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Final thesis

**Han Kang, the *Mansin*
of the *Minjung*:
Mourning, Resistance and Healing through
Shamanic Rituals and Literature in Contemporary
Korea**

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. An Jong-Chol

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof.ssa Serena De Marchi

Graduand

Serena Verdelli

Matriculation Number 889322

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E quanto dobbiamo amare per restare umani fino alla fine?
To what degree must we love in order to remain human to the end?
얼마나 사랑해야 우리는 끝내 인간으로 남는 것인가?

HAN KANG, Nobel Prize lecture, 7th December 2024

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Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

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Abstract

This research examines the work of Han Kang (Nobel Prize for Literature 2024) through the lens of Korean Shamanism, proposing that the author can be understood as a “*Mansin* of the *Minjung*” and, more broadly, of those who suffered violent and unjust deaths, particularly in the context of political protest (as in Gwangju) and violence (as in Jeju). While the association between Han Kang and shamanic practice has been only marginally addressed in existing scholarship, this study develops a comprehensive analysis of this connection by bringing together literary criticism and studies on Korean Shamanism.

This analysis was conducted by drawing on monographs, scholarly articles and ethnographic accounts, as well as close readings of Han Kang’s works—including 『소년이 온다』 (“Human Acts”) and 『작별하지 않는다』 (“We do not Part”) and by comparing them together. This research thus adopts a comparative methodological approach. It examines how her writing functions analogously to 굿 ([*kut*], shamanic rites), acting as a space for mourning, remembrance, resistance and the articulation of suppressed voices.

The analysis demonstrates that Han Kang’s literary production can be interpreted as a form of ritual practice that seeks to give voice to the dead and the marginalised, thereby enacting a process of collective healing. Her works are shown to engage deeply with the historical and ideological dimensions of the *Minjung* movement, functioning both as an elegy for those who suffered in its name and as a broader reflection on collective trauma.

By framing Han Kang’s writing as a form of shamanic mediation, this research also contributes to a reassessment of Korean *Musok*, challenging its frequent dismissal as superstition and highlighting its cultural and emotional

significance. Ultimately, the study offers a new interpretative framework for understanding the intersection of literature, ritual and memory in contemporary Korean contexts.

Introduction

In this research, I examine how Han Kang (Nobel Prize for Literature 2024) can be considered a “Shaman of the *Minjung*”, that is, a term denoting simultaneously “the (common) people”, those who have been marginalised, oppressed or subjected to political violence and of all those who died violent and unjust deaths, and also a specific political and cultural movement that emerged in South Korea from the 1970s onward in opposition to authoritarian rule. In particular, I focus on individuals who lost their lives while protesting for their rights during the Gwangju Democratisation Movement of 1980, when a popular uprising against military rule was violently suppressed, and the victims of the Jeju Uprising of 1948-1954, a period of severe political violence and state repression on Jeju Island.

This topic is especially relevant as the association between the Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Han Kang and the figure of a *Mansin*—a Korean female Shaman who mediates between the human and spiritual worlds through ritual practices—has rarely been taken into consideration by history and literature scholars up until now. Moreover, existing research that touches upon this connection tends to not delve deeply into the subject and to cite the topic only superficially and non-exhaustively. Instead, my research aims at being as comprehensive and complete as possible. By bringing together these three areas—the role of Korean *Mansin* in the processes of mourning, the massacres of Gwangju and Jeju and Han Kang’s literary production—this research seeks to provide new insights into both Han Kang’s literary production and Korean *Mansin*’s role in mourning.

The aims of this research are multiple. First of all, this research seeks to provide a renewed and comprehensive perspective on Korean *Musok*, often dismissed—within Koreans, too—as a superstition.

I am later going to describe and analyse the Gwangju and Jeju massacres, especially by linking them to *Minjung* and to the role it had.

Lastly, I explore how Han Kang may be understood as resembling a *Mansin* and how her books can be interpreted as forms of “굿” ([*kut*], or shamanic rites) or rites of collective memory and healing: in fact, some, if not all, of Han Kang’s novels seek to remember, mourn and celebrate the dead and oppressed, also by giving voice and by helping them finding a way to speak and let their suppressed and ignored voices out; in doing so, Han’s writing engages in an act of exorcising trauma, much like Korean *Mansin* (or possessed Shamans) do. By aligning *Musok* with Han Kang, who, instead, received worldwide praise and recognition, I aim to underline the cultural and emotional importance of Korean Muism.

Furthermore, Han’s books can be read as odes to the *Minjung*, both as a representation of ordinary people and as an historical movement: this research therefore explains how her work functions simultaneously as an epitaph for those who fought for *Minjung* ideals and for those who embody it.

Methodologically, this research mainly uses a text-based and comparative approach: it draws upon interviews, scholarly studies, monographs, anthologies and ethnographic accounts of Korean *Musok*, examining these sources in their historical and cultural contexts and comparing them with Han Kang’s novels, public speeches, essays and interviews. Through this comparative analysis, the research identifies points of convergence between the practices and beliefs associated with Korean Shamanism and Han Kang’s representations of mourning, trauma, the dead and collective memory.

Regarding Han Kang’s literary production, I mainly focused on 『소년이 온다』 (“Human Acts”) and 『작별하지 않는다』 (“We do not Part”); I have analysed all these sources in Korean and/or in English, depending on the availability, and in both languages as in the case of Han Kang’s novels.

The research is structured as follows: the first part is dedicated to an analysis of Korean *Musok*, especially from a modern and contemporary perspective; I analyse the structure and performance of Korean shamanic rites, how they can help in healing trauma for both living and dead subjects and how the ways in which the Shaman herself can be positioned as a marginal and oppressed figure.

The second chapter deals with the *Minjung* movement, focusing mainly on collective mourning after the Gwangju uprising in 1989 and the Jeju massacre in 1948-49, as well as on how these events have gradually gained more public recognition and commemorative importance.

In the following chapter, I address Han Kang's books within these two contexts, I reflect on what should be the role of a novelist and, lastly, analyse her novels considering all the aspects cited above.

Finally, I outline the ritual elements embedded in Han Kang's writing and demonstrate how her literary practice can be understood as an act of collective mourning, healing and remembrance.

Chapter 1: Korean *Musok*, Ritual and Collective Mourning

1.1 Korean *Musok* from a modern perspective. The *Mansin* as Mediator Between the Living and the Dead: *Kut* and *Ssitgim-kut* as Rituals of Mourning and Healing. *Han*, *Wŏnhon* and Collective Trauma

The essential starting point for this research is to define Shamanism (kr.: 무속, [*Musok*]). A proper understanding of this religious and cultural tradition is fundamental to the study of Korean religion, Korean culture and Korean studies more broadly and specifically for this research.

Describing Korean Shamanism has been defined as a “really problematic” task by various scholars, as it does not fall into the big and general category of official and ‘higher’ religions which includes Buddhism, Confucianism¹ and Christianity (Kim, C. 2003, 27). Scholars have traced down the beginnings of Korean Shamanism back to Siberia, where the word ‘*saman*’ described a person who could talk to spirits while in a state of trance (Sarfati 2021, 8-9). However, its origins alone do not help defining what *Musok* really is, as finding an exhaustive term to describe it is extremely challenging. Defining it with the instinctive term ‘religion’ can be both misleading and inaccurate. Scholars specifically identify *Musok* in different ways: Sarfati has described it as a

¹ The classification of Confucianism as a religion is contested and scholars have debated whether it should be understood as a religion, philosophy, ethical system or a combination thereof. This debate falls beyond the scope of this research. For the purposes of this essay, I use the term “religion” as a classificatory framework rather than as a claim about the nature of Confucianism itself. This distinction is particularly relevant given the historical contrast between Confucianism and Shamanism, including the ways in which Confucian thought has sought to regulate, criticise and marginalise Korean shamanic practices.

“vernacular religion” (2021, 96) and a “folk religion” (2021, 8) because of its wide spreading among Koreans. Kim C. uses the same definitions (2003, 27) and attributes them to other scholars (Chang C. 1974; 1988; Cho H. 1983; 1990; Kim J. 1989; Kim T. 1989b; 1993; Park G. 1989a; Zolla 1985). Bruno (2013, 175) and Kendall (2009, 63), instead, use the term “popular religion” as it underlines its lacking of institutionalisation. On the other hand, Grayson (2002, 216) uses the term *Musok-gyo* (where the syllable *gyo*/教 means “religion” or “teaching”²) as an umbrella term that designates the broader category of Korean folk and popular religion as a whole—mountain-spirit worship, non-Confucian ancestral rites, folk petitions for rain, etc.—and which predates and runs alongside Buddhism and Confucianism, with Shamanism as its central, most visible form, but not its only content. Grayson thus prefers this term as Korean folk religion is more than just Shamanism, but Shamanism is its primary form.

Indeed, Korean Shamanism lacks those structures considered typical in a religious system, especially in a Western one, such as a sacred book: its methods, songs, beliefs, knowledge and secrets are, in fact, handed down orally throughout generations of Shamans without the use of written media (Morillot 2024, 79; Sarfati 2021, 96). Additionally, *Musok* lacks an internal a central church or a congregation; rather, Shamans operate as “free agents” (Kendall 2009, 30), therefore there is no such thing as a central control or a ‘head-Shaman’ coordinating the Shaman community. A specific doctrine and a hierarchy are also absent (Kendall 2009, 28).

This structural absence becomes especially clear by contrasting Shamanism with other religions prevalent in East Asia. Institutional Taoism, as it developed in

² More on the meaning of this hanja here: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/教>

China, possesses canonical scripture (the *Tao-te ching*³ and *Chuang-zhu*⁴ foundational among them), an ordained priesthood and organised lineages such as the Way of the Celestial Masters⁵, complete with hereditary leadership and monastic institutions. Confucianism, while not always classified as a religion in the strict sense, nonetheless rests on a fixed canon—the Four Books⁶ and Five

³ *Tao-te ching* (道德經): the Book of the Way and its Power. The foundational text of Taoist philosophy traditionally attributed to Laozi (6th century BCE, though its actual dating is contested by modern scholarship). Composed of 81 short chapters, it expounds the concept of the Tao/Dao (“the Way”) as the ineffable source and pattern underlying all existence, and advocates wu wei (“non-action” or effortless action) as the ideal mode of living in harmony with it (Bowker: 1997, 952-953).

⁴ *Chuang-zhu* (莊子): a core Taoist text attributed to the homonymous philosopher Chuang Zhou (c. 4th century BCE), composed of parables, allegories and philosophical dialogues. Alongside the *Tao-te ching*, it forms one of the two foundational texts of philosophical Daoism, notable for its playful, paradoxical style and its exploration of themes such as relativism, spontaneity and the limits of human knowledge (Bowker: 1997, 220-221).

⁵ Way of the Celestial Masters (天師道 [*tianshi Dao*]): the earliest organised Taoism religious movement, founded by Zhang Daoling in 2nd-century CE China. It established Taoism as an institutional religion with ordained priests, congregational structures, and a hereditary leadership line (the “Celestial Master” title), moving Taoism from purely philosophical speculation toward organised religious practice (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Tianshidao.” Retrieved 18/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tianshidao>).

⁶ The Four Books (四書, [*sishu*]): a core canon of Confucian texts—the Analects, the Mencius, the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean—compiled and canonised as a unified curriculum by the Song-dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi. From the late Koryŏ period onward, they formed the basis of the civil service examination system across East Asia, including Chosŏn Korea. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Sishu.” Retrieved 18/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sishu>).

Classics⁷—and, in the Korean context specifically, produced a rigorously hierarchical scholar-official class (the *Yangban*/양반⁸) whose authority derived precisely from mastery of that written canon, along with codified ritual manuals prescribing correct ancestral rites. Buddhism, likewise, possesses an extensive canonical literature (the sutras⁹), a formally ordained monastic hierarchy (the *sangha*¹⁰) and, in Korea, centralised institutional structures such as the *Jogye*

⁷ The Five Classics (五經 [*Wujing*]): an older stratum of the Confucian canon, comprising the Classic of Poetry, the Book of Documents, the Book of Rites, the I Ching (Book of Changes) and the Spring and Autumn Annals. Alongside the Four Books, mastery of the Five Classics was central to traditional Confucian education and to qualification for state office (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Wujing.” Retrieved 18/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wujing>).

⁸ *Yangban* (양반, “two groups”): this term designated the ruling class of Chosŏn Korea (1392-1910), composed of civil officials (*munban*, 문반) and military officials (*muban*, 무반), a distinction originating in the earlier Koryŏ dynasty’s separate civil and military examination tracks. By the Chosŏn period, the term had come to denote the entire landholding elite, sitting at the top of a four-tier status system above the *chungin* (중인, technical/clerical middle class), *sangmin* (상민, commoners), and *ch’ŏnmin* (천민, the lowborn class discussed in section 1.5). *Yangban* status brought exemption from military service and corvée labour and exclusive access to the civil service examinations, but was not automatically hereditary: a family lost its *Yangban* standing if none of its members across three successive generations attained office. The system was formally abolished in the Gabo Reforms of 1894 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Yangban.” Retrieved 18/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/yangban>)

⁹ Sutas (經): canonical scriptures in Buddhism, traditionally understood as records of the Buddha’s own teachings (or, in Mahayana traditions, teachings attributed to him through later revelation). They form the textual core of Buddhist doctrine and monastic study across all major Buddhist traditions, including Korean Buddhism (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “sutra.” Retrieved 18/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sutra>).

¹⁰ Sangha (僧伽): the formally ordained monastic community in Buddhism, comprising monks and nuns who have undergone ordination and committed to the monastic precepts. The sangha constitutes one of the “Three Jewels” of Buddhism (alongside the Buddha and the Dharma/teaching) and represents the tradition’s institutionalised, hierarchically organised religious authority (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “sangha.” Retrieved 18/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sangha>).

Order¹¹. Set against any of these three systems, Korean Shamanism’s absence of scripture, ordination and centralised doctrine is a structurally defining feature and not simply an absence: it is, instead, a tradition organised around practice and relationship—between Shaman, spirits and community—rather than around text, hierarchy or institution (Grayson: 2002; Sarfati: 2021). Moreover, Shamans and spirits are themselves classified into various types according to different criteria (Grayson 2002, 218; Kendall 1985, 28, 57-58; Morillot 2024, 77-79; Walraven 2009, 76).

Across relevant scholarship, spirits have been divided in different manners and into different categories. In this work, I will follow the classifications developed by Grayson (2002, 221-225) and Kendall (1985, 113-114) and by combining them together in the attempt to paint, to the best of my abilities, a picture as complete and coherent as is possible of the vast array of figures that fall into the term “Spirit”.

Spirits may be divided into six classes according to Grayson: the Supreme Being, the Gods of the Air, the Gods of the Land or Gods of the Earth, the Gods of the Water, nameless lesser Spirits and Ancestral Spirits.

The Supreme Being (kr.: 하나님 [*Hananim*], 하늘님 [*Hanallim*], 하느님 [*Hanūnim*] or 하늘님 [*Hanūllim*]) is the “Ruler of Heaven” and the invisible ultimate cause of all things. While he is the sovereign over the universe, harvest and life, he is rarely worshipped directly, as “he is the invisible and ultimate cause of everything, [but] worship was given to those spirits to which he had delegated authority” (Grayson 2002, 221). He is often associated with the Seven

¹¹ Jogye Order (曹溪宗 조계종, [*jogyejong*]): the largest and most institutionally dominant order of Buddhism in contemporary South Korea, tracing its lineage to the Seon (Zen) tradition. It maintains a centralised administrative structure, formal ordination procedures, and oversight of the majority of Korea’s Buddhist temples, making it the primary institutional face of Buddhism in the country today (Grayson: 2002, 190-191)

Star Spirit, so the Pole Star (kr.: 칠성님 [*Ch'ilsong-nim*]), the pivotal constellation of the northern hemisphere (Grayson 2002, 221-222).

The Gods of the Air form a military-style hierarchy reminiscent of Central Asian tribal “hordes”. The “Generals of the Five Cardinal Points” (kr.: 오방장군 [*Obang changgun*]) are classified basing on their position: the *Ch'ongje changgun* (청제장군) or Azure General governs the East, the *Paekche changgun* (백제장군) or White General governs the West, the *Chokche changgun* (적제장군) or Red General governs the South, the *Hŭkche changgun* (흑제장군) or Black General governs the North and, lastly, the *Hwangje changgun* (황제장군) or Yellow General governs the Centre (Grayson 2002, 222).

The aides-de-camp to the Generals (kr.: 신장 [*Sinjang*]), instead, act as the primary confidants for Shamans and fortune-tellers (Grayson 2002, 222).

Finally, at the lowest level of the heavenly hierarchy, we can find the “heavenly troops” (kr.: 사자 [*Saja*]) (Grayson 2002, 222).

The Spirits of the Earth are also called Mountain Gods (kr.: 산신 [*San-sin*]): they are the most important earthly spirits among which the most ancient

is Tan'gun¹², who is also the father of all Shamans and the founder of the first Korean state (Grayson 2002, 222-223; Morillot 2024, 76). Then there are minor spirits responsible for the fertility of the soil (kr.: 천신 [*Ch'on-sin*])—but they are no longer widely worshipped because of the fast and recent industrialisation of Korea (Grayson 2002, 222). *Changsung* (장승) are tutelary spirits represented by wooden or stone posts at village entrances; carved as male and female figures, they block malevolent spirits from entering (Grayson 2002, 223-224).

Household Spirits are localised guardians of the home, including *Songju* (성주, chief guardian of the house, residing in the roof beams), *Samsin Halmoni* (삼신 할머니, the “Grandmother” spirit who protects childbirth), *T'aju taegam* (터주대감, guardian of the physical house site) and *Chowang* (조왕) and *Pyonso kakssi* (변소각시), which are Spirits of the kitchen and toilet, respectively (Grayson 2002, 224).

¹² Tan'gun (단군): Depicted as an old man with a tiger, he is the benevolent protector of villages, the most important earthly spirit and father of all Shamans. In Korean mythology, he is the legendary founder of the first Korean kingdom, Kojosŏn.

The most famous version of the myth describing his story goes like this: Hwanin, the “Lord of Heaven,” had a son named Hwanung, who wished to live among humans, so he descended from heaven with thousands of followers to a sacred mountain—often identified as Mount Baekdu (백두산), though some versions mention other mountains. There, he met a bear and a tiger, who prayed to become human. Hwanung gave them garlic and mugwort and instructed them to remain in a cave for 100 days without seeing sunlight. The tiger gave up, but the bear endured and transformed into a woman, known as Ungnyŏ. Ungnyŏ later married Hwanung, and their son was Tan'gun. Tan'gun eventually established Kojosŏn in 2333 BCE and ruled wisely for many years.

Most historians regard Tan'gun as a mythological or legendary figure, not a historically verified person. The story is understood as a foundation myth that explains the origin of the Korean people and state, much like the stories of Romulus for Rome, therefore he is a central ancestral figure in Korean cultural identity.

The earliest surviving written account of Tan'gun legend appears in the 13th-century chronicle *Samguk Yusa*, although the tradition itself is likely much older. Today, Tan'gun remains an important cultural symbol in both North and South Korea. In South Korea, National Foundation Day is celebrated annually on 3rd October to commemorate the legendary founding of Kojosŏn. (Morillot 2024, 76; Tudor 2012, 12)

Spirits of the Water are all conceived as Dragons (kr.: 용, [*Yong*]) who inhabit rivers, wells and clouds to control the rain. The Dragon King (kr.: 용왕, [*Yong-wang*]) is the supreme ruler of the seas and all marine life. He is specifically propitiated by fishermen and by villagers during droughts (Grayson 2002, 224).

Nameless Spirits are the lowest level of the spiritual realm, consisting of minor ghosts and imps; despite their belonging to a ‘lower’ class of spirits, they are the most important ones for the aim of this research. They are divided in two categories: Malevolent, Restless or Wandering Spirits (원귀)—which include the sub-category of *Wŏnhon*, 원혼, 冤魂¹³ or, in other words, the vengeful souls of those who died “unfulfilled”, such as drowned persons, unmarried youths or, more generally, those who died of a violent death (like the souls of those who were killed during the Gwangju and Jeju massacres). These souls are prevented by their violent and sudden death from being completely satisfied with their life and from fulfilling all their desires and needs, therefore their dissatisfaction leaves them lingering between this world and the realm of the dead (Kendall 1985, 99-100; Kim S. 2013, 225; Kim S. & Hwang M. 2023, 93; Kim Y. 2025, 1-2). For the aim of this research, this category is fundamental.

¹³ Malevolent, Restless or Wandering Spirits have a number of different sub-categories. *Wŏnhon* (원혼) is one of said categories and refers to the spirit of a deceased person who remains attached to the human world because of unresolved grievances, unfulfilled desires, an improper or untimely death or a dissatisfying funeral. The broader category of *Wŏn-gwi* (원귀) includes various types of potentially harmful wandering spirits (한국민족문화대백과사전, s.v. “영혼관.” Retrieved 18/08/2026. <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0037839?>). *Yŏngsan* (영산) is one of the specific spirit categories included within this broader classification in some Korean shamanic traditions and Kendall (1985) mainly refers to them in her book. On the other hand, Grayson simply names them ‘Nameless Spirits’. I have decided to choose the term ‘*Wŏnhon*’ in this research as it is the term that best applies to the topic I am writing about. The term *Wŏnhon* is used in Kim, Y. 2025 and Kim, S. 1989.

The second category is that of *Tokkaebi* (도깨비) are mischievous imps that cause minor household annoyances, like misplacing items or breaking pottery (Grayson 2002, 225).

Lastly, Ancestral Spirits (kr.: 조상 [*chosang*]) are the spirits of deceased family members. While later codified by Confucianism through the practice of *jesa* (제사)¹⁴, this worship of ancestors was part of indigenous Korean folk religion well before its Confucianisation (Kendall 1985, 29)¹⁵. This worship ranges from the national level (*Tan'gun* as the progenitor of the race) to the individual family level, where Shamans or household heads perform rituals to honour and appease their forebears (Grayson 2002, 181, 225).

As if mirroring the multitude of different Spirits that inhabit Korean Shamanism, its practitioners are, also, all but a monolithic group.

The first classification that has to be considered is gender-based. Howard (1991) points out how in 1975 Seoul there were just 124 male Shamans. At the same time, according to government's estimates, 778 female Shamans were active in the same area. In percentage terms, 86 percent of the total population of Shamans was female.

¹⁴ Ancestral rites (제사, [*jesa*]) are the most important rite of Confucianism, through which people show filial piety to their ancestors while honouring and remembering them. They are performed by providing offer food and drink, as well as symbolic offerings such as bows, to dead relatives, which are represented by ancestral tablets. When the name of a dead subject is inscribed on a tablet and installed in an ancestral shrine, that person becomes honourable and venerable as an ancestor. *Jesa* is still performed nowadays, especially during *Ch'usok*, Korean most important holiday, and on the anniversary of the death of a relative (Grayson 2002, 120, 143, 181).

¹⁵ This is suggested by pots of grain, baskets or nests representing ancestors that can be found in some villages. They represent the house ancestors and suggest a Pre-Confucian tradition (Kendall 1985, 29).

This notable gender discrepancy is reflected not only among practitioners but also among adherents, as the majority of those who participate in shamanic practices and attend *kut*¹⁶ rituals are women (Morillot 2024, 69-71). Men, instead, have traditionally been more reluctant to engage in shaman practices, mainly because Shamanism has often been regarded as socially disreputable, especially for its dancing and singing dimension (Ch'oe 1989, 219-220; Kendall: 1984, 59), and thus defined as *ũmsa*, an 'obscene rite' (Grayson 2002, 217). Consequently, many men have tended to identify instead with religions regarded as more socially prestigious, particularly Confucianism. Under both Buddhism—the State religion during Koryŏ dynasty according to Grayson (2002, 83)—and, particularly, Neo-Confucianism—Korea's official religion during the Chosŏn dynasty (Grayson 2002, 112), men controlled access to education, political authority, religious institutions and the patrilineal clan system, while women were largely excluded from formal learning and ancestral rituals (Morillot 2024, 71). Shamanism, by contrast, offered women a direct means of accessing the spiritual world, particularly through communication with ancestors and the dead, thereby granting them a form of religious authority comparable to that traditionally held by men; by participating in shamanist practices, women could thus transcend the traditional male-dominated social order. Moreover, the comparatively egalitarian character of shamanic cosmology, in which male and female spirits hold similarly significant positions and where men, too, are free to dance and sing without judgment (Ch'oe, K. 1984), further contributed to its appeal among women (Morillot 2024, 71).

¹⁶ *Kut* (꺆) is a traditional Korean shamanic ritual performed by a *Mudang* or *Mansin* (Shaman) to communicate with spirits, honour or appease them and restore balance or bring blessings. It often includes chanting, music, dancing, offerings, and symbolic performances. *Kut* does not have a fixed primary structure, but rather comprehends a number of different forms that change basing on the aim of the rite and the area in which it is performed. (한국민족문화대전, s.v. “꺆”. Retrieved 20/08/2026. <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0006765>)

Female Shamans may generally be referred to as *Mudang* (무당), but this term is often considered derogatory and offensive (Kim C. 2003, 26-27)¹⁷. Therefore, female Shamans usually prefer the term *Mansin* (만신), which is considered more respectful and is able to define the greatness and talent of a Shaman; this is because this word means “ten thousand (만, [man]) spirits (신, [sin])”, underlining the large number of spirits she is able to communicate with¹⁸ (Bruno 2002; Ch’oe K. 1978; 1981; Harvey 1979; Kendall 1985; 2009; Kim T. 1966; 1998; 1999; Morillot 2024, 71; Seo 2002 as cited in Sarfati 2021). On the other hand, male practitioners go by the term of *Paksu* (박수) and are a minority (Morillot 2024, 71). Furthermore, the term “Shaman” itself is considered problematic within the study of Korean religion, as it is viewed as an imprecise borrowing from other cultural and religious traditions, particularly Siberian Shamanism¹⁹, thus it is often met with objection. For this reason, “*Mansin*” and “*Paksu*” are the preferred terms²⁰ (Sarfati 2016, 180).

¹⁷ This term is considered offensive as it does not distinguish between *Kangshin-mu* (강신무) and *Sasŭp-mu* (사습무) and thus apply to both kinds of female Shamans. When using the term *Mudang* to describe a *Kangshin-mu* (who is more powerful than *Sasŭp-mu*), she may be offended by the word choice as she might find it belittling (Sarfati: 2021, 8). I will explain in detail the difference between the two types on page 23-24.

¹⁸ This term, instead, applies only to *Kangshin-mu* and it is able to efficiently convey the power and abilities of this kind of Shaman.

¹⁹ In Siberian Shamanism, the so-called “shamanic flight” is performed, whereas this phenomenon does not exist in Korean Shamanism; for this reason, the term ‘Shaman’, if applied to Korean practitioners, is considered inaccurate. I will explain the difference between Siberian Shaman and Korean *Mansin* in detail on page 30-31.

²⁰ Up to now, I have only employed the term “Shaman” to more accessibly introduce the research questions I wish to tackle in this work. However, in view the reasons just expounded and because mainly *Kangshin-mu* are relevant for the aim of this research, the term “*Mansin*” will be favoured—except in those cases where an English translation is needed or when the explanation does not refer particularly to a certain kind of practitioners.

Beyond these gender-based considerations, a further distinction has to be drawn between *Kangshin-mu* (강신무) and *Sasŭp-mu* (사습무). While the former term defines a possessed Shaman (or “god-descended Shaman”) who was chosen by a spirit, possessed by it, and underwent the painful process of Shaman illness (신병 [*shinbyŏng*] or 무병 [*mubyŏng*]), the latter refers specifically to a hereditary Shaman, whose ritual authority is transmitted through family lineage rather than acquired through spirit possession—which this kind of Shaman does not experience (Morillot 2024, 77). For the purposes of this research, it is particularly important to describe shamanic illness: this subject is relevant to the analysis of Han Kang, whose representations of bodily suffering and whose own experiences of recurrent headaches invite consideration of the possible connections between physical symptoms and the spiritual dimensions associated with shamanic illness. The *shinbyŏng* or *mubyŏng* is a culturally specific initiatory affliction in Korean Shamanism, understood as the manifestation of a spirit’s call to an individual destined to become a *Kangshin-mu* (Kim T. 1998, as cited in Kendall 1985, 37). Symptoms commonly begin with anxiety and physical manifestations, such as weakness, dizziness, fear, loss of appetite, insomnia and gastrointestinal issues. Later on, as the illness progresses, these symptoms develop into dissociation, visions, dreams, auditory experiences, altered states of consciousness and experiences of possession by ancestral spirits. These symptoms resist conventional medical treatment (DSM-IV 2000; Kim 1998, 48-49; Sarfati 2021, 28, 147). *Mansin* Yongsu’s Mother, when talking about those people affected by *shinbyŏng*, states:

It’s very difficult for them. They’re sick and they stay sick, even though they take medicine. And there are people who get better even without taking medicine. There are some who can’t eat the least bit of food; they just go hungry. There are some who sleep with their eyes open, and some who can’t sleep at all. They’re very weak but they get well as soon as the gods descend

in the initiation kut. For some people the gods descend gently, but for others the gods don't descend gently at all. So they run around like crazy women.
(Kendall 1985, 57)

These symptoms are very similar to those experienced by other god-descended Shamans-to-be in other cultures and religions: for example, in Western and Central Siberia it is common for god-descended individuals to experience seizures, whereas among the Tungus²¹ it is not rare to suffer from hysterical or

²¹ The Tungus are a group of Indigenous peoples of northeastern Asia, especially Siberia and the Russian Far East. The term is primarily an older collective name for peoples who today are usually called Tungusic peoples (e.g. the Evenks, Nanai, Ulchs, Oroks, etc.). Traditional Tungusic religions involved Shamanism, with beliefs concerning spirits, animals, ancestors and the natural world. Shamanic specialists could act as intermediaries between humans and the spirit world (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Tungus". Retrieved 24/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Evenk-people>).

hysteroid crises. On the other hand, the Buryat²² and the Altaians²³ usually experience dreams and convulsions (Eliade 1964, 15-20).

People affected by *shinbyōng* usually try to tackle it and to resist their calling (Sarfati 2021, 1), but, according to shamanic belief, these symptoms disappear only after the individual accepts the divine calling and undergoes the initiation ritual (kr.: 내림굿 [*naerim-kut*]) (Kim T. 1998, 41-42), through which the possessing deity is ritually installed and the neophyte is recognised as a Shaman (Kendall 1985, 58). While interpreted within religious and cultural frameworks by practitioners, *shinbyōng* has also been examined from anthropological and psychological perspectives as a culturally patterned form of altered consciousness and religious vocation. With regard to the psychological and psychiatric aspect, it must be underlined that in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), published by the American Psychiatric Association, *shinbyōng* is identified as an example of a

²² The Buryats are a Mongolic ethnic group native mainly to the region around Lake Baikal in southern Siberia, especially in Russia. They are the largest indigenous ethnic group of Siberia. Most Buryats live in Buryatia, a republic within Russia, as well as in neighbouring parts of Irkutsk and Zabaykalsky Krai, even though Buryat communities exist in Mongolia and China. Historically, Buryat spirituality combined Shamanism with Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism became particularly influential among many Buryats from the 18th century onward, but some communities maintain both Buddhist and shamanic traditions (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Buryat”. Retrieved 24/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buryat>).

²³ The Altaians are an Indigenous Turkic people of the Altai Mountains, a region where Russia, Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan meet. Most Altaians today live in the Altai Republic of Russia, in the southern of Siberia. Altaians emerged from a long interaction among various ancient and medieval peoples of the Altai region, including Turkic, Samoyedic, Mongolic, and other Siberian populations. Indigenous Altai spirituality includes Shamanism, reverence for mountains and nature, and traditions often referred to as Tengrism—a belief system originating in the Eurasian steppes, based on Shamanism and Animism. Russian Orthodoxy and, in some areas, Buddhism have also influenced communities (<https://www.gw2ru.com/lifestyle/246879-ethnic-groups-of-russia-altaians>, <https://www.fondation-culturelle-barbier-mueller.org/en/the-altaians-a-turkic-people-from-the-mountains-of-siberia/>).

culture-bound syndrome²⁴. It is worth noting, however, that even psychiatry's own confidence in this diagnostic category has since proven unstable. When the American Psychiatric Association published the fifth edition of the manual in 2013, it abandoned the "culture-bound syndrome" framework altogether, replacing it with a more provisional category termed "cultural concepts of distress," organised around the more modest aims of describing culturally specific idioms, explanations and syndromes rather than classifying them as bounded psychiatric entities in their own right (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

With respect to religious vocation, instead, Chongho Kim's ethnographic account of Korean Shamanism proposes a compelling interpretive frame for this affliction, one this research adopts as central to its own argument: shamanic illness operates according to a homeopathic logic, in which the *Mansin* becomes capable of healing others precisely because she has herself endured the most extreme form of misfortune. Kim argues no one in Korean society suffers more than the Shaman—both because of their stigmatisation and exclusion from society, and for the physical and mental pain they must endure (Kim C. 2003, 56); moreover, the illness that precedes initiation, far from disqualifying her from a position of authority, is what grants her the ability to understand her clients' suffering "from a similar viewpoint without threatening them with moral judgement or social injury" (Harvey 1976, as quoted in Kim C. 2003, 56). Suffering, in other words, is not merely a precondition the Shaman must overcome before she can heal; it is the very substance out of which her capacity

²⁴ According to the DSM-IV, culture-bound syndrome is a set of psychological or physical symptoms that is mainly recognised or understood within a particular cultural or social group. In other words, a culture can influence how people experience, describe and interpret mental distress. A syndrome may be common or meaningful in one culture but less familiar or interpreted differently in another. According to the same manual, *Shinbyŏng* is a perfect example of this phenomenon.

to heal is made. “Like cures like”: the Shaman’s own wound becomes the instrument of others’ recovery (Kim C. 2003, 56-57). This is particularly important for this research if linked to Han Kang’s life and own experience.

While *Kangshin-mu* undergo the painful process of *shinbyŏng*, *Sasŭp-mu* typically inherit ritual knowledge, liturgical repertoires and ceremonial responsibilities from parents or other close relatives, learning through apprenticeship from an early age (Sarfati 2021, 7). They generally do not experience or undergo an initiation focused on possession, mainly because they do not experience the descent of the spirit at all—rather, they perform the *kut* through inherited priestly office instead of through spirit descent (Lee D. 1990). An example of hereditary Shamans can be the *tan’gol mudang*, traditionally from Jeju Island (Kendall 2009, 179).

Kangshin-mu are considered the basic Korean Shaman type not only because they are the most important and powerful, since they experience spirit possession, but also because spirit-possession Shamanism was traditionally considered the basic type in Siberia. In this sense, *Kangshin-mu* may be understood as preserving, albeit in a significantly transformed form, certain features of the type of Shamanism traditionally associated with Siberia (Ch’oi K. 1989, 217). Traditionally, in the Northern part of the peninsula mainly *Kangshin-mu* could be found, while it was easier to come across a *Sasŭp-mu* in the Southern part of Korea (Ch’oe K. 1984, 230). Nowadays, however, a precise regional distinction cannot be established (Park M. 2003, 357) and “it would be meaningless to work out the exact geographical distribution of each type of Shaman” (Kim C. 2003, 28-29). Indeed, the distinction just explained was based on fieldwork conducted between 1960 and 1979 by Kim T’ae-gon, hence it may no longer accurately reflect the situation today (Kim, C. 2003, 28). Kim himself noted that hereditary Shamans were absent from some areas where they had previously existed, suggesting that this tradition had declined. The Korean War

(1950-53) also caused large-scale population movements, with many people relocating to unfamiliar regions. For example, many North Korean Shamans moved to South Korea during the war and continued practising there while maintaining the rituals they had learned in North Korea. Similarly, some Shamans moved to cities to escape the social stigma imposed on them and their families because of Shamanism. Those who continued practising often preserved the traditions they had originally learned rather than adopting local practices. In short, the 1960s, Korean society has undergone significant social and demographic changes, making older classifications of Shamanism increasingly difficult to apply to contemporary Korea (Kim C. 2003, 28-29).

However, regional practices and individual cases may vary (Yim et al. 1987, 369, as cited in Sarfati 2021, 7): for example, scholars also document cases where trance and possession happens not to the Shaman but to the client, mediated through a “Spirit Stick²⁵” (신장대, [*sinjangdae*]). Particularly, documents include a detailed first-person account from a woman named Mrs. Baek, who became violently possessed while holding the Stick during her own *kut*, and a family table (his mother-in-law’s) recording four *kut* across 1953-1995 in which sometimes the Shamans was possessed, sometimes the client was, and sometimes neither (Kim, C. 2003 28-31).

Overall, Korean Shamanism carries a rich tradition and history and still enjoys a wide following, even though it is usually complementary alongside other religious beliefs and practices and despite the discrimination it faces and

²⁵ *Shinjangdae* (신장대) is a ritual stick used in Korean shamanic ceremonies in certain regions, particularly in Chungcheong Province. It is used to communicate with and convey the will of *sinjang* (신장), or spirits/deities. The pole is typically made of bamboo or a straight wooden branch and decorated with strips of paper. During rituals, its movement is interpreted as a sign of the spirit’s presence or response. The object is known by different names in different regional traditions, including *sondae* in Chölla and *cheonwangdae* in Gyeongsang. (한국민족문화대백과사전. “신간 (神竿).” 한국민족문화대백과사전. Accessed 18th August 2026. <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0032602>).

the stigma associated with it. For instance, it is not rare for Korean atheists, Buddhists, Christians, etc. to occasionally seek help from a Shaman for private, spiritual and various matters (Sarfati 2021, 96); therefore, defining Shamanism as a “unofficial” spirituality of the people is also a correct way to describe this kind of belief (Morillot 2024, 69).

