponp'uri* (The Origin Myth of Headman Ko).<sup>34</sup> This story tells of the religious persecution that Cheju Islanders suffered at the hands of the Neo-Confucian officials sent to their island to govern and bring Cheju—once an independent polity that was colonized by the Koryŏ 高麗 and Chosŏn dynasties—in line with Neo-Confucian social practices. The basic narrative line of this story tells of a newly appointed magistrate, Yi Hyŏngsang 李衡祥,<sup>35</sup> who burns down some five hundred temples and shrines upon his appointment, and then banishes the shamans to the countryside where they are forced to labor. Yi wishes to become even more powerful, and seeks out a powerful shaman surnamed Ko, and asks if he can summon the spirits on Yi's behalf. Ko states that he can but will need time to prepare spiritually. Ko returns to his shrine and recruits his fellow shamans to demonstrate the power of their religion. They gather in seven days and conjure forth legions of *chapkwŭi* 雜鬼 (minor demons):

The branches of a thousand year-old Chinese nettle tree let forth violent screams and were accompanied by a fierce gale.

Suddenly, legions of *chapkwŭi* began to swirl about in a huge cloud filling the space between heaven and earth. At that time, Magistrate Yi, clapped his hands together in appeal:

“Although it was by my hand that all the shrines outside of the city walls were burnt, the power of the gods remains inside the walls!”

The magistrate could not order the shrines burnt inside the city walls and fled the island.

This narrative voices some very serious complaints of the people about the persecution of their native religious beliefs. The song does not feature the death of the culprit, but rather his capitulation to the gods of the island people. Interestingly, some aspects of the narrative can be understood to be somewhat humorous: We are told of a magistrate who first destroys shamanic shrines and then inexplicably seeks to gain greater wealth and power through a shaman, and of his ultimate defeat and embarrassment by a

swarming cloud of demons. Yet, humorous or not, the voice in the narrative calling for a relief from the systematic oppression of Chosŏn is very clear.

Narratives such as those discussed in this section dramatically demonstrate the anger of the people and were transmitted from generation to generation and performed despite the danger in criticizing the upper class masters. The extent of the damage to the collective psyche of the community is seen in the creation of powerful deities who would interact on behalf of their oppressed and maltreated constituents. The resistant dialogic engagement in narratives such as these reveal the depth of the destruction inflicted upon the Cheju people by the harsh and unjust Neo-Confucian ideology. Yet, by listening to performances such as these, the people would find hope in the actions of such powerful deities. Moreover, by sublimating their feelings of anger and despair into such proxies as the protagonists of these narratives, the people would have been better able to psychologically endure the inequities and persecution of the Chosŏn social system.

#### CONCLUSION

In the context of post-colonialism, resistant culture develops as a means of not only preserving one's native cultural heritage, but also as a way to contend with the difficulties wrought by being pushed to the margins of society by a conquering or encroaching force. It is a serious blow to the collective psyche of a given community or society to be treated as the Other in their own homeland. Thus, there rises among the colonized or marginalized people a strong refusal to turn the Other, that is, their indigenous culture, into the Same, or the impinging culture. While such a paradigm as described above is commonly framed in postmodern discourse (compare DURING 1993), I believe that we can see the same spirit of resistance in the narratives that I have discussed above.

Through the act of preserving one's culture, healing is possible. By refusing complete assimilation, one retains a sense of uniqueness and self-worth. After all, if one abandons his/her culture completely and adopts another, he or she has admitted the worthlessness of his/her prior beliefs and way of life. In Chosŏn the repressive character of Neo-Confucianism insisted on the elimination of other belief systems and adherence to a strict system of class and gender discrimination. The situation on Cheju Island was even more difficult as a completely different way of life was restricted and moved towards the brink of extinction by the new ruling powers from the Korean peninsula.

Yet the people did resist this cultural and social repression. Unable to challenge the ruling powers in political, economic or physical ways, they sought solace in narratives that not only preserved their former beliefs and

way of life, but also subverted the powers that oppressed them. Participation in the performance of shaman songs, such as those described above, permitted the healing of their psyche and growth. Men and women of all classes could reify and reassert the value and importance of their worldview and further challenge that which the ruling class was imposing upon them. While the struggle with the ruling ideology was only carried out in fictional works, it nonetheless allowed healing and comfort in reality.

## NOTES

An earlier working version of this paper was presented at the Violence and Religion conference held at Kangnam University, Yongin Korea (28 February 2002). The present form of the paper has benefited from the insightful comments of both the discussant and the audience.

