

Terms Used for Smallpox and Its Personification in Korean Shamanic Language

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Abstract

The history of the terms and expressions associated with smallpox offers evidence of semantic change and reflects both the internal and external worldviews of Korean people with regard to smallpox. In Korean shamanic language, smallpox is personified as gods known by various names with their own linguistic registers, personalities, and behaviors. The present paper first analyzes the semantic relationship between the terms used for smallpox and for smallpox gods, and argues that similarities in their meanings and in the characteristics of the disease were determining factors in the creation of the gods' personalities. The second part of the paper discusses how possession is defined in relation to the personification of smallpox, the smallpox goddess, and the person afflicted.

Keywords: smallpox, possession, shamanic language, personification, smallpox terms

Introduction

In Korea, as elsewhere, smallpox was one of the most feared diseases from ancient times up to its disappearance from the country in 1959.² It is therefore not surprising that it is one of the diseases that is mentioned most

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often in the annals and medical books of the Chosŏn period. The response of Korean people to the disease was not unidirectional: the idea that it was caused by supernatural entities was widespread at all levels of society and medical and traditional-popular cures for the disease were sought after, often mixing various methods. While the government occasionally deemed that treatment involved physical isolation, people also conducted rituals like *yŏje* 厲祭 during the smallpox epidemic to expel the disease by performing acts of deference to the smallpox gods. Indeed, such shamanistic healing rituals and popular prescriptions were often applied in parallel with those ordered by the government.³

It is uncertain when smallpox first arrived in Korea, but Chinese and Japanese documents indicate it first came from China between the fourth and the sixth centuries.⁴ The first mention of smallpox in Korean documents dates back to the year 785 in *Samguk sagi*, where it is reported that in the sixth year of the reign of King Sŏndŏk (r. 780–785) the king passed away after 13 days of the disease, while in 857 King Munsŏng (r. 839–857) died after 10 days. Although words related to smallpox are not mentioned, the length of the disease suggests that the cause of death was indeed smallpox.⁵

Terms for smallpox and semantic change

Studies in historical linguistics indicate that semantic change took place over centuries with regard to the terms used for diseases: these meanings encapsulate historical, social, and cultural information and reflect people's perception of diseases. Shin Tong-wŏn discusses diachronic changes in how the disease was conceptualized and the words that were used for smallpox in Korea prior to the twentieth century.⁶ Following a similar line of research, Ruth I. Meserve presents a linguistic analysis of the words used for smallpox in Tungus languages in the sixteenth century, incorporating not only the historical relationships between Manchu and other countries, but how they show important cultural, religious, and linguistic borrowings.⁷

According to Shin Tong-wŏn, the medical terminology for smallpox in Korean can be divided into two periods: before and after the introduction of “modern” western medicine. The first period is strongly indebted to oriental medicine and uses Chinese medical terminology, while the second is characterized by western medicine and the adoption of western medical terms. While Japanese, Mongolians, and Manchurians used their own native words for “disease,” Korea adopted Chinese terms and assimilated more Chinese medical words than neighboring

countries. An example of the close relations between the two countries is the Korean borrowing of the Chinese word for disease, *bīng* (Kr. *pyǒng*) 病.⁸

Semantic changes of words for disease may indicate Koreans' close relationship with other medical traditions, but there is abundant evidence to indicate native Korean concepts of the disease itself, and these concepts reveal the attitudes and emotions people had towards the disease, particularly before the introduction of "modern" Western medicine. Pertinent questions in this regard are: What do the terms for disease communicate or how do these terms manifest people's fears and hopes before and after the introduction of western medicine? What kind of diagnoses and therapies were prescribed according to official and non-official authorities? Were shamanistic practices and a shamanistic world view on smallpox distinct from the medicine of officialdom or did they overlap? By exploring the semantic aspects of terms for smallpox and the practices and prescriptions regarding the disease, I shall suggest that the traditional concept based on a shamanistic view of the disease is fundamental in understanding the pox, its characteristics, and the determination of effective therapies. This view was not in contrast with the more official diagnoses and prescriptions on the pox. Official terms prior to the introduction of modern western medicine tended to be merely descriptive but non-official terms indicate beliefs about spiritual power and the efficacy of ritual acts. The aim here is thus to demonstrate how by personification of the pox and by anthropomorphizing the disease, shamans produced diagnoses and constructed therapies and taught these to people. Since ancient times, Koreans have created familiar ways to control and deal with the terrible disease and references to the disease in shaman's *muga* or songs offer insights into attitudes and emotions.

Smallpox Reflected in Name Changes and Worldviews

Smallpox is a disease that is known by more terms than any other illness both in medical documents and in common parlance. *Chǒnyǒndu* 天然痘, *taeyōk* 大疫, *tuch'ang* 痘瘡, *tujin* 痘疹, *tuyōk* 痘疫, *wanduch'ang* 豌豆瘡, *p'och'ang* 抱瘡, and *hoyōk* 戶疫 are just some of the terms used in medical documents, while *sonnim* 손님, *mama* 媽媽, *paeksech'ang* 百歲瘡, *pyōlsōng* 別星, *k'ūn mama* 큰마마 (큰媽媽), and *hogu mama* 戶口媽媽 were some of the common terms and names of gods used in everyday speech.