It is also for this reason that Shamanism, which is considered by many Koreans a ‘superstition’, managed to survive despite modernisation and Christianisation that, in turn and mainly in the case of Evangelic doctrine, defines shamanist practices (alongside Confucian ancestral rites and others) as satanist (Kendall 2009, 5; Morillot 2024, 69; Sarfati 2021, 10). Despite this and some hardships that it has tackled in the past—such as *Mansin* being labelled as the lowest social strata (the impure) in the neo-Confucian hierarchy or its stigmatisation in Korean society (Deuchler 1992, 12-13)—Korean Shamanism is often noted as unusual for continuing to thrive despite, and arguably alongside, one of the most rapid and thorough modernisations of any society, and despite existing in a country with one of Asia’s largest Christian populations (Morillot 2024, 69). Moreover, it claims more than two hundred thousand Shamans are subscribed to official professional organisations (Lee K. 2003) and it is the most ancient religious belief in South Korea (Morillot 2024, 76).

Within Korean Shamanism, the *Mansin* occupies a central position as an intermediary between the human world and the spirit realm. Rather than functioning solely as a ritual specialist, the *Mansin* serves as a mediator who facilitates communication between the living and the dead, particularly with Malevolent, Restless or wandering Spirits (kr.: 원혼, [*Wŏnhon*]).

As already remarked²⁶, *Wŏnhon*’s unresolved deaths prevent them from attaining peace and reaching the realm of the dead. These spirits are believed to remain in the human world as a result of violent death, social injustice,

²⁶ See p. 19.

improper funerary rites or unfulfilled emotional attachments. As a consequence, they are not only condemned to wander among the living but may also become sources of misfortune. Because they are not properly addressed or commemorated through *jesa*, they are believed to remain hungry and may be attracted to food offered to ancestors during these rites. At the same time, their unresolved anger and dissatisfaction may cause them to vent their frustration on the living, resulting in illness, accidents or other forms of misfortune (Kendall 1985, 99-100).

The principal means through which the *Mansin* mediates the relationship between the realm of the living and that of the dead is the *kut* (꺆), a complex ritual performance that combines music, dance, offerings, costume changes and ritual speech, which is still widely performed even in modern-days Korea (Sarfati 2021). During the ritual, the *Mansin* invokes deities, Ancestral Spirits and *Wŏnhon* through formalised chants, prayers and invocations that establish communication across the boundary separating the worlds of the living and the dead. Ritual speech is therefore performative, not just symbolic: the spoken word is understood to summon, persuade and negotiate with spiritual beings, enabling reconciliation between spirits and their surviving relatives (Eliade 1964; Kendall 1985)

A defining feature of Korean shamanic mediation is embodied spirit possession. During moments of trance, the *Mansin* becomes a temporary vessel through which spirits manifest themselves physically and verbally. Rather than speaking on behalf of the spirits, the *Mansin* allows them to speak through her body, voice, gestures and emotional expressions. This embodied possession is in stark contrast with the ‘shamanic flight’ usually observed in Siberian Shamanism, which refers to an ecstatic or visionary journey undertaken by the Shaman’s soul into the supernatural realm. In many Siberian traditions, the cosmos is conceived as consisting of an Upper, Middle and Lower World, which

the Shaman is able to traverse in order to communicate with spirits and intervene on behalf of the living. Such journeys may serve various purposes, most notably healing: the Shaman may travel to the spirit world to locate and retrieve a person's lost soul, confront harmful spirits or negotiate with supernatural beings. The Shaman may also journey to guide the souls of the dead or obtain knowledge and assistance from spirits (Eliade 1964, 5, 182, 190-197, 200-214).

For Korean *Mansin*, on the other hand, the opposite happens. By letting *Wŏnhon* speak through their body, *Mansin* thus gives voice to those who are otherwise voiceless. Wandering souls, particularly victims of tragic or unjust deaths, are believed to lack the means to express their suffering or resolve their grievances independently. By serving as their medium, the *Mansin* enables these marginalised dead to narrate their experiences, request remembrance, seek proper ritual treatment or ask for reconciliation with the living. In simpler terms, it provides the *Wŏnhon* with the elements they lack to reach the realm of the dead.

Additionally, the descent of the spirit in the *Mansin*'s body transforms the ritual into a dialogic encounter in which the deceased can communicate directly with the living. Through this process, emotions that remained unexpressed during life—including grief, resentment, regret or affection—can finally be articulated (Kendall 1985; Grayson 2002; Morillot 2024). The ritual consequently functions not only as a religious practice but also as a social and emotional process that restores disrupted relationships between the living community and the deceased. Through successful mediation, both the spirits and their surviving families may achieve resolution, allowing the dead to transition peacefully into the ancestral realm while relieving the living from spiritual affliction (Kendall 1985). In this sense, this procedure can be defined as a process of care and *healing*, which is not limited to the treatment of physical

or psychological suffering, but able to restore relationships disrupted by death, grief and unresolved spiritual tensions (Lee N. & Kim E. 2017, 76).

Healing constitutes one of the principal functions of Korean shamanic rituals. Rather than focusing exclusively on physical illness, Korean Shamanism understands suffering as a condition that may encompass the body, emotions, family relationships and the spiritual world. Misfortune is frequently interpreted as the consequence of disharmony between the living and the dead, unresolved ancestral obligations or the presence of *Wŏnhon*. The *kut*, performed by a *Mansin*, seeks to restore balance by addressing these interconnected dimensions of distress through ritual communication, purification and reconciliation (Kendall 1985)²⁷.

The structure of a *kut* reflects this restorative purpose. Although regional traditions differ²⁸, most *kut* rituals consist of a sequence of ritual stages or ‘acts’ (kr.: 거리 [*kŏri*]), that may vary from twenty to thirty. These *kŏri* include the preparation of sacred space, the invitation of deities and ancestral spirits, offerings of food and symbolic objects, episodes of spirit possession,

²⁷ The motif of healing by cleansing, purification, and the release of negative emotions or experiences appears across many religious traditions. In Buddhism, for example, Bodhisattva Guanyin (관음 [*Kwansŭm*], in Korean) often carries a water vase symbolising purification, while the lotus—growing from muddy water yet blooming beautifully above it—represents the transformation of corruption and suffering into spiritual purity (Leighton 1998, as cited in Lee N. & Kim E. 2017, 79).

²⁸ Although *kut* constitutes a common category of Korean shamanic ritual, its form varies considerably across regional traditions. These variations encompass the type and ritual authority of the Shaman, the structure and sequence of ritual performances, the use of music, dance and narrative, the repertoire of ritual objects and the modes through which communication with deities and spirits is established. As stated on page 26-27, Northern and West-central traditions have historically been strongly associated with possession-oriented *Kangshin-mu*, whereas Southern traditions have traditionally placed greater emphasis on hereditary ritual specialists and the transmission of ritual knowledge. For some examples, see p. 35-38.

negotiations with spiritual beings and concluding rites that send the spirits peacefully back to the other world (Kendall 1985; Ch'oi K. 1989). Each of them is autonomous, can work on its own, has its own title and meaning and is created by a particular *Mansin*. It is possible to assert that a *köri* stems from the personality and strength of a particular practitioner. In particular, the *Mansin*'s strength defines the amount of Spirits the *Mansin* can communicate with, and consequently influences the structure and the number of *köri*.

Throughout the ceremony, the *Mansin* changes costumes to represent different deities or spirits, performs ritual dances, delivers invocations and enters trance states through which communication with the spirit world becomes possible. The progression of the ritual symbolically guides both participants and spirits from disorder toward confrontation, reconciliation and release. In fact, although the *Mansin* serves as the ritual specialist, healing does not represent an individual act performed solely by the Shaman. The *kut* is fundamentally participatory, involving not only the *Wönhon*, but also the deceased's family, community members, musicians and other attendees. Their emotional engagement forms an essential component of the ritual, transforming the *kut* into a collective process through which private suffering is acknowledged publicly and integrated into communal life (Kendall 1985). In this respect, healing extends beyond the individual and contributes to the restoration of social relationships disrupted by death, trauma or misfortune.

At the same time, lamentation, expressed through crying, singing and emotionally charged dialogue, creates a culturally sanctioned space in which grief, regret, resentment and affection can be openly articulated. Emotions that might otherwise remain suppressed are brought into public expression, allowing both the bereaved and the spirits to confront unresolved relationships (Morillot 2024).

Music performance are central to facilitating this ritual. The rhythmic accompaniment of drums (북 [buk]), gongs (징 [jing]) and cymbals, together with repetitive chants and ritual songs, gradually induces an altered ritual atmosphere in which communication with spirits becomes possible (Lee N. & Kim E. 2017, 79). Repetition serves not as a mere aesthetic device but as a ritual technique that intensifies concentration, reinforces symbolic meaning and supports the *Mansin*'s transition into states of spirit possession (Eliade 1964).

This therapeutic dimension is closely associated with the Korean concept of *Han* (한/恨²⁹), often described as a deeply accumulated sense of sorrow, resentment, grief and unfulfilled longing resulting from injustice, loss or prolonged suffering (Grim 1984, 237; Kendall 2009, 22). Particularly, Sun N. describes *Han* as “a feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one’s guts and bowels, making the whole body writhe and squirm, and an obstinate urge to take revenge and to right the wrong—all these combined” (Sun N., as cited in Yoo B. 1988, 221). *Han* is a complex and contested concept—I will later return on the difficulties that any attempt at giving it a clear-cut and unambiguous definition runs into³⁰. Despite these obstacles, it plays a pivotal role in understanding Korean religious practice.

Within the context of the *kut*, unresolved *Han* is understood to affect not only the living but also the dead, particularly those who experienced violent, premature or socially unjust deaths or, in other words, *Wŏnhon*. Through ritual dialogue, symbolic offerings and spirit possession, the *Mansin* provides an opportunity for these emotions to be expressed, acknowledged and ultimately

²⁹ The word *Han* presented here is written as 恨 in Hanja and it is not linked to the surname of the author Han Kang (which is written as 韓) in any way.

³⁰ See pp. 38-40.

transformed (Grim, J. A. 1984). Healing therefore involves not the erasure of suffering but its ritual recognition and gradual release (Grayson 2002; Kim H. H. 1999).

Among the many forms of *kut*, the *Ssitgim-kut* (씻김굿) is traditionally practiced in southwestern Korea (particularly in the region of Chŏlla and mainly in Chindo Island) and is especially significant for understanding purification from an unjust, sudden and violent death and the care³¹ of the deceased needed in such cases. The term *ssitgim* (씻김) literally means “washing” or “cleansing,” reflecting the ritual’s purpose of purifying the soul of the deceased from spiritual pollution, lingering attachments or unresolved resentment. Performed after death, the ritual aims to guide the deceased safely into the ancestral realm while preventing the spirit from remaining as a *Wŏnhon* (Lee, N. & Kim, E. 2017, 76). This type of *kut* is particularly useful in cases of violent or unjust death, suicide, murder, other tragic circumstances or, in short, for “bad deaths”: as Pettid states, “there are various minor rituals held at most funerals to appease the spirit of the dead, [but] an elaborate ritual such as [this³²] is held only in special circumstances” (Pettid 2014, 144). The circumstances Pettid refers to are those where ordinary funerary rites may be

³¹ Referring to the kind of care covered on pp. 30-32.

³² It is important to know that the *Ssitgim-kut* of southwestern Korea (mainly Chindo island and in the Chŏlla region) is one of several regionally distinct death rites sharing the same aim and basic structure; in the Seoul-Gyeonggi region, the analogous rite is known as *Chinogwi-kut* (진오귀굿/지노귀굿), whereas *Ogu-kut* (오구굿) is performed in Gyeongbuk, *Mangmugi-kut/Dari-kut* (망무기굿/다리굿) in the Hamhung/Pyongyang region, while Jeju has its own distinct version, sometimes called *Kwiyang-puri* (귀양풀이) or *Wangmaji* (왕맞이). Thus, we can say that Korean shamanic death ritual is but one fixed rite; it could be more appropriately framed, rather, as a regional family of related but distinctively-named practices (Rhi 2012, as cited in Lee N. & Kim E. 2017).

The term used by the author in the original sentence here is *Chinogwi-kut*, but in this case, and because the similarities underlined above, the two terms can be used as synonyms.

considered insufficient; in such cases, the *Ssitgim-kut* offers a means of restoring moral and spiritual order by acknowledging suffering, resolving grievances and facilitating reconciliation between the deceased, their family and the wider community (Kendall 1985; Park M. 2003).

Symbolic acts of washing, purification and the removal of spiritual impurities represent the soul's transition from suffering to peace, while ritual speech reassures the deceased that it is acceptable to depart from the world of the living. The *Ssitgim-kut* also serves an important function for surviving family members. First of all, it guarantees them a peaceful existence, because if the victim has died before solving some issues, then the *Wŏnhon* may cause discomfort and hardships to the living, because it is not able to leave the realm of the living nor to reach the realm of the dead. Instead, thanks to the *Ssitgim-kut*, the soul of the deceased can “air its grievances” (Pettid 2014, 144) and eventually reach the afterlife. Synthetically, we can thus say that “the preservation of harmony between the living and the dead is also a primary consideration” (Pettid 2014, 144).

Additionally, by witnessing the symbolic purification and peaceful departure of the deceased, relatives are provided with a structured means of expressing grief, confronting unresolved emotions and accepting loss.

As Lee N. and Kim E. (2017, 76) state:

“Sitkim³³ means cleansing of something such as anger, regret, sadness, and desperation. Gut³⁴, shamanic ritual, intends to ameliorate the wounds made by tragic events, serious illnesses and sudden deaths of beloved people. Sitkingut for the dead is usually performed when somebody dies before he

³³ *Sitkim* is a romanisation of the term 씻김 used by Lee and Kim in the original text; in the rest of my research, the romanisation I used is *ssitgim*.

³⁴ *Gut* is a romanisation of the term 굿 used by Lee and Kim in the original text; in the rest of my research, the romanisation I used is *kut*.

or she is ready to accept the dying process. Aim of Sitkimgut is basically to soothe the sadness and frustration of survivors and the dead. [...] Participants, mostly family members of the dead, then pray for the dead to go to the Kukrak (heaven) with the aid of purifying ritual and other participants to have a good luck (Rhi 2012).

Main formats of narratives and songs of Sitkimgut, have been orally transmitted from the past. Shamans memorize the traditional creation myth chants with long rhymes. [...] While participating in gut for the dead and the lost, participants keep on praying, dancing together, eating, drinking, weeping, and sharing their pain and the stories of the deceased people. The gut eventually builds up energy for the participants to eventually encounter a healing moment. All of the movements are strongly charged with emotional vigor.”

Therefore, this ritual addresses both the needs of the spirit and those of the living, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between the two realms that characterises Korean shamanic cosmology. Family members present offerings, respond to the *Mansin*’s questions, express grief and participate in acts of remembrance. On the other hand, the wish, requests, lamentations and pain of the *Wŏnhon* are addressed (Morillot 2024, 75), and the evoked spirit, descended in the *Mansin*’s body, is able to speak through her, therefore the *Wŏnhon* can openly and vocally scold their descendants and blame them for not having attended certain duties³⁵. The descendants can address these remarks and start a conversation with the spirit; this interaction can become very animated, almost violent. Both the spirit and the descendants may start screaming or crying, and

³⁵ An example of request by *Wŏnhon* can be the wish to be inscribed on an ancestral tablet and be venerable during *jesa*. Ancestral tablets represent the truth, thus the death of a subject is ‘official’, and peace for the dead is guaranteed, only if the deceased name is inscribed on a tablet (Kim S. 1989, 255).

either the *Mansin* or her assistant can even insert some comical elements to stimulate cathartic laughter (Ch'oe K. 1989, 223; Grim 1984, 244; Kendall 2011, 331-332; Kim S. 1989, 256; Morillot 2024, 75). By doing so, tears and laughter alternate, making the *kut* very similar to a therapy session (Atkinson 1992, 309-310; Fabrega 1974, 32-44; Kiev 1964; Kleinman 1980, chap.7; Murphy 1964, as cited in Kendall 2009) for both the family and the *Wŏnhon*.

In light of its various characteristics I have attempted to schematically present in the previous paragraphs, healing in Korean Shamanism should be understood as a multidimensional process that encompasses purification, emotional catharsis, spiritual mediation and social reconciliation. Through the *kut*, the *Mansin* seeks to transform relationships marked by grief, injustice or unresolved *Han* into relationships characterised by peace and balance. Ritual healing thus extends beyond the treatment of individual affliction to encompass the restoration of harmony between the living, the dead and the spiritual forces that connect them. This same dynamic—individual suffering transformed into collective reconciliation—is what allows *Han* and *Wŏnhon* to migrate from the domestic sphere of the *kut* into the register of national and historical trauma.

Having established the ritual functions of *Han* and *Wŏnhon* within the *kut*, I will now turn to the debates surrounding these concepts and to their extension from the individual to the collective and historical plane—a shift that is essential for understanding why Korean mourning has so often become a political and not simply a private process.

First, it must be stated how *Han* is inseparable from *Wŏnhon*. As already mentioned in passing³⁶, individuals who die violently, unjustly or without proper funerary rites are believed to remain trapped between the worlds of the living and the dead; their spirits retain resentment and anguish because they

³⁶ See pp. 19.

have been denied both justice and ritual completion. These Restless Spirits are not necessarily malevolent by nature; rather, their inability to transition peacefully reflects the incompleteness of their earthly existence³⁷. Kim Y. states: “In Korean society, [...] unresolved emotions are distinctly articulated through the concept of *Wōnhan*³⁸ (冤恨, resentment), encompassing unfulfilled grievances of the dead that disrupt harmony. [...] [*W*]ōnhan represents a broader moral and cosmological imbalance, addressed through cultural, literary, and ritual practices”. The task of the *Mansin*, discussed above with respect to individual mourning, therefore takes on a broader significance here: restoring a disrupted moral and cosmological order by acknowledging forgotten lives and guiding the spirits toward reconciliation is, at the collective level, indistinguishable from the work of historical recognition itself. In other words, for these spirits, being remembered accurately by history *is* the reconciliation they need. There is no separate ‘spiritual’ fix apart from the ‘historical’ fix.

Although *Han* has frequently been described as an essential characteristic of Korean national identity, contemporary scholars have challenged this interpretation. Rather than representing an immutable cultural essence, *Han* should be understood as a historically contingent emotional discourse shaped by experiences of colonisation, war, authoritarian violence, poverty and social inequality; these circumstances cause an accumulated sense of unresolved suffering or injustice, in which personal and collective experiences of loss, powerlessness and grievance remain emotionally present and are transmitted through memory, relationships and cultural expression (Pilzer 2016). Similarly, Kang M. (2002) argues that *Han* “denotes a uniquely Korean sense of profound sorrow, regret, resentment, rage and other negative emotions that are all bound

³⁷ See p. 36.

³⁸ *Wōnhan* can be understood as a deeper sense of *Han* and we can find it in *Wōnhon*, where it plays a pivotal role in guiding their rage and frustration—just like *Han* does (Kim, Y. 2017).

up inside an individual as well as the people as a whole. It has been claimed that modern Koreans inherited it from deep tradition, as a collective emotional memory of their ancestors' experiences of historical traumas, including many foreign invasions throughout the centuries." Therefore, according to Kang, *Han* is a social condition more than an individual feeling, and it emerges from unequal power relations and unresolved suffering, making it particularly relevant in ritual contexts where pain is collectively acknowledged and transformed.

Therefore, it can be said that relationship between *Han* and *Wŏnhon* becomes especially significant when examining episodes of collective violence. Following mass deaths caused by war, political repression or state violence, entire communities may experience unresolved mourning because the victims are denied public recognition, proper burial or historical justice. Under these circumstances, trauma extends beyond individual psychological suffering and becomes embedded in collective memory. Jeffrey C. Alexander defines cultural trauma as a process through which members of a collectivity come to believe that they have experienced a horrendous event that permanently marks their group consciousness and identity (Alexander et al. 2004). In the Korean context, however, such trauma is not only narrated historically but is also mediated through religious and ritual practices—such as the *Ssitgim-kut* discussed above—that seek to restore disrupted relationships between the living and the dead, now applied at the scale of an entire community rather than a single household.

Anthropological studies have repeatedly shown that Korean shamanic rituals frequently emerge in response to historical catastrophes. During the twentieth century, rituals were performed for victims of the Korean War, the Jeju Massacre, the Gwangju Uprising and other episodes of state violence in which proper mourning had been prevented for political reasons (Kim S. 2019; Kim S

& Hwang M. 2023, 85; Walraven 2009). In these cases, the *Mansin* assumes a role that extends greatly beyond religious mediation: she becomes a custodian of memory, giving symbolic presence to those whom official history has silenced. Rituals thus operate as a form of historical testimony, allowing communities to acknowledge deaths that have remained socially or politically unrecognised.

This understanding of trauma differs in important respects from individual-centred psychological models, which have tended to locate trauma within the survivor's own capacity, or incapacity, to process an overwhelming event. Alexander's account of cultural trauma explicitly positions itself against this individualist paradigm, arguing that certain traumas are constituted at the level of the collectivity rather than the individual psyche and that they become "real" only once a community comes to interpret an event as a horrendous and identity-marking wound shared by the group as a whole (Alexander et al. 2004). Korean shamanic traditions, examined throughout this chapter, can be read as a ritual elaboration of precisely this collective model: unresolved suffering is framed primarily as a disruption of social, familial and cosmological relationships, addressed not through the treatment of an individual patient but through communal participation, ritual performance, and the symbolic reintegration of the dead into the moral community. The *kut* transforms silence into speech, invisibility into presence, and exclusion into remembrance.

Such a perspective is particularly relevant for understanding the historical experiences that will be discussed in the following chapters, especially the Jeju Massacre and the Gwangju Uprising. In both cases, victims were denied not only life but also public mourning for many years. Their deaths generated forms of collective *Han*, while their continued absence from official memory resembled the condition traditionally associated with *Wŏnhon*. The eventual emergence of commemorative practices—including literary works—can therefore be interpreted as attempts to perform functions analogous to those

traditionally fulfilled by shamanic ritual: acknowledging the dead, restoring their voices and transforming unresolved grief into collective remembrance.

This conceptual framework also provides an important foundation for interpreting Han Kang's literary project. Her novels repeatedly depict individuals whose deaths remain unresolved and whose voices continue to demand recognition. Rather than presenting mourning as a completed process, Han portrays memory itself as an ethical obligation toward those who cannot speak. In this respect, her literary practice echoes the work traditionally performed by the *Mansin*: she creates a symbolic space in which the dead are invited to speak, the living are compelled to listen and historical trauma can begin to be transformed into shared memory³⁹.

1.2 The marginalised Body of the *Mansin*

In the preceding sections I have attempted to offer an account of what the *Mansin* does: in brief, mediating between the living and the dead, voicing the silenced grief of *Wŏnhon*, transforming individual and collective *Han* into shared. In this section I will instead turn my attention towards who the *Mansin* is within Korean society and to the paradox this entails; as I will try to show, their identity is, in some ways, paradoxically characterised by a marginalisation in Korean society and, at the same time, by a significant resonance and centrality for the destiny of *Wŏnhon*.

As I have argued for in the previous section, Korean Shamanism has been overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, a female practice. The majority of ritual specialists have historically been women, and the office is frequently transmitted along female lines, whether through hereditary succession in the southern

³⁹ I will return to this issue in Chapter 3.

regions or through the involuntary “descent of the spirits” more common in central and northern Korea⁴⁰. This gendered composition has never been incidental. Within a Confucian social order that prized male authority, patrilineal descent and female submission to household hierarchy, the Shaman represented an anomalous figure: a woman who spoke with independent ritual authority, who was paid for her services and bargained fiercely for her fees, who moved between households rather than remaining confined to one and who could, in trance, adopt the voice and even the gestures of male ancestors, generals or kings, who would meet men in private for consultations and danced and sung in public (Harvey 1979 and Kendall 1988 as cited in Sarfati 2023, 4). The *Mansin*’s social power therefore existed in a state of constant tension with the gender norms of the wider society (Sarfati 2023, 4; Yoo T. J. 2008, 32).

This devaluation has historically been compounded by class and economic position. Shamanic practice in Chosŏn-era Korea was formally classified among the “base” or outcast occupations (*ch’ŏnmin*, 천민), grouping *Mansin* together with butchers, tanners and entertainers—categories historically confined to the very bottom of the social hierarchy (Harvey 1979 and Kendall 1988 as cited in Sarfati 2023, 4). Many women entered the practice not by choice but out of economic necessity, following the onset of the initiatory illness or *shinbyŏng*. The *Mansin*’s vocation, in other words, has frequently been inseparable from poverty, illness and social precarity, and her ritual authority has coexisted with—rather than compensated for—her exclusion from the ordinary channels of social respectability.

The association of shamanic practice with madness, impurity and irrationality further reinforced this pariah-like status. Because spirit possession involves altered states of consciousness, trembling, weeping and speech attributed to beings other than the Shaman herself, *Mansin* have long been perceived by

⁴⁰ See p. 27.

segments of Korean society as mentally unstable, spiritually polluted or simply irrational—a judgment that draws on both indigenous notions of ritual pollution (*pujŏng*, 부정, 不淨⁴¹). More recently, imported psychiatric categories have been employed to reframe possession as a form of dissociative disorder or schizophrenia (Kim C. 2003; Silverman 1987 as cited in Kim H. H. 1999, 67, 94). Confucian elites in particular dismissed shamanic ritual as superstition unworthy of a rationally governed society, a position that persisted, in secularised form, well into the twentieth century (Kendall 2009, 3-21): during the Chosŏn dynasty *kut* were disregarded, discouraged and described as immoral mainly for their dance component and even today *kut* are considered to promote loose morality through their dancing (Ch’oe 1989, 219-220; Kendall 2009, 3-4). Despite this, until the 1970s *kut* could be performed by *Mansin* in their clients’ homes, whereas nowadays in Korean cities performing noisy rituals is forbidden and *Mansin* are forced to perform rituals in rented mountain shrines away from inhabited centres. This displacement should be understood less as a single deliberate policy than as the cumulative effect of generic urban noise regulation, rapid redevelopment and the structural incompatibility of apartment living with ritual performance, however Shamans tend to interpret this policy a form of ongoing harassment aimed at removing them from urban centres (Kendall 2011, 334; Sarfati 2021, 141).

Colonial rule intensified this stigmatisation considerably. During the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), colonial administrators classified Korean shamanic practice as backward superstition (kr.: 미신, [*misin*]) responsible of

⁴¹ *Pujŏng*, 부정, 不淨 it is the traditional Korean concept of ritual impurity/pollution—the idea that certain states, substances or events (death, blood, sickness and therefore, by extension, the *Mansin*’s altered body during trance) are spiritually “unclean” and need to be avoided or purified. Under this framework, the *Mansin*’s body—being possessed, taken over by outside spirits—was historically read as impure or contaminated, not just religiously different.

obstructing the modernisation of the peninsula. Therefore, *Mansin* were subjected to surveillance, public shaming campaigns and periodic bans on ritual performance (Sarfati 2009, 4-5). This colonial framing did not disappear with liberation: successive South Korean governments, particularly during the rapid industrialisation and authoritarian modernisation drives of the 1960s and 1970s, continued to treat Shamanism as an embarrassing relic incompatible with a modern, Christianised and internationally respectable nation, at times criminalising *kut* performances as public disturbances or superstitious fraud (Kendall 2009, 5-8). The most severe and best-documented episode of this postcolonial suppression is linked with President Park Chung-hee's (박정희) New Community Movement (*Saemaül Undong*, 새마을운동)⁴² of the early 1970s. Alongside its public-works agenda of rural modernisation, the Movement explicitly targeted what policymakers termed "backward rural mentality," and under its banner a dedicated campaign known as the Movement to Overthrow Superstition (*Misint'ap'a Undong*, 미신타파운동)⁴³ mobilised local leaders to attack shamanic ritual directly: village shrines were doused in gasoline and burned, individual *kut* were raided by local authorities and Shamans were, in some cases, fined or imprisoned for performing them (Kendall 2009, 10; Riotto 2018, 370). Kendall notes that Korean commentators today frequently judge this campaign to have done more lasting damage to the

⁴² *Saemaül Undong*, 새마을운동, or the "New Village Movement": it was a rural development campaign launched by the South Korean government in 1970 under President Park Chung Hee. It aimed to modernise rural communities and improve living standards through community-based development, increased productivity and the promotion of values such as diligence, self-help and cooperation. (한국민족문화대백과사전, s.v. "새마을운동." Retrieved 20/08/2026. <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0027443>)

⁴³ *Misint'ap'a Undong*, 미신타파운동, or the "Campaign to Eradicate Superstition": it was a state-led campaign that sought to eliminate practices and beliefs deemed superstitious, particularly traditional folk beliefs and rituals, as part of the broader project of social modernisation. (디지털제주문화대전, s.v. "미신타파운동." Retrieved 20/08/2026. <https://jeju.grandculture.net/jeju/toc/GC00702586>)

shamanic tradition than colonial-era suppression, since it is widely credited with driving large segments of the South Korean population to abandon their shamanic heritage as embarrassing “superstition” in favour of a rapidly growing Christian faith (Kendall 2009, 10); decades later, Shamans in Seoul who had lived through this period could still recall, in interviews, the harassment they experienced during the Movement’s height (Kendall 2009, 10).

Mansin were thus doubly marginalised: first by a traditional social hierarchy that placed them among the base-born and then by a modernising state that recast their traditional stigma in the vocabulary of national progress.

It is precisely this accumulated marginality—gendered, economic and epistemic—that gives the figure of the *Mansin* its particular resonance for the concerns of this work. A woman positioned at the margins of respectable society, frequently entering her vocation through suffering rather than privilege and historically dismissed as irrational or impure, is nonetheless the very person Korean cosmology charges with restoring the moral order disrupted by unjust death. This relationship between social marginality and ritual authority can be explained through I. M. Lewis’s influential theory of possession and deprivation (as cited in Kendall 1985, 23-25). Drawing on ethnographic material from a wide range of societies, Lewis argues that spirit possession tends to “run in particular social grooves,” disproportionately involving women and other socially subordinate groups (Lewis 1966; Lewis 1971). For those excluded from conventional structures of authority, possession can provide a culturally sanctioned means of expressing grievances and making claims that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to articulate in their own voices. The authority of the possessed person derives precisely from the displacement of agency: because it is the spirit, rather than the individual herself, who is understood to speak, a socially marginal woman can assume a voice and exercise an authority unavailable to her in ordinary social relations. In this sense, the

Mansin's marginality is not incidental to their ritual authority but constitutive of it: they speak for the excluded dead in part *because they themselves occupy a position of exclusion among the living*. Yet Lewis's framework must be qualified in the Korean context. His distinction between possession practices integrated into dominant religious structures and those that operate as peripheral or compensatory forms of religious expression⁴⁴ could, if applied too readily, encourage an understanding of Korean Shamanism as a secondary religious sphere available to women excluded from the male-dominated Confucian ritual order. Kendall explicitly resists such a characterisation. She does not treat women's shamanic practice as a peripheral substitute for men's Confucian ritual authority, instead she argues that shamanic ritual constitutes an integral component of Korean family and village religion, functioning in conjunction with, and not just in the absence of, Confucian ancestral rites (Kendall 1985, 23-25). This work follows Kendall's rejection of any attempt to paint the resulting practice as peripheral or compensatory rather than integral to the religious system as a whole (Kendall 1985, 23-25). The significance of the *Mansin's* marginality, therefore, lies not in making her ritual practice itself marginal to Korean religious life. Rather, her social marginality helps constitute the distinctive form of authority through which she participates in a religious system of which Shamanism is an essential part.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate and stress once again how the *Mansin's* authority to speak for the *Wŏnhon*—as socially and politically silenced dead—is inseparable from her own position as someone whose voice has likewise been discounted by the dominant order. This structural parallel between the

⁴⁴ Lewis distinguishes “main morality possession religions” (central, integrated into official religious/political authority) from “peripheral cults” (marginal, compensatory, existing in the shadow of a dominant male-controlled religion). Applied naively to Korea, this would cast Shamanism as a kind of consolation prize handed to women shut out of Confucian ritual authority.

marginalised Shaman and the marginalised dead she serves will prove central to the argument, developed in later chapters, that Han Kang's authorial position—as a woman writer giving voice to victims of state violence— comes to occupy an analogous place as the Shamans of yore did.

1.3 Possession, Voice and Embodied Memory: Shamanism and *Minjung* Culture

While the previous sections have tried to explain how the *Mansin* can be understood as mediator, healer and marginalised figure, this section will try to show the specific mechanism through which the mediation of the *Mansin* becomes possible: the body itself, transformed through possession into a vessel of memory. Spirit possession, discussed above primarily as a ritual technique for communication with the dead, deserves closer attention here as a distinctive mode of remembering—one in which the past is not narrated but re-enacted, not told but relived through another's flesh and voice.

Cultural memory studies have recognised that the past is transmitted not only through texts and monuments but through a variety of “media” and practices, of which embodied ritual performance is one of the most powerful (Taylor 2003, 19f as cited in Erll 2011, 51). Within the *kut*, the symbolic meaning of shamanic ritual is inseparable from its physical enactment: gesture, costume, dance and possession do not merely illustrate a shared cosmology but actively produce and renew it in the community's experience (Tambiah 1979, 120-121), a performative dimension of Korean shamanic ritual specifically noted in Kendall's own ethnographic account (Kendall 2009).

In this sense, the *Mansin*'s body functions as a site where memory is stored and reactivated rather than simply reported: what cannot be fully expressed in the ordinary language of everyday life is carried and periodically released through

the ritual body. In simpler terms, performing the ritual is what keeps the cosmology real and alive for the community. Each time the *kut* is performed, the community's whole worldview (spirits, ancestors, the moral order connecting living and dead) gets rebuilt and refreshed, not just displayed. Without the performance, the cosmology would fade or become abstract; the performance is what makes it less as an idea and more as a *lived* reality. Moreover, some elements (grief, injustice, *Han*, unspoken resentment) do not find space into normal conversation; rather they sit unexpressed, held in the community and in the body. The tension is finally released when the *kut* happens and, at that moment, through trance, possession, crying and dance, they burst out. The ritual body of the *Mansin* acts like a container that holds what words cannot hold and opens periodically to release it.

This embodied model of memory has direct consequences for how trauma is understood within Korean shamanic cosmology. Rather than locating trauma solely within the psyche of an individual survivor, Korean shamanic practice locates it additionally, and perhaps primarily, in the body—both the body of the deceased, whose violent or unjust death leaves a residue that must be physically addressed through ritual washing and purification, and the body of the *Mansin*, who takes on the physical symptoms, voice and gestures of the dead during possession. Trauma, in this framework, is transmitted rather than only remembered: it passes from the deceased into the *Mansin*'s body, and from the *Mansin*'s performance into the bodies and emotions of the assembled community, who weep, cry out and physically participate in the ritual's unfolding. This understanding of trauma as something lodged in, and communicated through, the body rather than resolved through narrative alone anticipates the reading of embodied trauma in Han Kang's fiction that recent criticism has begun to articulate, particularly in relation to "Human Acts" and "We Do Not Part" (Gulnar & Sarangi 2025).

Vocal performance and trance occupy a central place in this transmission. Ethnographic accounts of specific *kut*, such as the *Chaesu-kut* (채수굿)⁴⁵, describe in detail how the *Mansin*'s voice, movement and comportment shift register as different spirits are invoked and embodied in succession, each announced through a distinct manner of speech, tone and gesture (Grim 1984; Kendall 2011, 331; Sarfati 2021). Within the Korean context, a family's recognition of a deceased relative speaking through the *Mansin* typically rests on a combination of verifiable personal detail (facts, grievances or relationships the *Mansin* could not otherwise have known) and emotionally characteristic behaviour, gesture and tone (Kendall 1985, 65, 89, 148-149)

The phenomenon of one body speaking with, or as, another is central to the argument of this research, because without the *Mansin*'s body, spirits in general and *Wŏnhon* in particular could not be heard and represented—and the same centrality can be observed in Han Kang's writing, even though in a slightly different form. In possession, the *Mansin*'s own identity does not simply disappear to be replaced by the spirit; rather, *Mansin* and spirit coexist within a single body in a manner that is neither full erasure nor simple ventriloquism. The *Mansin* retains enough of herself to guide the ritual, negotiate on behalf of the living, and eventually release the spirit at the ritual's close, while nonetheless allowing the spirit's grief, resentment or unfulfilled *Han* to pass through her with sufficient force to be recognised as real by those present (Grim 1984). This

⁴⁵ *Chaesu Kut*, 채수굿: it is a type of Korean shamanic ritual performed to pray for good fortune, prosperity, health and protection from misfortune. The word *chaesu* (채수) in this context refers to good luck, blessings or increasing one's fortune. A typical 채수굿 includes an altar with offerings such as fruit, rice cakes, alcohol and other food, music played with drums and gongs, singing, chanting and dancing by the Shaman, invocations to household deities, mountain spirits, ancestral spirits and other protective gods and oracular messages or blessings delivered by the *Mansin* during moments of spirit possession or trance, depending on the regional tradition (Grim 1984)

capacity to hold another's voice without fully suppressing one's own is, I argue, the central analogy this research draws upon in reading Han Kang's literary practice. In the following chapters, I will attempt to demonstrate how her novels can be understood as textual sites in which the voices, sensations and bodily experiences of the dead—the tortured bodies of Gwangju, the drowned and buried of Jeju—are made to pass through the body of the text and, by extension, through the body of the reader, in a manner structurally analogous to shamanic possession. Recent scholarship on “Human Acts” has already begun to describe the novel's insistent focus on the corpse and the wounded body as a form of testimony that operates outside official historical record (Oh 2025); where the *Mansin* lends her body to the dead for the duration of a ritual, Han Kang's prose, as I will try to show, repeatedly lends its narrative voice and its attention to bodily sensation to those who can no longer speak for themselves, transforming reading itself into an act of embodied, rather than purely cognitive, remembrance.

