

Special Feature

# Verisimilitudes between Novels and *Musok*: Exploring Narrative Characteristics

Antonetta L. BRUNO



*The Review of Korean Studies* Volume 26 Number 2 (December 2023): 103–128

doi: 10.25024/review.2023.26.2.103

©2023 by the Academy of Korean Studies.

## Introduction to *Musok* in Literary Novels

Within the realm of literary novels, elements related to *musok* frequently emerge, offering unique and captivating narratives. These elements often serve as a conduit for exploring profound themes such as spirituality, the relationship between humanity and nature, and the relentless pursuit of knowledge and self-discovery. From a societal perspective, these novels provide valuable material for understanding the diverse approaches to *musok* and its role in reflecting various ideological, religious, and cultural positions within Korean society across different historical periods. Taking a diachronic view, the narrative characteristics associated with *musok* reveal the evolution and enduring presence of a particular perception of *musok* throughout literary history. They also illustrate the dynamic interplay between cultural heritage, historical context, and evolving societal beliefs in shaping this perception.

In the pre-modern era, Korean literature was intricately intertwined with mythology, serving as a means to unravel the mysteries of the world and natural phenomena. These narratives frequently featured legendary shamans and their interactions with divine beings, spirits, and ancestors. Pre-modern, modern, and contemporary literary works exhibit intertextualities in motifs, parallels in language styles, similarities in plot development, and character archetypes between various genres belonging to both oral and written literature.

Scholars in the field of literature have employed diverse approaches when analyzing both traditional and contemporary literary works related to *musok*. Numerous novels delve into the themes of *mudang* (shaman) and *musok* from diverse and multifaceted perspectives. Notably, scholars, particularly within the realm of oral literature, have emphasized intertextuality, establishing connections between “*muga*” (shamanic songs), myths, and written literature. Their aim is to explore the rich dimensions of both literary and spiritual-religious aspects—as evidenced by scholars like Walraven (1994) and Seo Daeseok (1982).

However, there exists limited research that involves a comparative analysis between novels in which dialogues with the deceased are integral to the narrative and sequences in shamanic rituals where communication with ancestors occurs. This discourse unfolds between the inhabitants of “this” and

“that world,” significantly influencing the progression of the ritual in *musok* and the development of characters and narrative plots in novels. The examination of motifs, narrative plots, and character development in novels related to *musok* reveals significant similarities. However, this paper posits that the interaction between inhabitants of different realms is a critical element which contributes in shaping and advancing these aspects.

One intriguing instance of dialogue between the living and the deceased in pre-modern literature can be found in “Eou yadam.” Yu Mongin narrates a tale of the miraculous power of a charismatic *mudang*, set in 1563 during I Taek’s tenure as the military governor of Pyeongan Province. Throughout this narrative and others, Yu Mongin offers vivid and intricate depictions of dialogues with gods and the souls of the deceased during *gongsu*. He provides insights into the rituals themselves, such as when “she invoked the gods, and the sound that accompanied them to the house was as thin as the sound of a fly” (Yu 2006, 218). Moreover, he shares stories revolving around dialogues between *yangban* (aristocrats) and ghosts, along with instances of female ghosts seeking vengeance for their deaths. In “Ghost That Met Song Suchim” a striking similarity emerges in a sentence spoken by the master to a ghost: “[...] if you are a ghost, you know that the roads for the living and the ghost are different, so go away right away” (Yu 2006, 246; emphasis mine).

This narrative semblance resonates with instances in the novel *Baridegi* when the protagonist encounters supernatural entities during her journeys to “that world” or “the other world,” as well as with Bari’s experiences in *muga*.

[In *muga*] “Are you human or a ghost? To a place where not even winged beasts and crawling insects can come, Why did you come here?”

(Pettid 1999, 283; emphasis mine)

[In the novel *Baridegi*] “I dreamed that a celestial maiden fell out of the sky and landed with a loud thud right on top of the house. She rolled off the roof and into the courtyard. I called out: ‘Hello, hello, if you’re a ghost, then back off, and if you’re a person, then be on your way.’ But she told me she had tended the garden of the Great Jade Emperor in his heavenly palace, and that she’d been dropped to Earth as punishment for overwatering the flowers and causing them to fall from their stems.”

(Hwang 2015, 19; emphasis mine)

\* This work was supported by the Seed Program for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2023-INC-2250002).

From Yu Mongin's narratives, it is evident that his perspective on *mudang* is not consistently negative. For instance, he acknowledges the expertise of the *mudang* in the aforementioned story. Conversely, in the case of Jeong Munbu, who initially harbors strong disdain for *mudang*, his sentiment evolves over time, eventually leading to his active involvement in *gut* (rituals) and even his acquisition of drumming skills, despite his initial reluctance (Yu 2006, 219).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a period of significant transformation in Korean society, primarily catalyzed by Japanese colonization (1910–1945) and modernization. During this era, literary works often depicted *musok* in response to external influences, such as the introduction of Christianity or the suppression of traditional practices under Japanese colonial rule. *Mudang* in these narratives were portrayed as either resisting or adapting to these changes. On one hand, there was resistance against modernization, which included conflicts with Christianity. Some writers viewed *musok* as an impediment to modernization, attributing the persistence of superstitious beliefs to a regressive mentality and culture. An illustrative example can be found in I Haejo and his novel “The Exorcist Sword” (1908), where a “sword that expels demons” becomes a unique means to eliminate shamans and *musok*. A similar perspective is reflected in Park Wansuh's serial story “The Stake of Mom” (1999), where the shamanic world is portrayed as mirroring an evil and decadent society, contrasting with a good and progressive world that opposes it.

A different approach emerged in the late 1930s with Gim Dongri. In his work “Munyedo” (1936) he positioned Korea's shamanic world as a narrative device capable of transcending the ruin brought by modernity. This tension between traditional beliefs and modernity, the clash between indigenous values and Western influences, and the conflicts arising from these dynamics played a dominant role in the plots of various novels, adding depth and complexity to the characters and storylines.

