
From Rural Outcasts to Urban Cosmopolitans: Spiritual Healers in Seoul

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Given the prominence and continued presence of spiritual healers in Korean society, it is imperative to examine their social status and cultural significance. This article explores the question: Are Korean shamans sophisticated cosmopolitan individuals or persons steeped in archaic superstition, holding beliefs that are irrelevant to the 21st century? First, it delves into the vernacular nature of musok and how this characteristic has facilitated the urbanization and globalization of the practice well into hypermodern contemporary society. Second, it reflects on the impact of these structural shifts on the marginalization of manshin. Next, it discusses the features of *cosmopolitanism* and its relevance to manshin, considering factors such as foreign language abilities, international travel and liminality, often seen as integral components of cosmopolitanism. Although cosmopolitanism of the masculine sort may not align with the experiences of most female practitioners of Korea's vernacular religion, I argue that its characteristics can help elucidate why manshin have successfully adapted to accelerated globalization. I conclude that the cosmopolitan nature of contemporary manshin is deeply rooted in the traditional belief system and practice of musok.

Keywords: Korea, shamanism, cosmopolitans, vernacular religion, globalization.

“Shamanism is one big mambo-jumbo”, “Shamans are people that use naïve believers for their financial gain” and “Shamanism does not fit a rational state of mind”. Such bold assertions have been common responses to my research topic presentation over the past twenty years. Korean shamans who practice possession-trance (*manshin*) have been mostly marginalized female members of Korean society and have also faced religious criticism since the arrival of Christianity on the Korean peninsula in the 18th and 19th centuries (Oak 2010).¹

Many in Korea and abroad view spiritual healers as opportunistic gain seekers, dishonest individuals, or simply mentally disturbed. However, in twenty years of numerous observations, interviews, and personal discussions on their beliefs and practices, I have found that the manshin I know are sincere in their intentions to heal, help people in complex personal conditions and appease the spirits of ancestors and the forces of nature.

Manshin translates to “10,000 spirits”, suggesting that the practitioner venerates and can be possessed by a myriad of supernatural entities, including nature gods, ancestors and famous historical figures. Another term for Korean shamans is *mudang*, signifying mediators between the human and supernatural realms, embodying the entities they commune with. The scholarly term for the broader phenomenon of spiritual healing and divination in Korean culture is *musok*, literally translating to “the practice of mediation”. Within this overarching term are other practitioners, called *sesŭp-mu*, who perform similar ritual performances without possession and are not believed to embody supernatural entities.

The phenomenological perception of manshin's patients and clients that I have encountered in rituals and daily life in Korea has mostly been favourable towards the services provided by these spiritual healers. Nevertheless, this observation is qualitative and based on long-term exploration involving a limited number of research interlocutors. It cannot be construed as an assertion on the scientific efficacy of Korean shamanism.

¹ I use the term South Korea or Korea to refer to the Republic of South Korea. I transliterate Korean words using the McCune-Reischauer system. However, I use shi to allow proper pronunciation.

Given the prominence and continued presence of spiritual healers in Korean society, it is imperative to examine their social status and cultural significance. This article explores the question: Are Korean shamans sophisticated cosmopolitan individuals or persons steeped in archaic superstition, holding beliefs that are irrelevant to the 21st century?

My exploration of this question unfolds as follows. First, I delve into the vernacular nature of musok and how this characteristic has facilitated the urbanization and globalization of the practice well into hypermodern contemporary society. Second, I reflect on the impact of these structural shifts on the marginalization of manshin. Next, I discuss the features of *cosmopolitanism* and its relevance to manshin, considering factors such as foreign language abilities and international travel, often seen as integral components of cosmopolitanism. The case of cosmopolitan manshin challenges the conventional definition of cosmopolitanism as primarily associated with intellectual men of the bourgeois sector (Thompson and Tambyah 1999: 221). While this term often “encodes a polyvalent, dialectical tension between masculinized meanings of travel and feminized meanings of dwelling” (ibid.: 238), manshin fit significant aspects of this concept, even without physically leaving Korea.

Although cosmopolitanism of the masculine sort may not align with the experiences of most female practitioners of Korea’s vernacular religion, I argue that its characteristics can help elucidate why manshin have successfully adapted to accelerated globalization. One reason lies in the open-minded attitude required from a practitioner who navigates between the human world and supernatural cosmologies. I analyse the manshin’s transition between these realms as structurally akin to intercultural experiences. Their daily traversal between different worlds creates the liminal condition of manshin, which has historically led to their marginalization in pre-modern and early-modern times, but has also facilitated their rapid incorporation of international travel and outreach to a global clientele. Thus, I conclude that the cosmopolitan nature of contemporary manshin is deeply rooted in the traditional belief system and practice of musok.

Vernacular Religion, Urbanization and the Globalization of *Musok*

Musok (Korean shamanism) is a vernacular religion transmitted orally, featuring diverse pantheons and individualized ritual styles that stem from traditional regional variations but are adapted in each case to fit the client’s needs, their personal deities and the pantheon of the manshin’s that will be addressed during the possession trances. In contrast, Cosmopolitanism has often been used to discuss religions that have been institutionalized, canonized and then transmitted globally through premodern cultural flows. In the West, this mostly applies to Christianity and its migration from the Mediterranean to much of the world. In East Asia, Buddhism brought its belief system along with its arts, texts, and practices from India to China and then to Korea and Japan (Baker 1994).