Generally speaking, terms for smallpox indicated in the *K'ūn sajōn* (1947)⁹ suggest a tendency for usage based on whether the register is oriental medicine, western medicine, or, until the end of the Chosŏn period, popular tradition relating to shamanism. From the above-mentioned registers—for convenience

called “official texts” (oriental and western medicine) and “unofficial texts” (popular tradition)—only some of the terms considered salient for the purposes of this paper will be discussed.

Terms for smallpox in official texts

Tuch'ang 痘瘡

Tuch'ang was the most common term for smallpox—also called *wönduch'ang* 豌豆瘡—and was mentioned for the first time in the thirteenth-century text *Hyangyak kugüppang* 鄉藥救急方.¹⁰ Yi Nüng-hwa looks back to the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) and notes the origin of the term: “[the] word *tu* 痘 is a re-figuration of the shape of a crusty bean.”¹¹ The character 痘 underwent several changes, and its synonyms *tuch'ang* 痘瘡 and *tujin* 痘疹 added second characters that represent the progression of the disease: *ch'ang* 瘡 refers to how the skin changes as it becomes moist and festers, while *chin* 疹 alludes to the outbreaks on the skin rather than to the change of color.¹² Before the Chosön period, the term *haengyök* 行疫 was also used: *haeng* 行 indicates movement, so its meaning suggests epidemic spread rather than bodily symptoms. Although *tuch'ang* was used less at the beginning of Chosön, the term *tu* 痘 in *tuch'ang* was widely used as a general term in oriental medicine by the end of the dynasty. In the *K'ün sajön*, the word is mentioned when listing another term for smallpox: *ch'önyöndu* 天然痘, which the dictionary states is synonymous with *tubyöng* 痘病 and *yökshin* 疫神, two words that will be discussed in more detail below. It is interesting that in the annals published at the beginning of the Chosön dynasty, one finds the term smallpox relating more frequently to the restrictions imposed from the shamanistic view of the disease, i.e., resorting to medication was an act against the smallpox gods and the disease must be welcomed. Not even the king and his family were exempt from such restrictions, the belief being that smallpox deities were extremely capricious and had the power to decide if an afflicted person should live, be harmed, or even die.

Yökshin 疫神

Another term that was widely used in official registers—and mentioned above in relation to *K'ün sajön*—was *yökshin*. Despite the fact that it signifies “smallpox god,” this term was not generally used by shamans or by ordinary people. Nevertheless, the meaning of the word puts emphasis on spiritual power and therefore on the popular religious belief system. In the case of the synonymous *yökbyöng* 疫病, the disease is objectified, as the second character indicates. It was during the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) that the use of the word *yök*

ceased to occur: *yŏkshin* was replaced with *tuch'ang* 痘瘡, which in some way signals the end of the personification of smallpox and the end of the idea that the disease had a spiritual cause. Objective “modernity” had arrived.

Terms for smallpox in unofficial texts

Mama

K'un sajŏn quotes the term *mama* that appears frequently with *tuch'ang* and *ch'ŏnyŏndu*. Shin Tong-wŏn points out that there is no mention of *mama* being used as a respectable appellative for the king and queen in the records before Chosŏn, and that its first appearance occurs in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries.

The headword *tuhŭiryŏ* 두회료 (痘回了) is indicated in the Korean language during the Chosŏn period as *yŏkchil tosyŏda* 역질도셔다 (a native Korean term), and in the Chinese Qing dynasty it was called *mama marimbi* 마마 마림비; moreover, the headword *songdu* 송두 (送痘), (send away the smallpox) is, in the Korean of the Chosŏn period, 送信 [송신] ㄸ-다, which corresponds to the Chinese Qing term *mama pudŏmbi* 마마 부담비. In other words, *yŏkchil tosyŏda* means the “smallpox gods are leaving;” 송신 ㄸ-다 means “bid farewell to the smallpox gods,” and the Manchu word *mama* corresponds to *tushin*. During the Manchu war (1636) the Qing invaded Korea, which was subsequently strongly influenced by the Qing; it is possible that the term *mama*, which was used in the Qing court, entered Korean, as with *tushin*.¹³

That the Manchu war was connected to smallpox in Korea is also mentioned by Ruth Meserve, who notes that Manchu soldiers were aware of the danger of smallpox in Korea and were concerned about contracting the disease. Of all the names for the smallpox gods in the Manchu language of the seventeenth century, it is interesting that twelve of the thirty-three that Meserve lists are terms where *mama* occurs: the meanings of the names have similarities with the names of the smallpox gods in Korean shamanism.¹⁴ Some examples of these Manchu names are listed below:

- Amba ilha mama*: Great flower spirit = smallpox (Meserve no. 1),
- Fodo mama*: Willow Goddess (or in Chinese: Zisun Niangniang = Offspring Goddess) (Meserve no. 5),
- Ilha mama*: Flower spirit (female) (Meserve no. 6),
- Mafa mama* (Sibe): Old Woman of the Variole (Meserve no. 7),
- Mama enduri* (Sibe): Goddess of the Pox (an evil spirit) (Meserve no. 8),
- Mama*: literally, grandmother or female ancestor (Meserve no. 10).