In most of the aforementioned novels, what's interesting is that the protagonist often assumes the role of a “*gangsinmu*,” a charismatic *mudang*. This type can be more intriguing for character development compared to hereditary *mudang*, who inherit the profession. Moreover, the arduous trajectory that the protagonist must go through to become a *mudang* is a source of inspiration for such novels.

After the Korean War (1950–1953), there was a renewed interest in *musok* and in novels. While the dominant literary trend during the modern and

contemporary periods was centered on realism, heavily influenced by the social and historical contexts such as colonialism, the Korean war, and dictatorship, Korean people continued to seek solace and spiritual refuge in *musok*. Amidst the profound suffering caused by war, death, and fear, a unique space emerged as a source of comfort, where the voices of both the deceased and the living could come together in an attempt to reconcile. This space is recreated in modern and contemporary novels, albeit in a different manner compared to pre-modern literature. Within these novels, the communicative and narrative qualities of *musok* serve as essential tools for exploring the universal themes of life and death, offering a framework to capture a world that cannot be adequately addressed by the logic-centered and realism-centered literature of modernity. At the same time, these novels symbolize traditional Korean values, emphasizing the significance of preserving a sense of unity and community to underscore themes of forgiveness and reconciliation.

## Verisimilitudes between Novel and *Musok*

Verisimilitudes between novels and *musok* encompass a wide range of narrative characteristics related to *mudang* and *musok* as religious phenomena. These verisimilitudes encompass both overt and covert elements, including prominent features such as how *musok* and the journey of becoming a *mudang* are depicted, as well as more subtle aspects like the atmospheric backdrop, language, and style.

In novels predating the 21st century, there is a stronger emphasis on descriptions of shamanic rituals and practices. These descriptions often straddle the line between fiction and non-fiction due to their depth and detail. They provide readers with informative insights into the mystical and spiritual dimensions of *musok* while also serving as essential narrative elements.

One prominent verisimilitude revolves around the spiritual journey and transformation of the main protagonist, typically a female heroine-*mudang*. In both novels and *musok*, this protagonist must confront challenges and obstacles that lead to a symbolic death, often referred to as a “half-death” or “small death” in *musok*. This prolonged period of adversity, marked by numerous events, shapes the narrative plot and defines the character of the heroine in the novel and the *mudang* in *musok*. The concept of *sinbyeong* (literally, god's illness),

where individuals experience a spiritual calling or illness that leads them to become *mudang*, can be a powerful narrative device for exploring the inner journey and transformation of a character. This process can be likened to a “divine calling” followed by an initiation rite, outlining the procedures through which the neophyte is “called” to become a shaman, following the tradition of charismatic *mudang*.<sup>1</sup> The guidance and intervention of supernatural entities play a crucial role in this journey, emphasizing the protagonist’s unique nature and their acceptance into a new identity within the community. The initiation ritual and the relationship between the spiritual mother and daughter can add depth and complexity to the protagonist’s backstory and motivations. Additionally, the exploration of spiritual powers and the supernatural elements associated with *mudang* can create a fascinating backdrop for character development and storytelling in novels.

In both domains, novel and *musok*, the aforementioned hardships propel the protagonist toward personal transformation and growth. These challenges often involve encounters with spirits, participation in rituals, and exposure to supernatural phenomena. Through these experiences, the protagonist gains deeper insights into themselves and the world around them.

Another recurring theme is the exploration of gender, stigma, and identity issues. This theme is particularly significant because a large portion of Korean shamans are female, leading to an examination of gender roles and the challenges women face in both traditional and contemporary society. In novels like *Baridegi* (Hwang 2015), the protagonist shares many similarities with *mudang*, challenging societal expectations and norms. The novel closely mirrors the life stories of *mudang*, highlighting the female protagonist’s experiences with conflict and stigma. These experiences encapsulate the consequences of being marginalized as a *mudang*, often viewed as an outcast or someone who has chosen isolation from society.

Moreover, the sense of community and belonging is another aspect of inspiration in novels that consolidate traditional cultural values. *Musok* is deeply ingrained in communal beliefs and practices, and narratives frequently underscore the importance of the shaman’s role within the community. In novels, the protagonist’s interactions with various community members

and their relationships with spirits can highlight the interconnectedness of individuals and the shared beliefs that bind them together.

Additionally, cultural heritage and folklore play a significant role in shaping narrative characteristics. Traditional stories, legends, and myths provide a rich cultural context and connect the narrative to the historical roots of the country. This perspective integrates a specific perception of *musok*, elevating it as an integral part of Korean cultural heritage and folklore that contributes to the identity of Korean novels.

### *Barigongju and Baridegi*

The aspects described above find compelling representation in a comparative perspective between the *muga* “Barigongju” (Pettid 1999) and the novel *Baridegi*. The novel provides an excellent example of the verisimilitude shared with *musok*. The very title of the novel alludes to the *muga* of “Barigongju.” Moreover, the novel follows a structure of twelve chapters, mirroring the pattern of a shamanic ritual, which typically consists of twelve sequences. Scholars have underlined the similarities and differences between them, examining how the novel has adopted Bari from *muga* as its meta-structure and as a subject in contemporary literature. It addresses contemporary global issues such as defection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, international migration, terrorism, and war within the context of a post-modern capitalist regime. Certainly, Hwang Sok-yeong’s novel is not purely centered on *musok* or *mudang* practices; instead, it can be seen as a modern novel that incorporates shamanistic elements. In the upcoming pages, my focus will be on the similarities rather than the differences between these elements and their integration into the narrative.