Vernacular religions in Korea and elsewhere have maintained their local uniqueness in terms of pantheons, belief systems, practices and ritual objects — even into the 21st century. Similar to other cases where hypermodernity and the internet have become integral to vernacular traditional expressiveness, here too “folklore is empowered by its diversity” (Blank 2009: 7). As lived religions are unofficial local traditions (Primiano 1995), we must be cautious

when examining the cultural and societal conditions that have enabled the vernacular traditions of musok to travel globally in real and virtual worlds. An important part of the contemporary mudang's aspirations is to become part of the Korean government system of heritage preservation, which entails broad coverage by local and international media, as well as public staged performances of shamanic rituals (known as *kut* in Korean). This system typically evaluates the relative authenticity of *kut* in relation to previously documented ones.

Evaluating contemporary rituals by comparing them with historic *kut* poses several challenges. In the past, the absence of filming devices produced mainly transcriptions of ritual songs, with little attention given to other performative aspects. When comparing contemporary rituals to historical ones, the transmission of tradition is perceived as an intergenerational imitation, overlooking the agency and creativity of the manshin in adapting traditional texts to specific contexts and altering ritual form and meaning according to their personal preferences. Furthermore, events that precede and follow the actual ritual, such as altar construction, were not extensively studied in early modernity.

However, in contemporary South Korea, many public *kut* rituals are sponsored under the Cultural Heritage Protection Act. This entails that a scholar writes a detailed recommendation for the specific manshin group to be designated as the preservers of the sponsored ritual. Such a recommendation is granted only when the ritual is deemed to possess significant historical, artistic, or academic value based on analytic categories formulated by scholars, rather than by performers and patrons who would emphasize the efficacy based on religious belief.

Designating *kut* ritual as an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage encapsulates a paradox as the desire to preserve rituals to connect the present with pre-modern Korean culture necessitates detaching the performance from its religious intent. Nevertheless, the designated practitioners continue to conduct their religious rituals in less public settings. Once designated within the program, the manshin typically becomes more renowned and attracts new clientele for her private spiritual healing and counselling services. This is but one of the complexities brought about by urbanization and modernization.

An accepted estimate for contemporary Korean Shamans exceeds 300,000, as indicated by the number of registered practitioners in one of their largest professional organizations, the Kyungsin Federation (Chyung 2017). The practitioners discussed in this article are often referred to as Northern-style shamans, charismatic shamans, or in Korean *shin-naerim mudang* (god descendent shamans). They regularly practice possession trance while conducting rituals that encompass learned traditions of material arts, song and dance. These rituals typically involve well-known possessing entities and are often performed in lengthy events held in the foothills outside cities due to the noisy nature of the rituals, which cannot be accommodated in densely populated areas.

To comprehend the complexity of vernacular religious practices undergoing urbanization processes, it is crucial to take into serious consideration the perspectives of musok practitioners. These reflections often revolve around ritual efficacy, a concept that may not necessarily align with the common scholarly distinctions regarding traditions, heritage preservation and the artistic value of the rituals.

Through such inductive research, we can observe how individual religious creativity has enabled vernacular concepts and practices to spread throughout the Korean peninsula and beyond its borders. Recent changes in Korea, such as the hypermodern environment of the global spiritual market, have led to the emergence of cosmopolitan Korean shamans, who cater to foreign clientele and adapt their rituals to meet new aspirations.

In the 21st century, several Europeans and Americans have been initiated as mudang. This exemplifies the globalization of musok practices, with several well-known manshin traveling around the world performing at folklore festivals, museums and universities. One such prominent figure was Kim Kūm-hwa, who passed away several years ago and was probably the most extensively traveled manshin in the 1990s and early 2000s, after being designated as an intangible national heritage holder in 1985. Despite not speaking foreign languages, Kim displayed a keen interest in other cultures and people raised within different value systems. During her international performances, she interacted with the local audiences through an interpreter and eagerly participated in documentary film productions, embodying the concept of an open-minded world traveler, a cosmopolitan.

Andrea Kalff is the first among several non-Koreans initiated as manshin by Kim Kūm-hwa (Photo 1). As a European apprentice and initiate, Andrea has been serving European clients, some of whom were also initiated. Kim, her spiritual mother, visited her multiple times in Germany and Hawaii, where Andrea resided. During these visits, Kim and her team conducted lengthy rituals for Andrea's clients. At other times, Andrea and her Western clients travelled to Korea for pilgrimage and extensive rituals.



Photo 1. Andrea Kalff Guided by Shaman Kim Kum-hwa During Her Initiation Naerim Gut Ritual in 2006. This picture was used in the movie "Andrea Sky-and Manshin-Ten Thousand Spirit" and is published with authorization from Andrea Kalff.