Up to now, I have primarily focused my attention on how Korean Shamanism functions as a religious and therapeutic system operating at the level of the individual household, the local community or the ritual specialist herself. I will now instead turn to a different, and for this research decisive, issue: the way in which shamanic practice has been mobilised, reinterpreted and re-performed as a resource for collective political identity, particularly within the *Minjung* movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Understanding this history is essential, since it establishes the conceptual bridge between the anthropology of the *Mansin* developed above and the historical material—the Jeju Massacre and the Gwangju Uprising.

As already mentioned⁴⁶, Shamanism has long occupied an ambiguous position in relation to Korean elite culture. Where Confucian orthodoxy and, later, institutional Buddhism and Christianity structured official religious and political life, shamanic practice persisted primarily among ordinary people—farmers, fishermen, urban poor and, above all, women—as a form of popular or folk religiosity largely excluded from formal recognition. Precisely because of this exclusion, from the 1970s onward, Shamanism came to be strongly identified with the lived religious and emotional world of ordinary people rather than with the doctrines of the literate elite. Kim Hyun-key Hogarth’s account of the relationship between Shamanism and Korean cultural nationalism describes how this association between shamanic practice and the “authentic” culture of the common people would later prove central to its reappropriation as a symbol of national and popular identity, in explicit contrast to imported or elite religious and political frameworks (Kim H. H. 1999, 338-349). In simpler terms, Korean Shamanism, in some cases, went from being labelled negatively as a religion for the lower class to being reconsidered positively and recognised as a genuine belief effectively representing authentic and unfiltered Korean culture, untouched by foreign influence or elite control.

This apparent tension is not in fact a contradiction, but reflects two related processes operating on different objects at once. Laurel Kendall (2009) argues that “superstition” and “tradition” are really two sides of the same coin—both with the outcome of denying Shamans real agency, even though they do it in different ways. Calling shamanic practice “superstition” dismisses it outright, whereas calling it “tradition” may seem almost positive, but it is just as dismissive in effect: it treats Shamanism as a relic of the past, and in doing so misses what actually matters about it—that it’s a living practice doing something real and consequential *right now*, not a preserved fossil of how things used to be (Kendall 2009, 206). On Kendall’s account, in fact, well-intentioned

⁴⁶ See p. 21.

efforts to celebrate the *kut* as national heritage or performance art can “objectify ‘tradition’ in a nostalgic valorisation of the past that necessarily denigrates living Shamans in the present” (Kendall 2009, 206). What Kim H. H. describes as “Shamanism’s reappropriation as a marker of authentic national identity” therefore operated primarily at the level of symbol and abstraction—where “Shamans evoked the superstitious countryside, nostalgia and nationalism would rehabilitate them as bearers of national culture” (Kendall 2009, 11)—while the lived social position of individual, practicing Shamans remained largely unchanged, and in some periods continued to worsen. Kendall traces this shift concretely to the 1980s, when memories of national hardship gave way to South Korea’s entry into the ranks of developed nations, culminating in the 1988 Seoul Olympics Arts Festival, whose organisers staged a major performance “as if it were a *kut*,” using shamanic music and dance to represent the nation to an international audience (Kendall 2009, 20).

This identification of Shamanism with the culture of ordinary people fed directly into the ideological vocabulary of *Minjung* (민중). As Hagen Koo (1993, 131-132) has documented, *Minjung* discourse constructed an oppositional historical narrative in which ordinary Koreans—peasants, workers, women and the politically marginalised—were positioned as the true bearers of the nation’s history and moral legitimacy, against a state and elite culture perceived as complicit with dictatorship, foreign influence and social injustice. Within this narrative, folk traditions that had previously been dismissed or suppressed as superstitions—shamanic ritual, mask dance (kr.: 탈춤,

[*talch'um*]⁴⁷), farmers' percussion bands (kr.: 풍물, [*p'ungmul*]⁴⁸) and communal work songs—were reclaimed as expressions of an authentic, resistant popular culture that had survived beneath, and despite, successive regimes of official suppression (Wells 1995).

The *Minjung* movement's appropriation of ritual culture was neither purely symbolic nor purely nostalgic. Activists became interested in Korean Shamanism because they saw it as “a spiritual source of nationalism” and in Korean shamanic ritual, which was seen as “a means of raising critical consciousness and comradeship among the participants of the social movement”; thus they got closer to it and used Shamanism and shamanic practices as a support for *Minjung* (Koo 1993, 144). In this process, the *Mansin*'s traditional function, discussed in the preceding sections, of giving ritual voice to the suffering and the unheard was extended analogically to an entirely new context: no longer only the individual *Wŏnhon* of a wrongly

⁴⁷ *T'alch'um* (탈춤), literally “mask dance,” is a traditional Korean folk performance genre combining dance, dialogue and satirical narrative, historically performed by traveling troupes or village communities at festivals and communal gatherings. Performers wear carved wooden or papier-mâché masks representing stock character types—corrupt aristocrats, dissolute monks, oppressive landlords, put-upon commoners—and use these masked roles to stage biting social satire that would have been dangerous to voice directly. Its capacity for anonymous, licensed critique of social hierarchy is precisely what made it attractive to *Minjung*-era activists seeking indigenous models of popular resistance (국악사전, s.v. “탈춤”. Retrieved 20/08/2026. <https://www.gugak.go.kr/ency/topic/view/1210>)

⁴⁸ *P'ungmul* (풍물), sometimes translated as “farmers' percussion music” or “farmers' band music,” is a traditional genre of Korean folk performance combining drumming, gong-playing, dance and processional movement, historically performed by farming communities at seasonal festivals, communal labor events and shamanic rituals alike. Performers play a core set of percussion instruments—including the *buk* (barrel drum), *jing* (large gong), and *kkwaenggwari* (small hand gong)—while moving in coordinated formations, often accompanied by acrobatic ribbon-hat spinning. Like *t'alch'um*, *p'ungmul* was reclaimed during the *Minjung* movement as an emblem of authentic, communal popular culture, and was frequently performed at student demonstrations and protests through the 1970s and 80s (한국민족문화대백화사전, s.v. “풍물”. Retrieved 20/08/2026. <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0060380>).

deceased relative, but the collective grievance of the *Minjung* as a whole, understood as a body of people denied political voice and historical recognition. This extension became especially visible in the practice of collective mourning surrounding the democratisation movement. As the number of politically motivated deaths, disappearances and unresolved killings accumulated through the 1970s and 1980s, communities and activist groups increasingly turned to shamanic ritual specialists to perform *kut* on behalf of victims whose deaths could not be properly mourned within official channels, whether because the state suppressed public commemoration or because families lacked the means or opportunity for conventional funerary rites (Kim S. 2019, 97; Kim S. & Hwang M. 2023, 84-85, 89). These rituals performed a double function consistent with the analysis developed earlier in this chapter: they addressed the specific spiritual needs of the deceased, understood within shamanic cosmology as *Wŏnhon* requiring recognition and release, while simultaneously constituting a public, embodied act of political testimony in contexts where verbal or written dissent remained dangerous or was actively censored. For this reason, *Mansin* have been described as politicised representatives of Koreans who fought for democracy (Sarfati 2021, 6).

This convergence of shamanic ritual and political mourning is especially evident in the aftermath of the Gwangju Uprising of May 1980, in which state and military forces killed an uncertain but substantial number of civilians during the suppression of a pro-democracy uprising, and in the earlier, longer-suppressed memory of the Jeju Massacre of 1948-49 (Kim S. 2019; Kim S. & Hwang M. 2023). In both cases, the state's initial refusal to acknowledge the scale or nature of the violence left thousands of deaths without official recognition, proper burial or public mourning for years or decades (Scott-Stokes & Lee J. 2015; Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003). Into this vacuum, shamanic ritual specialists were repeatedly called upon to perform *kut*, and specifically rites of the *Ssitgim-kut* type discussed above, for the unrecognised dead of both events, treating them

collectively as *Wŏnhon* whose resentment and unresolved suffering required ritual address (Kim S. 2013, 224-227; Kim S. 2019, 83-85). Scholarship on the Jeju case in particular has shown how such rituals functioned as an early, and for a long time nearly unique, form of public acknowledgment of the massacre, preceding by decades the official state apology and the eventual designation of 3rd April as a day of national commemoration (Kim S. 2013; Kim S. 2019; Kim S. & Hwang M. 2023). In light of this, it can be concluded that ritual mourning preceding and eventually feeding into official historical recognition constitutes a recurrent feature of post-authoritarian memory politics in South Korea rather than an isolated case.

It is this historical convergence—between shamanic ritual, *Minjung* political culture and the long-delayed public mourning of Jeju and Gwangju—that the following chapter will examine in detail. I have argued⁴⁹, above, that the *Mansin*'s ritual task of restoring cosmological order becomes, at the collective level, indistinguishable from the work of historical recognition. The case of Gwangju and Jeju demonstrates this convergence not as an abstract theory but as a documented historical practice: *Mansin* performed precisely the labour of memory-making that the state, for political reasons, refused to perform.

1.4 The Influence of Shamanism on Literature: Rituals, Memory-making, and Resistance to Forgetting.

In the preceding sections I have strived to describe some of the key details of the mechanics of Korean shamanic ritualism: its structure, its social function, its embodied and vocal dimensions and its extension into the political culture of *Minjung*. In doing so, my aim was to establish a staging ground allowing for an attempt to tackle a series of questions, the answer to which stand to define the very significance of the “*shamanic phenomenon*” itself. What kind of

⁴⁹ See p. 38-39.

relationship/interpretation to/of memory, and, ultimately, to/of time itself, is shamanic ritualism predicated upon? How has the same relationship between Shamanism and memory migrated beyond ritual practice into the specifically literary domain? These questions are of peculiar relevance to the aims of this work for the present research because it is precisely at this more abstract level—rather than at the level of surface resemblance between novelist and Shaman—that an analogy between Han Kang’s literary practice and Korean shamanic ritual should be established.

Ritual, in the Korean shamanic context examined throughout this chapter, functions as a technology of preservation quite unlike the archive, the monument or the written record: where documentary memory relies on fixing the past in a stable external form that can subsequently be consulted, ritual preserves the past by periodically re-performing it, functioning as what Diana Taylor calls the ‘repertoire’ of embodied memory—performance, gesture, movement—as against the fixed, documentary ‘archive’ (Taylor 2003, 19, as cited in Erll 2011, 51-52). The *kut* does not store the memory of the dead so much as it repeats the act of their acknowledgment, again and again, across generations.

This has a crucial consequence for what counts as “preserved” within this framework. A memory that is never repeated, that is not carried into the community’s periodic ritual life, is at risk not of being forgotten in the ordinary sense but of ceasing to exist as a shared reality at all: it slips from the register of the community’s lived cosmology into mere information, if it survives even that far. The symbolic content of the *kut*, as noted in the discussion of the *Mansin*’s body above⁵⁰, is inseparable from its physical re-enactment (Kendall 2009; Tambiah 1979, 120-121); by the same logic, memory sustained by ritual is inseparable from the repetition that keeps it alive.

⁵⁰ See p. 47-48.

This is why repetition, far from being a merely aesthetic or mnemonic device, operates in Korean Shamanism as an active defence against erasure.

Comparative studies of shamanic performance have likewise stressed that trance and possession function as skilled, repeatable performative accomplishments rather than singular, unrepeatable events: their capacity to hold a community's attention and belief depends on their being performed again, correctly, whenever the need arises—for as long as unresolved grievance or unfinished mourning persists.

Understood in this way, the repeated ritual acknowledgment of the dead takes on an unmistakably ethical dimension. As argued above⁵¹, Jeffrey Alexander's account of cultural trauma describes how particular deaths and sufferings can come to be understood not as private losses but as events that leave lasting marks on a group's collective identity and memory, thereby generating claims of collective responsibility and recognition for those who suffered (Alexander et al. 2004, 1-2). Within the Korean context examined here, this sense of responsibility and recognition also generates an obligation to remember the dead through ritual: it is not enough for a community to know, in the abstract, that an injustice has occurred. The *Wŏnhon* must be periodically addressed, given voice and ritually cared for, or the debt of recognition remains unpaid. Scholarship on the long path toward reconciliation for the Jeju Massacre illustrates precisely this dynamic, describing decades in which ritual mourning substituted for a historical and political acknowledgment that the state was for a long time unwilling to provide and treating the eventual achievement of official recognition as the fulfilment, rather than the replacement, of an obligation first enacted through ritual (Tambiah 1979, 120-121; Park, M. 2018). Remembering the dead, in this framework, is not an

⁵¹ See p. 40.

optional act of piety but a standing ethical demand that the living owe to those who cannot speak for themselves.

This ethical dimension is inseparable from a distinctive experience of ritual temporality, in which the past does not remain safely behind the present but continues to press into it and to influence it. In the specifically Korean shamanic context, this temporal structure takes the form of the *Wŏnhon*'s continued presence among the living precisely because their death has not been properly resolved. The wandering spirit is, in this sense, a temporal anomaly: a being whose past (an unjust or violent death) has failed to become fully past, and who therefore persists, demanding address, in a present that it has no proper business occupying. The *kut* exists to correct this temporal disorder—to allow what has not finished happening to finally be completed and released into a settled past—but it can only do so by first allowing the past to speak, fully and immediately, in the present tense of ritual performance.

This same logic of 'preservation through repetition', ethical obligation, and disordered temporality is not confined to ritual practice narrowly defined; as Chapter 3 will argue⁵², it also structures Han Kang's own relationship to the historical material she returns to across, and even within, individual works—a pattern of repeated revisitation rather than singular, completed treatment.

Literary scholars working on modern Korean fiction have repeatedly noted that shamanic structures of feeling, address and remembrance have migrated into literary form itself, particularly in writing produced by and about those excluded from official historical narrative. Bruce Fulton's survey of contemporary South Korean women's fiction observes that a recurring concern of this body of work is precisely the task of making visible—of narrating into presence—experiences and deaths that mainstream historical and literary discourse has tended to pass over in silence, a project he explicitly situates within

⁵² See p. 107-108.

a broader Korean tradition of using narrative to address the unseen and the unheard (Fulton 1996, 66). He states:

“[...] [their] characters bear witness to the tragedies of contemporary Korean history, especially the May 1980 massacre of the citizens of the southern city of Kwangju⁵³ by the South Korean military. The literary establishment in South Korea has a large activist sector, and to these writers and critics, the new fiction exhibits the historical consciousness essential to contemporary Korean writing. At the same time, this new work shoulders another function of modern Korean fiction: awakening younger readers to the stark realities of recent Korean history.”

Read alongside scholarship on *Minjung* culture, particularly Kenneth M. Wells’s account of the cultural construction of Korean history, in which popular and traditional forms were mobilised in projects of historical and political meaning-making (Wells 1995, 11-30), this body of scholarship suggests that modern Korean literature dealing with historical violence has frequently positioned itself, whether explicitly or not, as heir to a task that ritual once performed largely on its own: refusing to let the unjustly dead settle into silence, and insisting that their recognition remains an unfinished, ongoing obligation rather than a completed historical fact.

The remaining chapters of this thesis will take up this inheritance in detail, examining how a specific body of contemporary Korean fiction gives literary form to the ‘preservation through repetition’, ethical obligation and disordered temporality identified in this chapter as constitutive of Korean shamanic ritual. Chapter 3 will argue that this logic of repetition operates in

⁵³ A different romanisation from the one used so far for the city of Gwangju.

Han Kang's work not only thematically, in her recurring preoccupation with historical violence, but structurally: Gwangju, the subject of her 2014 novel "Human Acts", resurfaces seven years later in "We Do Not Part", where the narrator Kyungha is herself the author of an earlier book about a massacre in an unnamed city readers are invited to recognise as Gwangju—an act of authorial self-repetition that mirrors, at the level of literary composition, the ritual logic this chapter has identified: a death that cannot be addressed once and then set aside, but must be returned to, revisited, and spoken of again. For now, it is enough to note that the questions this chapter has posed of the *kut*—how a community keeps its dead from disappearing, how repetition resists erasure, and how the past continues to press into the present until it is properly addressed—are not questions unique to ritual practice. They are, I argue, questions that certain literary texts pose, and attempt to answer, by comparable means.

Chapter 2: The *Minjung* Movement: Gwangju, Jeju and the Long Road to Recognition

2.1 Defining *Minjung*

Before turning to the specific historical events central to this chapter, it is necessary to clarify a term that has already appeared repeatedly in this research and that will structure the analysis to follow: *Minjung* (민중). The word *Minjung* combines the Sino-Korean elements *min* (民, “people”⁵⁴) and *jung* (衆, “the masses” or “the multitude”⁵⁵) and in its most literal sense merely denotes “the people” or “the common folk” (Koo 1993, 143).

The term *Minjung* existed before the 1970s, but it is only then that it would come to assume a second, more specific meaning. Specifically, it started to be used in order to describe “students, writers, journalists, church leaders, and opposition party leaders—united by their common opposition to the Park regime” and who sought to construct an alternative historical narrative in which the true agents and moral centre of the nation were not its rulers but ordinary Koreans (Koo 1993, 143). It could therefore be said that the term describes some sort of social group. However, such definition is not without its limits. First and foremost, as I will attempt to demonstrate, *Minjung* is not merely a sociological category. Furthermore, there is strong ongoing debate over which groups of people to include under the term *Minjung*.

Indeed, *Minjung* is not a fixed or homogeneous social category but a constructed and contested one: who counted as *Minjung*, and on what basis, was itself a matter of debate among activists and intellectuals, and the term

⁵⁴ More about this hanja here: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/民#Korean>

⁵⁵ More about this hanja here: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/衆#Korean>

could be mobilised to include or exclude different groups depending on political context. For example, some scholars define this social class as the class of “alienated” people in contrast to the ruling elite, the educated class or the state (Han W., as cited in Koo 1993, 145). The main strength of this definition is that it draws attention to the relational character of the category: *Minjung* is defined by a condition of exclusion from political and social power, and not necessarily by a single occupation or economic position. This makes the concept particularly useful for understanding why groups with different socioeconomic backgrounds could identify with the *Minjung*. At the same time, however, such definition remains relatively broad and vague. If *Minjung* encompasses all those who are in some sense “alienated” from the centres of power, it becomes difficult to establish clear criteria for determining who belongs to the category and who does not.

Some other scholars, employing a Marxist classification, view it as an economical class composed by the urban poor, small autonomous producers, the working class and some progressive intellectuals (Park H. as cited in Koo 1993, 145); this approach has the advantage of providing more concrete socioeconomic criteria and of situating the *Minjung* within the class relations produced by South Korea’s rapid industrialisation. It therefore helps explain the material inequalities and class tensions that contributed to the emergence of *Minjung* activism. However, defining *Minjung* principally in economic terms risks presenting it as a more internally homogeneous class than it actually was. In particular, it struggles to account for the participation of sectors of the middle class whose political opposition to authoritarianism could not be explained solely by their position within the economic structure.

Others see it as a sort of political class which includes all those people oppressed by the authoritarian rule, therefore, according to them, the *Minjung* include a large section of the middle class, too (Han S. as cited in Koo 1993, 145). The strength of this approach is that it better captures the political nature of the

Minjung movement and explains why individuals who did not necessarily occupy subordinate economic positions could nevertheless participate in struggles against authoritarianism. Yet, precisely because it defines *Minjung* according to political oppression, this interpretation risks making the category excessively inclusive. If all those opposed to authoritarian rule are considered *Minjung*, the concept may lose much of its analytical specificity and become difficult to distinguish from the broader category of the democratic opposition. Koo, instead, combines these two latter classifications to create another definition for *Minjung* which, according to him, represents a “class-based political movement”, which “is class-based in the sense that widening income gaps and sharpening class relations have provided the ‘raw materials’ for its development. Korean economic development has engendered an acute sense of distributive injustice, not only among the lower class but also among much of the middle class” (Koo 1993, 145). Koo’s interpretation is particularly useful because it attempts to overcome this opposition between economic and political definitions.

For the purposes of this thesis, Koo’s definition provides the most useful framework among these four definitions, because it allows *Minjung* to be understood simultaneously as a category rooted in the socioeconomic transformations of South Korean development and as a political subject formed through opposition to authoritarian rule. It also accommodates the heterogeneity of the groups involved in *Minjung* activism without treating the category as completely open-ended.

Additionally, however, the term *Minjung* came to designate not only a group of people, but also a broad intellectual, cultural and political movement that reinterpreted Korean history and society from the standpoint of ordinary people far from power and that positioned itself explicitly against the authoritarian developmentalism of the Park Chung-hee and, later, Chun Doo-

hwan (전두환) governments. Therefore, understanding *Minjung* solely as a political movement would overlook an important dimension of its development: its attempt to construct an alternative cultural understanding of Korean society and history.

Kenneth Wells's interpretation is particularly useful in this regard. Wells argues that *Minjung* was not simply a political ideology or a clearly defined social group, but also, and perhaps primarily, a cultural project. This interpretation is significant because it shifts attention from the question of who objectively belonged to the *Minjung* to the processes through which the *Minjung* was represented and constructed as a collective historical subject. *Minjung* historians and activists challenged established forms of historical knowledge by broadening the range of sources considered relevant to the reconstruction of Korean history. Oral traditions, popular theatre and dance, shamanist practices and other religious rituals and beliefs were incorporated into an alternative historical narrative, through which the experiences of ordinary people could be placed at the centre of Korean history (Wells, 1995, p. 13).

The main strength of Wells's interpretation is therefore that it highlights the productive role of culture in the formation of *Minjung* identity. Popular cultural forms were, of course, ways of expressing the grievances of a pre-existing social group, but in this context they also contributed to defining who the *Minjung* were and how their historical experience should be understood. By presenting ordinary people as both the principal victims and protagonists of Korean history, *Minjung* intellectuals and activists constructed a narrative in which the *Minjung* had repeatedly suffered oppression, first under the *Yangban* aristocracy until the end of the nineteenth century, then under Japanese colonial rule from 1905 to 1945 and subsequently under postwar authoritarian and military regimes (Wells 1995, 13). Culture thus became a means of representing the *Minjung* and, most importantly, a way of producing a shared historical consciousness around which political mobilisation could take place.

At the same time, a cultural definition of *Minjung* presents a potential limitation if considered in isolation. By focusing on historical representation, cultural practices and the construction of collective identity, Wells's approach risks giving less weight to the material inequalities and political conflicts that provided the conditions for the emergence of the movement in the first place. In this respect, the cultural dimension identified by Wells should not be regarded as an alternative to the socioeconomic and political dimensions discussed above, but rather as complementary to them. The *Minjung* could be politically mobilised around experiences of authoritarian oppression and socioeconomic inequality precisely because these experiences were also interpreted and articulated through a shared cultural and historical framework.

Wells's contribution is therefore particularly valuable for understanding how the *Minjung* became more than a socioeconomic category or political constituency: it emerged as a collective historical subject with its own narrative, cultural practices and understanding of Korean history. For the purposes of this thesis, the cultural dimension of *Minjung* will consequently be considered alongside its class-based and political dimensions. This approach allows *Minjung* to be understood as a heterogeneous political and cultural subject whose identity was continuously constructed through the interaction of material conditions, political struggles and cultural representations, rather than as a fixed social group.

Building on this distinction, this thesis thus understands *Minjung* as referring to two related but distinct phenomena. On the one hand, following Koo, it denotes an ongoing historical and cultural condition: the lived experience of ordinary Koreans across generations of political and economic subordination. On the other hand, following Wells, it refers to the specific, historically bounded political and cultural movement that emerged in the 1970s

and 1980s and gave this condition its name and most visible organised expression.

Both senses of the term are relevant for this research, which is concerned both with the historical events of Gwangju and Jeju⁵⁶ as instances of *Minjung* suffering in the first sense, and with the deliberate cultural and ritual strategies—examined in the previous chapter and pursued further below—through which that suffering was given voice in the second, more specifically cultural, political and artistic sense.

With this framework in place, the chapter now turns to the two historical events that this research treats as paradigmatic instances of *Minjung* suffering and of the collective, politically induced *Wŏnhon* discussed in Chapter 1: the Gwangju Democratisation Movement of May 1980 and the Jeju Massacre of 1948-49.

2.2 The Gwangju Democratisation Movement (18th May 1980)

Having established, in Chapter 1, the anthropological and spiritual framework through which Korean shamanic ritual addresses unresolved death and injustice, this section will be devoted to the analysis of the first of the two historical events identified above: the Gwangju Uprising of 18th May 1980 (오일팔 민주화 운동).

The Gwangju Uprising was by no means an isolated event. On the very contrary, it took place within a broader historical series of societal upheavals that animated the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Therefore, it naturally follows that its significance as an immediately political phenomenon cannot be understood but by taking into full consideration its historical context. All the

⁵⁶ *Minjung* as a movement is historically later than Jeju Massacre, so here I am applying the broader analytical sense of *Minjung* retrospectively and I am not claiming that Jeju participants themselves necessarily understood their experience through the later *Minjung* framework.

more so can be said of its far-reaching cultural impacts, which require to an even greater extent, in order to be identified and analysed, a wider scope.

To establish a sort of “working definition”, this longer period could be described as a relatively brief “window” during which South Koreans hoped democracy might finally be possible, rapidly shut close by that hope being violently crushed (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XII). The first spark that would eventually serve as a trigger for the following events was the assassination of President Park Chung-hee by his own intelligence chief in October 1979, after eighteen years of authoritarian rule.

His mandate, in spite of its lack of democratic legitimation, having been set off by a coup d'état, did not initially incur into large popular dissent. This circumstance is at least partially motivated by success experienced by President Park's economic programme, which brought substantial growth to South Korean economy (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XII)⁵⁷. The turning point came in 1969, when Park Chung-hee modified the constitution in order to allow him to run for a third presidential election. In the wake of this backhanded political manoeuvring, his popularity began to wane. Nevertheless, despite mounting popular dissent, President Park would be sworn on 1st July 1971, setting start to his third mandate, having defeated the opposition's candidate Kim Dae-jung

⁵⁷ According to Gregg, per-capita income increased tenfold during Park's tenure, while the country developed into a major producer of steel, ships, chemicals, consumer electronics and other manufactured goods. Gregg attributes this growth principally to Park's early establishment of centralised economic planning and five-year development plans, the appointment of economists to implement them, and the mobilisation of substantial foreign capital. In particular, the 1965 normalisation of relations with Japan brought \$800 million in economic aid, while South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War generated substantial revenues and, during the mid-1960s, became the country's largest single source of foreign-exchange earnings. These resources helped finance the industrialisation that followed (source: <https://time.com/archive/6955539/park-chung-hee/>).

(김대중) in the elections with a relatively low margin⁵⁸. The hotly contested nature of the election, coupled with his growing unpopularity, led President Park to declare nationwide martial law on 17th October 1972, dissolve the National Assembly, suspend political activity and parts of the existing Constitution and initiate the creation of a new constitutional order. The resulting Yusin Constitution, promulgated on 27th December 1972⁵⁹, replaced direct presidential elections with indirect election by the National Conference for Unification, extended the presidential term from four to six years and removed limits on re-election. It also substantially strengthened presidential authority, including extensive emergency powers and greater influence over the legislature and judiciary. While the regime justified these changes on grounds of national security, political stability and Korean reunification, the Yusin system effectively institutionalised Park's authoritarian rule and enabled him to remain in power indefinitely⁶⁰. The changes, this time, would therefore be far more drastic than those effected in 1971, and this revised constitution of 1972 would be the midwife of the most repressive regime South Korea has ever witnessed. Among the more immediate consequences of this institutional subversion was the intensification of state intervention in both political and economic life, as the government simultaneously pursued an ambitious programme of heavy and chemical industrialisation (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XII).

Resistance to the Yusin system emerged almost immediately. The first major post-Yusin protests took place in October 1973, when students at Seoul

⁵⁸ Although Park won with 53.2% of the vote (6,342,828 votes) against Kim's 45.3% (5,395,900), Kim's strong performance—particularly his victory in Seoul—represented a significant electoral challenge to Park's rule (<https://theme.archives.go.kr/next/vote/info/voteInfo.do?page>).

⁵⁹ At this point, martial law was lifted.

⁶⁰ Source: https://contents.history.go.kr/front/hm/view.do?levelId=hm_150_0090

National University began demonstrations against the new authoritarian order, triggering a wave of anti-Yusin protests, demonstrations and boycotts at universities across the country. In 1974, student opposition intensified with the formation of the National Democratic Youth and Students Federation (민청학련), which attempted to organise nationwide demonstrations against the regime. The government responded to the movement with Emergency Measure No. 4, arresting 180 of the 1,024 people targeted and prosecuting them on charges including conspiracy to overthrow the government. Authorities also portrayed the movement as being linked to a communist organisation⁶¹ (Chang 2015).

The repression of 1974-75 temporarily weakened large-scale student mobilisation, but opposition to Yusin did not disappear. Instead, it increasingly spread to religious groups, intellectuals, dissident politicians and, particularly, organised labour. At the same time, the economic costs and social inequalities associated with rapid industrialisation became increasingly visible. The first oil shock and the rise in international oil and raw-material prices contributed to severe inflation, slower growth⁶² and balance-of-payments difficulties in South Korea. At the same time, the government continued its ambitious investment and policy support for heavy and chemical industries⁶³. Throughout the second half of the decade, workers in democratic unions repeatedly challenged state-controlled labour organisations and poor working conditions. Labour disputes

⁶¹ Source: 한국민족문화대사전, s.v. “전국민주청년학생총연맹사건”. Retrieved 06/09/2026. <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0068915>

⁶² Source: <https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/policy/index.jsp?poMode=view&policySeq=246>

⁶³ Source: <https://static.un.org/en/ga/second/62/iadelman.pdf>

and strikes increased substantially, from 54 in 1974 to 105 in 1979, despite the severe restrictions imposed on collective action⁶⁴ (Chang 2015).

By 1977-78, opposition to the Yusin system was once again becoming more visible. Labour and rural movements intensified, while dissident political forces became increasingly organised. The December 1978 parliamentary elections further exposed the regime's vulnerability: although the electoral system favoured Park's Democratic Republican Party, the opposition New Democratic Party, then led by Kim Young-sam (김영삼), received more votes nationwide⁶⁵ (Chang 2015). Meanwhile, renewed economic difficulties were emerging. The government's heavy-industrialisation strategy had generated structural imbalances and, following the second oil shock, inflation and economic instability intensified. In April 1979, the government therefore introduced an economic stabilisation programme that placed additional pressure on smaller businesses and urban workers, particularly in the industrial regions of Busan and Masan⁶⁶ (Chang 2015).

It was against this background of mounting political, social and economic tensions that the crisis of 1979 unfolded. In August, workers from the financially troubled YH Trading Company occupied the headquarters of the opposition New Democratic Party in protest against the company's closure and the government's failure to protect their livelihoods. On 11th August, riot police violently raided the building to disperse the workers; during the

⁶⁴ Source: 한국민족문화대전, s.v. “파업”. Retrieved 06/09/2026. <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0068930>

⁶⁵ Source: https://contents.history.go.kr/front/kc/printViewPopup.do?levelId=kc_i500150, https://data.ipu.org/election-summary/PDF/REPUBLIC_OF_KOREA_1978_E.PDF

⁶⁶ Source: https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/kc/view.do?code=kc_age_50&levelId=kc_i502300

operation, YH worker Kim Kyung-sook died after falling from the building⁶⁷ (Chang 2015). The YH incident transformed a labour dispute into a major political confrontation, particularly after the government subsequently moved against opposition leader Kim Young-sam. The resulting escalation of tensions contributed directly to the BuMa Democratic Struggle of October 1979, when students and citizens in Busan and Masan—two cities in the region where Kim Young-sam was from—launched mass demonstrations against the Yusin regime⁶⁸. The uprising, brutally suppressed by the government, ended with the death of a woman and culminated in a martial law declaration in the region. The uprising, however, demonstrated that opposition to the Yusin system had developed into a mass movement capable of challenging the regime on a scale that could no longer be contained through ordinary repression. The government's violent response further exposed the fragility of Park Chung-hee's dictatorship and contributed to the intensification of divisions within the ruling elite.

Scholars have therefore identified BuMa as a crucial turning point in the trajectory of South Korean democratisation, as its suppression did not eliminate popular opposition, but instead contributed to the political conditions that allowed the democratic movement to re-emerge in 1980 (Shim 2021).

In this sense, BuMa can be regarded as a prelude to the Gwangju Uprising. The two movements were separated by the collapse of the Yusin regime and the emergence of a new military leadership under Chun Doo-hwan, and they differed considerably in scale and outcome. Nevertheless, they formed part of the same broader struggle against military authoritarianism. Both involved

⁶⁷ Source: https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/kc/view.do?code=kc_age_50&levelId=kc_i502300, https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/kc/view.do?levelId=kc_i501400

⁶⁸ Source: <https://archives.kdemo.or.kr/display/1970.html>

students and ordinary citizens challenging military rule, and both were met with violent state repression. The experience of BuMa also shaped the political expectations of the democratic movement during the subsequent “Seoul Spring”: the collapse of the Yusin regime demonstrated that mass mobilisation could successfully undermine military authoritarianism, while the military’s determination to prevent a repetition of this outcome ultimately contributed to the confrontation that erupted in Gwangju in May 1980 (Shim 2021).

Park would be assassinated by the head of K-CIA on 26th October 1979⁶⁹ and the Yusin system consequently collapsed (Chang 2015; Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XIII; Wells 1995, 90). Power was then transferred in the hands of the ex-first minister of the Park regime, Choi Kyu-ha (최규하), who was a career diplomat and therefore lacked a personal power base, which was fundamental in order to lift up the country from the political and economic crisis (Riotto 2018, 372; Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XIII). His relatively weak position created a temporary power vacuum within the authoritarian system that had been built around Park, providing greater political space for opposition forces and civil society and political space for democratisation. This gave rise to a short period of relative political openness and often referred to as the “Seoul Spring” of 1980, during which students, workers and opposition politicians pressed for an end to military government and for constitutional reform (Chang 2015; Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XIII; Wells 1995, 90). This period would rapidly come to a close.

Chun Doo-hwan was then the commander of the Defense Security Command and was appointed to lead the investigation into Park’s assassination. On 12th December, a mere two months after the assassination of Park, Chun and officers

⁶⁹ See p. 68.

associated with the Hanahoe (하나회)⁷⁰ faction carried out a military coup, arresting Army Chief of Staff and Martial Law Commander and using forces under their control to seize dominance within the military. The coup did not immediately overthrow Choi's civilian government, but it made Chun the de facto dominant figure in the military and laid the groundwork for his subsequent seizure of political power in 1980. The National Institute of Korean History⁷¹ describes 12th December as the moment when Chun's "new military" faction emerged as the core of political power, while the Academy of Korean Studies⁷² likewise notes that Chun and his allies gained control of the military and subsequently used that position to acquire political power⁷³.

This crushed any hopes of a progressive development in the direction of greater democratic participation. On 15th May 1980, students, the workers and citizens who had animated this brief democratic Spring gathered at Seoul station to

⁷⁰ Hanahoe (하나회), "Society of One": was a clandestine faction within the South Korean military, formed around officers from the Korea Military Academy's 11th graduating class, including Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo. It expanded by recruiting trusted officers from subsequent academy classes, particularly those from the southeastern Gyeongsang region. During Park Chung-hee's rule, Hanahoe members cultivated close ties with Park and came to occupy key positions in the military, including in the Security Command, Special Warfare Command, Capital Garrison Command, and other strategically important units. The group effectively operated alongside the formal military hierarchy, creating a network of officers personally loyal to one another and, initially, to Park. By 1979, Hanahoe members controlled or held influential positions in several units around Seoul, which was crucial to the success of Chun's 12th December coup. The National Institute of Korean History describes Hanahoe as a secret organisation within the military and notes that its members occupied key military posts that enabled the coup; the Academy of Korean Studies likewise describes it as an unofficial private group of military officers headed by Chun Doo-hwan. Sources: https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/kc/view.do?levelId=kc_i500150, https://www.aks.ac.kr/cefia/webzine/1810/focus_eng.html

⁷¹ Source: https://contents.history.go.kr/front/kc/printViewPopup.do?levelId=kc_i500150

⁷² Source: 한국민족문화대전, s.v. "12.12 군사반란". Retrieved 06/09/2026. <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0034018>

⁷³ Source: https://www.aks.ac.kr/cefia/webzine/1810/focus_eng.html

protest against this new regime; the following days, on 16th May, the protesters withdrew for an announced period of two days, awaiting the government's redress to their grievances (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XIV). On 17th May 1980, however, General Chun extended martial law across the entire country, closed universities, banned political activity and ordered the arrest of prominent opposition figures, including Kim Dae-jung, who had strong regional support in the provinces of Chölla. (Riotto 2018, 373; Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XIV-XV).