Numerous similarities exist in the character of the protagonist. Some of them, in line with the content mentioned above, include the transformation of the Abandoned Seventh Princess into the seventh daughter, who becomes the protagonist of the novel, inspired by *muga*. Both protagonists undergo significant events and navigate various challenges, both direct and indirect. They are both gifted with the spiritual power of clairvoyance, further enhanced by other powers related to psychopomp and healing, aligning with the role and function of a *mudang*. In the novel, Bari possesses the spiritual gift to see dead spirits, communicate with an animal dog, Chilsung, or see a person’s entire life through a foot massage. In other words, these challenges encompass dramatic

1 For more details, see Harvey 1979.

events involving not only people but also intimate animals, family members, relatives, and ultimately all of humanity. Again, the transformation dictates that she grows, evolving from a special character bestowed with divine gifts into someone who learns how to utilize and control these gifts. The contemporary context supports shifting the noble origin of Bari in the *muga* into a citizen Bari born in North Korea who leaves impoverished North Korea, travels through various parts of China, and eventually settles in the United Kingdom.

Another essential element in the novel that closely resembles shamanism is the presence of assisting spirits. In this case, these spirits are represented by the grandmother and the dog. This concept resonates with *musok*. In *musok*, tutelary deities accompany the neophyte throughout the extended period of their profession after receiving the initiation ritual.

From a linguistic point of view, the novel contains pages of text that are very similar and, in some parts, identical to those in the *muga*. This similarity is enforced by Bari's grandmother, whose character is akin to a spiritual mother. She holds the thread of this and that world, the living and the deceased, by telling Bari the story of Princess Bari in the *muga* every night. She continues her role and function even after death, communicating with Bari in her dreams.

Here is a passage from the novel where the interplay of voices and identities, reminiscent of *gongsu*, enhances the depth of the narrative.

Words—half-song, half-incantation—burst out of me, and even in the midst of singing, I recognised them as “Hwangcheon muga,” the shaman song to console the spirits of the dead. It was from the story my grandmother used to tell me about Princess Bari:

“Aah, aah, deceased spirits!

At this open door between our worlds,

I pray, I pray.

To the mountains, to the rivers

you prayed, you prayed.

Hungry ghosts, starved spirits,

what became of the bodies you wore only yesterday?

Return! Return!

Go to Paradise, come back to life.

You are without sin;

lay down your burdens.”

When the song ended, the smoke retreated, low to the ground,

and vanished. (Hwang 2015, 134)

Switching the identity of the speaker is a typical aspect in *gongsu*, where whose voice is heard (ancestor, *mudang*, deities) through the *mudang*'s mouth can remain uncertain. In some ways, Bari in the novel recalls the special *mudang*'s language, especially in pages of the novel where the identity of the persona can give way to a certain confusion, blurring the lines between the voice of the person reading Bari's *muga* and the voice of the person embodying Bari.

Again, it is with her grandmother that this switching is part of role play:

[...] Back then, whenever I felt lonely and whenever times were tough, I thought of my grandmother. I would mumble the old stories we used to recite to each other, first speaking in my voice and then switching to hers.

(Hwang 2015, 195)

### *Dialogues with the Deceased in Novels and in Gongsu*

The act of communication between the living and the deceased, whether in a novel or during a ritual, hinges on the shared acceptance of certain fundamental concepts. These concepts revolve around *where* and *when* the communication takes place, how it is conducted, and *whose* voices are involved.

In the context of a ritual, participants possess a cultural understanding of how space and time are perceived within the *musok* worldview. These concepts are viewed as relatively clear and definitive, with mysterious or unexplainable elements being embraced as a natural part of the process.

The cultural interpretation offered by ritual participants emphasizes the similarities between “this” and “that world.” They perceive a logical connection underlying the hierarchy in the pantheon, the characteristics and preferences of the gods, the importance of material wealth, and the necessity of ancestral assistance on behalf of the living. This perspective suggests that “this world” is closely intertwined with “that world,” almost like an extension of it.

In essence, this viewpoint implies that the “other world” or “that world” is remarkably similar, if not identical, to the world of the living, much like the interconnectedness of the living and the dead. It challenges the notion of “that world” being confined to a structured division of cosmic levels, as “*Jeoseung*, that world, is everywhere, near you, here or over there [...]” It suggests that the “other



world” exists just around the corner or right by your side.<sup>2</sup>

In novels, the *musok* worldview is often employed as a narrative backdrop, lending credibility through elements of magical realism, symbolism, and supernatural occurrences. To facilitate communication between the inhabitants of different realms, there is mutual acceptance that a certain space serves as a boundary, situated between the human world and the spiritual world, where interaction can occur.

The novel *Hymn of the Spirit* (1983) written by Han Malsook offers insights into the spatial dimension of the worldview encompassing “this” and “that world.” In a particular scene where Yujin, convalescing in the hospital, expresses her gratitude to the nurse for her care, implying that without her, she might already be in a coffin, the nurse poses a philosophical inquiry. She raises the notion that it’s impossible to definitively assert whether Yujin isn’t already in “that world.” She underscores the incredibly thin line that separates these two realms, to the point where the distinction between them is almost imperceptible.

However, as the narrative unfolds, the portrayal of these two worlds becomes even more profound. They are depicted as intricately intertwined, so much so that they appear virtually indistinguishable, with no discernible boundaries. In fact, they blend seamlessly into each other.

In the same novel, Professor Chang undergoes a tumultuous emotional journey, marked by profound highs and lows, which ultimately drives him to contemplate suicide. The intensity of his anguish and isolation becomes so overpowering that he begins to equate the realm of the living with that of the dead. He starts to feel more alive within what he perceives as the domain of the deceased. This sensation is not entirely unfamiliar to him, as he had previously encountered it during his childhood. During that period, he had a sudden and vivid impression of existing in a state of both life and death, suspended between these two realms, unable to distinguish their boundaries or their disparities. This portrayal of the spatial relationship between the two worlds within the novel bears a striking resemblance to the *musok* worldview described earlier.

Similarly, the concept of “that world” as a spatial entity distinct yet intimately connected to “this world” finds vivid expression in Yi Cheong-

jun’s novel *Ieo-do* (1974). On this island, Ieo, located within the sea that surrounds Jeju Island, it exists as both a visible and an invisible island, closely associated with the deaths of fishermen. Here, the sea serves as a symbolic space representing the threshold between life and death. Whether it manifests as a sea, as in “Ieo-do,” a destination of death for fishermen, or as a river, as seen in Hwang’s novel where she travels in dreams, this intermediate space is distinct from Bari’s journey in *muga*, where she travels physically. In the novel, Bari can traverse these spaces through dreams. By incorporating other spatial domains into the narrative structure, the protagonist can move between them as a living individual, allowing the dream space to serve as a platform for the living to act and communicate.