Meserve explains *mama* further: “The role of such ‘old women’ is common among the Tungus. ‘On the road to the world of the dead (...) lived old women, the mistresses of the clan river-road and the guardian of the path of clan life.’”¹⁵

In the list above, the word *Niangniang* (Meserve no. 5) is of Chinese origin, sharing a meaning of respect with the Korean word *mama*. As Yi Nŭng-hwa notes: “In [Korean] slang, it is also referred to as *yŏkshin mama*; *mama* means *niangniang* (娘娘, the Chinese term for female members of the royal family). Moreover, in this case the term ‘emissary’ refers to the smallpox gods governing people’s lives.”¹⁶

In brief, *mama* has multiple meanings: it is a name for smallpox gods, it is a title of respect for the gods, and it is an appellative used for members of the royal family.¹⁷ What should be noted is the fact that the god’s personality is reflected in their names and appellatives in both Manchu and in Korean. Further characteristics of the smallpox gods that are common to Manchu and Korean shamanism regard the association of pockmarks with flowers and their descriptions of the gods as being very vindictive.¹⁸

Pyŏlsŏng 別星

Pyŏlsŏng is a multi-semantic item and its meaning recalls links with China. The term indicates a messenger or a government official who receives orders from the king to travel to another region and so is dispatched on a mission. Concerning the names *pyŏlsang* 別常 or *pyŏlsŏng* 別星, Shin explains: “...in Korea smallpox was transmitted from China, so Korean people accepted it just as they accepted orders from Chinese envoys; they called it *pyŏlsang*, a term that had existed since Koryŏ, and it later became *pyŏlsŏng*.”¹⁹

Pyŏlsŏng is also synonymous with *kaeksŏng* 客星, composed of *kaek* 客 “guest” and *sŏng* 星 “star,” that is, a star that appears from time to time. A connection between the king, star or sky, and smallpox is proposed by Yi Nŭng-hwa, who quotes a passage from the 1818 text *Mongmin simsŏ* 牧民心書 by Chŏng Yang-yong that describes a shaman scraping some yellow soil to drive away *pyŏlsŏng*, the smallpox god. This is similar to the ritual act performed by the king during his travels that recalled the sun’s elliptic orbit.

Hogu 戶口 (Wandering God)

*Hogu*²⁰ is also known by toponymic names: Kangnam *Hogu Pyŏlsŏng* and Kangnam *Hogu Kaesŏng*, but also *Hogwui Mama*. Kangnam (Ch. Jiangnan²¹) is a shaman reference to China, the place name thus revealing the origin of smallpox. The first

time that the word *hogu* is associated with the smallpox gods is in *Ojuyŏn munjang chŏnsan'go* (五洲衍文長箋散稿), an encyclopedic book written by Yi Kyugyŏng (1788–1863).²²

The gods of smallpox are called Hogwi Mama or Sonnim in the east and Soshin in the Yŏngnam or southeast region. When a child gets smallpox, a bowl with purified water is placed on a clean small table, and the parents pray every day, and they offer rice cooked in a pot and *siruttŏk*. When the child is ill, all the offerings, including paper flags and a horse made of bush clovers are presented to the gods. This is called to “deliver with respect.” When the child starts to suffer from smallpox, it is prohibited for the parents to sleep together. If a child with smallpox also has other diseases, it is believed that the cause and the healing depend on the gods. It is said that Nobong (老峯) and Minsanggong (閔相公) became the gods in charge of smallpox. That is nonsense! Moreover, they say that when they allow a child to get smallpox, parents see in their dreams a noble man entering in their house, and the child must tremble.²³

Hogu's red veil

In Europe the color red was used to treat smallpox.²⁴ Fenner et al., provides some examples showing that red had a strong symbolic power from the twelfth century. Red cloth was hung in the rooms of smallpox patients: King Charles V of France (r. 1364–1380) was dressed in red when he had the disease, and when she fell ill with smallpox in 1562, Elizabeth I of England was wrapped in a red blanket. Wearing red was extended “to all persons that come near the patient [who] must be clad in gowns of the same color.”²⁵ Later, Fenner et al., point out that “the red treatment was given scientific authority by Finsen, who claimed that the treatment of smallpox patients with red light reduced the severity of scarring, and later developed rules governing erythrotherapy.”²⁶

Elsewhere, red therapy was practiced in Japan, China, India, Turkey, Asian Georgia, and West Africa. In Manchu, red treatment was personified in the transformation of the smallpox god into the “Red Witch,” who was described as an ugly little old woman called “mother” or “grandmother.” In this respect, the description given in a tale reported by Meserve is of interest:

With red hair and robed in red fur or a red dress, she comes along the migration routes of reindeer or is at a crossroads. She sits on a sledge often pulled by dogs with red fur. Invisible to people, she can be seen by a shaman, who knows she is the evil spirit of smallpox. To appease her, various offerings are made or spirits appealed to; shamans may engage her in great battles.²⁷

The description of the Red Witch recalls Hogu's veil in Korean shamanistic rituals for Sonnim (or “Visitors”). In the sequence of shamanistic ritual dedicated to

Hogu, a young female god appears with her head and face completely covered by a red veil. Except for this description, there is no further direct reference to the color red being used as a treatment in Korean shamanistic rituals. The appearance of Hogu in the ritual is nevertheless significant and can be interpreted in various ways. One such interpretation is that the red of the veil symbolically refers to her pockmarked face; it indicates that she has been infected and is now immune.

