SHAMANS, GHOSTS AND HOBOGLINS AMIDST KOREAN FOLK CUSTOMS

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Legend has it that there is a night spirit that sneaks into the house on the first night of the New Year and tries to put the shoes of the family on – if it finds a matching pair, it steals the shoes and their owner suffers bad luck all year. Thus families take all their shoes into the living quarters on that night, putting out the lights and sleeping early. To ward off this bad spirit, people hang a sieve outside the front gate. When the spirit comes to the house it begins counting all the holes in the sieve, and inevitably has to count again and again since it surely confuses what needs to be counted with what has been counted. This continues until the night grows long and the day breaks, and then the spirit must depart.

(Hong Sŏkmo, Tongguk sesigi 6)\(^1\)

Introduction

It is not so much ghosts and spirits that haunt Korean customs, but more the Korean vision of the next world that dictates a strong influence on what we can now describe as Korean folk custom. Today we can examine this lore, but what does it tell us of how Koreans lived and how they might have viewed the world? Perhaps more than a little. If we lose our shoes on Sŏllal (lunar New Year) does it doom us to a year of bad luck? Having lost my own shoes once in Korea, albeit not on the lunar New Year, I wonder about such a situation and what drives such beliefs.

My own studies and interests led me long ago to pursue more knowledge of the customs of pre-modern Korea. Many of these customs are perhaps founded in the shamanic worldview, but just as many are influenced by Buddhism and Confucian beliefs as well. One of the first things that stands out when examining the customs of the Chosŏn dynasty is how they tend to be a blend of numerous worldviews.\(^2\) Such a mingling of

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\(^1\) Citations for pre-modern source materials are given in the following fashion: volume (kwŏn), page number, and, if so subdivided ‘a’ or ‘b’ for the right and left side of the page respectively. Other source materials in diaries are given by the date of entry.

\(^2\) The term ‘shamanism’ is not easily defined nor a Korean term. In this paper I use the term to indicate the group of practices that would have been part of the customs of the
shamanic, Confucian, Buddhist and other belief systems might be inconvenient for a scholar today seeking to properly label a custom as this-or-that, but it certainly was not a concern for the people of past times. In fact, if we look closely at how major events in people’s lives were conducted, we will surely see that by the late Chosŏn a blending of various worldviews was the rule for most events. Funerary rites, for example, contained various components that allowed Confucian, Buddhist, shamanic, and geomantic concerns to be met.

In this paper, I will examine some of the more prominent aspects of Korean folk customs, especially in the context of the mid- to late-Chosŏn period, which are related to shamans and their ongoing battle with spirits from the next world. It is in these confrontations that we can find fundamental aspects of Korean folk belief and examine how people of premodern Korea might have viewed their place within the cosmos.

**Shamans as Keepers of Order**

I went down to see my son; Sukkil was uncomfortable and his diarrhoea severe, purging his bowels five or six times. My daughter-in-law summoned a shaman (munyŏ) in order to save my son from his illness.

*(Mokchae ilgi, 1552-01-29)*

In the above account from 1552, we can see one aspect of the historical roles of the shamans. While there were certainly medical specialists in Chosŏn Korea and before who were trained in arts such as acupuncture, moxibustion, the use of herbal and other medicines and so on, for many consulting a shaman in times of serious sickness was also highly important. In Korean folk customs the idea that many serious illnesses were caused by injurious spirits was very strong, and a lingering illness was something that many believed required the intervention of a shaman. Such practices continued well into the twentieth century when the colonial government made a concerted effort to eradicate such ‘superstitions’. However, the strength of customs made such a programme very difficult to