In the novel, the water element plays a significant role, initially with the sea when Bari travels from China to England by boat, but it’s the river that becomes particularly relevant to our discussion. As Bari embarks on her journey along the river, the spatial concept of “this” and “that world” is once again emphasized. This river is imbued with a range of emotions, including agony, resentment, and other attachments to the world of the living, all of which Bari encounters during her dream travels. These dream journeys serve as spaces where Bari, much like a *mudang* in a ritual, can find solace not only for herself but also for those in need.

This blending of spaces and the fluidity between “this” and “that world” in the novel highlight the interconnectedness of these realms and their influence on one another, mirroring the *musok*’s worldview and enhancing the depth of the narrative.

The comparison between Bari in the *muga* and Bari in the novel, especially in terms of their respective endings and their interactions with the deceased, provides a fascinating insight into the themes of transformation and the relationship between the living and the dead in these narratives.

In the *muga*, Bari ascends to the status of a deity after saving her parents, representing a transformation that transcends the boundaries between the living and the dead. This transformation is characteristic of the *muga* narrative, where a *mudang* often undergoes significant spiritual journeys and emerges as powerful figures connected to the supernatural world.

In contrast, Bari in the novel experiences a different kind of transformation. She returns to her daily life with a new heart, leaving behind the grief of losing her daughter and her resentment toward the world. However, the world remains largely unchanged for her, much as it did before. This ending

2 Interviewed by Antonetta L. Bruno conducted on May 9, 1997.

highlights a sense of continuity and the idea that while personal transformation can occur, the external world may not necessarily undergo the same profound changes.

The concept of souls who cannot go to “that world” due to the mixed emotions of grudge, sorrow, and resignation aligns with the idea of the enduring fate of Bari in the novel. She, like the Death Messenger and other wandering souls, remains tethered to the world due to her attachments and emotions. Bari, despite her similarities to a shaman, differs in that she returns to “this world” and resumes her life with her husband, who has also come back. She becomes pregnant once again and is entangled in the chaotic events of the mortal realm. As described in the novel, a bus exploded in the middle of the road. People said there had been a second blast at King’s Cross Station. In this desperate struggle for survival in “this world,” both Bari and her husband are emotionally attached, as evident when the text reads, “With both hands, I wiped tears that wouldn’t stop coming, and turned to look back: Ali was crying too” (Hwang 2015, 276).

The ritual in *musok* serves the purpose of resolving these mixed emotions and sending the departed to “that world,” freeing them from their earthly attachments.

Time indeed holds a pivotal role in the communication with souls, and its significance often becomes evident through the use of verb tenses. This is particularly noticeable in the way past events are connected and transformed into the present moment. In literature, verb tenses serve to denote two distinct temporal aspects: the time of discourse, when the narrator or author is conveying the story, and the time of the story, when the events in the narrative transpire. Conventionally, the time of discourse is presented in the present tense, while the time of the story is depicted in the past tense. Narratives frequently encompass multiple storylines, each with its unique point of reference or “now.” Regarding the usage of verb tenses and the role of time in communication with souls, it’s interesting to note how literature, including both ritual and novels, manipulates time to convey meaning and develop the narrative.

Below are examples extracted from *gut* and novels that illustrate how the past events of the deceased gradually fill the role of developing the story by giving voice to these events in the present moment.

In *musok*, the present time is crucial, as the main goal is to bring health, wealth, and happiness to the living in the present moment. This is achieved through collaboration between all participants, including supernatural entities

and ancestors. Participants often engage in dialogues with the deceased, where the souls recount their past experiences. This narrative technique serves to bring the past into the present, allowing for a deeper understanding of the deceased and their unresolved matters. In brief, the past is essential in diagnosing and resolving problems, ultimately benefiting the present. Moreover, in the context of a ritual, the deceased’s past actions and emotions are brought forward into the present as they communicate with the living. This exchange of information and emotions serves to bridge the gap between the past and the present, enriching the narrative.

Similarly, in the novel *Baridegi* as above mentioned, the character embarks on a journey where she revisits her past through her dreams. These dreams become a space where her past experiences are vividly relived in the present, adding depth to her character and the overall narrative. The novel *Hymn of the Spirit* offers another example where the spatial and temporal dimensions of the story are interwoven. The character’s experiences (Professor Chang) lead him to perceive the world of the living as closely related to the world of the dead. This blurring of boundaries between the past and the present enhances the complexity of the narrative.

These examples demonstrate how the past events of the deceased are skillfully incorporated into the present moment, enriching the storytelling and character development.

Another effective narrative strategy is the utilization of monologues. In the novel *Hymn of the Spirit*, the character Yujin partakes in several dialogues presented as monologues with the deceased, individuals who hold special significance for her. These monologue-based dialogues serve a multitude of purposes within the narrative:

- Yujin, akin to a *mudang* in the previously mentioned example, employs these dialogues as a means of self-consolation. Through these inner conversations with the departed, she finds solace in times of grief and loss.
- The monologues also serve as a channel for profound reflection on the concepts of life and death. Yujin engages in introspective conversations with the deceased to contemplate the deeper meanings and implications of mortality and existence.
- Furthermore, these monologues function as a means to encourage the deceased to share their past experiences. Through this dialogue-driven narrative approach, the characters of the departed are brought to life as

they recount their life stories and memories. This serves to enrich the storytelling by providing a platform for the deceased to have their voices heard and their experiences acknowledged.

The parallels between *gongsu* and novels in how they manipulate time to bring the past into the present, to engage in dialogues with the deceased, and to depict the transformative journeys of their characters highlight the rich cultural and narrative traditions that explore the connections between the living and the dead in Korean literature.