Another aspect to consider is the association of the color red with other diseases. In the past, smallpox was not always distinguished from other contagious diseases, particularly measles, *hongyŏk*, literally the “red epidemic.” The disease was called *hongyŏk*, because a red rash developed all over the body, and it was also known as *majin* (hemp seed pox), because the rash resembled hemp seeds, which are even smaller than sesame seeds. Along with *tuch’ang* (smallpox) and another disease vaguely classified as a *yŏk* (pestilence), *hongyŏk* became established as one of the three most common and most widely spread epidemic diseases.²⁸

The red color is common to various epidemic diseases, but there was a tendency to consider them as a single category, as can be seen in the royal edicts. The rituals offered to the gods or demons of pestilence were among those rituals occasionally ordered by the king, in addition to other measures against *hongyŏk*. According to Sin Tong-wŏn, sacrificial rites devoted to the pestilence demons were undocumented up to the Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392), becoming institutionalized from 1403.²⁹

The color red also has significance in ritual practices. On the fifth day of October, a rice cake made with red *adzuki* beans is offered for good health; in Pyŏlshin *kut*, three cups of water mixed with red chili pepper and charcoal are offered to banish miscellaneous spirits and misfortunes. In healing rituals too, red-colored beans and red chili pepper are scattered around the area where the ritual is to take place in order to fight the disease and expel evil spirits.

Nor are shamanic songs lacking in smallpox gods represented by the color red. The brief appearance of the Red Ghost Hongshin—one of the most fearful gods in the song for Paridaegi, the abandoned princess—and Hogu’s red veil in Sonnin *kut* are just two instances where red undergoes a process of personification. Personification involves a symbiotic relationship and an association between the color red and high temperature (fever, anger) and possession (infection). In other words, red is charged with symbolic meanings that communicate the phase of the disease: the apex of vulnerability to the disease, i.e., the patient’s unconscious state and high fever is complemented by the gods’ possession of the patient. The afflicted person is therefore doubly possessed, by the disease and by the gods. However, if the patient is seen as a vessel at the gods’ disposal, the

gods become the alter ego of the patient, who exhibits this state of possession through the symptoms of the disease. The close relationship between the disease and the patient is best demonstrated by an analysis of the *Song of Ch'öyong*³⁰ and shamanic songs or *muga*.

Anthropomorphized names: shaping personality

Further to my discussion of names, we should consider how the names anthropomorphize the disease and even create personality. On the one hand, the names reflect people's fear of the disease and its cause. On the other hand, they demonstrate people's efforts to "control" the disease by anthropomorphizing it—giving it an appearance, character, and behavior.

In shamanic language, the aforementioned terms and Korean names for the smallpox gods can be grouped in the following way:

- 1) Yökshin and tushin: these terms stress the appearance of the disease, its supernatural cause (*yök* and *tu*, combined with *shin* 神), and the dangerous power of the gods.
- 2) Mama has multi-semantic features: it is a name that indicates beautiful young smallpox goddesses; it is an honorific title used for royal family members and thus highlights the great respect given to the gods.
- 3) Sonnim means "the guest" or "Visitor," and underlines that the god is an outsider or stranger: a guest who will be treated well, but one who should leave after a certain time.
- 4) Hogu is synonymous with *pyölsöng* and is identified as the god of smallpox who goes from house to house and person to person, without exception, spreading the disease.

Names more than terms seek to anthropomorphize, but they all seek to endow the disease with personality. Literary references make this abundantly clear.

The Personification of the Smallpox God

The oldest extant description of the god of pestilence is in the poem *Ch'öyong*, which clearly anthropomorphizes the smallpox disease. The poem tells of a man (Ch'öyong) married to a beautiful woman. Ch'öyong confronts the god of pestilence as the latter has transformed himself into a human being to lie beside the woman while Ch'öyong, her husband, is away. On his return, he witnesses the scene and improvises a song accompanied by dance. The god is moved by this unexpected behavior and decides to take his leave. Tradition says that if Ch'öyong's portrait

is hung at the front door of a house, the family will be protected from smallpox. Ch'öyong is seen as a shaman, who through his dance and song entertains the god, prompting the “demon” of pestilence to depart.

More can be said about the poem from a symbolic point of view, and in particular with regard to the intimate relationship between the agent and the object of the disease, that is, between the god and the smallpox victim. This is symbolized by the spirit lying beside the diseased female, which represents the smallpox incubation period: the god takes possession of the victim's body. Smallpox is anthropomorphized and transformed into a male god with a pockmarked red face. The poem focuses on the behavior of Ch'öyong, but not a word is mentioned about his wife. The silence that surrounds her is the symbolic language of passivity, like a person suffering from catching the virus: she is possessed by the god.