1. For more, see KIM Seong-Nae 1992, KISTER 1997, and PETTID 2000a, 2001a, 2001b.
2. This aspect of humor, as will be discussed below, has been demonstrated by Mikhail BAKHTIN (1984).
3. I have argued in the past that this subversive quality is found in contemporary resistance literature, such as that written by KIM Chiha (e.g., 1994, 2001). See PETTID 2001b.
4. For more on the Confucianization of Chosŏn, see DEUCILIER 1992 or DE BARY and HABOUSHI 1985.
5. For example, see SAID 1993, DAVIDSON 1978, and PIETERSE and PAREKII 1995.
6. There were other important aspects to the secondary culture, such as Buddhism and its practices.
7. For example, see YU Tongsik (1978, 163–70; 196–203) or KIM Inhoe (1987, 215–19). Additionally, an inspection of documents of the time such as the *Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄 [Veritable records of the Chosŏn dynasty] also reveals attempts to eradicate or otherwise control shamanic practices. The entry for 1443–08–25 in the *Sejong sillok* 世宗實錄 [Veritable records of King Sejong] outlines punishments for the husbands/male relatives of women who attend shamanic rites, including being barred from sitting for the government service examination 科擧, and prohibitions against shamans living within the walls of the capital. See *Sejong sillok*, 101: 34b–35a.
8. The most authoritative study on shamans and their ritual songs in English is that by Boudewijn WALRAVEN (1994).
9. An account in the third century CE Chinese history *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 [History of the Three Kingdoms] informs that in the kingdom of Puyŏ 夫餘 the king was responsible for controlling the outcome of the harvest. If the harvest was poor he would be killed or otherwise replaced. See CIEN 1973, 842.
10. While most shamans on the peninsula were women, this was not the case on Cheju Island where male hereditary shamans known as *sinbang* 神房 were, and are, the rule.
11. For a discussion of the causes and consequences of “shaman’s sickness,” see PARK 1997.
12. Two excellent works that in part discuss the multi-faceted social roles shamans filled in both past times and present are those of Youngsook Kim HARVEY (1979) and Laurel KENDALL (1988).
13. CHO 1993, SŌ 1992, and PHIL 1994 have all discussed this transition at length.
14. Notable here is the argument of CHO Hyejŏng (1988, 87–8) that since attending a



shamanic ritual and listening to the narrative songs was so effective for releasing the pent-up anger and frustrations of women, women were able to live their lives in accordance with the strict and discriminatory Neo-Confucian code.

15. Performed in the Chinogwi *kut*, this is a ritual for the spirit of the dead in the Seoul-Kyōnggi region; other renditions of the narrative are present in Kyōngsang 慶尙, Chōlla and Hamgyōng provinces.

16. Performed in the Mangmuk *kut* of South Hamgyōng Province 咸鏡南道. This is also a ritual conducted for the spirit of the recently deceased.

17. Performed in various *kut* peninsula-wide to petition the gods for abundance and fertility.

18. Found in the Ssitgūm *kut* of North Chōlla Province 全羅北道, this is also a ritual to ensure the passage of the dead from this to the next world.

19. For a more complete listing and explanation, see PETTID 2001a. It is notable that the Cheju narratives are generally not humorous and, rather, provide direct criticism of the ruling powers and violent intervention on behalf of the island people by supernatural forces.

20. Humorous subversiveness is also found in other literary genres of the Chosōn period such as *p'ansori* narratives, narrative *sijo* 時調 poetry, and literary collections. For further discussion, see PETTID 2001b.

21. This implies a lack of filial piety on the part of the protagonist, who did not want to buy the goods necessary to conduct ancestral rites for his own parents, but rather offered money. The money would not be consumed as would the fruit and meats that are normally used in conducting rites, thus allowing this miserly man to conduct rites without spending money.

22. Since drainage ditches had to be dug and cleaned through the collective (and unpaid) labor of the village's slaves and commoners, this offence demonstrates the protagonist's lack of concern for the well-being of both his community and its members.

23. In this instance there is an implied insult to the god of the kitchen (Chowang 竈王) who governs the fortune of a house. To leave a gourd on the table, or sharpen a knife on the hearth are both indicators of slovenly behavior and thus disrespectful to the deity that presides over the prosperity of a family. The "threat" of the kitchen god being displeased is one that mothers in past times used to chide their children into correct behaviors.

24. This offense also demonstrates the protagonist's lack of concern for the welfare of others in his community. Being a wealthy upper class man, Chang would have had the ability to compel others in lower social classes to follow his orders. Bringing an ox to his fields would have been one such task, requiring the time and efforts of others who had their own work to do. Chang's driving the ox off without using it demonstrates his basic contempt for others.

25. Recorded in KIM T'aegon 1992, 3.345. All translations in this paper are mine.

26. Recorded in KIM T'aegon 1992, 3.345. The messengers were punished by the deities of the underworld after being tricked by Chang.

27. Recorded in KIM T'aegon 1992, 3.98–100.

28. The seven grounds for expulsion of a wife are as follows: Not producing a male offspring, disobedience to one's parents-in-law, adultery, theft, undue jealousy, grave illness, and extreme talkativeness.

29. Recorded in KIM T'aegon 1992, 3.99.

30. The notion of *namnyō-ch'ilse-pudongsōk* 男女七歲不同席 (after the age of seven, one may not sit with one of the opposite sex) permeated official society, and as such, properly raised men and women were socialized in separate realms.

31. Many aspects of ancient Cheju culture suggest the strong possibility that the original

inhabitants of the island have origins separate from those of the peoples on the Korean peninsula. For further discussion, see PETTID 2000b.

32. Performed as a means of honoring and petitioning the shrine god of Sillye Village 新禮里. Recorded in HYŎN 1980, 731–33.

33. Two examples are *Ch'ilmörit-dang* [The Song of Ch'ilmorit shrine] performed in Cheju City 濟州市 and *Sinch'on ponhyang-dang* 新村本郷堂 [The Origin myth of Sin'chon shrine] conducted in Sinch'on Village 新村里. Both rituals are performed to petition the shrine gods for various human needs and abundance. See PETTID 2001a, 181–82 for further explanation.

34. Recorded in HYŎN 1980, 811–15. This shrine is located in Samdo Ward 三徒洞 of Cheju City.

35. Yi Hyöngsang (1653–1733) is a historical figure who served as a magistrate 牧使 of Cheju Island. He is said to have burnt down one hundred and twenty-nine shrines and banished over four hundred shamans to the countryside where they were forced to labor on farms upon his appointment to Cheju in 1702. See KIM Pongok (1990, 116) and CHIN Sönggi (1993, 84–5; 88).

36. Recorded in HYŎN 1980, 814.

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