[...] The dialogue of Taegam goes on, now with the client:

"Among your family is there a grandmother who made many sacrifices at famous mountains, at big rivers, or who died while living as a nun?"

The client: "They say that my grandmother had the palm of her hands worn down because of too much praying."

Taegam: "Right. Really? Then, honour your grandmother. Also, your father, when he was young, he went the way of the Gunung,<sup>3</sup> so did he die then coming back from some place? If not, did he die of an illness, of a kind of cancer?"

The client: "He just died."

Taegam: "You [the client] say that he just went the way of the Gunung. Keep in mind that he couldn't say the words he wanted to say, so today if you treat [him] well, it will be okay. A little later, make your father play in the Suyang Taegam sequence because he is sad..." (emphasis mine)

The inquiry by the shaman on the way the client's ancestors died is strategically elaborated during the entire *gongsu*. During the next pause, the guest *mudang* asks the client about what she said during the *gongsu*.

"Did you say that he [the father] died while he was holding government office?"

The client reacts: "And you said that he died falling down?"

The guest *mudang*: "He said that it is not that he died falling down while he was holding government office, he died after he fell from office."

Then she asks what his job was. The client answers that he was just staying at home, but the guest *mudang* insists, saying that it seems that he did something (political) at the time of the Liberal Party. The client does not reply and the guest *mudang* asks how old the brother was. After the client replies he was twenty-nine, the guest *mudang* says: "He was twenty-nine, but what was he doing, was he run over by a car?" The guest *mudang* subsequently explains that *the elder brother entered with his father*, so they have to entertain them well in Gunung sequence.

The same Taegam appears and talking about many things says that the father lost *yangban*<sup>4</sup> status by "falling" from office. Later, when the *mudang* is possessed by the grandmother of the client, she says:

"I received the communal sacrifice and the father went the way of the Gunung without being able to speak. In this site [this family] there is another dead spirit of a male ancestor. You release this Gunung through this person [pointing to the chief *mudang*] so don't worry... There is another ancestor who died in such a way, but I will help and protect you, so keep that in mind. Has your brother also died, beaten to death after he met the wrong people?... In this house, whether it is a younger brother or an elder brother, there is someone who died young..." (emphasis mine)

Some time after this *gut*, the client recalled the content of the *gongsu*, expressing her surprise about the *mudang's* skill in finding out about her ancestors. She also added that the day after she called her mother to ask more about them (Bruno 2002).

In the above *gongsu*, the ancestors, father, and elder brother are brought to speak through the mouth of the *mudang*, and they do so by "entering" the ritual. In this way, their past is recalled as events of the narration, and their "presence" in the ritual with the help of deities becomes acts in the present, "now."

Indeed, the deities instruct on how to release resentments in the context of *gut*. In this, the ancestor grandmother also participates. What is interesting is the client's reaction after the ritual. She continued, in a way, as a narrator-author, to develop the story by asking her mother for more information. But it's worth

3 That is, he died full of resentment.

4 In the past the term *yangban* indicated the upper class who could be appointed to civil official and military posts. Nowadays it is used in the meaning of "gentleman."



noting that in the context of *gongsu*, she remained silent and reserved, saving the “ambiguous parts” for later, guessing them to a certain degree, and perceiving them as “natural” within the context of *gut*.

In brief, time in literature adds depth and complexity to storytelling, allowing readers to engage with different temporal aspects of the narrative. In both contexts, time is used to convey various temporal aspects, including the past, present, and future. Readers or participants in the ritual must rely on context to fully grasp the meaning of dialogues and discern the identities of the speakers.

### *Communication Style: Shaping Characters through Voice*

From a narrative standpoint, while shamanistic oracles and novels belong to distinct realms—spiritual belief and literary fiction, respectively—they share certain characteristics regarding the content and style of communication when involving inhabitants of “this” and “that world.” The key questions revolve around *whose* voices we hear and *how* these voices shape the storytelling and influence the plot in both novels and rituals. For simplicity, I will refer to all statements expressed by ghosts, ancestors, and other deceased entities as the “voices of the souls” without delving into specific identities unless necessary.

It is generally assumed that in shamanistic sequences dedicated to ancestors, the communication involves spiritual realms, ancestors, and divine entities. However, as demonstrated elsewhere, the voice of the shaman as the officiant is not absent from other supernatural entities’ communication. For instance, from field notes, I have extracted some case examples from *gongsu* performed during ancestors’ sequences: one case involving the deceased mother of the daughter-in-law speaking through the *mudang*. The daughter-in-law weeps while standing in front of the *mudang*, who is assuming the role of the deceased soul. Nevertheless, upon closer examination of non-verbal cues in the ritual setting, it becomes evident that the *mudang* is the one weeping, not the mother of the daughter-in-law. This is indicated by the *mudang*’s body language accompanying the sentence uttered by the soul of the mother of the daughter-in-law: “I’m a friend of this *mudang*.” As the soul speaks, the *mudang* taps her own breast. It is likely that the *mudang* is expressing the emotion she feels as a friend of the deceased, leading to her tears. This practice of adopting the voice of a character is common among shamans, who may weep for themselves while

remembering their own personal sorrows, even as they are “possessed” by an ancestor.

Another example involves how *mudang* or *baksu* (male shaman) communicates with participants about daily affairs through the mouth of a spirit. There are instances where a *mudang* offers prayers or performs ritual prayers concerning her own immediate concerns. Similarly, in another ritual, a *baksu* laments his mother’s behavior during *gongsu*, shouting at her in his capacity as a spirit. In essence, these examples demonstrate how the *mudang*-speaker-narrator utilizes the voice of the soul to address personal matters.

Within the novel, the voices of the souls also serve as a narrative device for character development throughout the story. These communications often take the form of silent monologues, allowing readers to witness the transformations, conflicts, and resolutions experienced by the characters through their internal dialogues.