The advice to hang a portrait of the god's pockmarked red face in front of the house calls to mind the aforementioned tradition of hanging red cloth in the room of the smallpox sufferer or wrapping the victim in a red blanket. In other words, hanging the portrait of the smallpox god at the door is a precaution to avoid being infected by the virus, while also acknowledging that the god has the power to decide *not* to inflict the disease.

Over the centuries, the *Song of Ch'öyong* continued to have the function of exorcising smallpox. In order to control smallpox or an epidemic in general, the poem evolved during the Koryö dynasty into a dance called the Ch'ugyök 逐疫, a dance to expel spirits of diseases, and the Narye 儺禮 rituals to expel demons and evil spirits, which survived in the Yöje 厲祭 ritual.

Similar Traits in the Smallpox God and in the Disease

In the past, the smallpox ritual was held during a smallpox epidemic, but also whenever it was necessary to forestall one. A few songs of the Sonnim ritual were recorded before the disease was eradicated in Korea. Like other shaman's songs, the songs for Sonnim also have complex regional and individual variants. For the purpose of this paper, extracts of a Sonnim song from *Tonghaean muga* (Shaman Songs from the East Coast)³¹ will be considered.

In this *muga* we come to learn that there are over fifty-five smallpox gods, of whom only three decided to go to Korea from Kangnam China. The description of their journey to Korea closely recalls the itinerary of Chinese delegates in the Chosön period, and the song praises the wonders of the landscape and food in Korea; indeed, Korean delicacies are the things that make Sonnim decide to go there. Here, it is worth recalling the aforementioned term *yökchil tosyöda*,

comprising a noun *yōkchil*, pox, and a verb of movement, *tosyōda* to go out, that is, the smallpox gods leaving and the movement is in an outward direction.

Among the smallpox gods, we will focus only on the beautiful young goddess Kak-ssi Sonnim (Kak-ssi, the Visitor) as, more than others, her behavior is consistent with the illness compared to, for example, Monk Sonnim or Scholar Sonnim, whose tempers are less vindictive. Her beauty is as noteworthy as her temperament; her vindictive nature recalls the violence and fearlessness of the disease. Before entering Korea, she asks a boatman to loan her a boat to cross the Amnok River, but he tries to bargain with her, saying:

If the Visitor Kak-ssi will spend one single night with me, then
I will carry you across without charging for the journey. Then,
As soon as he uttered these words,
Visitor Kak-ssi, hearing them,
Thrust fire inside the smokestack and a torch into the fire,
Seized the shifty boatman, cutting off his head
And throwing him into the Amnok River in Ŭiju.

Kak-ssi (the Visitor) is characterized by her cruelty: her fury will not abate until she has killed all three sons of the boatman. Her actions are uncontrollable, violent, and lethal, similar to the virulence of smallpox. Further common traits with the disease are found in the obligations imposed on people: we again note that the obligations are subject to a process of personification, transformed into the personal tastes of the smallpox gods. Any offerings made must be clean, unpolluted, and carried out with a pure heart. In other words, the smallpox gods hate anything that is contaminated, unclean, and dirty. These precautions have to be taken to stop the disease spreading, and they must be strictly observed along with safeguards in hygiene. The shaman song continues with the following.

The old grandmother agrees to welcome the Visitors into her shabby house, but takes care to clean everything before they enter:

[...] In the four corners of the room, and the four corners of the kitchen,
She beats everything,
The dust which is on the ground,
The dust which is on the uprights,
She sweeps everywhere and spreads [carpets]
And although there is only a mat to sit on, she beats it,
Sweeps the floor free of all the dirty dust,
Washes and lays the clean carpet,
And after beating all the dirty kitchen utensils
And hanging them up again clean,
She receives the Visitors, she welcomes the three Visitors.

In another part of the *muga* narrative, pollution and dirt become the object of speech acts that convey human unwillingness to welcome the smallpox, acts which signify a lack of respect towards the gods, whose anger drives them to take revenge by infecting the child with smallpox.

Rich Mister Kim refuses to welcome the gods:

You know, suspecting that the Visitors might come back,
 He brings [outside the front gate] all the dirty things
 And in each corner scatters hens' droppings
 And other putrid things,
 Upon the gate he hangs branches and sprigs of Artemisia
 And takes floating feces out of the toilet
 And scatters them all over,
 He comes and goes in all directions
 Spreading red hot chili powder.

Mr. Kim is punished for such behavior as the Visitors are powerful supernatural beings who decide life and death. However, they can also be benevolent, deciding to infect a person with smallpox only lightly, rather than fatally.

Smallpox Infection—Possessed by the Gods

In the *muga* narrative above, one can observe that smallpox, as a disease and as gods, is distinct from the afflicted person who is seen as being a potential vessel of infection. The following lines of the *muga* tell of the infection by the gods, and the symptoms of the disease. First of all, the hope that the Visitors will infect the child only superficially is expressed in the words of the old grandmother:

I beg you to infect our Ch'örŭng [rich Mister Kim's son] with the first degree
 [of sickness],
 Please leave [after] infecting him
 And causing the black, the red, and the white rash of the second degree.