Among the manshin practicing outside Korea there are also Korean migrants to Europe, Asia and the Americas who were initiated before moving abroad and continue their practice in their new locations. One notable Korean shaman working in Germany is Park Hiah (Pak Hŭi-a), also initiated by Kim Kŭm-hwa. Park's webpage, *Global Shamanic Healing Arts*, provides information in English and German about her performances and workshops in Europe. Notably, there is no information in Korean since she has resided in Europe for over two decades and targets an international audience. Park incorporates Western elements, such as modern dance, in her performances. Her online self-introduction resonates with New Age terminology and practices like yoga and Buddhist meditation, as she asserts,

“My humble aim as a woman and a shaman is to move culture forward by the exercise of spiritual intelligence and the creative process. I believe that art and spiritual endeavors that are founded on ecstatic experience can contribute to our understanding of life.... The shaman helps participants to connect with their own sense of freedom, so we can be able to generate sufficient energy to overcome our obstructions. Fear is transformed into plentiful universal love, and suddenly, life is about more than suffering; it is also about experiencing rapture” (Park 2024).

Park also identifies herself as “a global shaman”, illustrating how the recontextualizing of musok within a cross-cultural spiritual framework has made this vernacular practice more accessible through internet platforms. Despite this, it is important to note that in the manshin's narrative, the choice of this spiritual vocation is explained as a demand from spirits and gods; rather than a conscious identity project pursued through middle-class consumerism, as in Thompson and Tambyah's exploration of expatriate men's cosmopolitanism (1999: 238).

Manshin recount how, at some point in their lives, spirits appeared in dreams, causing them to fall ill with *shinbyŏng* (spirit-inflicted sickness). They only recovered after accepting their role as eternal venerators of those entities (see Sarfati 2020). Thus, the application of the term *cosmopolitanism* to musok practitioners does not rely on the interlocutors' self-definition; rather, it is utilized as an analytical tool that proves useful in understanding the thriving of such spiritual practices in a hyper-technologized contemporary urban society.

Manshin, whether they have experienced geographic relocation or remained within Korea can be considered cosmopolitans, even when they explain that their geographical and spiritual travels and intercultural encounters were imposed on them by a supernatural calling to which they could not object. Moreover, unlike the expatriate men interviewed by Thompson and Tambyah (1999: 239) who were “trying to be cosmopolitan”, the manshin that I encounter become such because of the nature of their creed.

The emergence of non-Koreans being initiated as manshin is part of this process. The manshin who initiate foreigners claim that the spirits have demanded them to do it. This innovation has attracted attention within communities of practitioners. While the practice of *musok* was legitimized as an important national heritage by the South Korean government, practitioners continue to be initiated through individualized apprenticeship, allowing each

manshin to choose whom to initiate and how to conduct the apprenticeship. However, scholars who oversee the designation process never consider non-Korean manshin for national recognition.

Thus, the local government system only influences certain aspects of the lived musok tradition, while the vernacular nature of the practice, free of official constraints, continues to prevail. When clients consult with manshin about sickness involving unexpected behaviours like fleeing to the mountains, bodily pains and self-seclusion, they sometimes learn that these are signs of a shamanic calling, with the spirits urging them to become possessed at will and initiated. Since these spirits are predominantly Korean, it may not be straightforward to transport this practice to a non-Korean context.

The common practice of traveling to Korea with clients for lengthy rituals that international initiates do not master has recently been replaced by simultaneous online rituals. With the increased usage of digital communication and the global pandemic of 2020-2 that prevented easy international travel, screen-mediated rituals have often substituted on-site visits to musok shrines in Korea for both local and international venerators.

Non-Korea musok practitioners indicate that tradition is ever-changing. Foreign practitioners are interested in the efficacious aspects of the tradition rather than its traditional value, making the practice more global than national. They are less concerned with the “original form” of the ritual, which is of interest to Korean scholars and heritage designation officials. Rituals and performances lacking historical antecedents have often been labelled *invented tradition*, *folklorism*, or *fakelore* (Sarfati 2021: 27).

This is also how most Western manshin are perceived by many Koreans, including scholars, shamans and clients. These labels suggest that some traditions are genuine and properly performed, while others are considered fake or contemporary inventions that have little value. While terms such as *authentic shamanic rituals* have been used by many musok scholars, they must be approached with caution. For Andrea Kalff and other non-Korean manshin, their designation by the famous and acknowledged Korean manshin attests to the manner in which Korean senior practitioners viewed their spiritual capabilities.

In light of the developments outlined in the musok tradition, we may pose the question: Does mudang participation in the global spiritual market imply that they are no longer regarded as social outcasts in Korea?

Are Manshin Still Social Outcasts?

The enduring history of manshin being social outcasts has been attributed to the central role of other belief systems, including Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity, which have dominated Korea’s culture. Buddhists have not directly criticized manshin for their work and have permitted them to worship Sanshin (the mountain god) in small shrines within Buddhist monasteries. However, the male-dominated Buddhist establishment has regarded it as a female practice coexisting with the more sophisticated Buddhist doctrine. Confucian perspectives, which valued female subordination, were biased against manshin, who freely expressed their

ideas while possessed and did not hesitate to vocally criticize male clients. During the Chosŏn era (1392-1910), when Confucianism became the dominant doctrine of the elites, persecutions were directed at musok practitioners, as they appeared very disruptive in their spontaneity, lack of concrete ritual rules and female dominance in powerful positions. Several major attempts to eradicate musok resulted in the prohibition of practice within the cities (Walraven 1998: 56-7), the burning and destruction of many shrines and the prosecution of manshin (Howard 1998: 13 note 6). These efforts continued with the introduction of the Christian faith in the 18th and 19th centuries, as the polytheistic nature of musok was deemed unacceptable.