In *Hymn of the Spirit*, Enlightened One, a Buddhist believer, engages in dialogue with Taegu Woman, a channel through which the author gradually develops the character of Taegu Woman, who is murdered at the beginning of the novel. Taegu Woman expresses herself through non-verbal language, and her words without sounds are communicated through objects and dreams. Through indirect narration, readers piece together the character’s past and her transformation in the present, creating a feedback loop that closely resembles the unfolding of events in a *gongsu*.

In the novel *Baridegi*, she has the gift to dialogue with her dog and her sister without sound, reading and communicating with her mind throughout the entire novel. Her silent communication is part of the narrative structure and insight into her access to the spiritual realm, empowering her with special gifts reserved only for *mudang* or religious specialists.

She disappeared into the dark, and it was just Chilsung and me in the middle of the cornfield.

“Bari-ya!”

Startled, I looked behind me.

“I almost died! Strange men grabbed me and dragged me into the mountains!” (Hwang 2015, 52–53)

One specific example of this narrative trajectory can be seen in a *gongsu* ritual

sponsored by a daughter for her deceased mother.

During the *gongsu*, the mother briefly appears, rubbing her belly through the *mudang*. The client realizes that the spirit is her mother and bursts into tears, calling the *mudang* “Mother!” This seemingly simple action—rubbing the belly—holds profound meaning as it provides feedback related to a past event. In this case, the mother’s actions convey the pain and trauma related to an abortion that the mother had forced upon the daughter when she was too young to have a child. This revelation illuminates an unresolved obstacle in their relationship before the mother passed away—the daughter’s inability to express forgiveness to her mother. This example showcases how the non-verbal language of the deceased soul can provide new information in storytelling and develop the client’s family story and characters involved.

The following examples are how the invisible entities take part in the narrative plot by becoming visible, brought back to life through their voice. The following example is on kinesics in the communication during *gongsu*. Unexpectedly the Death Messenger personified by the *mudang* moves towards the altar. While he continues to talk with the initiate, he bows his head in front of the altar. In this way, the Death Messenger greets the mother as a person present on the scene, although nobody has introduced her yet. In just such a way, a visitor may enter a place, talk to person X, but then realize that other acquaintances are present, and so by a nod of the head or a gesture greet them while still talking with X. When, after turning to the altar, the *mudang* walks again towards the neophyte, the Death Messenger now reports the words of the mother.

In a similar narrative line, the soul of deceased Taegu Woman in *Hymn of the Spirit* takes part in communication with the Enlightened One via changes of nature, a shadow, objects, and an insect (butterfly) as we see below.

The Enlightened One has visited two brothers who murdered Taegu Woman.

“Njmu.imitjbul! Please, Taegu Woman, let those boys live! Put away your rancor and let them live.” The Enlightened One prayed within herself as she left the prison. The blue sky had since turned to clouds, and it looked as though a shower might pour down to beckon summer to hurry. Going into the living room, she saw some kind of shadow pass before the door to the master bedroom. She opened the door, but there was nothing in the quiet

room but a portrait of Chongim on the mother-of-pearl tea table. “I’m back Taegu Woman,” she muttered coming out to the living room and spied a butterfly resting on the kitchen door. It flipped away and came to rest on the southern window. Its body as well as its wings were beautifully dabbed with purple. Perhaps the one that had rested on Chonggu’s shoulder had sat on her back and accompanied her home from the prison. She tried to see if it had a torn wing, but it kept flying away whenever she got near. It stayed on the arm of the sofa for a while and then circled around the room and flew out the window. Standing quietly before the bedroom, the Enlightened One watched it and then went to look out the window. It was nowhere to be seen. (Han 1983, 192)

The dialogue between the Enlightened One and the butterfly (alias Taegu Woman) continues now verbally when the Enlightened One recalls Taegu Woman’s past to transmute it into the present and the future.

“Listen Taegu Woman, Have you come back to curiously look around the place you used to live? Or have you come back to tell those boys about their deaths? Please save them. They’ve had such a pitiful life. After all, it was your fault, so try and forgive them. Rubbing my hands like this. I beg you. I’ll take care of everything for you, so there’s no need to ever come back here. This is no place for you. Live peacefully in that world of no worries.” She thought bitter begrudging spirits should not come to the world of the living. The living should live happily without such spirits causing problems because of incidents in a former life. (Han 1983, 202)

The use of the soul’s voice or un-voiced speech in both novels and rituals serves to delve into characters’ inner worlds, adding depth and authenticity to their struggles, desires, and motivations. This narrative technique makes the characters more relatable to readers and helps them connect with the experiences portrayed.

### *Perception of the Novel by Readers and the Gut Sponsor’s Perspective*

In the context of the ritual, the shaman or soul uses the voice of the deceased to diagnose and address emotional crises, fostering an inner journey for the client to discover the root causes of their issues and to find solutions. Both in the novel and the ritual, the ultimate goal is healing, achieved through multiple layers of

meaning.

In the novel, this healing comes through empathy, as the soul's voice reveals a character's innermost thoughts and feelings. Readers can relate to and understand the characters' experiences, even if they differ from their own. This empathy helps readers connect with the narrative on a deeper level.

Similarly, in the ritual, the shaman guides the client through the soul's voice, revealing the life stories and characters of both the deceased and the client's own ancestors. This process creates empathy and understanding, fostering a sense of connection between the client and the spirits involved. The soul's voice serves as a channel for conveying divine insights, wisdom, and guidance, ultimately contributing to the healing process.

Both in novels and rituals, not all events are explicitly recounted, leaving room for interpretation and filling in the gaps by the reader or participant. This active engagement allows individuals to mentally provide conjectures, hypotheses, and assumptions to complete what is left unsaid.

Furthermore, the interpretation-translation process is influenced by the reader's or participant's cultural background and depth of knowledge about the subject matter. This active participation involves a silent dialogue with oneself, as individuals modify their thoughts and perceptions in response to the unfolding narrative, whether in a novel or a ritual. Listening to the soul's voice or following the narrative, readers and participants engage in a silent dialogue with themselves, deepening their connection to the characters or the ritual's purpose. This inner dialogue encourages them to create their own meanings and interpretations, enriching their overall experience. In these novels, the integration of shamanic beliefs and practices into the narrative serves to blur the boundaries between time and space, highlighting the role of the shaman or shaman-like characters as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms. This conceptualization mirrors the real-life role of *mudang* in Korean shamanism.