In the lines below, the imminent infection or possession involves a sudden change in the ongoing speech event: more participants take part, and this is marked by a change in personal pronouns, suffixes, and verb tenses, particularly in reference to symptoms. The symptoms of the disease are high fever and pain, which make those infected unable to control themselves; shamanic language is used when describing how the smallpox gods take possession of the child. Once the virus takes hold or, in other words, once the Visitors take possession of the child, the victim describes the terrible pains in the first person. A closer reading of the text suggests the presence of different voices. The alternation between the third person narrator and the first-person speaker followed by repetition of the

interjection “*Aigo*,” and the mention of specific parts of the body affected, render the scene dramatically:

They cause Kim Ch’örüng,
 Who was studying, to stop studying and make him ill.
 While he was studying, Kim Ch’örüng suddenly said:
 “*Aigo* my head! *Aigo*, my legs!
Aigo, my stomach! *Aigo*, what am I to do!”
 Breathing causes sharp pain,
 And there’s no question of eating or drinking,
 He feels only sharp pains.
 “*Aigo*, mother, *aigo*, father,
Aigo I will die.”

The *muga* shows the progression of the disease through a gradual possession by the Visitor, who enters the afflicted person’s body. One of the symptoms is a high fever that clouds the patient’s mind. This also transforms a healthy child into a possessed ill person who can “see” things that are “unseen” and can “hear” the voices of those who are familiar to him, i.e., extraordinary senses that only belong to special people or beings like the gods. The possession is made by visual and audible means: Visitor Kak-ssi takes on the appearance of Ch’örüng’s mother and follows Mr. Kim, who takes his son to a temple to hide him from the Visitors.

Visitor Kak-ssi took the appearance of Ch’örüng’s mother,
 And went up to the temple Yōnha, calling him from outside.
 “Hey, Ch’örüng! Ch’örüng!” she calls.
 Ch’örüng, whether he wants to listen or not,
 Knows that this is really his mother’s voice!
 He rushes out, *vrrrrr*,³² to look for her all around,
 But there is nowhere his mother might have gone,
 Only a sinister and desolate wind blowing!
 After looking around carefully, Ch’örüng does not see her,
 And is about to go back into the temple.
 How can Visitor Kak-ssi, who is a god,
 Become visible to human beings?
 As Ch’örüng is going inside, she catches him and inflicts a first stab,
 She catches him, and she inflicts one stab at a time,
 (...)
 Meanwhile, [the Visitors] force Ch’örüng to say:
 “*Aigo*, father, *aigo*, mother!
 I am dying, I beg you to let me live a little longer.
 Father! Please let me live.
 Mother! Please let me live.
 I am going, going away,
 Going away following the Visitors. [...]”

As [his son] is saying these words,
 The Visitors pierce his throat with a metal staple
 And his mouth with an iron gag,
 So that he may say no more.

The *muga* is interrupted by the shaman, who chants now in the first person.³³

I tell you, before, in those days, in their villages,
 either they are possessed by smallpox or measles,
 or are dead of smallpox or measles,
 before Sonnim departs from the village,
 [people] do not bury adults or children but
 they place a *ttöktae*³⁴ on the hill behind the house,
 and lay the corpse on top of the *ttöktae*,
 and if they guard it night and day
 it seems that sometimes [Sonnim] allowed the dead to come back to life...

The voice of the shaman narrator again changes into that of the Visitors' voices:

"We will let him live again, so don't bury his corpse,
 set up a *ttöktae* on the hill behind the house and lay his corpse outside
 and tell rich Mister Kim to go there to guard it!
 Tell him to stay awake night and day,
 to keep watch [over his son's body]."

The shaman speaks as an officiant in the first person:

When the Visitors are no longer angry, I mean,
 when they are truly pacified, they let Ch'örüng live again!
 They bring Ch'örüng back to life.

The *ttöktae* tradition mentioned in the *muga* requires some explanation. Murayama Chijun, an ethnographer who conducted fieldwork in Korea during the Japanese colonial period, reported the custom of exposing the bodies of those who died of smallpox to the air before giving them permanent burial. The corpse was wrapped well and placed upon a wooden altar set in a wall or tied to the branches of a tree, or else placed at the entrance of a village, or left in the fields or the mountains.³⁵

The reasons for this temporary grave custom differed from region to region. In general, it was thought that the death was the will of the gods, and if the corpse was buried immediately it would provoke their anger. The god would take revenge by infecting other children in the family or in the whole village, so the corpse was first offered to the gods by, for example, hanging it in a tree for three to seven days. According to the shaman's song above, the reason for laying the child's corpse on the *ttöktae* is to offer the child to the smallpox gods, and his

family must pray devotedly in the hope that the gods will forgive them and bring their son back to life.

Identification—Personification—Possession

Perundevi Srinivasan's work discusses a possible definition of the concept of "possession" in the context of the goddess Mariyamman, the goddess of poxes, in South India.³⁶ Indeed, her work prompts us to ask how possession can be seen in the case of the smallpox gods in Korean shamanism. Srinivasan discusses various explanations of "possession," but does not address clearly how infection with smallpox occurs in terms of "possession" by an external agent. She argues that in the case of Mariyamman, the "source" of the diseases is not conceived of as something that enters the body from the outside, but "dwells in the stomach and it arrives from there,"³⁷ i.e., it comes from within and manifests itself in pustules. The gods and the pustules are one and the same, that is, the afflicted person is identified with the smallpox goddess. Moreover, such gods are considered benevolent (they visit to protect, to save the family from greater tragedy), but people cannot simply "invite them" to receive a disease from them.