Furthermore, in the early 20th century, the Japanese colonizers' efforts to modernize Korea and assimilate Koreans into Japanese culture were accompanied by a derogatory discourse about local traditions such as musok (Kim 2013, Hwang 2012). In response, postcolonial discourse in Korea has portrayed musok as symbolizing the "true spirit" of Korea, a view also adopted by the Minjung Movement which sought to democratize Korea in the 1980s. "Traditional peasant dress, farmers' dances and shamanic rituals have been appropriated into the minjung movement as signifiers of cultural identity[...] an identity threatened with extinction by the corrosive action of modern capitalism" (Robinson 1993: 184).

The gradual change in attitude toward musok has accelerated with the rapid cultural changes characterizing the hypermodern urban conditions of 21st-century Seoul. Manshin have increasingly reclaimed personal agency in constructing their public image through activity in the digital sphere (Sarfati 2021: chapter 4). Their self-promotion has been evident in mainstream media such as television and film, as well as in individualized platforms such as social networks, YouTube channels and Instagram.

One significant indicator of the change in the social status of manshin in Korea is their increased usage of the title *mudang* instead of *manshin* or *posal*. Since the 1970s, scholars who wished to respect their spiritual-healer interlocutors have chosen to use the term *manshin*, instead of the more commonly used *mudang*. Laurel Kendall explained this in her seminal book from 1985 as follows, "Since the term [mudang] is not only imprecise but also derogatory, I refer to mudang only when citing sources.... I prefer the more polite and localized title manshin (pronounced man-shin), the term I used to address the shamans I know" (Kendall 1985: xi). In my initial ethnography, I followed suit and used *manshin* or sometimes *posal* to address my interlocutors. *Posal* (in Sanskrit- bodhisattva) is derived from Buddhist terminology, referring to a person who has undergone a process of spiritual awakening and chosen to continue helping people ease their sufferings instead of retiring into nirvana. Many manshin use this title as their suffix, demonstrating how they perceive their psychotherapeutic social role as professional spiritual mediators.

However, in recent years I have observed that many manshin are adopting the term *mudang* for themselves and even addressing their peers in performance teams with it. This reflects profound changes in social and cultural perceptions of them. Being a mudang is no longer considered a disreputable profession, a shift also depicted in popular television dramas, like the successful *Café Minamdang* (2022, directed by Ko Chae-hyŏn). In this series,

distributed globally by Netflix, a handsome young detective operates an office where he divines the future and solves crimes. His clients believe him to be a *mudang*, yet this does not deter them from admiring him, falling in love with him and behaving like fans of a celebrity. This increased social acceptance can be viewed as the mainstreaming of *musok* culture and *mudang* rituals. Moreover, the practitioners who have become media-savvy have utilized various platforms to gain fame and influence. They no longer consider themselves victims of the system, nor do their clients view them with pity.

Thus, the answer to the question posed above, “Are *manshin* still social outcasts?” is not a simple yes or no. We observe a gradual acceptance of *manshin* as cultural assets and artists, evidenced by government acknowledgment, financial sponsorship and increased representation in mainstream media. However, if we asked whether they wished their offspring to become *manshin*, most Koreans would likely answer no. This preference does not stem from the demanding lifestyle of *manshin*, as professionals in various fields also work many hours with limited leisure time. Rather, *manshin* are still perceived as deviant members of society, despite no longer being banned from living in cities and towns as they once were. The process of reducing the stigma surrounding these spiritual healers remains incomplete, but appreciation for their capabilities has risen compared to the disdain and derogatory discourse they faced in pre-modern Korea.

The marginalization of *manshin* in Korean society did not necessarily equate to ignorance, especially compared to other members of their communities in pre-modern Korea. As typically illiterate rural women, *manshin* had to develop exceptionally strong memories to learn and recite the long and complex *muga* texts sung and recited during *kut* rituals. Mastery of these texts was expected after an apprenticeship of oral traditions. This skill has been appreciated, particularly following compressed modernization and urbanization, as a crucial means of preserving vernacular myths and cosmologies, which were later written down. Additionally, the *manshin* were expected to perform dances, play musical instruments and craft altar decorations, outfits of supernatural entities embodied during the possession feats and offerings. This interdisciplinary artistry made *manshin* more sophisticated and adept in intellectually demanding tasks than many other women of their time and economic status.

Nevertheless, these pre-modern practitioners can hardly be described as cosmopolitan in the conventional sense of world knowledge and travel. The pre-modern *manshin* rarely ventured far from their homes, were typically unable to speak, read, or write Chinese, the cosmopolitan language of their area and likely remained uninformed about world events and news. Their cosmopolitanism lay in their understanding that their daily lives constituted only a small part of the universe, which included extensive realms of the supernatural. While *manshin* may not have been worldly travellers, they have long perceived the world as far more intricate than their immediate local sphere. They may have not conversed with people from other cultures, but they believed they communicated with various kinds of entities, understanding their language. Whether this constitutes cosmopolitanism is a matter of definition. Does

cosmopolitanism necessitate interaction with humans from other cultures? Must a cosmopolitan be fluent in a foreign human language?