The uprising itself began on 18th May 1980, when students in Gwangju gathered to protest against the closing of their university and the broader imposition of martial law (Riotto 2018, 373). The government's response was disproportionate from the outset—which followed a scheme, that of university students' protests, that had become popular: units of the Special Warfare Command, an elite airborne force trained primarily for combat rather than civil policing, were deployed to the city and used excessive and indiscriminate violence against demonstrators and bystanders alike, beating and bayoneting unarmed civilians in the streets (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XIV-XV). Predictably, rather than suppressing dissent, this brutality had the opposite effect, provoking an outrage that drew increasing masses of ordinary citizens, well beyond the numbers of protesters primarily made up of student, into active resistance: about four hundred people regathered at Gwangju railroad station and resumed demonstrations, which culminated again with riot police arresting four hundred and five people and injuring sixty-eight⁷⁴ (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XV). In the early hours of the following day, approximately three thousand protesters gathered again on Kūmnam Avenue and the demonstrators were once again met with police violence. The outcome, on this occasion, would be far grimmer: riot police searched buildings and private houses near that area,

⁷⁴ According to a martial law document.

assaulted every young man they found and took them into custody. Even assaults towards children, women and the elderly were reported.

The direct targeting of innocent civilians completely uninvolved with the protests would encourage those who had not, up to that point, taken part to the protests to join arms with the movement (Scott-Stokes & Lee J. 2000; Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XV-XVI). Demonstrations would continue on 20th May, met with the same response by the government: the military and the police continued killing, shooting and assaulting citizens.

The situation was bound to escalate. On 21st May, after martial-law troops opened fire on demonstrators outside the provincial government office, citizens began arming themselves, raiding police stations, police armories and military weapons stores in Gwangju and the surrounding countryside⁷⁵ (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XVI). Weapons and ammunition were also brought in from neighbouring areas, while vehicles—including trucks and armoured vehicles taken from the Asia Motors plant—were commandeered to transport people and supplies. From these improvised armed groups emerged what became known as the Citizens' Army (시민군). From 22nd to 26th May, people from different social backgrounds joined the Citizens' Army to defend Gwangju against the martial-law forces. The group had an organised command system and used Gwangju Civic Center as its headquarters, while later occupying major facilities including the old Jeonnam Provincial Government Office⁷⁶.

After the martial-law forces withdrew to the outskirts of Gwangju on 21st-22nd May (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XVI, 13-14), the Citizens' Army effectively became the armed component of the self-governing community that controlled the city for the next five days. Its scope was consequently much broader than a small group of armed protesters. Tens of thousands of citizens participated in

⁷⁵ Source: 한국민족문화대전, s.v. “5·18광주민주화운동”. Retrieved 06/09/2026 <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0038496>, <https://theme.archives.go.kr/next/518/sub3.do>

⁷⁶ Source: <https://dh.aks.ac.kr/~gwangju/wiki/index.php/시민군>

demonstrations, while others supported the movement by donating blood, preparing and distributing food, caring for the wounded and helping to maintain public order. Despite the city's isolation after the martial-law forces withdrew, citizens organised themselves to keep daily life functioning, and contemporary reports noted the emergence of informal systems for sharing food and medicine⁷⁷. The armed groups also extended beyond Gwangju itself, as residents of surrounding towns seized weapons and attempted to bring them to the city. Nevertheless, the Citizens' Army remained lightly organised and poorly equipped compared with the military; it lacked heavy weapons, formal military training and a unified command capable of coordinating the whole force. On 25th May, during this brief period of self-governance, sometimes referred to retrospectively as the "Gwangju Commune" or "absolute commune", residents organised the Citizens' Settlement Committee in an attempt to negotiate with martial law authorities, maintained public order, cared better for the wounded and arranged for the collective burial of the dead, in the absence of any functioning state administration (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XVI, 15-16). This experience of self-organised solidarity under conditions of extreme violence would later become, for *Minjung* intellectuals and activists, a foundational example of the movement's central claim: that ordinary people, left to their own devices and stripped of elite mediation, were capable of enacting a more just and humane social order than the state that claimed to represent them (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XVI, 11-12). Moreover, a more militant leadership emerged under the Citizens' Struggle Committee, headed by Yun Sang-won (윤상원), while other civic leaders continued to advocate negotiations and the surrender of weapons. The military ultimately retook Gwangju on May 27: army units

⁷⁷ Source: <https://www.518archives.go.kr/dcma/DcmaPageLink.do?baseMenuNo=1000000&link=1010000>, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/05/24/seoul-offers-compensation-in-kwangju/cbe2d137-d0fc-481e-9f78-dd5a3b3a67b6/>

backed by tanks retook the city by force, in an operation that brought the uprising to a violent end and caused the movement to collapse, those who remained at the provincial government office were killed or arrested⁷⁸ (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XVI, XVII).

The scale of the resulting death toll has never been definitively established, and this uncertainty is itself historically significant. The martial-law authorities initially released a much lower official figure, while subsequent government investigations revised the number of recognised victims upward. Independent estimates were considerably higher: contemporary foreign reports and later scholarship have placed the number of deaths at between roughly 1,000 and 2,000⁷⁹, while anthropologist Linda S. Lewis (as cited in Najbar-Miller 2021, 315), who was in Gwangju during the uprising, argued for a lower but still substantially higher estimate of around 400-500 victims. A 2020 academic study similarly describes estimates ranging from approximately 200 to 2,000 civilian deaths (Jackson 2020). The continuing variation reflects the censorship, disappearances, incomplete records and disputed accounting that surrounded the events (Riotto 2018, 373). This discrepancy between official and unofficial death tolls is not merely a matter of historical bookkeeping; it is, instead, much more than that, as it reflects the systematic suppression of information that characterised the immediate aftermath of the uprising, when the Chun government imposed strict media censorship and publicly characterised the events in Gwangju as a riot instigated by communist agitators, a framing designed to deny the uprising both its scale and its legitimacy (Scott-Stokes & Lee J. 2015; Seth 2023). Because the domestic press was tightly controlled, much of what became known internationally in the immediate

⁷⁸ Source: <https://www.518archives.go.kr/dcma/DcmaPageLink.do?baseMenuNo=1000000&link=1010000>

⁷⁹ Source: <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20180207004151315>

aftermath depended on the accounts of foreign correspondents present in or near the city, whose eyewitness reporting later became an important corrective to the official record and forms the core of dedicated compilations of contemporary press coverage (Scott-Stokes & Lee J. 2015; Shin G. & Hwang K. 2000).

The political consequences of this suppression proved, in the long run, to be self-defeating for the state. Rather than fading from memory, Gwangju became, over the course of the 1980s, the central symbolic reference point for the South Korean pro-democracy movement, repeatedly invoked in student demonstrations, underground publications and *Minjung* cultural production as evidence of the fundamentally violent character of military rule (Seth 2023). The memory of Gwangju's dead, denied acknowledgment through official channels, was carried instead through unofficial, oppositional cultural practice—protest songs, underground pamphlets, clandestine commemorations, and, as discussed in the preceding chapter, ritual mourning performed by *Mansin* on behalf of families who could not otherwise obtain public acknowledgment of their loss (Koo 1993, 144). In this sense, the souls of those died of an unjust and violent death can be considered *Wŏnhon*, while the years separating the 1980 massacre from its eventual official recognition function as a kind of prolonged national mourning heartfelt by the populace, but also an 'incident' that the state refused to allow to pass properly into public and historical memory, and whose partial resolution, examined in section 2.4 below, would only begin with South Korea's democratic transition later in the decade.

2.3 The Jeju Massacre (1948-1954) and the Bodo League Massacre (1950)

If Gwangju represents the paradigmatic case of state violence directed against a democratic uprising within an already-established Republic of Korea, the Jeju Massacre represents an earlier, longer and, for decades, far less visible instance of the same underlying pattern: a civilian population subjected to mass killing by its own state, followed by an extended period of enforced silence. Known in Korean as the Jeju 4·3 Incident (제주 4·3 사건), the massacre unfolded against the backdrop of Korea's division after liberation from Japanese colonial rule and the escalating Cold War confrontation that would shortly produce the Korean War itself. The incident, therefore, did not simply occur during one day or short period of time, but as Kim S. and Hwang M. (2023, 86) write: "[T]he 4.3 Incident has been widely used by local activists to mark the date: 'April third' of 1948 as the starting point for a wide-scale massacre and social destruction".

The roots of the violence lie in the tense years immediately following Japan's 1945 surrender, during which Jeju, like the rest of the southern peninsula, fell under the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK)⁸⁰ (Kim S. 2019, 81).

⁸⁰ The USAMGIK (United States Army Military Government in Korea) administered southern Korea from September 1945 to August 1948, after Japan surrendered and ended its colonial rule over Korea. Its purpose was to govern the southern zone temporarily while Korea transitioned out of Japanese colonial rule. USAMGIK ended in August 1948, when the Republic of Korea was established. USAMGIK is important because its policies and relationship with Korean political groups helped shape the political conditions that eventually contributed to the division of Korea and the creation of separate governments in the North and South (Steward R. W. 2010, 210).

Violence on Jeju first began during the March First demonstrations⁸¹ in 1947. The protests began with meetings held to commemorate the 28th anniversary of the Korean independence movement against Japan, with a rally at Buk Elementary School attracting around 30,000 people⁸²; this happened despite a ban by the military authorities. These gatherings quickly grew into large protests opposing the creation of a separate South Korean government and supporting Korean reunification based on the Moscow Conference⁸³ decisions and the spirit of March First demonstrations. Tensions increased when the military government tried to break up a meeting at a school in Jeju City. The

⁸¹ The March 1st Demonstrations (also called the March 1st Movement or Samil Movement) were a major Korean independence movement against Japanese colonial rule. They were held on 1st March 1919 all across Korea, which was controlled by Japan at the time. During those manifestations, large numbers of Koreans peacefully gathered, declared Korea's independence and protested against the Japanese rule. Japanese authorities violently suppressed many of the demonstrations, leading to deaths, arrests and widespread repression. However, the movement became an important symbol of Korean nationalism and independence (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "March First Movement". Retrieved 28/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/event/March-First-Movement>).

In 1947, Koreans on Jeju Island held demonstrations to commemorate the anniversary of the 1919 March 1st Movement. However, the 1947 protests also had new political demands, particularly opposition to the establishment of a separate South Korean government and support for Korean reunification.

⁸² Source: https://jeju43peace.or.kr/kor/sub01_01_03.do

⁸³ The Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers took place in December 1945, shortly after Japan's defeat in World War II. The United States, Soviet Union and Britain discussed postwar arrangements, including the future of Korea. For Korea, the conference agreed that a provisional Korean democratic government should be established and that a U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission would assist in its formation and consult with Korean democratic political parties and social organisations. The agreement also provided for the development of measures concerning political, economic and social assistance and proposed a four-power trusteeship involving the United States, Soviet Union, Britain and China for up to five years. The agreement became highly controversial in Korea, particularly because of the trusteeship proposal, and opposition to trusteeship quickly became a major political issue (source: https://contents.history.go.kr/mobile/hm/view.do?levelId=hm_144_0100&period=현대&tabId=02&theme=정치&utm_).

protesters moved into the streets, where a crowd of more than twenty thousand people gathered in the city square. Government workers also joined by going on strike. The crowd pushed through police barricades and moved toward the island's government building. American troops and Korean police fired shots over the protesters' heads to disperse them, preventing more serious violence, but a child was killed (Merrill 1980, 153-154). Similar demonstrations took place across the island, though most remained peaceful. In response to the killing, schools, businesses and government offices closed down. Because of the strong patriotic feeling surrounding the event, some police officers, soldiers and even members of a Coast Guard band also participated in the demonstrations (Merrill 1980, 153-154).

Tension escalated further in early 1948, when the United Nations moved to hold separate elections in the South alone on 10 May—a step that much of the Jeju population, along with left-leaning organisers on the island, viewed as formalising national division (Yang J. 2018, 41, 43-44). The decision was contentious even within the UN's own observer body: many members of the UN Temporary Commission on Korea⁸⁴ privately doubted that free elections could be held given the volatile political climate, and Korean moderates such as Kim Kyu-sik (김규식) warned that separate elections would “perpetuate the

⁸⁴ The United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) was established by the UN General Assembly in November 1947 to facilitate and observe elections intended to establish a representative Korean government. UN Resolution 112 initially envisaged elections across Korea, granting UNTCOK the right to travel, observe and consult throughout the country. However, Soviet authorities in North Korea refused to allow the commission to operate there. Consequently, in February 1948, the UN General Assembly's Interim Committee instructed UNTCOK to carry out the election programme in “such parts of Korea as are accessible to the Commission,” effectively restricting the UN-supervised elections to South Korea (sources: <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/past-operations/asia-pacific/united-nations-commission-korea.html>, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unga/1947/en/7814>).

division of the country and drive the North permanently into the Soviet orbit” (Merrill 1980, 161). Nonetheless, the proposal was pushed through by the UN Interim Assembly on 26 February 1948, a move some commission members regarded as a virtual “coup” against their near-unanimous reservations (Merrill 1980, 165).

On Jeju, opposition to the elections had been building for weeks under the direction of the Workers’ Party of South Korea (남조선로동당)⁸⁵ local branch. According to Merrill, the decision to take up arms was made at a clandestine meeting in late March, attended by Kim Tal-sam (김달삼), head of the party’s military wing, Cho No-gu (조노구), head of its political wing, and Lieutenant Mun Sang-gil (문상길), who led the Workers’ Party of South Korea’s underground cells within the island’s constabulary regiment (Merrill 1980, 166). In the early morning hours of 3rd April 1948, several hundred armed guerrillas—an estimated five hundred in the main force, roughly half carrying rifles and the rest armed with “swords, sickles, sharpened bamboo spears, homemade grenades, various types of explosives, and picks and shovels”—struck simultaneously at more than half of the island’s twenty-four police substations, concentrated mainly along the northern coast (Merrill 1980 166-167). As many as three thousand additional islanders reportedly joined or supported the guerrilla bands as they moved down from mount Halla, with further sympathisers mobilising in coastal villages (Merrill 1980, 167).

⁸⁵ The Workers’ Party of South Korea was a communist political organisation established in 1946 through the merger of several communist and socialist groups in southern Korea. It opposed the establishment of a separate South Korean government and advocated Korean reunification. The SKLP later became a major target of repression by the South Korean authorities and played an important role in the political unrest preceding the Jeju 4·3 uprising (한국민족문화대전, s.v. “남조선로동당”. Retrieved 28/08/2026. <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0012156>)

Notably, the insurgents directed their violence narrowly and carefully: Merrill stresses that “while pressing home their attacks with great ferocity, the guerrillas directed them only at police and rightist youth”—sparing the U.S. military government company stationed on the island, which took no part in the fighting (Merrill 1980, 167). Government losses in this opening exchange were roughly thirty killed against only four guerrilla dead, reflecting the element of surprise the insurgents achieved (Merrill 1980, 167).

What began as a localised uprising against a specific electoral decision rapidly transformed into what Merrill describes as “a much more violent cycle of resistance and repression on the island that soon swung wildly out of control” (Merrill 1980, 166). This “cycle” intensified over the course of 1948, culminating in the October Yösu-Sunch’ön mutiny⁸⁶ and prompting successive government suppression campaigns (Merrill 1980, 194-195).

The suppression increasingly took the form not of conventional warfare between armed combatants, but of collective punishment directed at the civilian population as a whole. Under U.S.-backed South Korean authority, and with the active participation of right-wing paramilitary groups such as the Northwest Youth League, the campaign escalated into a policy of near-total village destruction. Martial law was declared, a five-kilometre exclusion zone was established around the island’s mid-mountain regions, and anyone found within it was liable to be treated as an insurgent and killed on sight. Between November 1948 and February 1949, this intensified “scorched earth” phase saw roughly a third of the island’s villages burned to the ground, while their

⁸⁶ The Yösu–Sunch’ön mutiny (often called “Yösu–Sunch’ön Incident/Rebellion”) of 19th October 1948 was an armed uprising by soldiers of the South Korean Army’s 14th Regiment who refused orders to deploy to Jeju Island to suppress the ongoing Jeju uprising. The revolt, supported by local leftists and civilians, briefly spread to Yösu, Sunch’ön and surrounding areas before being suppressed by government forces, with substantial civilian casualties and reprisals following (Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion”. Retrieved 28/08/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Yeosu-Suncheon-Rebellion>).

residents were killed, driven into hiding in the island's forests and lava caves, or forcibly relocated to the coast (Merrill 1980, 169-170; Kim S. 1989, 254).

Victims were overwhelmingly non-combatants, and a substantial proportion were women, children and the elderly.

As with Gwangju, the precise scale of the killing has never been settled with certainty, and this uncertainty is itself a direct legacy of decades of state denial and obfuscation (Kim S. 1989, 251, 252). Estimates of the death toll across the full period of unrest, which continued intermittently through the Korean War until the last restrictions on the island's interior were lifted in 1954, range from the low tens of thousands recorded in later official investigations to figures approaching thirty thousand (Merrill 1980, 194-195; Yang J. 2018 41) and even eighty thousand suggested by some scholars (Bruce 2010, 124-125; Kim S. 1989, 251)—in either case, a scale representing close to a tenth of the island's entire population at the time (Kim S. 2019, 81; Najbar-Miller 2025, 314). Unlike Gwangju, whose violence was compressed into little more than a week and consequently entered national consciousness relatively quickly, the Jeju killings were dispersed across more than six years and were, until the 1990s, subject to a far more severe and durable regime of official silence, as if the entire episode was erased from official memory and history (Kim S. 1989, 251-252). Under South Korea's National Security Law⁸⁷, public discussion of the massacre was effectively criminalised for much of the postwar period, since

⁸⁷ South Korea's National Security Act (국가보안법) (1948) was enacted to protect the state from organisations and activities deemed hostile to the South Korean government, particularly communist and pro-North Korean activities. Over time, it was also used to suppress political dissent and restrict freedom of expression and association, making it a highly controversial law. The Act remains in force today, though subsequent amendments have sought to limit its application (sources: <https://www.law.go.kr/법령/國家保安法> <https://www.law.go.kr/LSW/lslInfoP.do?chrClsCd=010203&lsiSeq=179033&urlMode=engLsInfoR&viewCls=engLsInfoR&utm#0000>).

raising the subject risked accusations of communist sympathy; survivors and bereaved families were frequently unable to hold funerary rites, register deaths accurately or discuss their losses even within their own communities, let alone press for public acknowledgment (Kim S. & Hwang M. 2023, 89-90).

It is precisely this prolonged, state-enforced impossibility of mourning that makes Jeju so significant for the argument developed in this research. Where Gwangju's dead were denied official recognition for roughly a decade before the beginning of South Korea's democratic transition, Jeju's dead remained largely unmournable, in any public sense, for two generations. Kim Seong-nae's ethnographic work on the island describes how, in the absence of any legitimate public channel for grief or historical acknowledgment, shamanic ritual became one of the few available means through which survivors could address their dead at all: *kut* performed for Jeju's massacred civilians functioned simultaneously as private family mourning and as a barely coded form of political testimony, carried out under a regime that would have suppressed the same content had it been spoken in ordinary political language (Kim S. 1989, 251-254). In the terms established in Chapter 1, the victims of Jeju constitute an unusually stark case of collective *Wŏnhon*: souls whose deaths were not only violent and unjust but whose very memory was, for decades, actively criminalised, leaving both the dead and the living survivors trapped in a form of prolonged, state-imposed limbo.

The eventual, partial resolution of this limbo—beginning with the gradual lifting of restrictions on public discussion in the late 1980s and culminating in formal state acknowledgment decades later—forms the subject of the following section, which considers Jeju alongside Gwangju as two cases of State violence (Najbar-Miller 2025, 313) within a broader South Korean pattern of delayed, contested and ultimately negotiated historical recognition (Najbar-Miller 2025, 311, 316, 330).

It is worth noting, finally, that the suppression of 1948-49 did not mark the end of state violence connected to the fight against communism nor was Jeju unique in this respect. When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, the same anti-communist logic that had driven the earlier counterinsurgency campaign resurfaced on a national scale in the Bodo League Massacre (보도연맹 사건), in which tens of thousands, and by some estimates well over one hundred thousand, suspected leftists and their families were summarily executed by South Korean police, military and allied paramilitary forces across the country, out of fear that they might collaborate with the advancing North Korean army (Kim D. 2010, 1). Many of those killed had been coerced into joining the National Guidance League—the organisation from which the massacre takes its name—under the pretext of political “re-education,” and, as with Jeju itself, the killings were suppressed for decades and only formally investigated by South Korea’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 2000s (Kim D. 2010, 1). Families already marked by the violence of 1948-49 were in some cases affected a second time in 1950, and this later, nationally dispersed massacre forms an important part of the historical background against which one of the novels examined in Chapter 3, “We Do Not Part”, situates its account of a single family’s search for a disappeared relative. A fuller discussion of the Bodo League Massacre and its literary treatment is therefore reserved for section 3.2.3 below.

2.4 From Ritual to Official Recognition: The Long Road to Public Mourning

In the two preceding sections I have attempted to describe how Gwangju and Jeju can be considered as events whose scale of violence was compounded by decades of state-imposed silence, during which shamanic ritual, offered one of the few available means through which the dead could be acknowledged at all.

This section, instead, examines how, and under what conditions, that silence was eventually broken, tracing the parallel but distinct paths by which both events moved from suppressed memory toward official public recognition and considering what this trajectory means for the relationship between ritual mourning and historical justice that this research attempts to trace.

Despite taking the better part of two decades to fully come to fruition, Gwangju's path toward public recognition, was comparatively direct, closely tracking the broader democratisation of South Korean political life. Serious re-examination began only after the restoration of direct presidential elections in

1987—made possible by a new constitutional reform⁸⁸; when the National Assembly held its first public hearings on the events of May 1980 the following year, survivors were finally allowed to testify publicly and the slow process of revising the official record from “riot” or “incident” to “democratisation movement” began; moreover, president Chun was blamed for the Gwangju episode (Lee J. 2017, 140; Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XXVII, 46, 135-136). This process culminated in the 1995 Special Act on the May 18 Democratisation Movement, which suspended the statute of limitations for those responsible for the violent suppression of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising to

⁸⁸ The constitutional changes of 1969, 1972 and 1987, therefore, marked three important stages in the development of South Korea’s presidential system.

In 1969 a constitutional amendment removed the existing limit on presidential terms, enabling Park Chung-hee to seek a third term in the 1971 election (as already discussed at p. 68).

In 1972, Park introduced the Yusin Constitution, which replaced direct presidential elections with an indirect system in which the president was elected by the National Conference for Unification, extended the presidential term to six years, removed the limit on presidential re-election, and substantially expanded presidential authority over the legislature and judiciary (see pp. 69-70).

Following the June Democracy Movement of 1987, the government accepted another constitutional revision that restored direct presidential elections, established a single five-year presidential term and strengthened constitutional protections for political participation and civil liberties. Roh Tae-woo’s subsequent victory in the December 1987 election therefore took place under a fundamentally different constitutional framework from that of the Yusin period. The December 1987 presidential election marked a crucial turning point in South Korea’s transition from military dictatorship to democratic government. Roh Tae-woo, the candidate of the ruling Democratic Justice Party and a close ally of outgoing president Chun Doo-hwan, won with 36.6% of the vote, defeating opposition candidates Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, who together received the majority of the votes (Nohlen, Grotz, Hartmann, 2001). Despite Roh’s victory, the election represented a major institutional change: following the mass pro-democracy protests of 1987, which were shaped in significant part by the memory and political legacy of Gwangju, the regime had been forced to accept direct presidential elections and constitutional reforms that expanded political participation and civil liberties. Thus, although political power initially remained in the hands of a former military figure, the election marked the beginning of the transition away from the authoritarian system established under military rule (Kim S. 2016).

permit the prosecution of those responsible (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XXVII, 46). Former presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo (노태우) were thus convicted of treason and mutiny in 1996, sentenced respectively to death and life imprisonment (Waters 1996) before both sentences were commuted: on appeal, Chun's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and Roh's was reduced to 17 years. Both were later controversially pardoned and released in December 1997 in the name of national reconciliation⁸⁹.

and both men were controversially pardoned in December 1997 in the name of national reconciliation (Shin G. & Hwang K. 2003, XXVII, 49, 79, 130). That same year, 18th May was formally designated a national memorial day and the National May 18 Democracy Cemetery (국립5.18민주묘지) (Najbar-Miller 2025, 315)⁹⁰ was established (Yea, 2002, 1551-1552, 1559-1560). As Yea (2002, 1560) argues:

“the New Mangwol-dong Cemetery is at once the embodiment of the Korean government’s official apology for the suffering it caused the people of Kwangju, an appeal to the people of Cholla to place national unity before

⁸⁹ Sources: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-04-17-mn-49729-story.html>, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-dec-20-mn-508-story.html>, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/12/21/two-jailed-leaders-pardoned-in-s-korea/8b8d9f9b-90d0-4a80-b84e-71a565a61b49/>

⁹⁰ Mangwol-dong Cemetery (also called the old Mangwol-dong Cemetery / 5.18 old cemetery / 망월동 구묘역) was the original burial site where victims of the 1980 Gwangju uprising were buried and which is associated with the early memory and commemoration of the massacre. In 1997, the bodies were exhumed and transferred to the newly constructed National May 18 Democratic Cemetery (also called New Mangwol-dong Cemetery / 국립 5.18민주묘지); this cemetery was formally elevated to national-cemetery status in 2002 and renamed National May 18 Democratic Cemetery in 2006. The old cemetery was subsequently preserved as a historical site (sources: <https://www.mpva.go.kr/518/contents.do?key=418>, <https://www.mpva.go.kr/518/selectBbsNttView.do?bbsNo=116&integrDeptCode=&key=408&nttNo=176299&pageIndex=1&searchCnd=all&searchCtgy=&searchKrwrd>

regional separatism and, perhaps most importantly, an attempt by the Kim administration to align itself with populist/democratic impulses in the country”.

Moreover, the cemetery construction was followed in 2011 by the inscription of the movement’s archival record on UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register—an act of international, and not merely domestic, recognition⁹¹.

Jeju’s path was considerably longer and more circuitous, a difference that reflects the far more severe and durable suppression discussed in the preceding section. Although limited efforts to investigate the massacre emerged briefly after the April Revolution of 1960, these were suppressed following the 1961 coup, and for much of the authoritarian period public discussion remained constrained by the state’s framing of Jeju 4.3 as a communist rebellion (Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report, 39-40; Najbar-Miller 2025, 315). Jeju’s massacre remained largely absent even from oppositional discourse until the wider political opening of the late 1980s and the democratisation movement after 1987, burdened as it was by the additional stigma of association with a Cold War-era “communist uprising” narrative that made public discussion dangerous under the National Security Law (Kim S. & Hwang M. 2023, 89-90; Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report 38-42, 310).

Serious investigation began only with the National Assembly’s Special Act on Finding the Truth about the Jeju 4.3 Incident and Restoring the Honour of Victims, enacted in January 2000 (Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report, 49); it established a government committee, chaired by the prime minister (Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report, 49-50), to conduct a formal truth-finding inquiry. That committee’s report, finalised in October 2003, documented

⁹¹ Source: <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/human-rights-documentary-heritage-1980-archives-may-18th-democratic-uprising-against-military-regime>

14,028 registered victims while estimating the overall human toll at 25,000–30,000, and explicitly characterised the suppression by state forces as involving excessive and unlawful use of state power (Jeju 4·3 Incident Investigation Report, 41-42, 130, 455, 458-459, 461, 651-652); later that same year, President Roh Moo-hyun (노무현) travelled to Jeju to deliver the first formal presidential apology for the massacre, a gesture he repeated at a memorial service in 2006. The Jeju 4·3 Peace Park, whose construction had begun alongside the truth-finding process, opened fully to the public in 2008, and in 2014—more than three decades after the equivalent designation for Gwangju—3rd April was finally established as a national memorial day⁹².

Read together, these two trajectories reveal a consistent underlying pattern that bears directly on the argument of this research: in both cases, meaningful public recognition proved impossible under authoritarian rule and became possible only as a direct consequence of South Korea's democratic transition, arriving first through unofficial channels—testimony, activism, and, as discussed above, ritual mourning—before being formally absorbed into state institutions in the form of truth commissions, legal proceedings, national cemeteries and commemorative legislation.

Moreover, the substantial gap between Gwangju's designation as a national memorial space in 1997 and Jeju's designation of 3rd April as a national memorial day in 2014 underscores that official recognition was neither automatic nor uniform. In the case of Jeju, the process was shaped by the enduring political stigma surrounding 4·3, the efforts of survivor and bereaved-family organisations to challenge that stigma and the changing political priorities of successive governments (Kim H. 2014 61-82, 113–137).

⁹² Source: <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=156633>

It is important, finally, not to overstate the completeness of this resolution. Official recognition, in both cases, has coexisted uneasily with continued political contestation: revisionist narratives minimising state responsibility persist in parts of the South Korean political spectrum, compensation and honour-restoration processes for bereaved families remain in some respects unfinished and, in the case of Jeju, the search for the remains of the missing has continued into the twenty-first century (Kim H. 2014, 145-176). As a consequence, official recognition, in other words, has not simply replaced the older, ritual forms of mourning discussed in Chapter 1; the two continue to coexist, with shamanic ritual still performed for victims of both events alongside their now-official state commemoration, filling the gaps left by the latter's incompleteness and ambiguity. This coexistence is itself significant for the argument this research is developing: it suggests that the kind of recognition ritual provides—individualised, repeated, addressed directly to the dead—answers a need that official, institutional commemoration, however necessary, does not fully satisfy. The state can name a memorial day; it cannot, in the terms established in Chapter 1, perform the *kut*.

This gap between institutional recognition and the more intimate, repeated work of ritual mourning is precisely where the following chapter locates the significance of literary engagement with Gwangju and Jeju. Having established, across this chapter, both the historical facts of the two events and the long, uneven process by which South Korean society moved from enforced silence toward partial official acknowledgment, this research turns next to a form of remembrance that occupies a space between the two: neither a state ceremony nor a shamanic ritual, but a literary practice that this research will argue performs functions closely related to both.

Chapter 3: Han Kang's Books within the Historical Events of Gwangju and Jeju

3.1.1 The Role of the Novelist: Relieving Pain

Chapter 2 closed by identifying a gap between two forms of remembrance available to Korean society in the aftermath of Gwangju and Jeju: official, institutional recognition on the one hand and the older, ritual mourning discussed throughout Chapter 1 on the other. This section argues that literature, and specifically the kind of literature Han Kang has produced, occupies precisely this gap, and that understanding why requires returning to the vocabulary developed in Chapter 1—*Wŏnhon*, *Han*, *kut* and the figure of the *Mansin* herself—and asking what it would mean for a novelist to take on a comparable function.

Korean literary criticism has itself, independently of any comparison with Shamanism, identified something close to this function as central to the modern Korean novel. Sung Hyunah's account of Korean literary responses to state-organised mass death argues that literature was, for much of the twentieth century, one of the few available vehicles of counter-memory in a society where the state actively controlled which deaths could be publicly grieved and which could not; certain deaths, Sung notes, were denied not only life but even the basic possibility of being mourned at all, as association with the massacred was itself treated as evidence of guilt (Sung 2023, 29). Read against what has emerged in Chapter 1, this is a strikingly precise literary echo of the condition there described as *Wŏnhon*: a death rendered doubly unresolved, first by its violence and then by the active prohibition of its acknowledgment.

Sung further argues that Korean literature dealing with such deaths has had to resist not one but three distinct, and at times competing, temptations: a distorted mourning that falsifies the historical record to serve state or ideological

ends; a selective mourning that grieves some victims while allowing others—like women working in the adult entertainment industry, who also raised and fought for their rights in Gwangju—to remain unnamed and unmourned; and, lastly, a narrowly nationalistic mourning that reduces individual suffering to a symbol of collective identity, thereby abstracting away the particular person who actually died (Sung 2023, 29-30). This threefold resistance maps closely onto the ethical demands this research has already identified as constitutive of shamanic ritual in Chapter 1: not allowing *Wŏnhon* to dissolve into an undifferentiated collective category but, instead, *Mansin* insisting on naming and voicing the specific, individual *Wŏnhon* is, I argue, functionally the same demand that Sung identifies as literature’s task in resisting selective and nationalistic mourning.

Assmann’s distinction between communicative and Cultural Memory offers a productive starting point for reading Han Kang, but her work also exposes the limits of the model’s neat binary. According to Assmann (as cited in Erll 2011, 27-37), communicative memory is in contrast with Cultural Memory (capitalised as his specific term): while the former is the informal memory of everyday life, lives in casual conversation and personal experience, covers roughly 80-100 years (the span of living witnesses) and anyone can take part in it equally, Cultural Memory is a form of memory that is deliberately staged, tied to festivals, monuments and ritual, and maintained by trained specialists—he explicitly lists Shamans, priests and archivists as examples of these “carriers”. It reaches back to founding, almost mythic events that a community treats as the root of its identity. Because it’s institutional rather than casual, it needs continual “recharging” through ceremony to stay alive.

Han Kang’s novels, I argue, sit perfectly between these two categories. “Human Acts” and “We Do Not Part” draw on the communicative memory of survivors and descendants—testimony, family recollection, the “near horizon” of lived

experience Assmann associates with everyday remembering—yet Han does not simply transcribe this material. She stages it, condenses it and gives it a ritual shape, which is precisely what Assmann says distinguishes Cultural Memory from its communicative counterpart. In this sense Han Kang can be read as performing the work Assmann assigns to the “specialist” carriers of Cultural Memory—a role Assmann’s own definition explicitly extends to the Shaman—while working with material that has not yet been permitted to enter a society’s public, ceremonial register. Rather than confirming an already-established Cultural Memory of Gwangju and Jeju, her fiction can be understood as an attempt to manufacture one where the state had actively prevented it from forming; she obviously draws on an existing “festival” of memory, and she openly states she researched through a vast variety of material and sources, but she also tries to build one, to somehow “fill the gaps” which have naturally formed as the State tried to bury the memory of these events.

Erll’s chapter on historical and social memory is, too, very useful for the aims of this thesis: the author frames the relationship between “history” and “memory” as an ongoing contest rather than a settled hierarchy (Erll 2011, 38-66): Erll shows that historiography is not neutral, as historians select, exclude and narrate, just as memory does. So “official history” and “collective memory” are both constructions, and both can compete for authority over the same events. Additionally, in many societies, “memory” (especially “victims’ memory”, memory “from below”) gets pitted against official state history—often around colonial violence, genocide or state repression. Moreover, Erll references medieval scholarship on commemorative rites for the dead as social acts that bind the living to the dead—just like shamanic *kut* function as memory practice. Lastly, Erll describes how memory of the same event changes as it passes from direct witnesses to their children and grandchildren, and how trauma can be inherited even when not explicitly discussed.

This contest, I argue, is dramatised with unusual force in the case of Gwangju and Jeju, where official historiography spent decades minimising, denying or criminalising the very events survivors needed to mourn. Read against this backdrop and especially against the theory which sees memory against official state history, Han Kang's fiction does not simply supplement the historical record; it directly confronts the inadequacy Erll identifies in "objective-scholarly" approaches to atrocity, echoing the dilemma Erll traces through Holocaust studies, where the demand for a truthful account collides with the near impossibility of representing extreme violence in traditional historiographical language. Where Erll draws on trauma theory to describe a split between a traumatic "deep memory"⁹³ and a more processed "common memory"⁹⁴, Han Kang's prose—its silences, its recursive imagery, its refusal of straightforward chronology—can be read as formally enacting that split rather than merely describing it. This is where her work exceeds what historical memory studies alone can account for: Erll's chapter treats literature as one object among many that historians might study, but Han Kang's practice suggests literature can do something historiography structurally cannot, which is to inhabit trauma from the inside rather than report on it from a documentary distance.

⁹³ Deep memory is the raw, unintegrated memory of a traumatic event as it was originally experienced—fragmented, resistant to narrative order, and largely inaccessible to conscious, coherent recall. It preserves the emotional and sensory rawness of the trauma rather than an organised "story" about it (Langer 1991 as cited in Erll 2011, 46).

⁹⁴ Common memory is the socially shareable, narrativised version of the same traumatic past—car—the account a survivor has shaped into a coherent story that can be communicated to others and integrated into an ongoing life narrative. It is more detached and processed than deep memory, but also more distant from the trauma's original intensity (Langer 1991 as cited in Erll 2011, 46).