In novel on Bari, the protagonist embodies the modern *mudang*, assuming the role of an intermediary between different realms. Similarly, in Han Malsook's novel, the character referred to as the Enlightened One fulfills a role akin to that of a *mudang*, bridging the gap between Taegu Woman and her murderers, seeking to bring solace to Taegu Woman's soul, and working to amend the karma of her previous life, thus facilitating her rebirth. Much like a *mudang*, the Enlightened One engages in dialogue with Taegu Woman, with

the aim of providing closure and peace for the departed.

Throughout these narratives, the departed souls navigate the liminal spaces, the boundaries that separate the living from the dead. Communication and dialogue with these souls predominantly occur through silent words, devoid of audible sounds. This mode of communication encompasses spoken words, gestures, objects, and even the voices of the souls heard through the inner thoughts, emotions, and reflections of the characters. This narrative technique provides readers with a unique window into the inner worlds of the characters, enabling a profound connection with their experiences. The channels of communication vary widely, including inner monologues, dreams, and more.

In conclusion, these novels beautifully weave shamanic elements into their narratives, using them as a vehicle to explore the intricate relationships between the living and the dead, time and space, and the physical and spiritual realms. This integration of shamanism adds depth and complexity to the stories while offering readers a glimpse into the rich cultural tapestry of Korea.

## Concluding Remarks

In the exploration of shamanistic narratives and their intersections with literature, we embark on a journey through the intricate tapestry of storytelling, where time and space take on multifaceted roles. These narratives, whether woven through the words of a novelist or the words of a *mudang*, unveil a unique understanding of the temporal and spatial dimensions.

Within the pages of novels like *Baridaegi* and *Hymn of the Spirit*, we encounter protagonists who embody the role of a modern *mudang*, bridging the realms of the living and the spiritual. Much like their real-life counterparts, these characters serve as intermediaries, navigating the thresholds between human and divine. Their dialogues with the departed souls bring to life the age-old traditions of shamanism, enriching the narratives with layers of meaning. Hwang Sok-yong's and Han Malsook's novels share similarities with *musok* but also differences. In the case of Hwang Sok-yong's work, the protagonist's experiences of suffering or a near-death encounter are woven into the fabric of contemporary realities. This narrative approach utilizes mimesis but presents the contemporary world in an "unfamiliar yet artistic" manner, offering a captivating perspective that directly engages with the present reality.

Conversely, in Han Malsook's novel, the exploration of life and death delves into the concept of the "soul." The protagonist interprets these themes through the lens of Buddhist reincarnation theory, while the central character, a young boy, embodies the essence of a pure soul with strong connections to Christianity. This broader, universal perspective extends beyond the realm of Korean *musok*, addressing spiritual themes that transcend cultural boundaries.

One striking similarity between these narratives and shamanic rituals is the mode of communication. In both realms, the voices of the souls are often expressed through silent words, devoid of audible sounds. These modes of communication encompass spoken words, signs, objects, and even the inner thoughts and emotions of the characters. This technique provides readers with an intimate window into the inner worlds of the characters, fostering a profound connection with their experiences.

Readers and participants must rely on contextual cues to decipher the identities of speakers and the meanings of dialogues. Moreover, the power of empathy emerges as a common thread between shamanistic rituals and novels. In both contexts, the ability to delve into characters' inner struggles, desires, and motivations fosters a sense of connection with the narrative. Whether it's a reader empathizing with a character's innermost thoughts or a client seeking resolution through a *gut*, the aim is healing. Healing unfolds through layers of meaning in both the novel and the ritual.

In the end, these narratives invite active participation from the reader or participant. Much like the shamanic traditions themselves, interpretation and translation are vital. The audience actively engages, responding with their own interpretations and filling in the gaps left intentionally or unintentionally in the narrative. It is through this collaborative act of interpretation that the true depth and richness of these stories are revealed.

In the conceptualization of time and space within these novels, shamanic beliefs and practices become instrumental in weaving spiritual dimensions into the plots and characters. The shaman, or the alter-ego protagonist, emerges as the conduit between the human and spiritual realms, mirroring the role of real-life *mudang*.

In closing, the narratives explored here illuminate the intricate dance between the living and the dead, the tangible and the ethereal. They remind us that communication with the departed can transcend spoken words, resonating through silence, dreams, and the deepest recesses of the human soul. Through

these narratives, the boundaries of time and space blur, and the voices of the souls continue to echo, inviting us to partake in the timeless journey of storytelling and spiritual exploration. Furthermore, the incorporation of *musok's* narrative characteristics into modern literature offers a framework for capturing a world that modernity's worldview often overlooks. These characteristics transcend binary divisions, such as life and death, this world and the other world, time and space, and the physical and the spiritual. They enable the conveyance of the voice of "that world" and extend solace to individuals who may feel isolated in a fragmented world. As a result, *musok's* narrative delves into the possibilities of diverse lives and ensures a rich diversity of narrative techniques.

## References

- Bruno, Antonetta Lucia. 2002. *The Gate of Words: Language in the Rituals of Korean Shamans*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.
- . 2006. *Korean Shamanic Songs*. Vol. 2. Turin: UTET.
- . 2016. "Translatability of Knowledge in Ethnography: The Case of Korean Shamanic Texts." *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 89: 121–39.
- , trans. 2019. *The Stories of Ōu*. Rome: Carocci.
- . 2022. "Terms Used for Smallpox and Its Personification in Korean Shamanic Language." *European Journal of Korean Studies* 22 (1): 159–78.
- Gim, Jinyeong, and Taehan Hong. 1997. *Seosamuga Barigongju jeonjip* [Complete Collection of Princess Bari *Muga*]. 2 vols. Seoul: Publishing Company Minsokwon.
- Han, Malsook. 1983. *Hymn of the Spirit*. Translated by Suzanne Crowder. New York: Fremont Publications.
- Harvey, Youngsook Kim. 1979. *Six Korean Women: The Socialization of Shamans*. St. Paul: West.
- Hong, Taehan. 1998. "Mudang ui yuhyeong e ttareun seosamuga Barigongju ui jeongae yangsang mit uimi" [The Variies (*sic.*) & their Meanings Caused by Shaman Type in a Shaman Epic. "Bariongu" (*sic.*)]. *Hanguk ui minsok gwa munhwa* [Journal of Korean Cultural Studies] 1: 65–95.
- Hwang, Sok-yong. 2010. *Baridegi*. Seoul: Changbi Publishers.
- . 2015. *Princess Bari*. Translated by Sora Kim-Russell. Melbourne: Scribe



Publications.