Cosmopolitanism and the Question of Foreign Language Mastery

One of the most remarkable aspects Andrea Kalf's initiation process in 2006 was that she was not required to learn Korean. For Kim Kūm-hwa, the spiritual healing abilities she detected in Andrea were sufficient to consider her a manshin. Andrea recounts her journey into Korean shamanism, recalling how she was invited to speak privately with Kim after attending a folk music festival in Germany where the Korean team performed. Initially knowing little about Korean culture and attending primarily to support a friend performing Mongolian throat singing, Andrea was taken aback when Kim, through an interpreter, informed her that she was severely ill and needed to be initiated into shamanism. Andrea found the encounter strange and disregarded it. However, a few months later, she received devastating news from her family physician: she had a severe cancer diagnosis. After much deliberation and a surgery, she made the decision to travel to Korea and became the first European to be initiated as a Korean shaman.

Equally remarkable is Andrea's unwavering trust in Kim and her apprentices throughout their years of collaboration, despite relying on mediated translations for communication. She reflected on this challenge in a Facebook wall on August 26, 2023,

“In lands unknown, where words are strange, I journeyed far, a world to change. A foreign realm, a distant shore, where language barriers stood before. I battled of heavy illness, a relentless fight, seeking a cure, a glimmer of light. With weary steps, I left behind - the life I knew, the ties that bind. No words to bridge the cultural gap. No familiar phrases in my verbal map - yet trust became my guiding light - a beacon through both day and night. In lands where tongues danced unfamiliar, I let my heart be the steadfast pillar. Belief in self, in destiny's plan, I stepped forth as an intrepid clan. Courage surged from deep within. A fire fueled by the spirit's din - for like a mudang, I followed the call - a sacred whisper that enthralled [me]. In the shadows of uncertainty, I embraced my role with fervent glee - a mudang, soulful and strong & singing the ancient healing song.”

Andrea's narrative also reflects on her experiences as a new initiate in Korea, where many people sought her blessings and divinations despite the language barrier requiring a German interpreter. In Korea, manshin who have recently been healed by the spirits are regarded as having the closest connection to supernatural healing powers. Andrea's story serves as an example of a healing narrative: after her initiation, her cancer went into remission, she bore two more daughters and has since healed many clients. In a subsequent Facebook post, she navigates the complexities of being a European, non-Korean in ethnicity and language abilities and the need to trust her hosts' good intentions,

“Though I stumbled over syllables new - my intentions pure, my heart rang true. With rituals woven from threads of trust, I connected souls, bridging the gust.

Through eyes that spoke, and touch that healed. The language of souls, we both revealed, In a foreign land, I found my place, Guided by trust, love's gentle grace. Healing winds carried hope across the sky, as I dared to spread my wings and fly. From distant homelands, I took a chance - Trusting in fate's intricate dance. So let the winds of courage lift, as in foreign lands, spirits sift. For a mudang's heart knows no confines, when trust and belief intertwine. In sickness and health, I found my way, In foreign soil, where I chose to stay for a while. With trust as my compass, a heart full of grace, I healed and blossomed.”

For Andrea, the core of her commitment to becoming a mudang lay in her desire to heal herself from cancer. After successfully overcoming her illness, she remained committed to becoming a mudang, a commitment she has upheld for almost twenty years now, even after Kim’s passing. Kim never required her to recite the lengthy mythical texts performed during rituals. Instead, they annually convened to conduct extensive rituals for Andrea’s clients, either in Kim’s shrine in Korea or Andrea’s home shrine. These rituals necessitated extensive international travel, language interpretation and funding. The ritual tradition, encompassing artistic performances with music, song, dance and the use of various artifacts, proved portable when practiced at Andrea’s shrine in a Bavarian German village. Kim took pride in Andrea’s accomplishments, featuring her prominently in several documentaries, including the renowned 2014 film *Mansin: Ten Thousand Spirits* (directed by Pak Ch'an-gyŏng).

The language barrier also affects Korean mudang who cater to foreign clientele. As Korea urbanized and globalized, foreign residents of Seoul began seeking the help of manshin. For many in the Korean diaspora, including descendants of migrants and adoptees raised without a cultural connection to Korea, Korean is a second or foreign language. Nonetheless, many have begun exploring their cultural roots and developed an interest in musok. Consequently, manshin working with them have encountered also new entities, such as the ancestors of clients of foreign origins.

In the summer of 2022, I discussed this phenomenon with Yi Hae-gyŏng, a senior initiate of Kim Kŭm-hwa still practicing in Korea. She works with foreign clients and travels abroad for performances at festivals, conferences and museums. During my visit to her country shrine in the mountain range north of Ch'unch'ŏn for a three-day ritual, a group of photographers and scholars arrived on the first evening to participate in the nighttime ascent to the stone shrine above the house. The opening rite was performed there, and the team stayed over for the first part of the morning performance. Among the group was an American whose grandfather was a famous Korean scholar and politician. He asked many detailed questions about the essence of the event, facilitated thorough interpretation from me and one of the apprentices proficient in English. My experience with Korean participants in kut rituals suggests that they rarely pose such detailed questions about possession, the involved entities and ritual efficacy.