Additionally, Erll argues that literature's "fictional privileges"—the ability to invent, to represent consciousness from within, to include the unverifiable—allow it to approach what historiography cannot: the repressed, the silenced, the never-officially-acknowledged (Erll 2011, 140-160). This is almost a precise description of what Han Kang does for the victims of Gwangju and Jeju, whose deaths were, for decades, denied even the status of legitimate historical fact. Ricoeur's three-stage model of mimesis, as Erll adapts it, also maps closely onto her method: Han Kang's prefiguration⁹⁵ draws on testimony, court records and survivor accounts; her configuration⁹⁶ reshapes this material into narrative forms—e.g.: the shifting perspectives of "Human Acts"—that a conventional historical account would not permit; and her refiguration⁹⁷, especially amplified by her Nobel recognition, has demonstrably reshaped international and domestic understanding of these massacres, feeding back into public memory culture in the way Erll's model predicts. Yet Han Kang also complicates Erll's account of the "cultural text". Erll suggests cultural texts gain authority by losing their "literary" ambiguity and being read with reverence as bearers of fixed, communal truth. Han Kang's novels resist this reduction: their

⁹⁵ Prefiguration (*mimesis*₁) is the stage at which a literary text draws on the pre-existing, extra-textual world of memory culture—its symbols, values, temporal structures and shared understanding of past events—before any story has been shaped. It is the raw cultural and mnemonic material the writer has available to work with (Ricoeur 1984 as cited in Erll 2011, 152-157).

⁹⁶ Configuration (*mimesis*₂) is the active, creative process by which this raw material is arranged into a plot—given a beginning, middle and end, a causal and temporal order, a narrative voice and structure. This is the properly literary, "world-making" stage, where selected elements are transformed from disconnected fact into meaningful story (Ricoeur 1984 as cited in Erll 2011, 152-157).

⁹⁷ Refiguration (*mimesis*₃) is the stage at which the reader receives the text and reintegrates it into their own understanding of the past. The configured story reshapes the reader's perception of reality, memory, and—potentially—future action, feeding the transformed material back into the culture's broader memory (Ricoeur 1984 as cited in Erll 2011, 152-157).

power lies precisely in their refusal to resolve ambiguity, their insistence on multiple, even irreconcilable, perspectives on the dead. If her work is becoming a “cultural text” in Assmann’s sense—canonised, ritually reread, treated as central to a collective self-understanding—it is doing so without shedding the polyvalence Erll associates with “merely literary” texts. This suggests that the shamanic model, more than the canonical one, may better describe what Han Kang is doing: not fixing a single normative truth, but repeatedly performing an open, unresolved rite of mourning that each reading re-enacts rather than settles.

Han Kang’s own account of her practice, offered in interviews, suggests that she understands her role in comparably functional, rather than purely aesthetic, terms. Discussing the writing of “Human Acts”, she has described her project as an attempt to sit with, and not simply resolve or explain away, the unbearable fact of human violence (Lee K. 2016, 64-65), treating the act of writing as a means of lending “body and voice”, but also her sensations, emotions and life, to those who can no longer testify for themselves (Armitstead 2016⁹⁸; Kang H. 2024; Shin S. 2016⁹⁹), rather than reducing their deaths to a safely comprehensible narrative. This distinction matters for the argument developed here: it positions the novelist as someone who takes on, and is changed by, the material she handles and avoid framing her as a historian producing an authoritative account from a position of distance. This description begins to approach the logic of possession discussed in Chapter 1¹⁰⁰,

⁹⁸ Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/05/han-kang-interview-writing-massacre>

⁹⁹ Source: <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang>

¹⁰⁰ See p. 48-51.

in which the *Mansin* does not simply report the spirit's suffering but is temporarily inhabited by it.

Recent literary scholarship on Han Kang's fiction has pushed this comparison further, even without always using shamanic vocabulary explicitly. Readings of "Human Acts" and "We Do Not Part" through the framework of embodied trauma emphasise how Han's prose renders historical violence through bodily and sensory experience, making trauma something to be encountered rather than merely narrated as historical information (Gulnar and Sarangi 2025). Similarly, Jenny Yoojin Oh's analysis of "Human Acts" examines the novel's treatment of the sacred body, the corpse and the wounded body in relation to ritual and literary testimony, arguing that its testimonial form unsettles conventional modes of historical representation and challenges the authority of sovereign history (Oh 2025). Adhy Kim's broader account of Han Kang's fiction similarly examines how human suffering and violence are reframed through nonhuman and vegetal forms (as in "The Vegetarian"), arguing that these transformations situate human-rights violations within longer histories of colonial, militarised and ecological violence (Kim, A. 2021, 435-438). For example, one of the protagonists of "We Do Not Part", Kyungha, profoundly mourns the passing of her friend In-sön's parrot (Sung 2023, 31). Taken together, this body of criticism describes, in its own terms, a writer whose fiction attempts to make the reader feel implicated in it and who does not simply depict pain—which is to say, a writer whose work aims at something closer to transmission than to description.

It is exactly this notion of transmission, more than simple depiction, that justifies extending the vocabulary of Chapter 1 to Han Kang's literary practice and that gives this section its subtitle. Sung's reading of "We Do Not Part" identifies pain itself as the connective tissue Han Kang uses to bind reader to victim: her characters, and by extension her readers, are moved to grieve for

strangers with whom they share no bond except the physical fact of pain, whether that pain belongs to a torture survivor, a bereaved mother or a dying bird. The significance thus lies in pain, which is conceived as a shared human sensation capable of generating an affective connection across such boundaries, and does not simply lie in nationality, shared ideology or shared historical experience (Sung, 2023). However, Han Kang does not, or at least, *did* not write with the purpose of making the reader suffer:

“After ‘Human Acts’ was published, Han was surprised to discover that readers also felt pain reading the novel. She wanted to know why. «One day, I thought to myself, maybe it is because of our love that we feel pain together in front of all the evidence of violence and human atrocity or human debasement,» she says. «That was the beginning of ‘We Do Not Part’.»” (Allardice 2025).

This is, in the vocabulary established in Chapter 1, functionally analogous to the claim made there about the *Mansin*’s vocal and bodily transformation during possession: that recognition of the presence and suffering of the dead is achieved not primarily through explicit verbal claims but through something closer to felt, embodied transmission, which persuades an audience precisely because it is sensed rather than simply asserted (Kendall 1985, 10-11, 54-85; Stewart & Strathern 2008, 55-56). Where the *Mansin* lends her body to a specific spirit for the duration of a ritual, allowing its grief to pass through her with sufficient force to be recognised as real, this research will argue that Han Kang’s prose performs a structurally comparable operation on the page: it does not explain the pain of Gwangju’s or Jeju’s dead so much as it renders it in forms capable of being felt, directly and physically, in the body of the reader. Han Kang herself has talked about transmitting physical sensations to the readers during her Nobel acceptance speech (2024):

“When I write, I use my body. I use all the sensory details of seeing, of listening, of smelling, of tasting, of experiencing tenderness and warmth and cold and pain, of noticing my heart racing and my body needing food and water, of walking and running, of feeling the wind and rain and snow on my skin, of holding hands. I try to infuse those vivid sensations that I feel as a mortal being with blood coursing through her body into my sentences. As if I am sending out an electric current. And when I sense this current being transmitted to the reader, I am astonished and moved.”

On this basis, the pages that follow will develop, and substantiate against specific texts, the central claim toward which this section has been building: that Han Kang can be understood as occupying a role structurally continuous with that of the *Mansin* herself—a mediator who gives voice to collective—who transmits, more than simply reporting, historical pain and whose literary practice can, in this specific and carefully qualified sense, be read as a form of *kut* performed in and through the novel. Her creation of common spaces where the collectivity can mourn their dead is moreover an extremely anti-individualistic practice, openly opposite to the individualistic character that the Korean society has developed after the Second World War and the Korean War.

This anti-individualism is closely bound up with an anti-capitalist dimension of Han’s work, one that recent criticism has begun to articulate. Adhy Kim, for instance, argues that Han situates the violence of Gwangju within a longer “natural history” of militarised state capitalism, one that runs from the colonial period through the Cold War and into South Korea’s neoliberal present, tracing how women’s labor in particular has been made simultaneously indispensable and disposable within this system (Kim A. 2021, 441-443). Han’s recovery of

episodes such as the 1976 Dongil textile workers' strike¹⁰¹—folded into “Human Acts” through the figure of Seonju—recuperates a genealogy of collective, often female-led resistance that official developmentalist and human-rights narratives have tended to marginalise in favour of later, more masculinised labor struggles (Kim A. 2021, 446-447). Kim further contends that Han's speculative imagination refuses the redemptive logic by which capitalist reform is assumed to “historicise”, and thereby leave behind, earlier forms of state violence and class exploitation; instead, her novels figure that violence as a repetition that persists into the present and future (Kim A. 2021, 437-438). Read in this light, Shamanism, and the practices linked to it, can be seen as powerful actions with an anti-capitalist and even revolutionary role: the *kut*'s work of collective mourning stands in direct opposition to a social and economic order that isolates, individualises, and renders bodies expendable. For these reasons, I argue, understanding Han Kang merely as a writer sympathetic to the victims of Gwangju and Jeju, or just as a novelist engaged in literary counter-memory—in the sense of Sung Hyunah's definition—is highly reductive.

¹⁰¹ The Dongil Textile workers' struggle (동일방직 노동자투쟁) refers to the democratic trade-union movement led primarily by women workers at Dongil Textile in Incheon between 1972 and 1978. The workers challenged the company-aligned, male-dominated union and sought to establish a democratic union, facing interference and repression from company management, male workers, the police and the Central Intelligence Agency. The struggle included the 1976 police suppression of a union sit-in and, most notably, the February 1978 “feces-throwing incident” (똥물투척사건), in which male workers disrupted a union election by throwing feces at female workers. Following subsequent protests and sit-ins, 124 women workers were dismissed in April 1978, and they continued a campaign for reinstatement. The struggle is regarded as a significant example of women workers' democratic union activism in South Korea during the 1970s (Source: 한국민족문화대백과사전, s.v. “동일방직 노동자투쟁”. Retrieved 17/09/2026 <https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0078976>).

Sections 3.2.1¹⁰² and 3.2.2¹⁰³ turns to this claim in detail, examining “Human Acts” and “We Do Not Part” in turn to trace exactly where, and how, this ritual structure becomes visible in Han Kang’s own literary technique.

3.1.2 The steps of a Spirit: Han Kang’s Own Testimony

If the preceding argument has tried to draw the analogy between novelist and *Mansin* primarily from external theoretical and critical sources, it is worth pausing to ask whether Han Kang’s own account of her practice supports this reading in her own words. Her Nobel Lecture, delivered at the Swedish Academy in December 2024 under the title “Light and Thread,” offers striking material in this respect, describing her creative process in terms that repeatedly and, it seems, unselfconsciously echo the vocabulary of shamanic vocation developed in Chapter 1.

The most direct point of contact concerns *affliction*. Han Kang has spoken publicly on several occasions of the severe, recurring migraines that have shadowed her adult life and writing career, migraines so debilitating that she has described spending the day before her own Nobel ceremony confined to bed by one such attack, even as she composed the lecture she was shortly to deliver (Rocco 2025¹⁰⁴). Additionally, she reported having suffered from severe arthritis in her fingers while writing “The Vegetarian”, her most famous book (The

¹⁰² See p. 110.

¹⁰³ See p. 156.

¹⁰⁴ Source: <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/culture/69393/han-kang-versus-the-korean-establishment-we-do-not-part>

Booker Prize 2023¹⁰⁵). This pattern of bodily affliction accompanying, and seemingly inseparable from, her literary vocation invites comparison with the *shinbyŏng* discussed in section 1.1¹⁰⁶: a recurring, physically incapacitating disturbance that does not so much interrupt the vocation as constitute its precondition. I wish to stress that in this work I do not wish to claim that Han Kang herself frames her migraines in explicitly shamanic terms; rather, I argue that the structural pattern—an affliction of the body that returns cyclically alongside, and seemingly as the price of, an unusual capacity to give voice to others’ suffering—closely mirrors the “homeopathic” logic identified in Chongho Kim’s account of shamanic illness, in which the healer’s authority to address others’ pain is inseparable from her own susceptibility to it (Kim C. 2003, 56-57).

A second point of contact concerns *compulsion* and calling. Han Kang describes, in the lecture (2024), attempting in 2012 to write “a novel that takes another step towards light and warmth”—a deliberately gentler book than what would become “Human Acts”—only to find herself unable to continue: something within her, she says, prevented her from writing it. It was at this point, unable to proceed with the project she had chosen, that she found herself returning instead to the material she had spent decades trying not to write about: the massacre in her home city of Gwangju. Later, she wrote “We Do Not Part”, which, in turn, deals with the Jeju massacre of 1948. When asked about the writing process of this work, Han Kang stated: “It’s not like I decided: ‘OK,

¹⁰⁵ Source: <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/han-kang-interview-i-never-imagined-the-vegetarian-would-find-so-many>

¹⁰⁶ See p. 23-26.

I'm going to deal with another massacre'" (Allardice 2024¹⁰⁷). Rather, Han Kang admits feeling a "calling" from a story which urges to be written by her. This sequence—an intended, chosen work blocked by an involuntary resistance, resolved only by submission to a different, unchosen and more painful subject that urges to be written—recalls nothing so much as the classic structure of shamanic calling described in section 1.1¹⁰⁸: an affliction that does not lift until the individual accepts the vocation being demanded of her, rather than the one she would have preferred.

This sense of being called rather than choosing is reinforced by the account Han Kang gives of the genesis of "We Do Not Part", which, in her Nobel lecture, she describes as originating not in a deliberate authorial decision but in an unbidden dream. The third point of contact lies thus in the *oneiric dimension*: a vast snow-covered plain studded with black tree stumps and burial mounds, the sea rising to reclaim them and Han Kang herself standing helpless, without a shovel, aware that the bones in the lower graves were already being swept away. She reports intuiting, on waking, that this dream "was telling me something important", and treating it thereafter as the germ of the novel she would spend the next seven years writing. A vision received passively, in sleep, and subsequently obeyed rather than authored, is a structure of creative origin that corresponds closely to the visionary and oneiric symptoms Chapter 1 identified as characteristic of *shinbyŏng*¹⁰⁹, in which dreams and involuntary visions function as the vehicle through which the spirit's demand is first communicated to the afflicted individual (Kim C. 2003, 200).

¹⁰⁷ Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/feb/01/i-want-to-be-hopeful-nobel-prize-winning-novelist-han-kang-on-the-crisis-in-south-korea>

¹⁰⁸ See p. 25-26.

¹⁰⁹ See p. 23-26.

Han Kang's description—again, in her Nobel lecture—of her visit to the New Mangwŏl-dong cemetery in December 2012, undertaken while she was still contemplating whether and how to approach Gwangju directly, offers a further point of contact, this time with the ritual vocabulary of Chapter 1 rather than with *shinbyŏng* specifically. She recalls visiting the cemetery on a winter afternoon after heavy snowfall and walking out at dusk with her hand over her chest, close to her heart. Later, while writing “Human Acts”, she returned to the cemetery from time to time; on these visits, she describes closing her eyes and feeling the sun's orange rays suffuse her eyelids, an experience she calls “life's own light”, accompanied by an “indescribable warmth” of light and air. This account bears a structural resemblance to the ritual technology of ‘preservation through repetition’ discussed in section 1.4¹¹⁰. Moreover, Han Kang adopts in different books several corresponding or similar elements: for example, Ama, the parrot in “We Do Not Part”, which looks dead but is then found alive, reflects the representation of the soul, described as a bird which flies away when the body dies, in “Human Acts”. Other examples could be the role of nature (snow in “We Do Not Part” and flowers, seasons and light in “Human Acts”), which does not forget, the dead that refuse to remain in the past, the continuous transmission of trauma to readers and offsprings, and the role of the body, especially feminine, that carries pain and remembrance.

Therefore, the fourth point of contact with Shamanism is *repetition*: there are, in Han Kang's writings elements and places that must be revisited, bodily, again and again, in order for the dead it holds to remain addressable, rather than a place that yields its meaning to a single visit.

Additionally, Han Kang does not write about Gwangju or about Jeju once and consider the matter closed. She returns to the same historical material, and in one striking instance to the same fictional event, across separate books written

¹¹⁰ See p. 59-60.

years apart. The clearest example of this is Gwangju itself. “Human Acts” (2014) is Han Kang’s direct, sustained treatment of the 1980 massacre. Yet Gwangju does not end there: in “We Do Not Part” (2021), the narrator Kyungha is introduced as the author of an earlier book about a massacre in a city identified in the text only as “G_____”—a naming device transparent enough that readers, reviewers and critics have consistently read it as a direct reference to Gwangju, and by extension to “Human Acts” itself. Kyungha’s ongoing psychosomatic migraines, triggered by her research into that earlier book and continuing to afflict her throughout “We Do Not Part”, echo Han Kang’s own well-documented recurring migraines discussed above, further blurring the line between narrator and author. The effect is that “We Do Not Part” does not simply address a new historical subject, Jeju, in isolation; rather, it explicitly carries the unfinished weight of Gwangju into a second book, as though one act of mourning, however sustained, could not on its own close the matter.

This sort of “layering” is not incidental. It is a literary enactment of the same principle identified in section 1.4 in relation to *ritual*: that an unresolved death cannot be addressed once, definitively, and then set aside, but must be returned to, again, whenever the underlying injustice remains unacknowledged. Just as a Shaman may be called upon to perform the same rite for the same restless spirit more than once across a family’s history, Han Kang returns to the same historical wound across separate works, each new book neither simply repeating nor fully superseding the one before it, but extending an ongoing, unfinished act of address. Therefore, the fifth point of contact can be found in *ritual revisitation*.

Finally, and most explicitly, Han Kang describes her method of composition in terms that align closely with the model of possession—or, in

other terms, *body lending* to spirits—developed across Chapter 1. Of the writing of “Human Acts” specifically, she states that she “could not undo what had been done to the dead, the bereaved or the survivors”; all she could do, she says, was “lend them the sensations, emotions, and life pulsing through [her] own body” (2024). This specific formulation—lending one’s own body and its sensations to the dead and avoiding simply and only narrating their story from a position of documentary distance—is close to a direct restatement, in Han Kang’s own vocabulary, of the possession dynamic examined in section 1.3¹¹¹: the *Mansin*’s capacity to hold another’s grief within her own body, retaining enough of herself to guide the encounter while allowing the dead’s suffering to pass through her with sufficient force to be felt as real.

Han Kang herself, in her Nobel lecture (2024), retrospectively describes “the boy”—which is also the title of Chapter 1 of “Human Acts”—Dong-ho’s movement toward the present and the reader; she explains the title 『소년이 온다』 ([*Sonyŏn-i onda*], “The Boy Comes”) and writes that, when the boy is addressed in the second person, he walks towards the present as a spirit:

“The Korean title of this novel is ‘Sonyŏn-i onda’. The last word ‘onda’ is the present tense of the verb ‘oda’, to come. The moment the sonyŏn, the boy, is addressed in the second person as you, whether the intimate or the less intimate you, he awakens in the dim light and walks towards the present. His steps are the steps of a spirit. He draws ever nearer and becomes the now.”

This suggests that this correspondence is not just a critical imposition upon her text: rather, it is a figure she reaches for, deliberately or not, to describe her own practice.

¹¹¹ See p. 48-51, 99.

Taken together, these five points of correspondence—affliction, compulsion, oneiric calling, repetition, ritual revisitation and bodily lending—do not prove that Han Kang consciously understands herself as a *Mansin*. They do suggest, however, that the analogy this work develops is not a sort of interpretive superstructure imposed upon her practice from the outside, but a structure that her own account of that practice repeatedly, and from several independent angles, gestures toward. The following sections will be devoted to a close analysis of the three novels, illuminated from the perspective delineated by the five points of correspondence between her work and shamanic practices already individuated. I will try to show that the three novels should be read not as three self-contained case studies of three separate deaths, but as three moments within what is, considered together, a single, sustained and still-unfinished labour of mourning.

3.2.1 “Human Acts”: Candles for the Absolute Community

“Human Acts” (『소년이 온다』, literally “The Boy Comes”), first came out in 2014 and is a choral novel revolving around the Gwangju Democratisation Movement of 1980¹¹². It is composed of seven parts distributed across different narrators, timeframes and even states of being—living, dying and dead; such formal fragmentation, I argue, is itself the first sign that it is attempting something closer to ritual address than to conventional historical narration.

¹¹² See p. 67-79.

In order to provide an overview of the novel as detailed and comprehensive as possible, I will briefly summarise each chapter, highlighting the themes, elements and passages that are most significant to the aims of this thesis.

The first chapter, “The Boy. 1980”, is narrated in the second person and follows a nameless middle-school boy who witnesses the Gwangju Uprising. The novel begins *in medias res*, after the massacre of a number of civilians by the military and police has already taken place, but while the violence is still ongoing. The boy, whose name is later revealed to be Dong-ho, is helping to take care of the bodies of those killed during the uprising. Together with several other volunteers, he is responsible for receiving and arranging the corpses in the Provincial Office and, later, in a gymnasium, where the bodies are kept so that relatives can identify them before burial. Among the volunteers are Jin-su, the oldest of the group; Eun-sook, a high-school student; and Seon-ju, a factory worker. Dong-ho encountered them after one of the military attacks during which his friend Jeong-dae was shot. Unable to determine whether Jeong-dae has been killed or taken away by the soldiers, Dong-ho goes to the Provincial Office, where the bodies have initially been collected. Although he cannot find his friend among the corpses, he decides to remain there and help the other volunteers. As the number of dead increases, the bodies are transferred to the gymnasium, which becomes progressively filled with corpses brought from hospitals as well as those killed during the military attacks.

As the chapter progresses, it becomes clear that Dong-ho was the last person to see Jeong-dae alive. He witnessed his friend being shot but was unable to intervene. Dong-ho is tormented by the belief that he should somehow have helped Jeong-dae, although he understands that attempting to rescue him would most likely have resulted in his own death. His experience of the uprising is therefore marked not only by grief but also by guilt and helplessness. Throughout the chapter, Dong-ho repeatedly reflects on the fate of the dead

and wonders what happens to the human soul after death. His concern with the relationship between body and soul anticipates the novel's subsequent exploration of death, memory and the persistence of the dead beyond the destruction of their bodies.

The second chapter, "The Boy's Friend. 1980", shifts to the first-person perspective of the boy's friend. Although the narrator is not initially identified by name, the chapter reveals that he is Jeong-dae, Dong-ho's friend who was shot during the uprising. By shifting the narrative perspective from Dong-ho to Jeong-dae, Han Kang moves from the experience of witnessing death to the experience of existing after death. Jeong-dae's narration establishes that Dong-ho's search for his body is ultimately futile.

After his death, Jeong-dae's body is transported to a remote location together with the bodies of other victims, preventing his relatives and friends from finding and identifying him. His physical body is subsequently subjected to further violence: even after death, the corpses remain vulnerable to destruction and are eventually burned by the soldiers. Jeong-dae nevertheless continues to exist in a disembodied state. Han Kang does not explicitly define this existence as that of a "ghost" or "spirit"; instead, Jeong-dae experiences himself as detached from his physical body and capable of observing it from the outside. His consciousness remains connected to the bodies of the dead even as they decay and are destroyed. In this sense, death does not represent a complete disappearance but rather a transformation of the relationship between the individual and the material body. Jeong-dae remembers the circumstances of his death and thinks about Dong-ho, although he initially does not know whether his friend has survived. He eventually realises that Dong-ho is alive and learns that his own sister, Jeong-mi, has also been killed. His consciousness therefore remains attached not only to his destroyed body but also to the people he has lost. At the end of the chapter, Jeong-dae senses Dong-ho's death and

experiences overwhelming grief. The chapter thus extends Dong-ho's earlier concern with the fate of the dead by giving one of the victims a voice from beyond death.

The third chapter, "The Editor. 1985", takes place five years after the Gwangju Uprising and shifts to a third-person narrative centred on Eun-sook, who has become an editor at a publishing house. The chapter is divided into seven sections, corresponding to the seven slaps that Eun-sook receives from an interrogator during a police interrogation. After the assault, she decides that she will try to forget one slap each day, so that after a week the incident might become a memory she can leave behind. However, the structure of the chapter demonstrates the difficulty of separating the present violence from the memories of Gwangju that continue to haunt her.

The interrogation takes place because Eun-sook has been working with a translator who is wanted by the authorities. Two weeks earlier, she had met him to discuss the manuscript of a play that he had translated. Although the translator appears quiet, polite and even timid, Eun-sook knows that he is being pursued by the authorities. During the interrogation, the officer repeatedly demands information about his whereabouts. When Eun-sook refuses or is unable to provide the information he wants, the interrogation becomes physically violent: the officer slaps her seven times across the face, causing significant physical injury, including temporary hearing loss. The ordinariness of the interrogator's appearance intensifies the violence of the scene, suggesting that state violence can be enacted not only by visibly brutal figures but also by seemingly ordinary individuals.

The seven sections of the chapter follow Eun-sook's attempt to forget each individual slap. Her physical suffering repeatedly brings her back to memories of Gwangju. In particular, she remembers the Provincial Office during the uprising and recalls Dong-ho, who had remained there despite the danger. The

memory of Dong-ho links her present experience of violence with the events of 1980 and demonstrates that the trauma of the uprising has not disappeared with the passage of time. Instead, it continues to resurface through the body and through involuntary memories.

Eun-sook's work as an editor also introduces a different form of violence: censorship. The play she is working on is submitted to the state censors, who remove large portions of the text. When Eun-sook examines the censored manuscript, she finds that so much has been blacked out that the original work appears almost destroyed. The suppression of the play parallels the physical violence inflicted upon Eun-sook: in both cases, the state attempts to exercise control over bodies and language. The censorship also recalls the regime's broader attempt to suppress representations of political violence and to control how the events of Gwangju can be remembered and narrated. Despite the censorship, the play is eventually published and staged. When the published version appears, Eun-sook discovers that the translator's name has been removed and replaced by the name of another translator, reflecting the danger faced by those associated with the original work. At the performance, much of the censored material cannot be spoken aloud; the actors instead perform around the missing words. Eun-sook, who had worked on the manuscript, knows what those absent words should have been. The performance therefore becomes an indirect act of remembrance: although the state has attempted to erase parts of the text, the missing words remain present in Eun-sook's memory and in the knowledge of those who encountered the original work. The chapter consequently expands the novel's treatment of violence beyond the physical destruction of bodies. In Chapter 1, the dead are subjected to violence even after death, while in Chapter 3 language itself becomes an object of state violence. Eun-sook's attempt to forget the seven slaps is ultimately placed alongside the regime's attempt to erase or control memories of Gwangju. The chapter thus establishes a connection between bodily trauma, censorship and historical

memory: what cannot safely be spoken may nevertheless persist through memory, literature, and the act of bearing witness.

The fourth chapter, “The Prisoner. 1990”, shifts the narrative to the perspective of a former political prisoner whose identity is initially withheld. Ten years have passed since the Gwangju Uprising, but the violence of 1980 continues to shape the lives and bodies of those who survived it. The narrator recalls his imprisonment and the torture he endured at the hands of the authorities, gradually revealing the physical and psychological consequences of his detention. The prisoner’s memories move between his present life and his experiences in prison. He remembers the interrogations and torture to which political prisoners were subjected, as well as the constant threat of further violence. Additionally, he is tortured by remorse and guilt, because Kim Jin-su, previously presented in the first chapter, was his mate in prison and they shared everything, starting from objects and ending with tortures; however, Kim Jin-su died, while the nameless narrator did not, and he wonders why Kin-su died among the two and how it was possible, since they shared everything.

The chapter emphasises that imprisonment does not end when the prisoner is released: the violence remains inscribed on his body and continues to affect his everyday life. His damaged body becomes a form of testimony to the violence of the state, even when he is unable or unwilling to speak openly about his experiences. The narrator is also connected to the events of Gwangju through his memories of the people who were killed there. He reflects on the difficulty of understanding how ordinary human beings can participate in extreme violence and on the impossibility of returning to an ordinary existence after witnessing or experiencing such brutality. His memories demonstrate that the passage of time does not necessarily diminish trauma. Ten years after the uprising, the past remains physically and psychologically present. The chapter also introduces a broader reflection on the relationship between individual suffering and political

history. The prisoner's experience is not presented as an isolated personal tragedy but as part of a systematic pattern of state violence. His body carries the evidence of a history that the authorities have attempted to suppress. In this respect, the chapter continues the novel's concern with the persistence of the dead and the survivors' responsibility to remember them. The violence inflicted upon the prisoner becomes another form of testimony through which the suppressed history of Gwangju survives.

The fifth chapter, "The Factory Girl. 2002," moves forward to 2002 and focuses on Seon-ju, the factory worker who appeared among the volunteers caring for the bodies in the first chapter. Unlike the preceding chapters, which are closely connected to the immediate violence of Gwangju or its direct aftermath, this chapter examines the long-term consequences of the uprising through the life of a working-class woman.

Seon-ju has continued to live with the memories of 1980 and with the physical and psychological consequences of the violence she witnessed. Her experience connects the Gwangju massacre with the exploitation and violence experienced by industrial workers in South Korea. Her life as a factory worker exposes another dimension of political oppression: violence does not exist only in spectacular acts of military repression but can also be embedded in working conditions, economic inequality, and the treatment of workers. The chapter recalls Seon-ju's involvement in the uprising and her memories of the Provincial Office and the bodies of the dead. These memories remain particularly vivid because she was confronted directly with the physical consequences of the massacre. Her memories of the corpses establish a connection between the bodies she encountered in 1980 and her own body as a working woman, which is subjected to exhaustion, injury, and exploitation. Seon-ju's perspective also contributes to the novel's wider exploration of the difficulty of remembering traumatic events. She is unable simply to leave Gwangju behind, even though

more than two decades have passed. Her memories return unexpectedly, demonstrating that historical violence continues to inhabit the present. At the same time, her position as a worker allows Han Kang to connect the repression of the Gwangju Uprising with the wider history of South Korea's authoritarian and industrial development. The chapter therefore expands the scope of "Human Acts": the novel is no longer concerned only with the victims of the massacre but also with the social structures and forms of violence that persist after the historical event itself. Through Seon-ju, Gwangju becomes part of a longer history of bodily suffering, political repression, and the struggle for dignity among South Korean workers.

The sixth chapter, "The Boy's Mother. 2010", shifts the focus to Dong-ho's mother and takes place three decades after the Gwangju Uprising. The chapter explores the massacre from the perspective of a parent who has lost her child and consequently emphasises the intimate and familial dimension of political violence. Dong-ho's mother remembers her son and the circumstances surrounding his death. Her grief is presented not as something that has diminished with time but as a continuing presence in her life. Thirty years after Gwangju, she still experiences the loss of her son as an immediate wound. Her memories of Dong-ho are intertwined with feelings of guilt, helplessness and anger, particularly because she had been unable to protect him. Her recollections also return to the period immediately before his death. She remembers Dong-ho as a child and reflects on his character, his relationship with his family, and the ordinary life he might have had if he had survived. This contrast between Dong-ho's childhood and his violent death emphasises the arbitrariness of the massacre: a child who should have been concerned with school and family life instead becomes responsible for caring for the bodies of the dead and ultimately becomes one of the victims himself. The mother's perspective also reveals the lasting effects of political violence on those who

survive the victims. Dong-ho is physically absent, but his death continues to structure his mother's existence. Her grief becomes a form of memory through which the dead remain present. The chapter therefore extends the novel's interest in the relationship between the living and the dead: remembering Dong-ho is simultaneously an expression of maternal love and an act of resistance to his disappearance from history. By placing the mother's private grief within the larger history of Gwangju, Han Kang demonstrates that historical violence cannot be understood solely through statistics or collective narratives. The death of each victim represents the destruction of an individual life and of an entire network of familial relationships. Dong-ho's death is therefore not confined to 1980; it continues to affect his mother decades later.

The epilogue, "The Writer. 2013", shifts once again to a first-person perspective and introduces a writer who is investigating the events of the Gwangju Uprising. 'The Writer' is closely connected to Han Kang—so much that a large portion of the public and the critics identify her as Han Kang herself, making the chapter a sort of 'meta-narration'¹¹³—and the epilogue therefore introduces an autobiographical and metafictional dimension to the novel¹¹⁴.

From this overview two immediate observations readily emerge: all characters, each in their personal way, are linked to Dong-ho (Kim A. 2021, 437) and that the theme of "proper" mourning is present throughout the novel and can be traced back to its very beginning. In the first chapter, in particular, Dong-ho tries to find the deceased's relatives so that the dead can be properly

¹¹³ Sources: <https://www.audible.com/blog/summary-human-acts-by-han-kang>, <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/human-acts/epilogue-the-writer-2013>, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/05/han-kang-interview-writing-massacre>

¹¹⁴ I will further delve into the last chapter on p. 144-151.

mourned: he tends to the unclaimed corpses of massacred citizens, lighting candles beside each body and covering it with a white sheet. This is not incidental scene-setting; it reproduces, almost exactly, the opening structure of a *kut* as described in Chapter 1—the preparation of sacred space, the offering made to the unrecognised dead, the candle lit to mark the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. Han Kang has stated that she deliberately wished to “light a candle at the start and the end of the novel,” treating this act as structurally, and not just thematically, central to the book. He helps the relatives identify the corpses and gives them time and space to mourn the deceased, even before the actual funeral. He also wonders: “When a living person looks at a dead person, mightn’t the person’s soul also be there by its body’s side, looking down at its own face?” (Han K. 2016, 18), but he immediately corrects himself: “Just before you step outside, you turn and look back over your shoulder. There are no souls here. There are only silenced corpses, and that horrific putrid stink” (Han K. 2016, 19).

Some pages later, a discussion between Jin-su and Eun-sook triggers in Dong-ho further reflection:

“We need there to be more of us, not less, if we’re to prevent the army from re-entering the city ... the mood’s not good. Every day there are more coffins; people are starting to think twice about venturing out of doors.”

‘Hasn’t enough blood been shed? How can all that blood be simply covered up? The souls of the departed are watching us. Their eyes are wide open.’

[...]

The repetition of that word, ‘blood’, gives you a tightening feeling in your chest, so you open your mouth wide and suck in another deep breath.

A soul doesn’t have a body, so how can it be watching us?”

(Han K. 2016, 28)

These passages initially can be interpreted as suggesting that Dong-ho is highly materialistic and deeply skeptical about the existence of souls, both in terms of their physical presence in the world and, particularly, their presence in a place as horrific as Gwangju at that moment.

On the following page, Dong-ho again reflects on souls and their existence:

“What about those who are now in the gym hall – have their souls also escaped their bodies, flying away like birds? Where could they possibly be going? It surely wasn’t some alien place like heaven or hell, which you’d heard about the one time you ever went to Sunday school, when you and your friends were lured there by the prospect of chocolate Easter eggs. You’d never been convinced by the historical dramas on TV, where the spirits of the dead were supposed to be scary figures, dressed all in white and wandering around in an eerie fog, their dishevelled hair the sign of an unquiet rest.”

(Han K. 2016, 29-30)

Thanks to these passages, we can understand that Dong-ho is equally skeptical of the idea that the dead might continue to exist as disembodied souls in a conventional heaven or hell. He cannot accept the idea that the dead continue as disembodied souls who watch over the living, as he believes that once someone has been killed, the physical person is gone. From his perspective, the idea of a soul continuing to exist somewhere—especially in a conventional heaven or hell—does not provide a convincing explanation for what has happened.

The following chapter, however, changes the ontological perspective and stands in stark contrast to Dong-ho’s apparent skepticism. As already mentioned, the narrator of the second chapter is precisely a spirit: that of Jeong-dae. This contrast, I argue, can be read through a number of different interpretive keys. Firstly, Dong-ho represents rationality and, more broadly, a rational way of understanding the world, and his skepticism is part of the novel’s moral

problem. He attempts to understand death rationally, but the novel repeatedly forces both him and the reader into an experience that rational categories cannot comfortably contain. The dead seem to demand recognition even when their physical bodies have been destroyed. In this sense, Dong-ho would seem to be in the wrong in his endeavours.

At the beginning of the chapter, however, the spirit retains an intense relationship with the body. Even though it can detach itself from the body, Jeong-dae's soul remains near his own body and the other corpses. This is important because one of the novel's central concerns is the violence inflicted upon bodies. The dead, therefore, do not simply float away into an abstract afterlife; they remain preoccupied with their corpses, with other bodies, and with what has been done to them. In this respect, Dong-ho's positions are vindicated: the body remains fundamental even after death, and the spirit cannot simply be understood independently of it.

These two apparently contradictory aspects, I argue, echo one of the fundamental claims of this research: the spirit gives a voice to someone who has been silenced. A dead person cannot literally speak, but literature can give that person a voice. In this sense, the spirit exists not necessarily because the novel endorses a conventional religious conception of the afterlife, but because the dead continue to exist through memory, testimony, guilt, trauma, and the consciousness of survivors. The supernatural perspective of the second chapter can therefore be understood as a literary means of making the dead present and allowing them to speak within a narrative from which they would otherwise be excluded.

This interpretation becomes even more interesting when considering that Dong-ho himself describes something resembling a bird that is present within living people but absent from corpses:

You fix on her eyes, which have become hollow and shadowed, and think, whereabouts in the body is that bird when the person is still alive? In that furrowed brow, above the halo-like crown of that head, in some chamber of the heart?

(Han K. 2016, 33)

And later:

How long do souls linger by the side of their bodies?

Do they really flutter away like some kind of bird?

Is that what trembles the edges of the candle flame?

(Han K. 2016, 53)

These passages complicate the idea that Dong-ho might be considered materialistic, sceptical and someone who categorically denies the existence of souls. Although he explicitly rejects the idea of disembodied souls watching over the living, he repeatedly imagines the existence of something within the human body that could be understood as analogous to a soul. He even perceives its possible presence through the image of the bird. What he cannot determine is precisely what this “bird” is, whether it truly exists, and whether it leaves the body after death.