It is not particularly useful in this study to try and formulate a general definition of "possession," but rather to place "possession" within a field of meaning that can be derived from this *muga*. Sonnim does not dwell inside the body of an afflicted person, but is invited to infect it superficially. The cause of the smallpox is thus perceived as an external entity that enters the body and causes the suffering. The smallpox gods are identified with the disease. The afflicted person is not identified with the smallpox goddess or the disease. A question remains, however, as to whether possession completely occludes the sufferer's identity or not. The narrative of the *muga* suggests that a healthy child is possessed by Sonnim, who enables the child to "hear" the voices of those who are familiar to him, i.e., that the power to "hear" and "see" the voices of people who are not there can be available only to special beings, like the gods. Endowing the sufferer with special powers does not identify the afflicted person with the smallpox gods or even with the disease itself. To be more precise, the power is *granted* by the smallpox goddess, who allows the child to "hear" his mother's voice: the power remains with the goddess, who transforms her appearance and her voice to be those of Ch'örüng's mother. Later in the *muga* it is again Sonnim who induces Ch'örüng to describe the symptoms of the pain in detail. The source is Sonnim, the speaker is Ch'örüng, and the two entities remain distinguishable. The voices do not overlap, but are heard alternately. The switching of personal pronouns in the *muga* clearly distinguishes the speakers throughout the narrative structure.

The first-person pronoun is used by the shaman as narrator and officiant, and by Ch'örŭng to describe his sufferings, and lastly by Sonnim. Elsewhere, I have discussed possession in the case of *kongsu*, or an oracle, when the change of speakers is indicated by the switching of personal pronouns, verb endings, and verb tenses.³⁸ Although the physical voice of the two speakers, the possessed and the possessor, come from the same body, grammatical cues indicate the actual speaker—the ordinary person or the possessive or oracular power.

In short, the possession found in the *muga* can be defined as: 1) smallpox with an external spiritual cause; 2) the afflicted person is possessed by an external agent; 3) the afflicted person's power "to hear" is again identifiable with an action induced by an external agent. That power "to hear" does not come from the afflicted person. In other words, the aforementioned *muga* indicates possession by the smallpox goddess and the disease, but they remain different from the afflicted person, who is a mere vessel of the smallpox goddess.

As to personification, two types can be seen: one is connected with the disease itself and the other one with its causes. The disease is treated in an anthropomorphic way, with certain features of character attributed to it. The disease was spoken to with reverence to avoid hurting its feelings and prevent it from attacking another person. The personified disease as a goddess then caused the affliction; the affliction did not come from within.

Final considerations

There are interesting parallels between the names for smallpox and those for the smallpox gods, which reflects how people perceived the disease at the time. That is, smallpox came from outside the body and it had personality. The terms often found in official documents refer to place or symptom, but the popular view of smallpox, as evidenced in the *muga* examined above, was different. Furthermore, the linguistic and cultural aspects highlighted here (colors and hygiene) do not contradict our modern concern with the material origins of disease and so we would not be justified in calling them superstitious. Meanings in names and terms, and the narrative voice in shamanic songs indicate the processes through which the disease became anthropomorphized in the smallpox gods' characters and behavior. Because the disease acquired a personality, it then became amenable to negotiation and supplication. Although people believed that smallpox had a supernatural cause, they prayed that it would enter the body only minimally, in other words, that a child would not die, but recover after a few days. Further measures were the restrictions put into force during a visitation of the smallpox gods: the gods required clean, uncontaminated food and pure clean water; they

hated dust and dirt, and strict rules had to be followed. These are similar to the guidelines given in connection with modern medicine in order to avoid infection during an outbreak of smallpox.