Yi was unfazed by these questions, having been interviewed numerous times in both Korean and foreign media and collaborating with several filmmakers and photographers,

including featuring as the main protagonist in one of the most details ethnographic films about musok, *Sai-esõ* (2006, directed by Yi Ch'ang-jae). I asked her about her approach to foreign ancestors who might manifest during rituals with foreign participants present. She explained that she can communicate with spirits who do not speak Korean. While drafting a chart of gods and spirits, including those of Korean and Japanese origins and Jesus Christ, she remarked,

“Language is no barrier to communicating with ancestors and gods. I understand their message and tell it to the audience. I do not need to say things in words for the spirits to understand, nor do they need to speak in my language.... It is the same as when a Christian worshipper prays in his language to Jesus, and Jesus can hear and understand even though he never spoke that particular language while he was alive.”

Thus Korean manshin who do not speak foreign languages can interact with foreign supernatural entities and expand their pantheon globally.

Could Spiritual Travel Within Supernatural Cosmology Be Considered Cosmopolitanism?

For manshin, their interactions with people constitute only a small portion of their daily communications. They are much busier engaging with emotional and practical matters with the spirits and the gods of nature. While this type of communication may not necessarily entail knowledge of the planet's actual geography and its diverse cultures, as we would expect from modern cosmopolitans, it still offers a broad perspective on human existence, communication modes and beings beyond local knowledge.

The way manshin explain their cosmology and navigation within it resembles international travel. Each realm of existence, such as the world of the dead, comes with expected behaviours and speech. When seeking to placate an angry spirit, specific words and material offerings are required. Structurally, this parallels negotiating with foreign cultures, which requires a cosmopolitan capacity, described by Ulf Hannerz as characterized by an organization of diversity rather than a replication of uniformity (1990: 237). While for Hannerz this trait is typically associated with modernity, for the manshin it is a fundamental aspect of the cosmos. While rural Koreans in pre-modernity were confined to a limited geography and a mostly uniform culture and language, manshin conducted spiritual travels to other realms. They were not what Hannerz calls locals, who lived “purely within the structure of the locality” (ibid.).

Therefore, I contend that Korean shamanic culture contains a core that aligns with the definition of “cosmopolitanism as a perspective, a state of mind, or- to take a more processual view- a mode of managing meaning” (ibid: 238). If cosmopolitans are “those who move about the world” (ibid.), and the world encompasses both the physical and spiritual realms, then manshin are inherently cosmopolitans. This is especially true because the cosmology of musok is not a fixed, unified set of ideas. Instead, each individual's pantheon is customized and shaped by their spiritual travels and negotiations with the supernatural.

If a manshin venerates a certain guardian spirit, her daily practices differ significantly from a colleague who venerates a different guardian spirit. The vernacular nature of musok fosters diverse cosmologies and practices, unlike most monotheistic religions. Monotheistic

practices can traverse geographical distances while maintaining adherence to their original tenets, but manshin explore the spiritual world with an open-minded approach, encountering and negotiating with new entities in each ritual. Hannerz explains that not everyone who travels in the world is cosmopolitan. For the monotheistic missionary, maintaining the original faith and practice vigorously while encountering new religions is the primary goal and a source of personal agency. My observation here is that the monotheistic missionary is not necessarily cosmopolitan, whereas the manshin can be. This is not a value judgment, as being a cosmopolitan is not necessarily a virtue; instead, it might suggest that a pre-modern Korean spiritual healer who lived within her local community is closer to cosmopolitanism than a European catholic missionary of the same period who crossed an ocean.

Changing one's venerated pantheon is common for manshin, as they travel to the supernatural realm, encountering various entities, and incorporating them into their altars, prayers and rituals. This characteristic does not pose a theological dilemma because the musok pantheon is characterized by parallelism, where the venerated entities do not necessarily adhere to a clear hierarchy of significance (Kwōn 2023). In light of the intricate and close interactions that manshin have with other realms of existence, their work can be viewed as cosmopolitan in the sense explained by Hannerz,

“The perspective of the cosmopolitan must entail relationships to a plurality of cultures understood as distinctive entities.... Furthermore, cosmopolitanism in the strict sense includes a stance toward diversity itself, toward the coexistence of cultures in the individual experience. A more genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the other. It is an openness toward divergent cultural experiences, as a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (1990: 239).

If we set aside the unanswered question about the existence of the spiritual realm and its inhabitants and closely examine how manshin discuss and relate to it phenomenologically, then their lives exhibit cosmopolitan characteristics. They embody “the cosmopolitan ideals of nomadic mobility and cultural adaptability” (Thompson and Tambyah 1999: 214). Manshin's openness to exploring and engaging with diversity is evident in their material culture, which increasingly includes imported goods (Kendall 2008). Moreover, musok performance teams have embraced gender fluidity, despite the general disapproval of cross-gender behaviours in Korea's traditionalist society (Sarfati 2020). While reflecting on musok's inherent cosmopolitanism, I will now analyse another aspect of the *cosmopolitan* concept, the individual's liminal status.

The Liminal Position of Manshin

Liminality is one of the features of cosmopolitanism. Individuals who can adeptly negotiate between multiple cultures and lifestyles often find themselves in a state of being “betwixt and between”, experiencing a profound shift in behaviour and perception during intercultural transitions. Many of the manshin I interviewed described feeling a sense of displacement. They

often recounted strange dreams and visions since their childhood, realizing early on that they were somehow different from those around them. For many, the first time they felt understood and at home was when they began working with a musuk performance team.