Dong-ho’s scepticism, therefore, is not necessarily a complete rejection of the possibility of a spiritual dimension; rather, I argue, it can be understood as an inability to give a name or a definite form to something he nevertheless senses. His rationalism prevents him from fully accepting the traditional concept of the soul, but his own perceptions repeatedly undermine his certainty. The bird becomes a liminal figure between the material and the immaterial: it is imagined as something located within the body, yet capable of leaving it; something that is not quite the body, but is nevertheless intimately connected to it.

The second chapter can consequently be read as an extension and transformation of this unresolved tension. Rather than simply introducing a supernatural element that contradicts Dong-ho's worldview, the chapter gives concrete narrative form to something that Dong-ho himself was unable to understand. Jeong-dae's spirit embodies the possibility that there is a continuity between the dead and the living, while its attachment to the body simultaneously prevents this continuity from becoming a conventional representation of the afterlife. The spirit neither simply disappears with the body nor completely transcends it.

In this sense, the second chapter does not merely prove Dong-ho wrong. Rather, it exposes the limits of his rational framework and offers another way of understanding death. The spirit gives the reader access to a perspective that Dong-ho cannot articulate for himself: the possibility that death does not mean the complete disappearance of the person, while also refusing the reassuring separation implied by traditional notions of heaven or hell. The dead remain attached to their bodies, to the violence inflicted upon them, and to the living who remember them. Their continued presence is therefore simultaneously physical, spiritual, psychological and narrative.

The contrast between Dong-ho's scepticism and Jeong-dae's experience thus becomes central to the novel's treatment of mourning. Proper mourning, for Han Kang, requires more than recognising that a body has died and burying it; it requires acknowledging that the person who has died continues to have a presence, a history and a voice. By allowing a dead character to narrate his own experience, Han Kang transforms the seemingly impossible persistence of the dead into a literary reality. The spirit is, therefore, not simply evidence of an afterlife but a way of refusing the final silencing of the dead.

Mourning the dead is also an important concern of the protesters, who, through the voice of a boy shouting into a megaphone, incite the population to resist and fight while urging them to remember what they are fighting for:

“We cannot just hand in our weapons and surrender unconditionally. First they have to return our dead to us. They also have to release the hundreds they’ve thrown in prison. And more than that, we have to make them promise to admit the true facts about what happened here, so we can recover our honour in the eyes of the rest of the country. After that, there wouldn’t be any reason for us not to return their firearms, would there? What do you all say?”

(Han K. 2016, 27)

The protesters’ first demand is significant: before considering the release of prisoners or the restoration of their honour, they demand the return of the dead. The bodies therefore become an essential condition for the community’s ability to respond to the violence inflicted upon it. The demand to “return our dead” suggests that the deceased cannot simply be reduced to the physical remains left behind by the massacre. Their bodies must be recovered, identified, returned to their families and, ultimately, properly mourned and buried. In this sense, mourning functions not only as an expression of respect towards the dead but also as a means through which their families and community can restore a degree of dignity to those who have been killed.

The emphasis on the bodies is particularly significant when considered in relation to the novel’s treatment of the boundary between the physical and spiritual dimensions of death. As discussed above, Dong-ho repeatedly associates the existence of the deceased with their bodies, while simultaneously wondering whether something of the person might remain after bodily death. The protesters’ demand to recover the bodies similarly suggests that the physical

remains of the dead constitute an essential part of the process through which death can be acknowledged and mourned. The recovery and burial of the bodies therefore become more than practical necessities: they represent an attempt to restore a relationship between the dead and the living that has been violently disrupted.

This dimension of mourning can also be considered in relation to the Korean shamanic concept of the *Wŏnhon*, or the restless and unresolved dead¹¹⁵. From this perspective, proper mourning and funerary practices can be understood as important not only for the living but also for the dead, since they help establish a proper relationship between the deceased and the community that remains. The absence of the body, conversely, prevents this process from being fully completed. The protesters' demand for the return of the dead can therefore be read as a demand for the possibility of mourning itself: without the bodies, the community is deprived not only of its dead but also of the rituals through which those deaths can be acknowledged, commemorated and given meaning. The passage thus reinforces the broader argument that mourning in "Human Acts" is not presented as a private emotional response to individual loss. It is also a social and collective act through which the dead are recognised and their continued significance for the living is affirmed.

In another passage, still relevant to the framework developed in Chapter 1, we can see how the dead do not represent a menace to Dong-ho. His mother—unaware of her son's whereabouts and terrified by the ongoing police and military violence—finds him in the gymnasium and poses him a seemingly banal question:

*"Don't you know how shocked I was when people said they'd seen you here?
Good grief, all these corpses; aren't you scared?"*

¹¹⁵ See p. 19-20, 29-41.

‘The soldiers are the scary ones,’ you said with a half-smile. ‘What’s frightening about the dead?’”

(Han K. 2016, 35)

In its simplicity, this exchange contains a significant part of the novel’s overall meaning: Han Kang reverses the conventional association between death and danger, redirecting fear away from the dead and toward those responsible for producing them.

Dong-ho’s mother is, understandably, worried that her son—a middle-school child—may be harmed or traumatised by constant exposure to corpses. Dong-ho, however, rejects this assumption, perhaps precisely because of the scepticism already noted in this chapter: it is not the dead who should be feared, but the soldiers. Rather than treating the corpses as a source of horror, he recognises that the true threat lies with those who have actively inflicted violence on the living, and grasps the significance the corpses carry. The dead are not threatening because they are not the agents of violence; they are its victims—victims who must be remembered, and whose voices must continue to be heard. This is why Dong-ho chooses to remain in the gymnasium to care for the bodies: despite professing no belief in spirits, he senses that the dead are nonetheless owed respect and mourning. Through this, Han Kang suggests that the importance of mourning is universal, independent of any particular metaphysical or religious conviction.

This scene also mirrors Han Kang’s own account of the dichotomy she perceived on first encountering the Gwangju massacre through the photograph album described in her Nobel Lecture¹¹⁶: that human beings are capable of unspeakable violence—embodied here by the soldiers—while simultaneously capable of acting to protect and care for one another—embodied here by Dong-ho’s vigil over the dead.

¹¹⁶ See p. 144-145.

The passage thus anticipates one of the novel's central ethical concerns: how the living can bear witness to the dead and prevent their violent deaths from being rendered meaningless. Han Kang's treatment of the dead, in other words, does not merely evoke horror; it transforms death into a site of memory, mourning, and moral responsibility.

In Chapter 1, Jeong-mi, Jeong-dae's older sister, asks Dong-ho if he happens to still have some of his first-year textbooks. When Dong-ho asks her why she needs them, Jeong-mi immediately explains:

“The world's changed since they assassinated President Park. The labour movement's gathering strength, and now our bosses can't force us to work overtime any more. They're saying our salaries will go up too. This could be a great opportunity for me, I need to take advantage of it. I want to start studying again. But I've been out of school so long, I'm not sure I'd be able to just pick up where I left off; I want to go back over the things we did in the first year before I make a go at anything else... then, by the time Jeong-dae's on holiday, I should be okay to move on to the second-year stuff.”

(Han K. 2016, 45)

Although the passage contains no explicit reference to *Musok*, it can nevertheless be connected to the concept of *Minjung* established in Chapter 2¹¹⁷. As previously discussed, *Minjung* can be understood both as a cultural movement following Wells's definition, and, basing on Koo's definition, as a class-based political movement encompassing those excluded from political power as well as groups occupying disadvantaged positions within the economic and social structures of South Korea. Jeong-mi can be situated within this framework through both her social position and her relationship to the

¹¹⁷ See p. 62-67.

changing conditions of labour in 1970s Korea. South Korea's rapid industrialisation was closely intertwined with militarisation and the expansion of foreign investment, particularly from the United States and Japan. During this period, the state increasingly prioritised the interests of large corporations (*chaebol*), while agricultural communities were weakened and industrial workers were subjected to suppressed wages and exploitative working conditions. The resulting alliance between the authoritarian state and capitalist development therefore produced significant social and economic inequalities, particularly for the industrial working class, whose labour was central to the country's economic growth but whose rights and interests remained marginalised (Kim A. 2021, 442-443).

Jeong-mi's position as a factory worker is therefore to be situated within this broader socioeconomic context. Her employment in a sewing factory and her comments concerning wages and working hours reflect the conditions experienced by the industrial working class during South Korea's rapid industrialisation. Her desire to resume her education further illustrates how economic circumstances constrained opportunities for workers such as herself. Her living conditions emphasise her marginal social position: she shares a dependance with her brother near Dong-ho's *hanok*¹¹⁸, suggesting the economic constraints under which she lives. Her circumstances therefore correspond to the class position associated with the *Minjung* as discussed above.

More importantly, however, Jeong-mi does not occupy this position passively: her comments demonstrate an awareness of the broader social changes taking place around her. She explicitly connects the improvement of her working conditions to the growing strength of the labour movement, noting that workers are increasingly able to resist compulsory overtime and demand higher

¹¹⁸ A *hanok* is a traditional Korean house, recognisable for the natural materials employed in its construction, curved roofs, wooden structures and design that harmonises with the surrounding environment.

wages. Her understanding of these developments places her individual circumstances within a wider collective struggle over labour rights. Although she does not explicitly identify herself with the *Minjung* movement, her words suggest that she is affected by and, at least to some extent, participates in the social consciousness associated with it.

Her desire to resume her education is particularly significant in this context. Jeong-mi does not simply express a private wish to return to school; she understands the changing conditions of her workplace as creating an opportunity to pursue an aspiration that had previously been made difficult by her working circumstances. Her intention to use the additional time made available by improved labour conditions to resume her studies therefore links material improvement with the possibility of personal development. Education becomes something that was previously inaccessible to her because of her position within the labour system, but which may become attainable as workers gain greater control over their time and conditions.

Jeong-mi can consequently be read as embodying an important dimension of the *Minjung*: not only marginalisation and economic disadvantage, but also the aspiration to transform the conditions that produce such disadvantage. Her position as a factory worker, together with her awareness of labour rights and her desire to reclaim an educational opportunity that was interrupted by economic necessity, illustrates how individual aspirations can intersect with broader collective struggles. The passage therefore expands the novel's representation of the *Minjung* beyond political protest alone. Through Jeong-mi, Han Kang also depicts everyday lives, together with the constraints and aspirations of those whose social position places them outside the structures of political and economic power.

Turning to Chapter 2, we encounter another significant element in the novel's treatment of mourning and the dead. Jeong-dae's spirit remains among

the other unclaimed bodies, unable to depart from the place where he was killed. This situation can be read in relation to the beliefs underlying the *Ssitgim-kut* discussed in Chapter 1¹¹⁹, particularly the idea that the dead require proper mourning and funerary rites in order to complete their passage from the world of the living. Jeong-dae's circumstances are precisely the opposite: he has been shot and killed, abandoned in a remote field by soldiers, and deprived of the funerary rites through which his death could be properly acknowledged. His inability to leave can therefore be interpreted through the concept of the *Wŏnhon*, the restless dead whose passage has been disrupted and whose grievances remain unresolved.

From this perspective, Jeong-dae's chapter can be read as a literary reworking of a function associated with the *Mansin*. Rather than performing a ritual that enables the dead to communicate their grievances and achieve release, Han Kang creates a narrative space in which Jeong-dae can articulate his experience of death and the violence inflicted upon his body. The novel thus provides the dead with something that the historical circumstances of Gwangju denied them: an opportunity to be heard. Jeong-dae's eventual departure from the pile of bodies can consequently be understood not simply as a supernatural event, but as the culmination of the narrative process through which his previously silenced experience has been given form and voice. In this sense, the chapter itself can be understood as performing a function analogous to the work of the *Mansin*: it brings the experience of a restless dead person into communication with the living and allows his unresolved suffering to be acknowledged.

The closing pages of the chapter are particularly significant in this regard. Jeong-dae's spirit finally rises and becomes detached from the bodies among which it has remained. His physical body remains behind, but his consciousness has been given a narrative voice through which his death, his suffering and the circumstances surrounding his abandonment can be communicated. Han Kang

¹¹⁹ See p. 35-37.

imagines and reconstructs, in literary form, a form of release that the historical reality represented in the novel could not provide. The dead cannot literally return to speak for themselves, but the narrative can temporarily overcome this silence by allowing them to speak within the literary text. Jeong-dae's departure can consequently be read as the culmination of this process: by giving the dead a voice, Han Kang symbolically allows them to move beyond the state of unresolved existence in which the novel initially presents them.

As established in Chapter 1, however, the *Ssitgim-kut* has a function that extends beyond the release of the dead. The ritual also creates an opportunity for the bereaved to address the deceased and thereby offers a form of healing to the living. "Human Acts" does not reproduce this exchange literally: no character is given a ritual scene in which they directly communicate with Jeong-dae or with the other dead. Nevertheless, the novel achieves a comparable effect through its multiplication of voices. By allowing survivors of the Gwangju violence to articulate experiences that might otherwise remain unspoken, Han Kang creates a literary space in which the living can confront, remember and mourn what has been lost.

The opening chapter provides an important example of this process. By narrating Dong-ho's experience in the second person, Han Kang adopts a form of address that places the reader unusually close to the protagonist while simultaneously creating a sense of distance between the narrator and the character. This narrative choice can be understood as part of the novel's broader attempt to transform an individual experience into a collective one. Dong-ho's experience is not presented solely as his private story; it becomes one point through which the experiences of those who survived Gwangju can be represented and remembered. The chapter therefore gives narrative form to a type of experience that would otherwise remain inaccessible, allowing the trauma of the survivors to become part of the reader's encounter with the past.

The subsequent chapters extend this process by presenting different experiences of surviving the massacre and its aftermath. Rather than functioning only as isolated individual portraits, the characters can be read as embodying different dimensions of survivorship: Dong-ho as the young person confronted with the violence of the massacre; Eun-sook as the survivor whose later life remains marked by its consequences; the former militiaman as a figure of imprisonment, guilt and psychological trauma; Seon-ju as a survivor struggling to confront the memories of violence; and, lastly, Dong-ho's mother as a representation of bereavement and the enduring pain of losing a child. The novel thereby moves beyond the perspective of a single victim and constructs a plurality of voices through which the consequences of Gwangju can be remembered.

This progression culminates in the final chapter, in which Han Kang herself enters the narrative through her investigation of the massacre and its victims. The movement from the dead, to individual survivors, to the author herself consequently establishes a chain of transmission: the dead are given a voice; the living survivors are given a space in which their experiences can be articulated; and the author burdens herself with the task of transmitting these voices to readers who did not experience the events themselves. Read through the framework of the *Mansin*, this chain of transmission is significant because it positions Han Kang not simply as a writer representing historical trauma, but as a literary mediator between the dead, the survivors and the contemporary reader.

In Chapter 3, the focus shifts to Eun-sook. One of the most striking passages throughout this chapter takes place when she gets off the bus and immediately enters a telephone booth to call the provincial office and complain about the premature reactivation of the city fountain:

“I’ve just seen water coming out of the fountain, and I don’t think it should be allowed. Tremulous at first, her voice became clearer as she carried on speaking. ‘What I mean is, how can it have started operating again already? It’s been dry ever since the uprising began and now it’s back on again, as though everything’s back to normal. How can that be possible?’”
(Han K. 2016, 77)

Eun-sook’s reaction to the fountain can be understood as another expression of the novel’s concern with mourning. Her objection is not directed towards the fountain itself, but towards what its reactivation represents: the return of ordinary life before the violence of the Uprising has been properly acknowledged and mourned. The fountain has remained dry throughout the Uprising, and its sudden return to activity therefore becomes, for Eun-sook, a visible sign that the city is attempting to restore a sense of normality. Her question—“How can that be possible?”—expresses her inability to accept such a return to normality while the memory of the dead remains unresolved.

The contrast between the dry fountain and its renewed flow is particularly significant. During the Uprising, the absence of water marks the disruption of ordinary life; once the fountain is reactivated, however, the city appears ready to resume its previous rhythm. Eun-sook experiences this restoration as premature because the violence has not been adequately mourned. The problem is therefore not that the fountain is functioning again, but that its return seems to imply that the events of the Uprising can already be regarded as finished. Her response challenges precisely this assumption: for her, the restoration of everyday life cannot simply erase the presence of the dead.

In this sense, Eun-sook’s complaint can be interpreted as another demand for mourning. Like the protesters’ insistence on the return of the bodies in Chapter 1, her reaction to the fountain expresses the need to prevent the dead from being prematurely absorbed into the past. The fountain’s return to normal

operation contrasts with the absence of a corresponding process through which the victims can be properly mourned and remembered. Eun-sook therefore resists the restoration of normality because, from her perspective, the community has not yet fulfilled its responsibility towards the dead.

The scene also develops the distinction established earlier between mourning as a private response to death and mourning as a collective and social obligation. Eun-sook's grief is not confined to her own personal experience; it affects the way she perceives the public space around her. An ordinary civic object becomes intolerable precisely because it appears to disregard the continuing presence of the dead. Her reaction consequently demonstrates how trauma transforms the experience of everyday life: what might ordinarily signify vitality and renewal instead becomes a reminder that the violence has been insufficiently acknowledged.

Eun-sook's insistence that the fountain should not yet be operating can therefore be read as a refusal to allow the city to move on before the dead have been properly recognised. Once again, Han Kang presents mourning not simply as an emotional response to individual loss, but as an ethical obligation towards those who have died and towards the community that survives them.

In the same way, Chapter 3 reveals that the play which caused Eun-sook to be slapped by the censor is nevertheless performed, despite the fact that large portions of the text have been covered with black ink. Eun-sook describes one scene in particular:

“Once the figures of the men have melted back into the wings, their steps sliding forward with a dream-like lassitude, the woman begins to speak. Or so it seems. In actual fact, she cannot be said to say anything at all. Her lips move, but no sound comes out. Yet Eun-sook knows exactly what she is saying. She recognises the lines from the manuscript, where Mr Seo had

written them in with a pen. The manuscript she'd typed up herself, and proofread three times.

'After you died I could not hold a funeral, and so my life became a funeral.'
[...]

'Oh, return to me. Oh, return to me when I call your name.

Do not delay any longer. Return to me now.'"

(Han K. 2016, 107)

The scene explicitly connects the absence of a funeral with the inability of the living to move beyond the death of the person they have lost. The statement "my life became a funeral" transforms mourning from a finite ritual into a continuing condition: because the deceased could not be properly mourned, the bereaved person remains trapped in an ongoing state of grief. The impossibility of performing the funeral therefore does not bring mourning to an end; rather, it prevents mourning from reaching its conventional conclusion.

The scene becomes even more significant when the actress' subsequent words transform the world surrounding her into a series of shrines:

"After you died I couldn't hold a funeral, so these eyes that once beheld you became a shrine.

These ears that once heard your voice became a shrine.

These lungs that once inhaled your breath became a shrine.

[...]

The flowers that bloom in spring, the willows, the raindrops and snowflakes became shrines.

The mornings ushering in each day, the evenings that daily darken, became shrines.'"

(Han K. 2016, 108)

The absence of a formal funeral thus produces an alternative form of memorialisation. In place of a ritual space specifically dedicated to the deceased, the entire sensory and natural world becomes a repository for memory. The body of the bereaved person itself becomes a shrine, as do the ordinary elements of the world through which the deceased continues to be remembered. Mourning is therefore displaced from a specific ritual occasion into everyday experience.

This representation has a direct impact on Eun-sook, who immediately associates the performance with Dong-ho and with her own unresolved grief. The fountain, which she had previously experienced as an intolerable symbol of the premature return to normality, now reappears within her own attempt to remember the dead:

*“After you died I couldn’t hold a funeral, so my life became a funeral.
After you were wrapped in a tarpaulin and carted away in a garbage
truck.
After sparkling jets of water sprayed unforgivably from the fountain.
Everywhere the lights of the temple shrines are burning.
In the flowers that bloom in spring, in the snowflakes. In the evenings that
draw each day to a close. Sparks from the candles, burning in empty drinks
bottles.”*

(Han K. 2016, 110)

The repetition of “After you died I couldn’t hold a funeral” establishes a direct connection between the play and Eun-sook’s own experience. Like the woman in the play, Eun-sook has been deprived of the possibility of properly mourning the person she has lost. The reference to the fountain is particularly significant because it recalls the earlier scene in which Eun-sook reacts with anger to its

premature reactivation. What initially appeared to be an isolated complaint about a public object is therefore revealed as part of a much deeper experience of unresolved mourning. The fountain becomes a symbol of the world's return to normality in the absence of a corresponding process of mourning for those who died.

At the same time, however, Eun-sook's poem transforms the significance of the fountain. In the earlier passage, the fountain represented the painful return of ordinary life; here, it becomes incorporated into her personal landscape of mourning. Alongside flowers, snowflakes, evenings and candlelight, the fountain becomes part of the world through which Dong-ho is remembered. The ordinary world can therefore no longer be separated from the memory of the dead. What Eun-sook initially experiences as an offensive reminder that society has moved on becomes, through the act of writing, another place in which the dead can be remembered.

The poem consequently develops the idea introduced by the play: when formal mourning is prevented, memory does not disappear but instead becomes dispersed throughout everyday life. Eun-sook's inability to hold a funeral for Dong-ho does not mean that she ceases to mourn him. On the contrary, her surroundings become saturated with reminders of his absence. The flowers, snowflakes, evenings, candles and fountain acquire the status of improvised memorial spaces, allowing Eun-sook to maintain a relationship with the dead despite the absence of a conventional funerary ritual.

This is particularly relevant to the understanding of mourning developed throughout "Human Acts". The novel repeatedly presents situations in which the dead cannot receive the rituals through which their deaths would ordinarily be acknowledged: their bodies are abandoned, their deaths are denied and survivors are prevented from openly confronting their grief. Han Kang nevertheless constructs alternative spaces in which the dead can continue to be remembered and addressed. The theatre and Eun-sook's poem become such

spaces. Through language, memory and representation, they perform a commemorative function that the historical circumstances of the Gwangju Uprising made difficult or impossible to perform through conventional means. Read in relation to the *Ssitgim-gut* and the figure of the *Mansin*, this displacement of mourning from formal ritual into language is particularly significant. The novel creates a literary space in which the relationship between the dead and the living can nevertheless be articulated, and that can thus be perceived as mirroring a *kut*. Eun-sook's poem becomes an act of mourning precisely because it allows her to address an absence that could not be properly addressed, as a funeral could not be performed. In this sense, writing becomes another means of giving form to the relationship between the living and the dead, anticipating the broader argument that Han Kang's literary practice can be understood as a form of mediation between those who have died and those who continue to live with their memory.

Moreover, the representation of the play can be read as creating a space that parallels, in important respects, the function of a shamanic ritual. The actors impersonate characters who are themselves victims of the Gwangju Massacre, whether dead or profoundly traumatised by the violence, while the audience consists of people who are able to encounter these experiences through their performance. The relationship between the stage, the actors and the audience can therefore be compared to that between the *Wŏnhon*, the *Mansin* and the bereaved in a *Ssitgim-kut*.

The comparison does not imply that theatrical performance literally reproduces a shamanic ritual. Rather, both create a space in which experiences that have been suppressed or left unresolved can be brought into the presence of the living. In the shamanic ritual, the *Mansin* mediates between the dead and the living, giving form to the grievances of the deceased and enabling the bereaved to confront their loss. Similarly, the play gives theatrical form to the experiences

of those killed and traumatised by the Massacre, allowing an audience to encounter and acknowledge what might otherwise remain absent or silenced.

The actors therefore function not as *Wŏnhon* themselves, but as the medium through which the voices and experiences of the victims are represented. The audience, in turn, occupies a position analogous to that of the bereaved insofar as it is confronted with the suffering of those who have been lost and is invited to remember and mourn them. The theatrical space consequently becomes a space of encounter between the living and representations of the dead, transforming performance into a possible alternative site of mourning when conventional funerary practices have been disrupted.

This parallel is particularly significant because the play is itself an act of resistance to silence. The original text has been censored, with large portions covered in black ink, yet the actors continue to perform it. Even when the words of the dead cannot be spoken aloud, the performance allows their experiences to remain perceptible through gesture, silence and the audience's recognition of the censored text. The theatre therefore becomes another medium through which the suppressed dead can be made present. In this sense, the play does not merely represent mourning; it performs a commemorative function, creating a space in which the relationship between the dead and the living can be temporarily restored.

Chapter 5, narrated by Seon-ju, returns once again to the question of the soul and its relationship to the living and the dead. Years after the Gwangju Uprising, Seon-ju occasionally finds herself wondering whether the sensations and memories through which Dong-ho returns to her might constitute what is traditionally understood as a soul:

“Only occasionally, just now and then, you wonder.

Some weekend afternoon when the sun-drenched scene outside the window seems unusually still and Dong-ho's profile flits into your mind, mightn't the thing flickering in front of your eyes be what they call a soul? In the early hours of the morning, when dreams you can't remember have left your cheeks wet and the contours of that face jolt into an abrupt clarity, mightn't that wavering be a soul's emergence? And the place they emerge from, that they waver back into, would it be black as night or dusk's coarse weave? Dong-ho, Jin-su, the bodies which your own hands washed and dressed, might they be gathered in that place, or are they sundered, several, scattered?"

(Han K. 2016, 177-178)

Unlike Dong-ho, who initially questions whether a soul can exist independently of the body, Seon-ju approaches the question from the opposite direction. Her uncertainty emerges from the persistence of their memory within her consciousness, rather than from physical proximity to the dead. Dong-ho's profile appears in her mind, his face emerges with unexpected clarity and she begins to wonder whether these experiences might constitute the appearance of a soul. The novel therefore continues to destabilise the distinction between material and immaterial existence: the soul is not presented as an objectively verifiable entity, but neither is its possibility dismissed.

The repeated use of the modal "might" is particularly significant. Seon-ju does not claim that what she experiences is a soul; instead, she asks whether it might be one. Her uncertainty prevents the passage from becoming a straightforward affirmation of supernatural belief. At the same time, the fact that she repeatedly entertains the possibility demonstrates that the dead have not ceased to exist for her. Dong-ho and Jin-su remain present through memory, dreams and sensory impressions, even years after their deaths. The question of whether this presence

should be called a “soul” consequently becomes less important than the fact that the dead continue to occupy the consciousness of those who survive them.

This passage also recalls the relationship between the body and the soul established in the first two chapters. Seon-ju explicitly remembers “the bodies which your own hands washed and dressed”, thereby bringing together the physical remains of the dead and the possibility of their continued spiritual presence. She has encountered their bodies directly, yet she now wonders where their souls might be. The question therefore does not separate body and soul into two independent realms. Instead, the memory of the physical bodies becomes the very basis from which Seon-ju imagines the possibility of their continued existence.

Her final question—whether Dong-ho, Jin-su and the other dead might be “gathered” somewhere or instead “sundered, several, scattered”—further demonstrates her inability to establish a definite boundary between the dead and the living. The dead are physically absent, but they remain psychologically and emotionally present. Their location is therefore uncertain: they may exist in some unknown spiritual realm, but they also clearly exist within Seon-ju’s memory. Han Kang consequently allows the concept of the soul to remain deliberately unresolved, while presenting remembrance itself as a form of continued presence.

Seen in relation to the mourning framework developed above, Seon-ju’s reflections suggest that mourning does not necessarily conclude with burial or with the passage of time. The dead continue to return through memory, dreams and involuntary recollection. In this sense, Seon-ju’s experience represents another form of the unfinished relationship between the dead and the living that has characterised the novel from its beginning. Whereas the bodies in the gymnasium could not receive proper funerary treatment, and Jeong-dae’s spirit could not initially depart from them, Seon-ju demonstrates that the dead may remain present even after many years have passed. Their continued presence is

no longer primarily physical; it has become internal, but it remains no less powerful.

This shift is important for understanding the broader development of mourning in “Human Acts”. The novel moves progressively from the physical bodies of the dead, through the imagined existence of their spirits, towards their persistence within the memories and consciousness of survivors. Mourning consequently becomes a process through which the dead continue to inhabit the lives of those who remain. The soul, whether understood literally or metaphorically, becomes inseparable from this persistence: what Seon-ju experiences as a possible “soul” may also be understood as the continuing presence of the dead within the memory of the living.

From the perspective of the *Mansin* framework, this passage further expands the notion of mediation developed in the preceding chapters. The boundary between the dead and the living is no longer represented exclusively through a supernatural encounter. Instead, memory itself becomes a medium through which the dead return. Seon-ju becomes the site in which Dong-ho and the others continue to exist, while Han Kang’s narrative gives this otherwise private and intangible experience a literary form that can be shared with the reader. The dead therefore move through several forms of mediation throughout the novel: through Jeong-dae’s direct narration, through the survivors’ memories and, finally through the literary act of representing those memories. In each case, the boundary between absence and presence is made permeable, allowing the dead to remain connected to the living.

As already mentioned¹²⁰, the narrator of the last chapter is strictly identifiable as Han Kang remains formally unresolved, but the chapter is unmistakably autobiographical in substance. Han Kang has spoken of having lived in Gwangju during the earliest part of her life, and of discovering, as a child

¹²⁰ See p. 117.

in her family's Seoul home, a book shelved spine-upward—its contents, she later realised, photographs documenting the massacre. Han Kang, during her Nobel Lecture, stated this was her first real encounter with the Gwangju Uprising:

“I was nine years old when my family left Gwangju in January 1980, roughly four months before the mass killings began. When I happened across the upside-down spine of ‘Gwangju Photo Book’ on a bookshelf a few years later and looked through it when there were no adults around, I was twelve. This book contained photographs of Gwangju residents and students killed with clubs, bayonets, and guns while resisting the new military powers that had orchestrated the coup. Published and distributed in secret by the survivors and the families of the dead, the book bore witness to the truth at a time when the truth was being distorted by strict media suppression. As a child, I hadn’t grasped the political significance of those images, and the ravaged faces became fixed in my mind as a fundamental question about humans: Is this the act of one human towards another? And then, seeing a photo of an endless queue of people waiting to donate blood outside a university hospital: Is this the act of one human towards another? These two questions clashed and seemed irreconcilable, their incompatibility a knot I couldn’t undo.”

This experience, which has to be considered fundamental for Han Kang, can be understood through Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, as discussed by Gulnar and Sarangi (2025). Drawing on her work “The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust” (2012), Hirsch argues that photographic images documenting catastrophic events can survive the events themselves and outlive, like ghostly remains, the individuals they depict. As traces of an irretrievably lost world, these images may subsequently return to survivors as haunting remnants of the past: this is exactly what

happens to Han Kang as a child, when she discovers the “Gwangju Photo Book”: she enters in contact with a traumatic past she did not know and is hit with the contradicting nature of humans, who are capable of destroying fellow humans, but also of helping them by, in this case, queuing outside of the hospital to donate blood.

Hirsch, moreover, locates memory within a tension between the desire to recover and reconstruct the past and the recognition that such a past can never be fully retrieved or understood. For those who survive catastrophic violence, this creates an enduring dilemma between confronting the memory of violence and attempting to turn away from it, despite the impossibility of completely escaping its effects (Gulnar & Sarangi 2025). This is, I argue, something that Han Kang experienced too, even though she did not experience the massacre first-hand: she became traumatised when she saw that book, and despite trying to bury the memory of it and attempting not to include it in her works, in the end that trauma urged to be written and explored in one of her novels. This is also something she explores in her Nobel lecture:

“The question I wanted to ask here was this: Could it be that by regarding the softest aspects of humanity, by caressing the irrefutable warmth that resides there, we can go on living after all in this brief, violent world?”

Having reached the end of this question, I began thinking about my next book. This was in the spring of 2012, not long after “Greek Lessons” was published. I told myself I would write a novel that takes another step towards light and warmth. I would suffuse this life- and world-embracing work with bright, transparent sensations. I soon found a title and was twenty pages into the first draft, when I was forced to stop. I realised that something within was preventing me from writing this novel.

*

Until then, I hadn't considered writing about Gwangju."

In light of this passage, we can begin to understand how she attempted to escape that memory, but also how, in the end, the same memory urged to be written; in the end, Han Kang surrenders to that request. This, I argue, perfectly echoes the processes and mechanisms of the shamanic calling explored in Chapter 1¹²¹: Han Kang, just like those affected by the *shinbyŏng*, initially rejects her calling and does not address trauma's and memory's desire to be written in the same way a *Mansin*-to-be does not initially surrender to spirits' will.

Moreover, the concept of "postmemory" describes how the descendants of survivors inherit and carry the emotional and traumatic consequences of events they did not directly experience. This framework is particularly relevant to "Human Acts" in which photographs of dead bodies—and, in other parts of the novel, human remains, bones and traces of blood—function as material reminders of collective violence. These images extend the effects of trauma beyond the immediate witnesses, demonstrating how the memory of catastrophic violence can persist across generations and become an enduring, seemingly irreversible inheritance (Gulnar & Sarangi 2025): this is exactly what happened to Han Kang, who did not experience the Gwangju Uprising as she lived in a completely different city, but became traumatised because of images which managed to travel through generations and carry the trauma through them.

In "Human Acts", 'the Writer' narrating the last chapter has lived a strikingly similar experience: she was born in Gwangju, then left it and moved to Seoul; she was nine when the Gwangju Democratisation Movement broke out. 'The

¹²¹ See p. 23-26.

Writer’, as a child, grasped some fragments of the conversations between adults, but could not quite understand the whole situation; the reader, however, is able to understand that ‘the Writer’s’ father had been Dong-ho’s teacher in some classes. This element, too, forms a connection, as it is known that Han Kang’s father was a teacher¹²². Additionally, Dong-ho’s family had bought ‘the Writer’s’ family *hanok* when they moved to Seoul.

Han Kang discovered the book of pictures of Gwangju in the same way ‘the Writer’ does, and they were struck by it in the same way. The book now jumps forward and describes how ‘the Writer’ comes back to Gwangju to enter in contact with the places in that book (such as the gymnasium). Han Kang, analogously, described her research process during her Nobel Lecture—reading over a thousand pages of witness testimony, nine hours a day for a month—and from it we can understand she chose to do so not as a scholarly exercise conducted at a documentary remove, but as an act of deliberate self-exposure: “I mobilised my senses, emotions, soul, everything... I was feeling that I was lending my own body and soul.” This is, in the vocabulary developed in section 1.4, a description of possession rather than research: the author does not just report the dead’s pain from outside, she allows the dead’s suffering to pass through her own body with sufficient force to be transmitted.

‘The Writer’ also hopes to find Dong-ho’s relatives still living in her old *hanok*. However, she discovers that her house was demolished and in its place a brand new furniture shop was built. ‘The Writer’ stays in Gwangju to collect documents and testimonies about the Uprising, a research Han Kang experimented too. Moreover, just like Han Kang, at this point ‘the Writer’ experiences nightmares in which she is chased by soldiers and stabbed with a bayonet in her solar plexus. Eventually, she manages to meet Dong-ho’s brother and talk to him; he gives her the permission to write the book citing his brother,

¹²² Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. “Han Kang”. Retrieved 07/09/2026. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Han-Kang>

but he also clearly states she can write her novel “only if you do it properly. Please, write your book so that no one will ever be able to desecrate my brother’s memory again”. Later, ‘the Writer’ visits the New Mangwŏl-dong cemetery; at this point, a pivotal scene is described:

“Dong-ho, I need you to take my hand and guide me away from all this. Away to where the light shines through, to where the flowers bloom”.

The boy with the slender neck and thin summer clothes is walking along the snow-covered path that winds between the graves, and I am following behind. The snow has already melted in the heart of the city, but here it lingers. The boy steps into a frozen drift, soaking the bottom of his tracksuit bottoms. Startled by the cold, he turns to look back at me. He smiles, and the smile reaches his eyes.

Except that, of course, there was no actual encounter among the graves.”

(Han K. 2016, 216)

This passage is of heightened relevance for two different reasons.

First, Han Kang, during her Nobel lecture, similarly describes how she decided to write an entire book about Gwangju after having visited the New Mangwŏl-dong cemetery.

Second, the function of the medium becomes particularly evident here. ‘The Writer’ first imagines herself following the boy, asking him to guide her towards a bright and luminous place where flowers are blossoming. She then symbolically occupies a position between two worlds as she kneels before his grave in the snow and lights candles, watching the edges of their flames flicker like translucent wings (Najbar-Miller 2025, 323). ‘The Writer’ here therefore occupies, quite precisely, the ritual position of the *Mansin* at the close of a

Ssitgim-kut: having voiced the dead's grievance throughout the body of the text, she now performs the final office of releasing that spirit, while asking it, in the same gesture, to illuminate the way for the living reader who remains behind. However, this act of mediation extends beyond the encounter with the dead: its purpose is to give voice to the suffering of all those who have experienced sorrow, both living and deceased, within the Gwangju community. Through this process, Han Kang seeks to recall the 'jewel of conscience'—a symbol of moral integrity that has been shattered by state violence, yet remains capable of being restored. Thus, while acknowledging the enduring and devastating effects of trauma, Han Kang also foregrounds the significance of confronting and remembering such experiences, ultimately linking them to the ongoing struggle for human dignity and freedom, as illustrated in the following passage from the epilogue (Najbar-Miller 2025, 323). Moreover, I argue, it is clear that 'the Writer' manages to "see" and perceive Dong-ho's presence, even though Dong-ho is not really there: this phenomenon reflects the spirit's descent a *Mansin* experiences during a *kut*, as Najbar-Miller (2025) states. Of course, there are some differences: the *Mansin* is possessed by the spirit, that is free to talk through her; Han Kang and 'the Writer', instead, do not possess this ability, but manage to obtain a similar result nevertheless. In particular, 'the Writer', and by extension Han Kang, manages to picture Dong-ho and perceive his presence; she follows him between the graves, and this, I argue, can be interpreted a will of understanding him, of perceiving what he feels and of following his lead to write the novel which indeed acts like a *kut*. For this reason, in the end, Dong-ho turns back and smiles: he is now satisfied and content, because he knows that his grievances will be addressed. To sum up, Han Kang is unable to perform a standard *kut* in which she undergoes possession, but despite this lack, she is able to perform something equivalent to the *kut* by giving voice to the dead, and in this case to Dong-ho, through her novels. For this reason, her novel can be considered a *Ssitgim-kut*.