Notes

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2. Kim Ok-chu, “Chosŏn malgi tuch’ang ūi yuhaeng kwa min’gan ūi taeŭng,” *Ŭisahak* 2.1 (1993): 38.
3. Kwŏn Pok-kyu, “Chosŏn chŏngi yŏkpyŏng e taehan min’gan ūi taeŭng,” *Ŭisahak* 8.1 (1999): 21–32.
4. W. H. McNeill, *Plagues and People* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985).
5. Kim, “Smallpox Epidemics,” 1993, p. 39.
6. Shin, Tong-wŏn, *Hohwan, mama, ch’ŏnyŏndu* (Seoul: Tolbegae, 2013).
7. Ruth I. Meserve, “Smallpox among the Tungus Peoples: The language of a disease,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 50.1 (2006): 75–100.
8. Chŏn Chae-wan, “Shin Tong-wŏn, *Hohwan, mama, ch’ŏnyŏndu*,” *Yonsei ūisahak* 16.2 (2013): 123.
9. *K’ŭn sajŏn*, 1947. The dictionary comprises several volumes with the first volume published in 1947, the second in 1949, the third in 1950, and the fourth, fifth and sixth in 1957. The medical terms from *K’ŭn sajŏn* are those mentioned by Shin Tong-wŏn, *Hohwan, mama, ch’ŏnyŏndu*, 2013.
10. See *Hyangyak kugŭppang*, 1258, and *Sejong Sillok*, vol. 107, Sejong, year 27, first month, *kyŏngin*; *Sŏnjo Sillok*, vol. 25, Sonjo, year 24, first month, *shinch’uk* (quoted in note 17 by Kim Ok-chu, p. 39).
11. Yi Nŭng-hwa, *Chosŏn musok: yŏksa ro pon Han’guk musok* (Seoul, Ch’angbi, 2008): 361–362, at 360.
12. Chŏng Yŏn-shik, “Chosŏn shidae ūi Ch’ŏnyŏndu wa min’gan ūiryŏ,” *Inmun nonch’ong*, Seoul Yŏja taehakkyo Inmun kwahak yŏn’guso 14 (2005): 97–108.
13. Shin Tong-wŏn, *Hohwan, mama, ch’ŏnyŏndu* (Seoul: Tolbegae, 2013), p. 175.
14. Lee, Ki-Moon, “A Comparative Study of Manchu and Korean,” *Ural-Altische Jahrbücher*, 30 (1958): 104–120, indicates *buturi* as “measles” and *mama* as “smallpox;” quoted by Meserve in note 29, p. 82.
15. Meserve, “Smallpox,” p. 83.
16. Yi Nŭng-hwa, *Chosŏn musok*, pp. 361–362.
17. *Han’guk minsok taebaek kwa sajŏn* vol. 1 (Seoul: Minjok munhwasa, 1991): 654.
18. During the Japanese colonial period, the Japanese anthropologist Akiba reported that Korean people believed that pockmarks were given by the god Tu, and associated these marks to smallpox and the various names related to *mama*: *mama chaguk* and *sonnim: sonnim chaguk*. See Akamatsu Chijō and Takashi Akiba, *Chosŏn musok ūi yŏn’gu, second part* (first printed 1938). (Korean language translation of *Chōsen fuzoku no kenkyū*, Study of Korean Shamanism), (Seoul: Tongmun, 1991), p. 170.
19. Shin. *Hohwan*, p. 173.
20. Hogu Pyŏlsŏng 戶口別星 is also called Hogwi Pyŏlsŏng 胡鬼別星; here the emphasis is on the smallpox goddess going from house to house to spread the disease.
21. “Kangnam” likely refers to Jiangnan 江南.

22. Yi Kyugyōng's book consists of 60 volumes, 60 books, and a total of 1,417 topics covering history, art (literature, music), life history, religion (Buddhism, Taoism, geomancy, epidemiology), livelihoods (agriculture, fishing, commerce), and natural science (astronomy, biology, medicine).
23. *Han'guk minsok taebaek kwa sajōn*, <https://folkency.nfm.go.kr/kr/topic/detail/3042> (accessed 21 May 2021).
24. F. Fenner, D. A. Henderson, I. Arita, Z. Jezek, I. D. Landyi, *Smallpox and its Eradication* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1988), p. 228.
25. E. Kaempfer, *The history of Japan, 1690–92* vol. 1 (trans. J. G. Scheuchzer in 1727; reprinted 1906) (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1906), p. 296. Quoted by Fenner, *Smallpox*, 1988, p. 228.
26. N.R. Finsen, "The chemical rays of light and smallpox." In Finsen, N. R. (trans. J. H. Sequiera), *Phototherapy* (London: Arnold, 1901): 1–36, quoted by Fenner, *Smallpox*, 1988, p. 228.
27. Meserve, "Smallpox," p. 84.
28. Shin Dongwōn [Shin Tong-wōn], "Measures against Epidemics during Late 18th Century Korea: Reformation or Restoration?" *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 37 (2014): 191.
29. King Chōngjo ordered the immediate performance of sacrificial rites to the demons of pestilence at the same time as the court was pondering measures against *hongyōk*. In Shin Dongwon, "Measures against Epidemics," 2014.
30. One of the *hyangga* of the Silla period, the *Song of Ch'ōyong*, 879 reads: "Having caroused far into the night/ In the moonlit capital,/ I returned home and in my bed,/ Behold, four legs./ Two were mine;/ Whose are the other two?/ Formerly two were mine; What shall be done now they are taken?" Peter Lee, ed. *A History of Korean Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 73.
31. Ch'oe Chōng-nyō and Sō Tae-sōk, eds. *Tonghaean muga* (Seoul: Hyōngsōl, 1974): 240–406.
32. Onomatopoeic sound of the verb to run.
33. See A.L. Bruno, *The Gate of Words: Language in the Rituals of Korean Shamans* (Leiden: Leiden University Press), 2002.
34. A rectangular wooden board.
35. Murayama Chijun, *Chosōn ūi kwishin*, trans by No Sōnghwan (Seoul: Minūmsa, 1990), pp. 286–288.
36. Perundevi Srinivasan, "Sprouts of the Body, Sprouts of the Field: Identification of the Goddess with Poxes in South India," *Religions* (2019): 147.
37. Srinivasan, "Sprouts of the Body," 6.
38. Bruno, *The Gate of Words*.

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