The cosmopolitan's awareness that certain accepted "truths" vary significantly across cultures creates a sense of distance, akin to the experiences of manshin encountering ineffable spiritual incidences. Liminality also characterizes the lives of migrants, particularly within the spiritual dimensions of Korean diasporic communities. Migrants frequently harbour strong nostalgia and yearning for their native land and its traditions (Prato 2016). This sentiment may lead Korean diaspora members to seek out Korean spirituality in their new environments. Conversely, locals in their new residences may perceive them as potential innovators in spiritual practices, fostering mutually beneficial relationships that can shape new value systems (Prato 2009).

Korea's diaspora communities, estimated to encompass over 10% of the global ethnic Korean population, have emerged due to modernization in the late 19th century and increased international mobility in the 20th century (MOFA 2021). Many have sought better education opportunities and engaged in international commerce. The three largest Korean diasporas are located in the United States, China and Japan (Abelmann and Lie 1997, Lee and Kim 2020, Ryang 1997). Smaller communities have been documented in Brazil, Russia and Europe. Among these migrants are manshin and their services are sought after by fellow migrants. Consequently, Korean manshin reside and work in diasporic communities, where cosmopolitanism is an integral aspect of daily life and identity, embodying a dual liminal state as migrants and spiritual mediators.

One Korean-American manshin, known online as *Mudang Jenn*, serves a diverse clientele that includes many non-Koreans. She performs shamanic songs and myths during rituals, having acquired mastery of shamanic crafts through traditional apprenticeship held in the United States. Her spiritual mother is an elderly Korean manshin residing in New York, and together they frequently journey to Korea to conduct rituals on sacred mountains and procure goods from specialty shamanic stores for their work in the United States. Fluent in Korean and well-versed in Korean customs, Jenn's liminal status is evident, as she navigates between Korean and American identities.

In the summer of 2022, I visited a Korean scholar of shamanism along with Jenn during my research in Seoul. Throughout our visit, discussions revolved around the phenomenon of non-Koreans being initiated into musok. While Jenn's initiation was deemed acceptable by the Korean scholar, American and European initiates were perceived as lower in the hierarchy of heritage maintenance. Korean practitioners trained in traditional methods were regarded as the most authentic manshin, while diasporic and non-Korean practitioners were viewed with varying degrees of skepticism and described at best as "fusion manshin", or "global shamans".

This emphasis on authenticity is significant in the daily practices and ritual choices of Korean manshin in Korea but is often absent among diasporic and foreign practitioners. Excluded from the governmental effort to preserve the tradition as heritage, non-Korean

manshin exercise greater interpretative freedom, adapting the esoteric practice to align with their religious inclinations, cultural interpretations and practical needs of their clients. These considerations are emphasized by another Facebook post by Andrea Kalff from August 24, 2023,

“In the realm of the spirit, I am a guardian of ancient wisdom and a weaver of souls. Like the wind that moves through the trees, I move between worlds, carrying the hopes and dreams of those who seek solace. In the tapestry of life, I am a mudang, a shaman of the heart, dedicating my existence to nurturing others and beseeching blessings upon them. My path is one of selfless devotion, where the echo of my prayers resonates through the universe, even as my bones grow weary and my body tired. Yet, recognition is not what I seek, for I understand the silent dance of giving and receiving that underlies all existence. I stand at the crossroads of human pain and divine healing, channeling the energies that mend the broken and uplift the weary.”

Andrea is aware that some of her Korean counterparts may not comprehend how she practices musok without the language and cultural understanding of Korea. However, her clients in Europe and the United States often perceive her as a mystic figure in their lives. In 2021, she collaborated with Austrian psychiatrists to explore whether shamanic healing could benefit individuals with persistent mental issues resistant to biomedical and psychiatric treatments. Together with psychiatrist Iris Zachenhofer they co-authored a book in 2022 detailing their experiences. This interdisciplinary approach bridging bio-medicine and spiritual healing is groundbreaking and has not been undertaken in Korea. Korean manshin primarily collaborate with ethnographers and folklorists and are less inclined toward experimentation with medical professionals. This demonstrates the innovative potential inherent in the cross-cultural exchange of esoteric knowledge, and the multiple liminality of Non-Korean mudang.

Conclusion

Spiritual healers within Korean shamanic traditions are individuals of sophistication, capable of communicating with a diverse array of human clients and supernatural entities. Their belief system necessitates the exploration of unfamiliar experiences in spiritual realms, where they are expected to engage in behaviours uncommon in the daily lives of most Koreans. This open-minded approach imbues them with a certain cosmopolitanism. Over the past 50 years, international travel has become commonplace for renowned manshin, who are often invited to perform in world festivals and academic gatherings. Their artistry has elevated them to esteemed preservers of heritage. Others have found success serving foreign clients both in Korea and abroad. These developments signify the cosmopolitanization of musok.