Rather than focusing on another direct witness to the uprising, in this final chapter the narrative perspective shifts to that of someone who attempts to represent the suffering of others through literature. ‘The Writer’ reflects on the difficulty of writing about Gwangju and on the ethical problem of representing extreme violence. She is conscious that she did not personally experience the massacre and therefore questions whether she has the right to speak on behalf of those who did. At the same time, the impossibility of completely representing the victims cannot justify silence.

The very act of “writing”, in “Human Acts”, is identified as an attempt to approach the experiences of the dead and of the survivors without claiming to reproduce or fully recover them. ‘The Writer’s’ research leads her back to Dong-ho and to the testimonies and memories surrounding his death, thereby returning his story to the centre of the novel. The various voices encountered in the preceding chapters—including those of the boy, the dead friend, Eun-sook, the prisoner, Seon-ju, and Dong-ho’s mother—are brought together through ‘the Writer’s’ effort to understand and represent the violence of the Gwangju Uprising and Massacre. This movement between individual memories and collective testimony also foregrounds the emotional and psychological consequences of loss and trauma. In this context, Zefanya Wynona and Susanne Andrea H. Sitohang’s “The Pain of Losing in Han Kang’s ‘Human Acts’” (2024), as discussed by Gulnar and Sarangi (2025), examines the representation of grief through these five characters, whose experiences are shaped by the violence of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising and Massacre. Drawing on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief, the study analyses the characters’ responses to violence, loss and trauma, highlighting the psychological and physical consequences of their experiences. The study offers an empathetic interpretation of grief and trauma in the novel. This perspective is particularly relevant to ‘the Writer’s’ return to Dong-ho, as her attempt to reconstruct his

story demonstrates that remembering the dead is not simply an act of historical recovery but also an encounter with the enduring grief carried by survivors and those who inherit their memories.

The epilogue returns to one of the novel's central questions: how can the dead be remembered when their bodies have been destroyed and their voices silenced? The novel does not suggest that literature can perfectly restore the past; rather, it presents writing as a means of preserving traces of experiences that might otherwise disappear. This concern is particularly evident in "The Writer. 2013," in which 'the Writer' reflects on her research into the Gwangju Uprising and her attempt to reconstruct Dong-ho's story. As Janet Handley observes, the final chapter is significant because Han "writes herself into the novel", bringing the act of writing and the problem of representing traumatic memory into the narrative itself (Handley 2024, 149). 'The Writer's' position is therefore closely connected to the act of testimony: she encounters fragments of memory, recognises the limitations of her own position and attempts to transform these fragments into literary form. This process can be understood as an effort to resist the historical erasure of Gwangju. Sangma (2026, 169-170) similarly argues that "Human Acts" challenges official historiography through individual and collective acts of remembrance, allowing the characters' memories to preserve histories that have been suppressed or neglected.

The final section consequently transitions the narrative of "Human Acts" from one primarily concerned with the events and aftermath of the Gwangju Uprising toward a broad, deep reflection on the processes of remembering, witnessing and representing historical trauma. Therefore, 'the Writer'—and Han Kang too, as a consequence, I argue, can further be read as a kind of ritual mediator, occupying a position analogous to that of the Mansin: she stands between the dead whose stories risk being forgotten and who risk not being mourned properly, and the living who are called upon to remember them. This

interpretation is reinforced by the novel's polyphonic structure. Its constantly changing perspective through a movement among first-, second-, and third-person perspectives, identifying now with the victims', now with the survivors', the relatives', the witnesses' and so on, this suggests that no single consciousness can encompass the entirety of the historical event. Instead, these fragmented perspectives collectively produce a form of testimony.

The epilogue therefore makes explicit what the structure of the novel has already established: remembering the dead becomes an ethical act, while writing offers one possible means of resisting their erasure. The novel's movement across time reinforces this argument.: the novel's subsequent chapters extend this logic of mourning outward from the initial massacre into its long aftermath, tracing the persistence of trauma across the 1980s, 1990s, and into the new millennium through the testimony of survivors. For instance, "The Editor" Eun-sook, demonstrates how state censorship can be a form of violence; "The Prisoner" demonstrates the persistence of political violence in the bodies and memories of survivors in two different ways: Jin-su is a former militia member, whose suicide follows years of imprisonment and torture, while the nameless prisoner is a survivor who will however forever be marked by trauma; "The Factory Girl" connects Gwangju to the continuing history of labour and social violence through the story of Seon-ju, unable to trust or be touched after her own torture and sexual violation; "The Boy's Mother" reveals the enduring consequences of loss within the family; and "the Writer" turns toward the problem of representing these experiences through literature. Each of these testimonies performs, in miniature, a function Chapter 1 identified as central to ritual mourning: the transformation of privately held, unspeakable grief into publicly witnessed and acknowledged suffering¹²³.

Moreover, the narrative moves progressively further from the events of 1980 while simultaneously demonstrating the persistence of the past. Time does not

¹²³ See Section 1.3 (p. 48).

erase Gwangju; instead, the event continues to return through bodies, memories, testimonies and acts of writing. In this sense, “Human Acts” transforms literary narration itself into an act of remembrance and resistance. Where the state’s official silence denied these individuals a public language for their pain, the novel supplies one.

In short, what ultimately distinguishes “Human Acts” from a conventional testimonial or historical novel, and what justifies extending to it the vocabulary of Chapter 1, is precisely this refusal to remain outside its material as a documentary witness. The novel does not explain Gwangju to its reader from a position of safety; it insists, through its narrative technique—second-person address that summons the dead directly, present-tense narration that refuses to let the massacre settle into completed pastness, and an authorial epilogue that abandons fictional distance altogether—on making the reader, like Han Kang herself, a participant in an ongoing act of collective mourning rather than a spectator of a finished historical account. In the terms this thesis has developed, *Human Acts* does not simply describe a *kut* performed for the dead of Gwangju; in its very structure and mode of address, it attempts to be one.

To conclude, “Human Acts” incorporates nearly every element of *Musok* examined in this thesis. Not only can it be read as a *kut* (Najbar-Miller 2025), but the novel as a whole can be specifically be read as a form of *Chaesu-kut* or *Ssitgim-kut*¹²⁴ or, as Choi Chungmoo stated (as cited in Najbar-Miller, 2025, 323), as a *Chinhon-kut*¹²⁵: through narration, Han Kang finds a way to air the

¹²⁴ See p. 35-38.

¹²⁵ As Najbar-Miller (2025) states: “During *chinhon’gut*, Shamans, accompanied by percussion and dance, recite a narrative incantation to express the grievances of the invoked spirits and free them from resentment because in Korean traditional beliefs grieving souls cannot depart this world and consequently seek revenge on the living. The cleansing ritual is followed by the ritual of transporting the spirits to paradise or another good place in the other world via a ‘path of flowers’ (*kkotkil*) and help them find peace.”

grievances of the dead by allowing them to speak directly. The clearest instance of this, I argue, occurs in the second chapter, where Jeong-dae—though never described using explicit vocabulary such as “soul” or “spirit”—is unmistakably presented as dead and is given a distinctive, eloquent first-person voice capable of articulating his own pain and grief with an intimacy no external narrator could supply. Read in the terms established in Chapter 1, therefore, Dong-ho, Jeong-dae and the other massacred citizens of “Human Acts” are figured throughout the novel as collective *Wŏnhon*: victims of a violent, state-inflicted death whose resentment must be ritually voiced before it can be released.

One aspect that Najbar-Miller and Choi fail to underline, however, is the overall aim of Han Kang’s ‘shamanic rituals’ in “Human Acts”. On the one hand, it is undeniable that the Author attempts to air the grievances of the dead, of *Wŏnhon* trapped in the realm of the living and freeing them by mourning them through her book, which can be considered a *Ssitgim-kut*. However, on the other, Han Kang’s aim, I argue, cannot be solely reduced to this. The Author outspokenly states in her Nobel Lecture that her initial questions while writing “Human Acts” were:

*“Can the present help the past?
Can the living save the dead?”*

However, in the same Lecture, she explains how, as time passed, she realised these were “impossible questions”. While reading testimonies of survivors in Gwangju, nevertheless, she understood that these two questions had to be inverted:

*“Can the past help the present?
Can the dead save the living?”*

Later, during the writing of “Human Acts”, she did not limit herself to recounting events that could help the deceased and give them peace. On the contrary, she “sensed at certain moments that the past was indeed helping the present, and that the dead were saving the living”. This, I argue, is at the basis of Han Kang’s *Minjung* consciousness: as I have already strived to explain in Chapter 2, Gwangju Democratisation Movement represents one of the fundamental struggles for *Minjung* as a social group. With “Human Acts”, I argue, Han Kang tries to give voice not only to the deceased, but also to the survivors and to the wider *Minjung* whose history, suffering and political struggle are embodied in the Gwangju Democratisation Movement. In this sense, Han Kang’s position can be understood as that of an ally of the *Minjung*: she does not speak on their behalf in the sense of claiming to possess or reproduce their experiences, but instead creates a literary space in which their voices, memories, suffering and political aspirations can be heard. Through her representation of Gwangju, she preserves the movement’s significance beyond the immediate historical and geographical context of South Korea, making its history and its underlying struggle accessible to readers who may have no direct connection to the events. Her writing therefore participates in what I propose to understand as the *Minjung* project of remembering, articulating and transmitting the experiences of those who have been marginalised or silenced by dominant political and historical narratives. This mirrors the already mentioned thesis by Koo (1993, 144)¹²⁶ according to which the *Mansin*’s traditional function is extended to the collective grievance of the *Minjung* as a whole, understood as “class-based political movement”¹²⁷ and as a body of people denied political voice and historical recognition.

¹²⁶ See p. 54-55.

¹²⁷ See p. 64.

At the same time, however, Han Kang's relationship with the *Minjung* should not be understood solely in terms of representation. Following Wells's interpretation of *Minjung* as an artistic and cultural movement, "Human Acts" can itself be situated within a broader *Minjung* aesthetic. The novel's formal and thematic choices—its polyphonic structure, its attention to ordinary and marginalised subjects, its privileging of embodied experience over official historical narratives and its insistence on remembering state violence—resonate with the central concerns of *Minjung* cultural production. Rather than presenting history from the perspective of political institutions or official discourse, Han Kang reconstructs Gwangju through the fragmented voices and bodily experiences of those who endured it. In doing so, she adopts an artistic practice that is compatible with the *Minjung* emphasis on recovering the experiences and consciousness of the oppressed and transforming them into a form of cultural resistance.

It is therefore possible to read "Human Acts" as both a novel about the *Minjung* and, in a broader aesthetic sense, a *Minjung* novel. Han Kang's intervention lies not only in mourning the dead but also in demonstrating how the voices of the dead can continue to speak to the living. This is precisely where her inversion of the original questions—"Can the present help the past?" and "Can the living save the dead?"—becomes significant. The novel ultimately suggests that the relationship between past and present is reciprocal: the dead do not merely require the living to remember them; their struggles, memories, and unfinished aspirations can also shape and illuminate the present. Han Kang therefore positions literature as a medium through which the historical consciousness of the *Minjung* can survive beyond the immediate circumstances of Gwangju. By carrying the memory of the movement into a contemporary and international literary sphere, *Human Acts* allows the past to intervene in the present and enables the dead to continue participating in the ethical and political consciousness of the living.

With this in mind, I will now turn to an analysis of “We Do Not Part”, a novel that contains several elements similar to those found in “Human Acts” and can, in some respects, be regarded as its sequel. At the same time, however, it introduces a number of distinctive elements, which I will examine in the following section.

3.2.2 “We Do Not Part”: A Genealogy of *Wŏnhon*

If “Human Acts” addresses a single, historically bounded catastrophe, “We Do Not Part” (2021) is structured around a genealogy of violence that refuses to stay contained within any one event, generation or even nation. The novel’s narrator, Kyungha, has herself previously written a book about a massacre in a city referred to only as G_____—an evident, deliberately unconcealed reference to Gwangju, and to “Human Acts” itself—and suffers, like Han Kang, from severe recurring migraines, as well as nightmares, bodily pain and an acute sense of exhaustion, that intensify alongside her exposure to historical violence. Her closest friend, Inseon, is a carpenter and documentary filmmaker whose own most recent project concerns the atrocities committed by South Korean soldiers against Vietnamese civilians during the Vietnam War. It is only when Inseon is hospitalised after she severely injured her fingers that Kyungha travels to Jeju in her place, as Inseon asks her to go to her house on the island and care for her bird, Ama. Kyungha travels to Jeju during an intense snowstorm, but her attempt to reach Inseon’s house becomes increasingly dreamlike and unstable. She is caught in a snowstorm, which delays her arrival to the house, and when she finally reaches it, Ama appears to be dead. Kyungha thus buries him under a tree and later falls asleep, as she is feeling tired from the travel and, at the same time, the cold weather makes her feel sick and causes her to have a fever. The following day, when she wakes up, Ama is alive and kicking in his cage, while Inseon later appears with her injured hand restored. From this point

onward, the distinction between waking reality, memory, hallucination and communication with the dead becomes deliberately uncertain.

This destabilisation is crucial to the novel's treatment of historical memory: traumatic history is not presented as a stable body of facts that can simply be retrieved from an archive. Instead, it returns fragmentarily through testimony, dreams, bodily sensations, photographs, objects, landscapes and the stories transmitted between generations. The book mirrors this fragmentation: it does not follow a precise plot, rather it follows different storylines at once and all of them result to be disconnected, confusing and non-linear.

As Kyungha waits for Inseon's return, the boundaries between her own experience and the memories of others become increasingly unstable and undistinguishable: she encounters traces of Inseon's family history and, through it, she gradually becomes immersed the island's suppressed past and in the experiences of people who suffered during the massacres that took place there. In this way, the novel deliberately layers four distinct sites of twentieth-century Korean state violence—Gwangju Democratisation Movement, Jeju Massacre, the Bodo League Massacre and Vietnam War—onto a single, intimate friendship between two women, refusing to let any of them stand as an isolated historical episode.

Additionally, the snow-covered landscape of Jeju functions almost as a space outside ordinary time, allowing the past to intrude upon the present. Han Kang does not reconstruct the massacre through a single authoritative historical narrative and lets the novel shift away from a conventional linear plot; rather, the novel develops through fragments of testimony, recollection, dreams, bodily sensations and historical documents, which Jeongsim (Inseon's mother) collected. Memory thus flows from documentary material, newspaper clippings, photographs, testimony and fragments of family history to Jeongsim, from Jeongsim to In-sŏn and, lastly, from In-sŏn to Kyungha. Memory in "We Do Not Part" is thus relational rather than individual. Kyungha did not experience

the Jeju massacre herself, yet she gradually becomes implicated in it. In-sŏn likewise inherits memories that originated with her parents and other relatives. Her mother, Jeongsim, spends decades searching for the remains of her brother, who disappeared during the violence associated with the Bodo League massacre. In the novel, the Bodo League massacre extends the temporal reach of Jeju trauma: the violence experienced by In-sŏn's family cannot be confined to a single event in 1948-49 but continues into the Korean War and its aftermath.

The novel's central act of mourning belongs to Inseon's mother, Jeongsim, even though she herself is dead before the narrative begins. As a child, Jeongsim survived the Jeju massacre discussed in section 2.3¹²⁸, losing both parents to a mass shooting; her older brother, arrested and imprisoned in Daegu on suspicion of collaboration with the 1948 uprising, was ultimately executed during the Bodo League massacre of 1950 in a cobalt mine near Kyŏngsan, one of the tens of thousands of victims of that later, nationally dispersed killing. These massacres remained politically suppressed and difficult to mourn publicly for decades, and Jeongsim spent decades of her subsequent life attempting to recover even a fragment of her brother's remains in order to hold a proper funeral. Han Kang has herself, in her Nobel lecture, identified Jeongsim, rather than either of the novel's two ostensible protagonists, as the book's true centre: the figure who "bears pain and stands against oblivion" and "does not bid farewell"—a description that gives the English title of the novel its full resonance, and that positions refusal to stop mourning not as pathology but as a form of ethical fidelity to the dead consistent with the obligation identified in section 1.4.

In the novel, Jeju functions both as a geographical setting and, mainly, as a landscape saturated with unacknowledged memory. The dead continue to

¹²⁸ See p. 80-93.

inhabit the island imaginatively, while the traces of violence persist in the memories of survivors and descendants. Jeongsim's decades-long search for her brother's remains is consequently more than a personal family story: it represents the struggle to recover a dead person from a history that has denied him proper recognition and mourning. The absence of a body thus becomes an absence within historical memory itself: bones, photographs, lists, newspaper clippings, testimony and archival fragments become imperfect substitutes for bodies that can no longer be recovered. The novel repeatedly links the physical remains of the dead with the problem of naming, remembering them and holding a funeral for them: an explicit, literal instance of the ritual obligation to the dead discussed throughout Chapter 1, in which the failure to perform correct funerary rites leaves the deceased suspended as *Wŏnhon* and the living correspondingly unable to complete their mourning. The failure to locate or properly bury the dead means that mourning cannot be completed. In this sense, the title "We Do Not Part" expresses an alternative to conventional closure: the dead cannot simply be separated from the living because the past remains ethically present. Recent scholarship similarly reads the novel as an exploration of how the unacknowledged affect of Jeju 4.3 returns through dreams, snow, birds, wounded bodies, archives and mediated testimony (Kim S. 2023).

The Vietnam War broadens this structure of memory beyond Korea. Inseon has worked on a documentary concerning Vietnamese survivors of violence committed by South Korean soldiers during the war. South Korea sent around 320,000 troops to Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 in support of the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government. During the war, Korean forces were responsible for massacres and other forms of violence against Vietnamese civilians, including the killings of hundreds of civilians in Bình Hòa, Phong Nhị-Phong Nhất and Hà My. For decades, these events received little attention

in South Korea, where the war was largely remembered through the framework of anti-communist struggle and military achievement. More recently, survivor testimonies and activists have brought these events into public discussion (Dung 2023). The inclusion of Vietnam is therefore significant because it complicates the position of Koreans as victims of historical violence. The novel asks its readers to hold two positions simultaneously: Koreans can be victims of colonialism, partition, dictatorship and massacre, while they can also become perpetrators of violence elsewhere. Inseon's documentary work therefore creates a form of transnational ethical memory. Remembering Korean suffering cannot become an excuse for forgetting Korean responsibility. The memory of Jeju must be placed alongside the memories of Gwangju and Vietnam, producing a larger history of violence in which the categories of victim and perpetrator are not always nationally fixed.

This connection is particularly important when considering G_____, the unnamed city that haunts Kyungha. The city is strongly identifiable with Gwangju, the site of the 18th May 1980 uprising and subsequent military repression. Kyungha's earlier novel about the massacre has left her traumatised, demonstrating that witnessing does not necessarily require direct physical experience. She encounters Gwangju through photographs, testimony, research and writing, and nevertheless experiences its violence as something that enters her own body and imagination. The decision to leave the city unnamed is itself meaningful: rather than turning Gwangju into a fully explained historical object, Han allows it to remain a haunting presence. Critics have noted that the text deliberately withholds the names of the city, massacre and dictator, forcing readers to encounter history through traces rather than through straightforward exposition—just like Inseon and Kyungha do when approaching Jeongsim's history.

Gwangju, Jeju and Vietnam thus form a constellation of historical memories. They are separated by geography and chronology, but Han Kang links them through recurring structures of violence, silence, witnessing and mourning. Kyungha's experience of Gwangju prepares her for Jeju, while Inseon's documentary about Vietnam demonstrates that historical memory must cross national boundaries. The novel consequently resists the idea that each traumatic event can be remembered in isolation. Instead, memories accumulate and resonate with one another. The individual who encounters one history of violence becomes vulnerable to the memory of another. The novel's treatment of memory is therefore also a critique of forgetting and historical closure. Official history tends to organise events through dates, causes, perpetrators, victims and conclusions; Han Kang's narrative repeatedly frustrates such organisation. In "We Do Not Part", the past instead emerges through incomplete testimony and fragmentary traces. The archive itself is incomplete, particularly because decades of political repression prevented survivors from publicly narrating what had happened. The disappearance of records thus parallels, in the novel, the disappearance of bodies. Remembering consequently becomes an ethical task rather than a simple act of retrieval: Kyungha must approach the past without assuming that she can master it, reconstruct it in its entirety or represent it without remainder. Traumatic history does not appear as a stable body of facts waiting to be recovered from an archive; it returns through testimony, dreams, bodily sensations, photographs, objects, landscapes and stories transmitted between generations.

The novel's form mirrors this condition of historical memory. Rather than following a linear and fully resolved plot, it moves between different temporalities, perspectives and narrative registers, allowing fragments of Jeju's history and Gwangju's violence to bleed into one another. This formal fragmentation can be read alongside Jan Assmann's distinction, discussed by Erll, between "stored memory" and "functional memory" (Erll 2011, 35-37).

Whereas stored memory refers to the accumulated materials preserved within cultural institutions and archives, functional memory involves the selective and often urgent activation of the past in response to the needs of the present. Han's novel does not simply reject the archive in favour of lived memory; rather, it exposes the inadequacy of archival traces when they are separated from the people, bodies and acts of remembrance that give them meaning. Kyungha does not encounter a complete historical record that she can simply consult and reproduce. Instead, she assembles the past from scattered and sometimes unstable fragments: Inseon's mother's silences, surviving documents, photographs, objects and recurring dreams that collapse distinctions between different episodes of violence.

In this respect, the novel also recalls what Langer describes as "deep memory"¹²⁹: a form of remembrance in which traumatic experience resists the narrative integration and chronological order characteristic of ordinary autobiographical memory. Han's fragmented structure therefore does more than represent the difficulty of remembering trauma; it formally reproduces that difficulty. The reader is repeatedly denied the security of a single, chronological account and is instead required to encounter the past as the characters do—through gaps, repetitions, contradictions and sudden intrusions of memory. This does not mean that historiography is incapable of representing contradictory testimony or acknowledging uncertainty. Rather, the distinction lies in the different evidentiary obligations of historical and fictional discourse. Historiographical reconstruction must distinguish between sources, evaluate competing accounts, establish chronology where possible and identify the limits of available evidence. Fiction, by contrast, possesses what Erll calls "fictional privileges": it can bring together dream and testimony, the dead and the living, different historical moments and perspectives, without having to resolve their contradictions into a single authoritative account.

¹²⁹ See p. 97.

It is through these fictional privileges that “We Do Not Part” turns fragmentation into a mode of historical remembrance. By allowing Jeju and Gwangju to reverberate across one another, and by refusing to separate historical testimony from dream, bodily experience and inherited memory, Han suggests that traumatic history cannot always be adequately apprehended as a sequence of discrete and fully recoverable events. The novel’s disorientation is therefore not a failure of narrative clarity but a formal argument about the nature of traumatic memory itself. Its structure enacts the tension Erll identifies between history as the ordered reconstruction of the past and memory as an embodied, selective and continually reconstructed relationship with that past. In this sense, instead of simply telling its readers that historical trauma remains unresolved, the novel makes them experience something of that unresolvedness. Its fragmentation comes closest to the logic of the shamanic rite, which does not organise the dead into a single retrievable historical account but repeatedly brings the past into the present through ritual, embodiment and re-enactment. Reading the novel consequently becomes another form of such re-enactment: an encounter with a past that cannot be completely recovered, mastered or brought to closure, but that must nevertheless continue to be remembered.

The recurring images of snow, birds, blood, bodies, bones, fire and darkness reinforce this conception of memory. Snow appears to cover the landscape while simultaneously revealing its vulnerability: beneath the apparently pristine surface lies a history of death. Ama’s fragile body recalls the vulnerability of human life, while the bird’s uncertain status between life and death contributes to the novel’s destabilisation of temporal and ontological boundaries. Similarly, Inseon’s injured fingers transform bodily pain into a form of testimony. The body becomes an archive in which historical violence is repeatedly inscribed. Recent scholarship has particularly emphasised this relationship between corporeality, spatiality and historical trauma in the novel.

Ultimately, “We Do Not Part” does not offer historical memory as something that can be resolved through the discovery of a final truth or the recovery of every missing body. Instead, Han Kang presents remembrance as an ongoing ethical relationship between the living and the dead. Kyungha’s movement through Jeju becomes a movement into histories that precede her, while Inseon’s family history demonstrates how violence continues to affect descendants long after the original event. The novel’s refusal of a clear boundary between life and death is therefore inseparable from its refusal of a clear boundary between past and present. The dead remain present because the living continue to carry their unfinished histories.

The final image of Kyungha striking a match in the darkness crystallises this idea. The small flame does not erase the darkness or restore the dead; it simply prevents total disappearance. In this sense, the title “We Do Not Part” names the novel’s fundamental ethics of remembrance: to remember is not to master the past but to *refuse to abandon those whom history has attempted to erase*. Jeju, Bodo League, Gwangju and Vietnam become interconnected sites through which Han Kang examines the persistence of traumatic memory and the responsibility of the living to remain in relation to the dead. The novel ultimately transforms memory from an archive of the past into an ongoing practice of mourning, witnessing and care.

The novel’s structural device for accessing this buried family history is itself organised around possession and spirit-crossing rather than conventional flashback or exposition. Once Kyungha reaches Inseon’s isolated house on Jeju, the narrative’s boundary between the living and the dead progressively dissolves: in the novel’s second part, Kyungha encounters what she takes to be Inseon’s own spirit, and it is through this encounter—rather than through documents, interviews or historical research within the fiction itself—that she learns the tragic history of the family. Kim Jeeun’s (2008, as cited in Najbar-Miller 2025,

328) account of Korean shamanic funerary ritual identifies a specific practice, *paegarŭgi* (베가르기), in which the Shaman walks the length of a white cotton cloth and cuts through it with her own body, physically enacting the passage of a spirit out of this world; Han Kang's own filmed performance piece accompanying the novel restages precisely this image, with two women carrying a length of white cloth through snow-covered forest and shoreline, while in the novel itself the white cloth is displaced onto the thick, enveloping snow through which Kyungha struggles to reach Inseon's house (Kim J. 2008, cited in Najbar-Miller 2025). Kyungha's arduous and near-fatal journey through the blizzard to reach her friend is, on this reading, itself a ritual crossing and not simply a plot device generating narrative tension: it can be read as representing the Shaman's traversal into the space where the dead can be addressed.

The novel's closing image makes this ritual identification explicit. In the third and final part, Kyungha and Inseon together light a candle "at the bottom of the sea", addressing the drowned and buried dead of Jeju directly in a gesture that fuses the two women's individual acts of witness—Kyungha's writing, Inseon's filmmaking—into a single, shared rite performed on behalf of the dead they have each, separately and now together, spent their careers trying to reach. Han Kang's own account of the novel's genesis reinforces this reading: in her Nobel Lecture she reports that the entire project began not from research or intention but from an unbidden dream—very similar to the one Kyungha dreams—received passively in sleep, of black tree stumps and burial mounds being swept away by a rising sea—a dream she describes herself as obeying and not authoring, in a structure of creative compulsion closely resembling the involuntary visionary experience that precedes acceptance of the shamanic calling, discussed in relation to *shinbyŏng* in section 1.1¹³⁰.

What distinguishes "We Do Not Part" most sharply from "Human Acts", and what most directly serves the argument of this thesis, is its intergenerational

¹³⁰ See p. 23-26.

legacy of pain or, in other words, refusal to treat historical trauma as confined to a single generation or a single site of violence. The novel constructs an unbroken chain of transmitted suffering across three generations and multiple geographies: Jeongsim's own trauma on Jeju in 1948-49; the further, compounding loss of her brother in the Bodo League massacre during the Korean War in 1950; Inseon's own inherited, secondary trauma, absorbed across a childhood spent caring for a mother whose grief never resolved, and reactivated as an adult when she discovers newspaper photographs of human remains excavated from beneath Jeju's airport¹³¹; and finally, in the same generation, Inseon's own chosen professional confrontation with a distinct but structurally related atrocity, the Vietnam War violence her documentary investigates, alongside Kyungha's own prior confrontation with Gwangju. Read together, these four instances suggest that the novel is not simply commemorating one historical episode but modelling the broader argument of this thesis directly: that *Wŏnhon*, once produced by state violence, does not remain contained within the generation or the location of the original death, but propagates outward—through family, through inherited grief, through the deliberate professional vocations its survivors' descendants choose—until it is finally, and only provisionally, addressed through an act of ritual acknowledgment. In “We Do Not Part”, that acknowledgment takes the form of the novel itself: a shared candle, lit at the bottom of the sea, for victims separated by seventy years, three thousand miles, and four distinct atrocities, but joined, in Han Kang's telling, by a single, unbroken thread of unmourned death.

The theme of unmourned death and the intergenerational inheritance of trauma is established from the opening of the novel through Kyungha's haunting dream:

¹³¹ Another event which really took place.

*“Was this a graveyard? I wondered. Are these gravestones?
I walked past the torsos—treetops lopped off, exposed cross sections stippled
with snowflakes that resembled salt crystals; I passed the prostrating
barrows behind them. My feet stilled as I noticed the sensation of water
underfoot. That’s strange, I thought. Within moments the water was up to
my ankles. I looked back. What I saw astonished me: the far horizon
turned out to be the shoreline. And the sea was crashing in.”*
(Han K. 2021, 3-4)

Read against the historical material established in Chapter 2, this image gains a precision it would otherwise lack. Many victims of the Jeju massacre were never given proper burial: bodies were hidden in mass graves, dumped into the sea or simply never recovered¹³², and the truth of their deaths was suppressed for decades under threat of prosecution as communist sympathisers. The dream’s graves—indistinct, half-formed, threatened by an encroaching sea—can accordingly be read not as a generic image of mortality, but as a precise metaphor for this specific, historical, state-enforced erasure: graves that ought to serve as sites of mourning and recognition are instead on the verge of being physically obliterated, just as the historical record of the massacre itself was, for so long, submerged.

The dream’s central action—water rising until it reaches, and presumably will eventually cover, the graves entirely—extends this metaphor into the novel’s larger argument about the transmission of trauma across generations. The rising

¹³² These three circumstances preventing the bodies from being reunited with their families are all described in “We Do Not Part” and are all historically accurate (see Chapter 2.3, p. 80-87): bodies hidden in mass graves is linked to the bodies recently found under the runway in Jeju airport (described in Chapter 2, part II of “We Do No Part”), the bodies dumped in the sea are described in a testimony Inseon had found (described in Chapter 3, part II), while an example for a body which was not recovered is Jeongsim’s brother’s (Chapter 5, part II).

water suggests that violence, which has been denied or left unmourned, instead of simply disappearing with the passing of the generation that suffered it directly, it remained latent, submerged and liable to resurface elsewhere, whether in memory, in dream or, as the novel goes on to demonstrate through the figures of Jeongsim and Inseon discussed in the previous section¹³³, in the psychological inheritance of a subsequent generation. The dream thus compresses into a single image the intergenerational structure the rest of the novel will make explicit: what is not properly mourned by the first generation returns, in altered form, to the second.

It is on this basis—rather than merely because the novel concerns historical violence—that this opening dream can be read as establishing a specifically ritual, rather than only thematic, structure from the outset. The dream shares three features with the shamanic vision discussed in Chapter 1 as characteristic of *shinbyŏng*¹³⁴: it is received passively, in sleep, rather than composed or willed by the dreamer; it communicates its significance through bodily sensation (the cold, the water rising against the skin) rather than through explicit statement or reflection; and it concerns unnamed, faceless dead whose specific grievance the dreamer does not yet understand, but is nonetheless compelled to attend to. On this reading, Kyungha's dream therefore introduces the novel's themes, but also, and mainly, enacts, in miniature, the involuntary calling that this thesis has argued characterises Han Kang's own relationship to her material more broadly. The novel's opening can accordingly be read as a prelude to a *Ssitgim-kut*: before Kyungha performs any act of address on behalf of the dead, she must first, like a Shaman receiving the summons of *shinbyŏng*, be claimed by them.

¹³³ See p. 156-159.

¹³⁴ See p. 23-26.

Immediately following this description, Kyungha begins to recount the origins of the recurring dream, during which the city of G_____ is mentioned for the first time. The temporal connection between the dream and Kyungha's earlier work is particularly significant: the dream first appears in the summer of 2014, only a few months after the publication of her book on the G_____ massacre. Notably, 2014 is also the year in which "Human Acts" was published, establishing a significant temporal correspondence between the novel and the historical events that inform Kyungha's dream:

"The dream had come to me in the summer of 2014, a couple of months after the publication of my book about the massacre in G_____. Over the next four years, it had never occurred to me to question the dream's connection to that city."

(Han K. 2021, 5)

The passage therefore establishes an immediate and clear connection between the dream and the memory of the massacre. Kyungha's inability to question this connection for four years further suggests that the violence represented by the submerged graves is associated with G_____, which has remained present in her consciousness, even when it has not been consciously confronted. The dream thus becomes a medium through which suppressed or unresolved historical violence resurfaces, linking Kyungha's personal experience to the collective memory of political trauma.

Additionally, the presence of Han Kang's own experience in the novel mirrors that of "Human Acts", in which, as I have already described¹³⁵, the last chapter is presumably totally dedicated to the author's own connection with the trauma described in the novel.

¹³⁵ See p. 146-152.

“I started having nightmares in the winter of 2012, after I began researching the book I went on to write. Initially these were dreams of outright violence. Running from airborne troops, being bludgeoned on the shoulder, falling to the ground. I can’t recall the face of the uniformed man who kicked me in the flank as I lay sprawled on the ground and turned me over with his boots. What I do remember is the shudder that ran through me when he grabbed his gun with both hands and pushed the bayonet into my chest.”

(Han K. 2021, 13)

The passage shows how Kyungha is haunted by nightmares after beginning her research for the book. Importantly, the violence she experiences in her dreams closely recalls the forms of violence she has encountered through her research. Her nightmares can therefore be understood as expressions of personal fear, and as proof for how trauma can be more than strictly personal and can thus be transferred to other people, such as relatives or children. However, I argue, they mainly have to be interpreted as the psychological and bodily internalisation of the testimonies and historical accounts she has read. In other words, although the violence did not happen directly to Kyungha, her encounter with the victims’ experiences becomes so profound that she begins to experience their suffering as if it were her own. This creates a connection between Kyungha and the victims whose stories she is attempting to reconstruct: through her research, their previously experienced suffering is transformed into a present, embodied experience. This process can be related to the figure of the *Mansin*. As discussed in Chapter 1, the *Mansin* functions as a mediator between the living and the spirits of the dead, allowing the suffering and grievances of those who can no longer speak for themselves to be communicated to the living. Similarly, Kyungha becomes a medium through which the experiences of the victims can be brought into the present. Her nightmares are significant in this respect

because they suggest that the historical violence she has encountered does not remain distant or abstract: it possesses her psychologically and makes her experience, in an indirect way, the pain of those whose stories she has uncovered. If Kyungha is read as a reflection of Han Kang's own engagement with the historical trauma of Gwangju, this comparison can also be extended to the author herself. Han Kang, through her literary work, similarly gives form and voice to experiences that might otherwise remain silenced or forgotten. The figure of the *Mansin* therefore provides a useful link to the *Minjung* movement, too: like the *Mansin*, the writer can be understood as a mediator who brings the suffering and voices of marginalised or oppressed people into the public sphere. In this sense, Han Kang's writing manages, at the same time, to represent historical trauma and to become a means of transmitting and preserving the voices of those who experienced it.

"The nightmares, unsurprisingly, continued regardless. In retrospect it baffles me. Having decided to write about mass killings and torture, how could I have so naively—brazenly—hoped to soon shirk off the agony of it, to so easily be bereft of its traces?"

(Han K. 2021, 20)

In this passage, Kyungha retrospectively recognises that she had underestimated the psychological consequences of writing about mass killings and torture. Her initial assumption seems to have been that she could investigate such violence and subsequently "shirk off" its agony, maintaining a distance between herself and the suffering she was representing. However, the persistence of the nightmares demonstrates that such separation is impossible. The violence she encounters through her research leaves traces on her own body and psyche, making her experience the historical trauma she is attempting to represent rather than simply observe it from a distance.

This is significant for the comparison with the *Mansin* because it reinforces the idea of the writer as a mediator. Kyungha collects and reproduces the victims' stories and, at the same time and, I argue, more importantly, she becomes affected by them and, in a sense, allows their suffering to pass through her. Her inability to remain detached resembles the function of the *Mansin*, whose connection with the spirits allows their suffering and grievances to be experienced and communicated to the living. Thus, the nightmares can be interpreted as evidence of the process through which Kyungha becomes a medium for the memory of historical violence. This also supports the connection with the *Minjung* movement, insofar as the writer's role becomes one of transmitting the experiences of those whose suffering might otherwise remain unheard or forgotten.