- Jo, Dongil. 1980. *Gubi munhak ui segye* [The World of Oral Literature]. Seoul: Saemunsa.
- Jung, Yeun-jung. 2010. "Seosamuga wa soseol ui gujojeok sanggwan gwangye yeongu: seosamuga *Barigongju* wa Hwang seogyeong ui *Baridegi* reul jungsim euro" [A Study on Structural Correlation between Narrative Shamanist Songs and Novels: Centering Shamanist Song "Princess Bari" and *Baridegi* by Hwang, Seok-young]. *Hanguk munhak gwa yesul* [The Korean Literature and Arts] 5: 175–213.
- Kwon, Seong Woo. 2008. "Seosa ui changjojeok gaengsin gwa rieollijeum ui tochaeng sai: Hwang seogyeong ui *Baridegi* lon" [Between the Creative Renewal of Narrative and the Degradation of Realism: Hwang Sokyong's Theory of *Baridegi*]. *Hanminjok munhwa yeongu* [The Review of Korean Cultural Studies] 24: 227–53.
- Lee, Yong Shik. 2000. "Sin ui eumseong: Hanguk guteseo ui gongsu ui eumakjeok yeongu" [Speech of God: The Manner of the Deliverance of Divine Messages (*kongsu*) in Comparison with Song and Speech in Korean Shamanism]. *Syameoijeum yeongu* [Shamanism Studies] 2: 181–94.
- Park, Wan-suh. 1999. "Momma's Stake" In *A Sketch of the Fading Sun*, edited by Hyun-Jae Yee Sallee and introduced by He-ran Park. Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press.
- Pettid, Michael J. 1999. "From Abandoned Daughter to Shaman Matriarch: An Analysis of the Pari Kongju Muga, A Korean Shamnistic Song." PhD diss., The University of Hawai'i.
- Seo, Daeseok. 1982. "Muga." In vol. 3 of *Hanguk minsokdaegwan* [Survey of Korean Folk Culture], edited by Research Institute of Korean Studies, Korea University. Seoul: Korea University Press.
- . 1992. *Hanguk muga ui yeongu* [Research of Korean Muga]. Seoul: Literature & Thought.
- . 1997. *Gubimunhak* [Oral Literature]. Seoul: Hainaim.
- , and Kyeongshin Pak. 1990. *Anseong muga* [Muga of Anseong]. Seoul: Jipmoondang.
- Sullivan, Lawrence E. 1986. "Sound and Senses: Toward a Hermeneutics of Performance." *History of Religions* 26 (1): 1–33.
- Sun, Soon-hwa. 1992. "The Vocational Socialization of the Korean Shaman." *Korea Journal* 32 (3): 86–102.

- Yi, Cheong-jun. (1974) 2015. *Ieo-do* [Island Ieo]. Seoul: Moonji Publishing
- Yu, Kyoung-soo. 2009. "Dawonjeok sotong eul hyanghan diaseuporajeok sangsangnyeok: Hwang seogyeong ui *Baridegi* reul jungsim euro" [The Study of Hwang Seok yeong's Novel in *Baridegi*]. *Bigyo Hangukhak* [Comparative Korean Studies] 17 (1): 437–61.
- Yu, Mongin. 2006. *Eouyadam* [The Stories of Eou]. Translated into modern Korean by Ik-cheol Shin, Hyeong-dae Lee, Yong-hee Cho, and Young-mi Noh. Paju: Dolbegae.
- Walraven, Boudewijn C.A. 1994. *Songs of the Shaman: The Ritual Chants of the Korean Mudang*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International.

---

**Antonetta L. BRUNO** (antonetta.bruno@uniroma1.it) is Full Professor in Korean Language and Literature (LOR-22) at Institute of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University of Rome. She is Director of Korean Studies department and has been President of AKSE (Association of Korean Studies in Europe), Chairperson of Korea Foundation Fellowship Committee for EU. Her research interests encompass oral literature, linguistic anthropology, religions, and popular culture. Her publications primarily focus on the study of Korean shamanic language, as well as media in Korean culture, including topics related to food, film, and popular culture.



## Abstract

The voices of ancestors and other souls play a pivotal role in storytelling, evident in both novels and Shamanistic rituals dedicated to ancestors. In both domains, these voices serve as conduits for conveying wisdom, insights, and messages from an individual's deeper spiritual realm and the realm of the deceased in the "other world." The predominant scholarly perspective distinguishes these narratives primarily based on their context and purpose. This paper aims to explore the shared narrative characteristics, or verisimilitudes, between contemporary novels and *musok* (Korean shamanism). Employing a comparative approach, this study centers on the communication between inhabitants of "this" and "that world" as the primary narrative device. It defines time and space according to the typology of communication and delves into language and narrative characteristics, with a particular emphasis on the role of the reader-receiver in interpretation. In essence, this study examines how these voices shape storytelling and influence the plot in both novels and rituals. This perspective is substantiated by excerpts from novels and recorded *gongsu* (oracle) sessions gathered during my previous fieldwork. Among the novels, Hwang Sok-yong's *Princess Bari* (2015) and Han Malsook's *Hymn of the Spirit* (1983) will be taken into consideration.

**Keywords:** verisimilitudes, soul's voice, communication, time and space