In the last two decades, Korean shamanic diagnosis and esoteric practices have embraced non-Koreans as part of the global spiritual market. Some European manshin blend shamanic practices from various sources into a unique amalgamation. Screen-mediated rituals are increasingly utilized within Korea and between Korea and other locations where manshin

practice. However, this shift in ritual settings does not necessarily indicate an epistemic transformation. The non-Korean practitioners interviewed for this ethnography upheld the established cosmological understanding of musok and felt deeply connected to the Korean shamanic tradition. They crafted a hybrid form of musok, incorporating a portable version of the ritual involving shorter consultation meetings along with longer traditional rituals conducted either in Korea or with Korean manshin who travel to Europe and the United States for this purpose. This adaptation represents a vital aspect of this living tradition, demonstrating its relevance to urban populations in 21st-century Korea and beyond. While not all mudang are cosmopolitans, an increasing number have embraced cosmopolitanism.

The cosmopolitanization of musok commenced with spatial mobility within the Korean peninsula. The migration from rural to urban areas during rapid urbanization in the 20th century expanded ritual opportunities and the vernacular nature of this tradition facilitated swift adaptation to new environments and contexts. This facilitated active engagement in processes of globalization, wherein the vernacular evolved into the cosmopolitan.

Ideological cosmopolitanization of musok entailed syncretism with New Age concepts, made feasible by the parallelistic polytheism inherent in this tradition. Manshin are sophisticated members of society, adept at navigating diverse ideologies, beliefs, languages and concepts. They often exhibit greater acceptance of diversity than many hypermodern Koreans. Furthermore, their engagement in urban settings facilitates easier integration into a society where individualism is on the rise and spirituality remains a sought-after commodity and experience.

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Comments on the Paper Given at the Seminar
(in alphabetical order)

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It was great to hear Liora Sarfati's talk. I have two questions. Would the acceptance of Korean Shamanism by those situated in South East Asia, like in Japan, China and other places like Cambodia etc. be also considered as global cosmopolitanism? In other words, is cosmopolitanism only seen as Euro-America centred? What are the elements of Korean religion other than shamanism?

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Liora Sarfati challenged several premises in the social sciences and humanities in her presentation. The first was "Cosmopolitanism", nested by scholars in notions of modernization and urbanization whereby "scientific" attitudes lead to the abandonment of local folk beliefs and practices, or as put by Sarfati -- vernacular religion. My own vernacular excursions concern urban landscapes; including religious structures and practices. Her research informs my own in that vernacular landscapes are mobile, adapting to new locales. However, "Do they mean the same in the new place?"

Her implied and explicit comparisons to "established" religions reminded me of Roman Catholicism's enculturation practices. The discussion of Korean Shamans at home and abroad brought to mind Santeria, Voodoo, shrines, saints, mystics, relics and fundamental Christian "hands on" faith healing links to spiritual worlds. In Catholicism, priests are necessary. Protestants challenge this but clergy are given special status. Christians have a notion of "calling" while Shamans are selected by the spirits. As to their power, scientific scepticism suggests placebo effects for "cures". W.I. Thomas' theorem suggests "If men define things are real.". Other connections made by "hypermodern" cosmopolitans ("Cosmopolitan Spiritualists"?) regarding cures are naturalism and folk medicines and treatments. This reminds of my mentor Feliks Gross' remarks about Plains Indian medicine men who viewed their practices as more functional than philosophical.

In regard to my comments on Korean shamans in horror movies allowed Professor Sarfati to raise gender issues. Most Korean Shamans are male but in movies men are more likely to play the part, as a capitalistic response to the monetary potential of the "craft". Obviously, a clearer definition of "cosmopolitanism" is needed beyond mere openness to diversity. It is assumed that modernization and urbanization eliminated Folk Society, but it can and has survived. I expect Shamanism will adapt to Artificial Intelligence as it has to the Virtual World, but will it affect spirits' authenticity?

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Sarfati's presentation on contemporary Korean shamanism and its cosmopolitanism raises thought-provoking, and comparative, reflections on the flexibility and potential broad appeal of vernacular religion and spiritual healing in contemporary society, including in the supposedly secularised Western urban settings.

I wonder whether the cosmopolitanism and global appeal of Korean shamanism might be analysed in relation to the renewed approach to health as total well-being (physical, spiritual and psychological), and the growing interest, even among the established medical profession, in folk medicine/remedies as complementary to bio-medicine.

I found it interesting that most contemporary *manshin* are women, and also that there are no clear guidelines on who can be a shaman (both in terms of gender and of national or ethnic origins). It would be useful to know whether this lack of guidelines is new.

An additional consideration. I am familiar with Sarfati's work on shamanism and I have often noted some similarities between the spiritual healing of Korean *manshin* and *musok* and some spiritual healing practices found in Catholicism — where a plethora of saints and other sacred entities supplements the religion's monotheism. In particular, I note the significant role of specific individuals in communicating with spiritual beings, or entities — a role that is often not recognized, nor approved by the official religious institutions, who regard such practices as folklore and superstition. I think, for example, of Italo Pardo's analysis of the role of "mundane liminality as a point of entry to the supramundane domains" in Naples (e.g., his *Managing Existence in Naples*, 1996, CUP); especially, of individuals who, by virtue of their "social liminality", are believed to have "special powers" and thus act as mediators with the supernatural on behalf of the living, crossing, as Pardo says, "different domains of existence". It would be interesting to explore such comparative aspects between Korean shamanism and other vernacular ("unofficial") religious practices, and how they might become more or less institutionalized, or become appealing beyond their specific cultural milieu.