*"I thought I'd black out from the pain,
I thought I'd rather black out than go on feeling it, but instead, I've no idea
why, I remembered your book.
The people in your book—no, the people who were actually there at the time.
No, not just the people who were there, but everyone who's ever suffered
similar fates regardless of place.
Hit with bullets,
hit with cudgels,
lives severed by blades.
How agonizing it must have been
when it hurts this much to have the tips of one's fingers sliced off.
Everyone who's ever met such violent death, everyone who's ever been pierced
or stabbed
to the point their breath itself was excised."*

(Han K. 2021, 59-60)

This passage further develops the connection between Kyungha's writing, the experience of suffering and the transmission of collective memory. Importantly, it is Inseon who speaks here. While experiencing intense physical pain, she recalls Kyungha's book and initially associates it with "the people" represented in it. She then immediately corrects herself: these are not merely fictional or literary figures, but "the people who were actually there at the time". Her reflection subsequently expands even further, from the specific victims represented in Kyungha's book to "everyone who's ever suffered similar fates regardless of place." Inseon's individual experience of pain therefore becomes connected to the suffering of historical victims and, ultimately, to a broader category of people subjected to violent death.

This passage is significant because it demonstrates that Kyungha's writing does much more than simply preserving the memory of particular historical events: it also allows the suffering of those who experienced them to become present to another person and to be connected with suffering beyond the specific historical context. Inseon's physical pain becomes a point of identification through which she can imagine the pain of others. The book therefore functions as a medium of transmission: the suffering of people who are absent, dead or historically distant is communicated to someone in the present, therefore this process can be, again, connected to the figure of the *Mansin*. As a mediator between the dead and the living, the *Mansin* enables the experiences, grievances and suffering of those who can no longer speak for themselves to reach the living. Similarly, Kyungha's writing creates a space through which the suffering of the victims can be transmitted across time and experienced by others. The passage is particularly important because it shows that this transmission does not end with Kyungha: the suffering moves from the historical victims, through Kyungha's writing, to Inseon, and is then expanded by Inseon into a recognition of the suffering of people beyond the original historical event. Kyungha therefore performs a function comparable to that of the *Mansin*, acting as a mediator

through whom suppressed or forgotten suffering can continue to speak to the living.

This also reinforces the connection with the *Minjung* movement. The movement's concern with giving visibility and voice to the experiences of ordinary and oppressed people can be related to the way Kyungha's writing preserves and transmits the experiences of victims. Her role is not simply that of an author representing an historical event; she becomes a mediator between those who suffered and those who encounter their suffering afterwards. Inseon's response demonstrates the ultimate effect of this mediation: the memory of specific victims is transformed into a broader recognition of shared human suffering.

"I sit up straight and dig inside my coat pocket. My hand brushes against a thin pack of gum. I had bought it in a rush at a convenience store in Gimpo Airport as my boarding time was drawing near. I'd popped a square of gum into my mouth as the plane was taking off, and now I push a second piece out through the blister-pack foil and start chewing. I can sense a migraine coming on like ice cracking in the distance. I have no idea what causes these headaches, which last ages and are accompanied by terrible abdominal spasms and a drop in blood pressure. Never knowing when one might begin, I've taken to carrying medicine most days, but since I more or less came straight here, I don't have any on me. However, once the prelude is over and the real symptoms start, any emergency prescription is useless. In my experience, gum is the only thing that helps in that critical moment right before a migraine begins in earnest. And once a migraine is underway, even the mildest juk does more harm than good as I can't keep anything down."

(Han K. 2021, 74-75)

The description of Kyungha's migraine introduces another important dimension to the relationship between historical trauma and the body. Just like Han Kang, she suffers from headaches; hers, however, are presented as recurring, unpredictable and resistant to ordinary medical treatment: she carries medicine with her, yet she knows that once the symptoms have fully developed, it is ineffective. The only thing that helps her during the critical moment preceding the migraine is the simple act of chewing gum. The lack of a clear physical cause, together with the severity and unpredictability of the symptoms, makes Kyungha's condition particularly significant when considered within the framework of *shinbyŏng*, or shamanic illness. As discussed in Chapter 1, once *shinbyŏng* affects an individual, there is no known remedy for it other than accepting one's fate and becoming a *Mansin*. This framework is particularly significant in Kyungha's case because, following the flight described in the passage, her journey to Jeju can be understood as more than a merely physical journey. As previously discussed, Kyungha eventually reaches Inseon's house after an arduous journey, after which she experiences fever and a worsening of her migraine before falling asleep. Significantly, when she wakes the following morning, her headache has disappeared. This disappearance can be interpreted as marking Kyungha's internal acceptance of the role she is about to assume: together with Inseon, she will confront the memories of the Gwangju and Jeju massacres, the Bodo League Massacres and the violence perpetrated by Korea in Vietnam. By undertaking this journey, Kyungha accepts the responsibility of bringing to light the trauma experienced by individuals and communities across different generations. Her physical symptoms can therefore once again be understood through the framework of *shinbyŏng*: rather than being resolved through medical treatment, they subside once she accepts the role that has been imposed upon her, namely that of confronting, transmitting and bearing witness to the suffering of others.

Rather than interpreting Kyungha's migraines simply as a medical condition, I argue they could also be read as part of the novel's broader representation of suffering that manifests through the body. This is particularly relevant because Kyungha's physical symptoms develop alongside her engagement with traumatic historical material. Her body consequently becomes another site through which experiences that cannot easily be articulated are manifested. In this sense, her illness can be understood as a form of embodied response: historical and emotional suffering exceeds the purely intellectual level and becomes physically experienced.

This interpretation can also be extended to Han Kang. If Kyungha is read as reflecting aspects of Han Kang's own experience of researching and writing about historical violence, Kyungha's bodily suffering can be understood as paralleling the author's own physical and psychological response to confronting traumatic history. The comparison with *shinbyŏng* is therefore useful partially because it can prove that either Kyungha or Han Kang literally suffers from *shinbyŏng*, but also because the concept provides a framework for understanding how unprocessed or inherited suffering can manifest physically. The body becomes a medium through which experiences that cannot otherwise be fully expressed make themselves present.

"She told me about how, when she was young, soldiers and police had murdered everyone in her village. My mom had been in her last year of elementary school and my aunt was seventeen. The two of them had been away on an errand at a distant cousin's house, which was how they managed to avoid the same fate. The next day, having heard the news, the sisters returned to the village and wandered the grounds of the elementary school all afternoon. Searching for the bodies of their father and mother, their older brother and eight-year-old sister. They looked over the bodies that had fallen every which way on top of one another and found that,

overnight, a thin layer of snow had covered and frozen upon each face. They couldn't tell anyone apart because of the snow, and since my aunt "couldn't bring herself to brush it away with her bare hands, she used a handkerchief to wipe each face clean. I'll wipe them, she told my mom, and you get a good look at them. She didn't want her little sister touching dead people. But something about the words "get a good look at them" so terrified my mom that all she could do was grab her sister's sleeve, shut her eyes tight, and cling to her as they walked. Whenever my aunt said, Look at them, take a good look and tell me what you see, my mom reluctantly opened her eyes. That day, she came to understand something clearly. That when people died, their bodies went cold. Snow remained on their cheeks, and a thin layer of bloody ice set over their faces."

(Han K. 2021, 93-94)

This passage introduces another important aspect, namely Inseon's relationship with historical trauma: the responsibility of witnessing and transmitting the memory of the dead. The aunt's repeated insistence that her younger sister (Jeongsim) "look at them" is particularly significant. Faced with the bodies of their murdered family members, the sisters are placed in the position of witnesses. Although Jeongsim initially tries to avoid looking, her sister forces her to confront what has happened. The command to "take a good look and tell me what you see" therefore suggests that seeing the dead is not only an act of grief but also an act of remembrance. The victims can no longer speak for themselves, so those who survive must see, remember and eventually communicate what happened to them.

The passage also emphasises the importance of the body as evidence of violence. Jeongsim's realisation that "when people died, their bodies went cold" transforms the abstract fact of death into a physical reality that she will carry with her. The bodies covered by snow become a lasting image of the massacre,

demonstrating how historical violence survives through the memories and sensory impressions of those who witnessed its aftermath.

This chain of witnessing is particularly relevant to Inseon: the story and its consequent trauma passes from the murdered family members to the aunt and mother, and from them to Inseon, who subsequently narrates it to Kyungha. Inseon, in short, therefore becomes a second-generation witness: she did not directly experience the massacre, but she receives the testimony of those who did and assumes the responsibility of transmitting it further. Her writing consequently functions as a means through which the dead continue to be remembered and their suffering remains present.

This process can again be understood through the figure of the *Mansin*, who, as already stated, is able to mediate between the dead and the living, allowing those who can no longer speak to communicate their suffering and grievances. Similarly, Inseon, like Kyungha, occupies a mediating position between the victims whose experiences she has inherited through testimony and the readers who encounter those experiences through her writing. Since Han Kang is the author inventing and transmitting this story to the readers, she too can be seen as a *Mansin*. The passage therefore helps clarify that her role is not simply to represent the past, but to ensure that the voices and experiences of the dead are not erased. This also strengthens the connection to the *Minjung* movement, since the act of preserving and communicating the suffering of people who have been subjected to political violence can be understood as an act of giving visibility and voice to those whose experiences have been marginalised or suppressed.

The relation between body and historical trauma is central and is further developed in a number of passages. For example:

“I think my mum brought it up that night in the grip of some sort of fervour. Or perhaps a chill—her jaw kept clattering like she was cold. I was at a loss, seeing her in such a different state from the quiet, sad grandmother-type I thought I knew so well. It wasn’t clear in that moment if this sudden change had been brought on by the horror from decades earlier that she was relaying to her daughter for the first time, or by the shock of the accident that had almost robbed her of her child. Remarkably, though, she didn’t say a word about my running away, not then and not after. She didn’t blame me, and she didn’t ask why. Just as she never spoke about how two young sisters managed to find their dead family and see to their burial, or what perseverance and good fortune was required for them to survive afterward. She only spoke about the snow. As if there were a causal link between the unmelting snow she had seen decades before in reality and the snow on my face in her recent dream, and this link was the single most terrifying logic running through her life.

Then my mom said: The thing is, every time it snows, it comes back. I try not to think about it, but it keeps coming back. So in my dream that night, to see your face whited out by snow...as soon as I opened my eyes to the dawn, I thought, my baby’s dead. Aieee, all I could think was that you were dead’.”

(Han K. 2021, 95-96)

This passage, as already stated, develops the relationship between traumatic memory and the body, while also introducing the idea that trauma can be transmitted across generations. Inseon’s mother recalls the massacre of her family decades earlier, but her recollection is accompanied by a physical reaction: her jaw “kept clattering like she was cold”. The distinction between “fervour” and “chill” is significant because it renders the memory as something physically

experienced rather than merely narrated. The traumatic event therefore continues to affect her body long after the original violence has ended.

The most significant element of the passage, however, is the connection between the snow covering the bodies of her family members and the snow covering Kyungha's face in her dream. The mother herself perceives this connection as the "single most terrifying logic" running through her life. The snow consequently becomes a recurring image through which past and present are connected: although the massacre occurred decades earlier, it repeatedly returns through her memories and dreams and is ultimately projected onto her daughter. Her statement that "every time it snows, it comes back" emphasises the involuntary nature of this return. The past cannot be consciously suppressed because it continues to reappear through sensory experience and dreams. Jeongsim's suffering is thus not presented as something that can simply be resolved by rationally suppressing or forgetting the traumatic event. Instead, the unresolved experience repeatedly manifests itself through physical and psychological symptoms. In this sense, her experience illustrates how trauma may become embodied and continue to demand recognition, which in this case is given to it thanks to Han Kang's narration. The snow functions almost as a trigger through which the past makes itself present again, suggesting that the memory of violence remains active within the body even when the conscious mind attempts to repress it.

Furthermore, the passage is particularly relevant to the idea of inherited or intergenerational trauma. Inseon did not experience the massacre herself, yet she becomes implicated in her mother's traumatic memory through the dream and its association with the snow. The mother's past therefore enters the daughter's present, demonstrating how historical violence can extend beyond those who directly experienced it. This reinforces the broader pattern established throughout the novel: trauma is transmitted from one person to another and

from one generation to the next, rather than remaining confined to the original victims.

This process can also be related to Inseon's role as a *Mansin*-like mediator. Just as the *Mansin* mediates between the dead and the living, Inseon occupies a position between past and present, receiving experiences of violence that she did not personally witness and bringing them into the present through her writing. The passage therefore strengthens the connection between Han Kang, her characters and *Musok*: Han Kang, as stated for the other passages, manages to air the grievances and trauma of the dead through literature, and in this passage it's Inseon who makes this possible: thanks to her, specific trauma is addressed and suffering is transmitted and communicated. Inseon's memory and Kyungha's writing, described in the preceding sections¹³⁶, consequently become two interconnected sites through which the trauma of previous generations can return and be made visible.

Additionally, Inseon too has an instrument she uses to transmit the memory of the dead: if Kyungha uses the novel, Inseon uses cinematography as her preferred technique. In "We Do Not Part", the focus is particularly on a documentary she had shot in Vietnam about the violence perpetrated by Korean soldiers to the populace:

"Once she had a rough cut, Inseon invited a few close acquaintances to a pre-release screening. In this version the rainstorm scene followed shots of the woman's daily life, the woman who had looked at the camera and answered, All right. I'll tell you. We saw her walk to the yard to wash her kettle at the water pump. She pumped the handle a few times to get the water flowing, then rinsed the kettle inside and out. On the fourth rinse, we heard her low voice say as subtitles appeared on screen, 'That night the

¹³⁶ See p. 156-158.

soldiers came'. Before her account was over, the long-take scene of falling rain began. The grass-thatched roofs were drenched. The brass water pump gleamed as it deflected the pelting raindrops. The overgrown hedge of wild jasmine shook. The chicken coop was awash with muddy water and flapping wings. Women appeared in dripping, rolled-up cotton trousers, bamboo baskets over their heads. The yard, choppy with rainwater. The round heads of chicks, wobbling like wet balls of wool."

(Han K. 2021, 120)

This passage further develops the idea of testimony as a form of mediation between past violence and the present. Inseon's film initially presents the woman through the ordinary details of her everyday life: she walks into the yard, pumps water and washes her kettle. These mundane images establish her as an ordinary individual before her testimony suddenly introduces the violence of the past: "That night the soldiers came". The transition is significant because it shows how historical trauma exists alongside everyday life rather than remaining confined to a distant past. The woman's ordinary existence is interrupted by the memory of violence and the film similarly interrupts its representation of everyday life with the testimony of the massacre.

The subsequent long take of the rainstorm is particularly significant. Rather than illustrating the violence directly, Inseon allows the landscape to become a visual medium through which the woman's testimony can be experienced. The rain saturates the familiar surroundings—the roofs, water pump, hedge, chicken coop and yard—transforming an ordinary domestic space into one charged with the memory of violence. The absence of an explicit representation of the massacre does not make the violence less present; instead, the landscape becomes a space in which the testimony continues to resonate. In this way, the film makes visible and sensorially present an event that can no longer be directly witnessed. The same thing that happened to Jeongsim and her sister, who admit of

thinking to the brutal massacre every time it snowed, now is shown to be happening to the Vietnamese woman too. This time, however, Koreans are not the victims, but the perpetrators: this fact complicates Koreans' position as merely victims, but at the same time is coherent with Han Kang's choice to represent all of those included in the *Minjung* movement.

Moreover, this process can again be connected to the role of the *Mansin* as a mediator, as here Han Kang, through Inseon's filmmaking, allows the experiences of those who are absent or dead to become present to the living, giving expression to suffering that can no longer be communicated directly by its victims: Inseon does not reproduce the massacre itself, but creates a medium through which the testimony of the survivor can reach an audience, just like the *Mansin* does not reproduce trauma or grievances, but instead transmits them to the relatives and, more generally, to the public, through her body. The film therefore becomes a space of mediation between the historical event, the surviving witness, and those who did not experience the violence themselves. The artistic act here surely becomes a representation of violence, but it can also be seen an act of witnessing and remembrance.

The passage also reinforces the connection between Kyungha and Inseon. Kyungha uses literature to transmit the experiences of victims and survivors, while Inseon uses film to perform a similar act of mediation. Both artistic forms therefore become means of preserving memories that might otherwise disappear.

The relationship between Inseon and Kyungha, as well as a clear representation of the connection between Kyungha and the victims of historical violence and a description of the efficiency of Inseon's transmission of trauma and memory is further explored in another passage:

"Doesn't water circulate endlessly and never disappear? If that's true, then the snowflakes Inseon grew up seeing could be the same ones falling on my

face at this moment. I am reminded of the people Inseon's mother described, the ones in the schoolyard, and release my arms from around my knees. I wipe the snow from my numbed nose and eyelid. Who's to say the snow dusting my hands now isn't the same snow that had gathered on their faces?"

(Han K. 2021, 150)

Kyungha begins by reflecting on the circulation of water and snow, wondering whether the snowflakes falling on her body might be the same ones that fell on the faces of the people whose bodies Inseon's mother had described. The question, "Who's to say the snow dusting my hands now isn't the same snow that had gathered on their faces?", collapses the temporal distance between the present and the historical past. The snow that once covered the bodies of the victims is imagined as physically returning to Kyungha, allowing her to experience a material connection with people whom she never personally encountered.

The natural cycle of water therefore becomes a metaphor for the persistence and transmission of traumatic memory. Although the victims have died and decades have passed, the snow has not simply disappeared: it has become part of a continuous cycle through which the past can return to the present. Kyungha consequently does not perceive history as something fixed in the past, but as something that continues to circulate and affect the living. This is particularly significant because she physically removes the snow from her own face immediately after thinking of the victims. Her body thus becomes the point at which the present and the past meet.

This passage can thus be connected to the figure of the *Mansin* in two ways; first of all, it illustrates how Inseon, as a *Mansin*, succeeded in transmitting memory and trauma; secondly, it shows the dissolution of the boundary between the living and the dead. The *Mansin* occupies an intermediary position

between these two realms, allowing the voices and suffering of the dead to reach the living. Similarly, Kyungha experiences a moment in which the distance between herself and the dead becomes almost physically imperceptible. The snow serves as the medium through which this connection is established: it has touched the dead in the past and now touches Kyungha in the present. She therefore becomes more than an observer of historical suffering; she becomes a living body through which the memory of the dead is experienced and brought into the present. The circulation of the snow thus becomes analogous to the circulation of memory: just as water does not disappear but continually changes form, the memory of historical violence can be transmitted from one person and generation to another. Literature consequently becomes a means through which the experiences of marginalised victims continue to be present and cannot be erased from collective memory.

“The caves on this island have narrow mouths. Barely wide enough for one person to squeeze through. Roll up a rock outside and they’re impossible to find, but as you go deeper the caves open up. There’s one cavern where folk from an entire village were able to hide out in the winter of ’48.”

(Han K. 2021, 178)

The description of the caves reflect that of the real caves young boys hid into during the Massacre, but it also introduces another important metaphor for the relationship between historical violence, concealment and memory. Their narrow entrances make them “impossible to find” once a rock is placed over them, while their interiors open into spaces large enough to shelter an entire village. The physical structure of the caves therefore reflects the way in which historical experiences can become hidden from view: what appears insignificant or invisible from the outside may contain the traces of an entire community and its suffering.

The statement that “folk from an entire village” were able to hide inside one of these caves also emphasises the collective dimension of the violence. The cave is not merely a hiding place for an individual but a space in which an entire community sought refuge. At the same time, its concealment creates an association with the suppression of their experiences. The people who entered the cave disappeared from the visible world, and the history of their suffering risks undergoing a similar process of disappearance if it is not remembered and transmitted. This interpretation thus strengthens the connection with the *Minjung* movement. The cave contains the history of an entire community whose experiences risk remaining outside dominant historical narratives. By entering and representing these hidden spaces, Kyungha participates in a process of recovering marginalised voices and making suppressed histories visible. The movement from the concealed interior of the cave toward literary representation therefore parallels the broader movement from silence to testimony and from historical marginalisation to collective remembrance.

“What are we calling it? Our project.

She turned to me, smiling as she poured bottled water into the kettle. I realized I’d never asked, she said.

‘We Do Not Part’, I answered.

Approaching me with the kettle and two mugs in her hands, Inseon echoed the words. ‘We Do Not Part.’”

(Han K. 2021, 216)

The naming of the project provides a concise formulation of one of the novel’s central ideas: “We Do Not Part”. The repetition of the title by both Kyungha and Inseon gives it the quality of a shared declaration, suggesting that the project they are undertaking is based on a refusal of separation. This refusal can be understood on several levels. At the most immediate level, it refers to the

relationship between Kyungha and Inseon; however, in the broader context of the novel, the “we” can also be understood as encompassing the relationship between the living and the dead and between the present and the historical past. This interpretation is particularly significant when considered alongside the novel’s recurring representations of traumatic memory. Throughout the narrative, the boundaries separating past from present repeatedly become unstable: historical violence returns through dreams, physical symptoms, testimony and recurring images such as snow. The declaration “We Do Not Part” therefore suggests that the dead cannot simply be separated from the living by the passage of time. Their experiences remain present through memory and continue to affect subsequent generations. To remember the victims is, in this sense, to refuse the separation that death and historical distance might otherwise impose. The subject that makes this possible is clearly the *Mansin*: she occupies an intermediary position between the living and the dead, establishing communication between two realms that would otherwise remain separated. Kyungha and Inseon similarly refuse this separation by entering into contact with the memories and experiences of those who suffered before them. Through their research, filmmaking and writing, all encompassed in Han Kang’s writing, the voices of the dead are carried into the present, allowing them to remain connected to those who are still alive. “We Do Not Part” can therefore be read as expressing the principle underlying her role as mediator: the dead and their suffering must not be separated from the living through forgetting.

The title can also be connected with the *Minjung* movement: if *Minjung* literature seeks to preserve and give voice to experiences that have been marginalised or suppressed by dominant historical narratives, then refusing to “part” from the dead becomes an ethical and political act. Remembering those who were subjected to violence prevents their experiences from disappearing from collective consciousness. Kyungha and Inseon’s artistic project, as well as Han Kang’s, therefore becomes a form of resistance to historical erasure: their work

insists that the victims remain part of the present and that their suffering continues to be acknowledged by subsequent generations.

In this sense, “We Do Not Part” can be understood as more than the title of a project. It expresses the novel’s broader understanding of memory itself. The past does not disappear but continues to circulate through bodies, stories, images, places and artistic works. The role of the writer, like that of the *Mansin*, is consequently not to allow the dead to disappear into the past, but to maintain the connection between those who suffered and those who remain to remember them.

“Sometimes...it feels like there’s some other presence here, Inseon said, looking up from the knotted beads of wax. Like there’s something that stays behind after Ami’s come and gone.

Now a question followed, reaching me across the stillness.

Do you know what I mean?

As Inseon leaned forward, her shadow rippled across the ceiling. Sensing its movement, how it swelled and settled in time with her breathing, I answered with a question. How long have you felt that way?

I saw the familiar crease of her forehead, her usual look of concentration. Was she counting in months or in years? The clear melted wax pooled beneath the flame suddenly overflowed. It whitened instantly and formed new nodes down the pillar.

*

Ever since I saw the bones, Inseon answered. On the plane coming back from Manchuria.

This was unexpected. I’d thought she would say after Ami’s death or after the loss of her mother. If it had started when she was filming in

Manchuria, that was already ten years ago. Inseon was still living in Huam-dong back then.

That was the autumn they unearthed the remains, Inseon said.

Where? I asked.

She lowered her voice. Jeju Airport, she said. Underneath the runway.

I quietly met her eyes, which seemed to be asking if I remembered the event. I had forgotten the exact year, but I remembered seeing that article. And I remembered the photo of the pit in the ground, cordoned off with caution tape.

I'd grabbed a newspaper as I boarded the plane, she said, and there at the bottom of the front page was a photograph from the excavation site.

(Han K. 2021, 235-236)

And:

All afternoon, I read about how from mid November of 1948, the uplands of Jeju burned for three months and upward of thirty thousand civilians were slaughtered. By the spring of 1949, when the scorched-earth policy was temporarily abandoned after the state failed to find the whereabouts of the roughly one hundred guerrillas, an estimated twenty thousand civilians were hiding out in Hallasan, mostly with their kin. They had judged it safer to brave starvation and the cold than risk facing summary executions along the shores. The commander who had been appointed to the island in March announced plans to sweep through Hallasan to eradicate all commie guerrillas and leaflet-bombed the island to flush civilians out to the coast for the efficiency of their operations. Archive photos showed rows of emaciated men and women walking down slopes, shielding children and elders with their bodies even as they held up branches tied with white cloth, an entreaty to the soldiers not to shoot.”

(Han K. 2021, 299-300)

These passages are particularly significant because they establish the moment in which Inseon first becomes conscious of a presence that remains after the dead are physically gone. She explains that she has felt “some other presence” ever since she encountered the bones discovered beneath Jeju Airport. The temporal connection is crucial: her perception of this presence begins not simply after a personal loss such as Ami’s death or her mother’s death, but after she encounters the material remains of victims of historical violence. The bones therefore function as a physical trace of people who are no longer present but whose existence and suffering continue to demand recognition.

The discovery of the remains also transforms Inseon’s relationship with the historical past. She first encounters the massacre through a photograph and a newspaper article, but subsequently spends the afternoon reading about the violence committed on Jeju. The progression from seeing the bones, to encountering their photographic representation, to researching the historical circumstances surrounding their deaths illustrates a process of mediation similar to Kyungha’s. A physical trace of the dead prompts an attempt to recover the circumstances of their lives and deaths. Historical research thus becomes a means of responding to the presence that Inseon feels but cannot directly communicate with.

This passage also emphasises the collective scale of the violence. The description of tens of thousands of civilians being killed and of thousands more hiding in Hallasan, as described in Chapter 2.3, transforms the bones from an isolated archaeological discovery into evidence of a much larger historical catastrophe. The archival photographs further reinforce this process by giving visible form to people who would otherwise remain anonymous. The image of civilians descending the mountain while protecting children and elders and holding branches tied with white cloth is particularly significant because it restores

individuality and vulnerability to people who might otherwise be reduced to historical statistics.

This is where the passage becomes particularly relevant to the *Minjung* framework. Inseon's research moves from an apparently anonymous historical event toward the recovery of the experiences of ordinary civilians. By investigating the remains and representing the people who suffered, she participates in the process of bringing marginalised and suppressed experiences into visibility. Her artistic practice therefore performs a function comparable to the political and cultural work associated with *Minjung*: it challenges historical erasure by insisting that the suffering of ordinary people must be remembered.

The passage also parallels Kyungha's trajectory. Both women encounter historical violence through traces left by the dead; both respond by investigating what happened; and both transform what they discover into artistic projects. Their experiences suggest that artistic creation in the novel functions as a form of witnessing. The dead cannot directly tell their stories, but their bodies, photographs, testimonies and historical traces remain. The writer or filmmaker becomes the mediator who gathers these fragments and allows them to speak again to the living.

"In the end, my mum failed.

Inseon's voice has grown so quiet, I feel as if she's somewhere far away.

She never recovered his bones. Not a single one.

(Han K. 2021, 329)

The brief statement that "She never recovered his bones. Not a single one" emphasises the incompleteness of the process of recovering the dead. Jeongsim's attempt to find and recover the remains ultimately fails, leaving her without the physical evidence that could provide a sense of closure.

This absence is significant because, throughout the novel, physical remains function as important traces through which the dead can be encountered by the living. Here, however, even those traces are missing. The impossibility of recovering the bones consequently makes the work of memory and testimony even more important. When the body cannot be recovered, the story becomes one of the few remaining means through which the person's existence and suffering can be preserved. In this sense, the failure to recover the bones does not mean that the dead disappear completely; rather, their absence creates an obligation for those who remain to remember and transmit what happened.

The passage especially reinforces the novel's connection to *Minjung*. The failure to recover the victim's bones represents not only an individual loss but the broader historical difficulty of recovering the experiences of people whose deaths have been marginalised, forgotten or excluded from official memory. By returning to these incomplete stories, Han Kang's writing challenges that disappearance. Literature cannot undo the violence or restore what has been physically lost, but it can preserve the existence of those who were denied a complete burial, recognition, or historical remembrance. The act of remembering therefore becomes a form of resistance to erasure.

How much further into these depths can we go? Is this the silence that lies below the ocean in my dream?

'Beneath the tidal waves that rose up to my knees.

Leagues below the hollowed-out graves dotting the plain.'"

(Han K. 2021, 329)

The final passage can be read as a culmination of Kyungha's encounter with historical trauma. Her question, "How much further into these depths can we go?", transforms the physical imagery of the ocean into a metaphor for the depth of the suffering she has been attempting to uncover. The "depths"

therefore refer not only to the literal space beneath the sea, but also to the layers of violence, memory and trauma buried beneath the surface of the present. Kyungha's question also suggests that there may be limits to how deeply the living can enter into an experience that belongs to the dead.

The connection between the ocean and the graves is particularly significant. Kyungha asks whether the silence beneath the ocean is the same silence found "leagues below" the graves scattered across the landscape. The two spaces are consequently brought together: the ocean conceals its depths beneath the surface, while the graves conceal the bodies and histories of those who were killed. In both cases, what lies beneath is inaccessible to ordinary vision. The silence therefore becomes more than an absence of sound; it represents the voices of those who can no longer speak and the histories that have been buried beneath the visible present.

This imagery can be connected to the role of the *Mansin* as a mediator between the living and the dead. The dead occupy a realm that is inaccessible to the living, just as the depths beneath the ocean and the graves cannot be directly seen from the surface. The *Mansin* provides a means of crossing this boundary by allowing what belongs to the realm of the dead to reach the living. Han Kang, through Kyungha, Inseon and Jeongsim, performs a comparable function throughout the novel: she repeatedly descends into the "depths" of historical memory, encounters the traces and testimonies of the dead and brings what she discovers back into the present through her writing. Her role is therefore not to eliminate the silence surrounding the dead, which would be impossible, but to approach it and make its existence perceptible.

The passage also provides an important qualification to the idea of the writer as a *Mansin*. Kyungha asks how far "we" can go into these depths, acknowledging that there may be an irreducible distance between those who suffered and those who come afterwards. The writer cannot completely reproduce the experience of the victims or speak in their place. Instead, she can approach their silence,

listen to the traces they have left behind, and transmit what can be recovered to subsequent generations. This makes her mediation an ethical rather than omniscient act: she does not claim to possess the victims' experience, but refuses to allow their silence to become equivalent to forgetting.

In this sense, the passage brings together the central elements of the novel's representation of historical trauma. The dead are buried, their stories are partially hidden, and their suffering risks disappearing into silence; yet their memories continue to surface through testimony, bodily experience, dreams, images, landscapes, and artistic representation. Kyungha's movement into these "depths" can therefore be understood as the movement of the writer toward suppressed historical memory. Through this process, literature becomes a form of mediation between the buried past and the living present.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to ask what it might mean to call Han Kang a Shaman of the *Minjung*—a claim that, stated baldly at the outset, risks sounding more like a striking metaphor than a serious argument. Over the course of three chapters, I have tried to show that the claim can be made to bear real analytical weight: not as a decorative comparison between a Nobel laureate and a stigmatised folk practitioner, but as a precise, structural correspondence between two figures who occupy, for related reasons, a similar position in relation to the unresolved dead.

Chapter 1 established the theoretical vocabulary this correspondence depends upon. The *Mansin*, I argued, surely performs a religious service, but above all she mediates between the living and a specific category of the dead—the *Wŏnhon*, the restless, wandering spirit produced by violent, unjust or improperly mourned death—through ritual practices whose efficacy depends on repetition, embodiment and voice rather than on documentary record. Crucially, the *Mansin*'s authority to perform this mediation was shown to be inseparable from her own social marginality: a woman positioned, historically and to this day, among the stigmatised and the economically precarious, whose vocation is as likely to begin in affliction as in privilege. Following Lewis' account of possession as a strategy available to the socially powerless, and Kendall's insistence that this marginal position does not diminish the resulting practice but constitutes it, this thesis argued that the *Mansin* speaks for the excluded dead in part because she herself inhabits a position of exclusion among the living—and that the Shaman's own historical stigmatisation and later, uneven rehabilitation as a symbol of authentic national culture are, in Kendall's phrase, flip sides of a single coin, neither fully honouring the practice they claim either to condemn or to celebrate.

Chapter 2 grounded this theoretical framework in the specific historical events that make it more than an abstract anthropological claim. The Gwangju Uprising and the Jeju Massacre, together with the Bodo League killings that extended Jeju's violence into the wider peninsula, were shown to have produced exactly the collective, politically constituted form of *Wŏnhon* that Chapter 1's theoretical apparatus anticipated: mass deaths compounded, in both cases, by decades of active state denial that prevented the ordinary work of mourning from taking place at all. What this chapter demonstrated, and what proved decisive for the argument as a whole, is that the eventual, partial resolution of this denial did not arrive from the state alone, nor emerge in a single, clean transition. Long before either massacre received official acknowledgment—truth commissions, presidential apologies, national memorial days—ritual mourning, testimony, and *Minjung* cultural production had already been doing the work that official recognition would only later, and unevenly, ratify. Recognition, I argued, first entered through unofficial channels and was only belatedly absorbed by the state; the Shaman, quite literally, performed the labour of memory that the state, for reasons of its own political survival, had refused to perform.

It is this historical argument that licenses the literary claim developed in Chapter 3. If ritual mourning and historical recognition are not sequential but convergent processes—if giving voice to the unjustly dead is, at the collective level, indistinguishable from the work of historical justice—then a novelist who takes on this same task inherits, whether she intends to or not, something of the Shaman's traditional office. Han Kang's own account of her practice, examined through her Nobel Lecture, offered a striking, largely unprompted confirmation of this correspondence: an affliction that recurs alongside, and seemingly as the price of, her vocation; a compulsion to write that overrides her own stated intentions; a creative origin received passively, in dream, rather than authored; a

ritual site that must be revisited bodily, again and again; and, most explicitly, her own description of lending her body and senses to the dead rather than merely representing them from without. The close readings of “Human Acts” and “We Do Not Part” that followed traced this correspondence into the texts themselves: Jeong-dae’s spirit rising from the pile of unclaimed dead once Han Kang has finally given him voice; Kyungha’s opening dream of a submerged graveyard, received without comprehension and only fully understood in the novel’s final pages as the specific, unresolved absence of a single unrecovered body.

Taken together, these two chapters suggest a thesis stronger than the sum of its parts. Han Kang can be called a Shaman of the *Minjung* not because the comparison is evocative, but because both perform, in different registers and through different technologies, structurally the same operation: they take on, in their own bodies or in their own prose, the unresolved grief of those who cannot speak for themselves, and they do so from a position that is itself marked by suffering, marginality or affliction, rather than from a position of documentary distance or institutional authority. Where the *Mansin* lends her body to a spirit for the duration of a *kut*, Han Kang, by her own account, lends her body and senses to the dead of Gwangju and Jeju for the duration of a novel—and, I argued, does not stop at any single novel, but returns to the same unfinished grief across her body of work, in a structure of repetition that mirrors the Shaman’s own understanding that an unresolved death cannot be addressed once and set aside. Additionally, by doing so both the *Mansin* and Han Kang do not stop at giving voice to the oppressed, the dead and the *Wŏnhon*: rather, they also help relieving the pain, grief and remorse of those who survived those massacres and those who carry the trauma of having witnessed them directly or indirectly.

This argument carries two further implications beyond the immediate case of Han Kang.

First, it suggests a renewed way of approaching Korean Shamanism itself—not as a superstition to be explained away, nor merely as a heritage object to be nostalgically preserved, but as a living technology of mourning whose logic continues to operate, often unrecognised, in ostensibly secular cultural production. If a novelist working in one of the most internationally celebrated literary idioms of the twenty-first century can be shown to reproduce, largely independently and evidently without deliberate imitation, the structural features of a stigmatised folk practice, this should prompt some reconsideration of the hierarchy that places “literature” above “superstition” in the first place.

Second, it suggests that the questions I have posed of Han Kang’s work—how does a community keep its dead from disappearing; what obligation does the living generation owe to grief it did not itself experience directly; can an act of representation ever discharge, rather than merely defer, a debt owed to the unjustly dead—are not questions confined to Korea, or to Shamanism, or even to literature narrowly defined. They are, I have argued, ethical questions that any society formed by unacknowledged historical violence must eventually confront, in whatever cultural vocabulary happens to be available to it.

It is appropriate, in closing, to return to the title Han Kang herself gave to the novel most centrally concerned with mourning, memory and the refusal of closure. “We Do Not Part” is, on the reading I have strived to develop in this work, not only the title of a book but, rather, a statement of method: an insistence that the proper response to historical violence is neither silence nor a single, completed act of commemoration, but a sustained, repeated and necessarily unfinished fidelity to the dead. In this work, I have attempted to practise something of the same fidelity—tracing, across anthropology, history and literary criticism, the many forms this fidelity has taken in Korea across the

twentieth and twenty-first centuries. If I have succeeded, I will have shown that Han Kang's fiction does not simply describe the work of the *Mansin* from the outside, but continues it: giving voice, novel after novel, to grievances that a violent history left unspoken, and refusing, in her own words and in her own practice, to bid them farewell.

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