

A Study of East Asian Ghost Stories and Healing in Bora Chung's *Midnight Timestable*

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Abstract: While mainstream science fiction (SF) often prioritizes techno-scientific speculation, ghost stories have long been marginalized as a subgenre confined to superstition and the grotesque. This study argues that contemporary East Asian SF writers, such as Korean writer Bora Chung in *Midnight Timestable*, reclaim the ethical significance of ghost stories as a distinctive literary genre. Specifically, this paper contends that Chung reconceives East Asian ghost stories not merely as a trope of vengeance but as a framework for ethical healing that challenges the dehumanizing logic of capitalist rationality and the structural oppression it generates. By using the East Asian philosophical imagination, Chung constructs an alternative fictional world that integrates rational thoughts with ethical reflection, presenting this integration as a path towards healing amid contemporary predicaments.

Keywords: East Asian ghost stories; *Midnight Timestable*; the Tree of Life; healing

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标题：郑宝拉《午夜时刻表》中东亚鬼故事书写与治愈叙事研究

内容摘要：主流科幻小说常侧重于科技层面的想象，而鬼故事被视为迷信与怪诞题材的亚类型，其文学价值长期被边缘化。本研究以韩国作家郑宝拉的《午夜时刻表》为核心文本，探讨当代东亚科幻作家创作的鬼故事所蕴含的伦理内涵，并论证此文类伦理价值的重要性。具体而言，郑宝拉对鬼故事的重构使鬼故事不再仅停留在复仇叙事中，更将其重塑为承载伦理治愈功能的文类，并借以批判资本主义理性的非人化逻辑及其衍生的结构性压迫。与此同时，作家借助东亚哲学想象，构建出融合理性思考与伦理反思的虚构文学世界，为身处困境中的人们指出一条疗愈之路。

关键词：东亚鬼故事；《午夜时刻表》；生命之树；治愈

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与比较文学；崔昌笏，南京大学朝鲜语言文学系教授，研究方向为韩国现代文学与比较文学。本文为吉林省高教所课题“高校科幻文学教育现状分析与其教学内容研究”【项目批号：JGJX2023D70】的阶段性成果。

Introduction

Midnight Timetable (한밤의 시간표, 2023) consists of seven interconnected short stories narrated by a newly appointed employee of a strange “research institute” that stores haunted objects. Its author, Bora Chung, is a prolific South Korean writer, translator, and social activist. She received considerable international attention when her *Cursed Bunny* (2021), translated by Anton Hur, was shortlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize. As the prize citation reads, she presents a genre-defying collection of short stories that blur the lines between magical realism, horror, and science fiction.¹ Although Chung’s works have a significant presence in popular media, scholarly engagement remains limited. Most critical analysis in South Korea appears in reviews, articles, and interviews. Among these, Sehee Park points out that *Midnight Timetable* offered a sharp critique of irrational elements within contemporary society.²

Although Chung is primarily known as an SF writer in Korea, her works frequently engage with ghost stories. For instance, her novel *Fox* (호, 2017) retells the Korean traditional myth of a nine-tailed fox spirit. Her literary tendency aligns with a broader resurgence of ghost stories in contemporary popular culture across East Asia. Such a revival not only revitalizes traditional cultural elements but also facilitates deeper exploration of contemporary human and societal conditions. For example, the 2024 film *Exhuma* (파묘) attracted considerable global attention. Shamans, rather than being relegated to the margins of superstition, are portrayed as positive characters who serve as crucial intermediaries between the spectral and human realms. Their belief systems are viewed not as superstitions but as alternative modes of understanding, separate from modern scientific paradigms. Similarly, a resurgence of interest in ghost stories has occurred in China, especially amid the boom of popular culture. This is seen in Zhang Muye’s online novel series, *Candle in the Tomb* (鬼吹灯, 2006-2008). In Japan, Yumemakura Baku is known as an SF writer whose multi-volume ghost story series *Onmyoji* (おんみょうじ, 1988-

1 See The Booker Prizes, 2022. Available at: <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/books/cursed-bunny>. Accessed 17 May 2026.

2 See Sehee Park, “Book Review: Dating Violence, Animal Experimentation... Stories of Cursed Things,” *Munhwa Daily*, 9 June 2023. Available at: <https://munhwa.com/news/view.html?no=2023060901032012082001>. Accessed 17 May 2026.

2007) has achieved enduring popularity across East Asia. Building on this success, his novel *Shamon Kukai Feasts with Demons in the Tang Dynasty* (沙門空海唐の国にて鬼と宴す, 2004), was adapted into the movie *Legend of the Demon Cat* (妖猫伝, 2017), directed by the Chinese filmmaker Chen Kaige.

Much like SF writer Baku, Chung deliberately addresses contemporary readership through ghost stories. This resurgence of traditional motifs in East Asian popular culture provides a lens for examining evolving societal values and epistemological perspectives. The central argument of this study is that Chung redefines the significance of ghost stories by situating *Midnight Timetable* within the broader context of a regional revival of ghost storytelling and by integrating East Asian imagination with Western rationality. Specifically, her work illustrates a shift from themes of vengeance to ethical healing.

I. “Research Institute” and the Death of “Chaotic” World

The “research institute” in *Midnight Timetable* is not a conventional scientific center but a vault for storing haunted objects away from the real world. Contrary to its presence in the real world, the institute does not follow the logic of scientific rationality. This heterogeneous space straddles the boundary between the real world and the spiritual one. Objects, like a handkerchief, stuffed animals, and a jacket from an accident, transcend their material form to represent ghostly narratives.

Significantly, the director of the institute himself is a ghost. His mission is to protect the boundary between the spiritual and the real. The threshold between the two is the research institute’s underground parking lot. In the opening story of *Midnight Timetable*, “Do Not Enter Here,” the director imposes a strict restriction on all staff: the parking lot is off limits. Chanyi, a new employee, strays across the threshold on his motorbike on his way home and then enters a tunnel. The tunnel’s attributes deviate conspicuously from the conventions of the real world. The exit is elusive, and emergency exit signs are out of order: number 8 succeeds 4, and 6 is absent. Both the parking lot and the tunnel are governed by irrational principles distinct from the structured order of the rational world. The disorderly and incomprehensible nature of this realm inherently evokes fear. Chanyi, overwhelmed with fear, picks up the emergency phone in the tunnel. However, instead of offering aid, the interlocutor on the line is preoccupied with inquiries concerning Chanyi’s funeral arrangements and veterinary services. A similar case occurs when a senior colleague meets the director for the first time. While descending the staircase to the underground parking lot, she witnesses a series of uncanny phenomena: the stairway begins to distort, producing a mounting sense of dread. As she attempts to

rationalize the irregularity, the anomalies intensify in scale. At the height of danger, she hears the director's voice instructing her to ascend; she flees upstairs at full speed and narrowly escapes. In this story, the underground parking lot functions as a gateway to the realm of the dead, a site where human rationality collapses and order gives way to chaos.

However, in the real world, the dominance of Western scientific rationality has long rejected what it defines as "chaos," including irrationality, superstition, and East Asian culture. Ghost stories fall victim to this dismissal. However, in East Asian imagination, ghosts are not merely supernatural beings; they are also manifestations of unresolved injustice. Shamanism holds that ghosts linger in the earthly realm when something prevents their passage into the afterlife, as exemplified by the nineteenth-century Korean legend of "Arang," one of the most influential local ghost stories, centered on a murdered maiden whose spirit returns for revenge and justice.

This dynamic has traditionally positioned ghost tales as vehicles for social critique rather than mere horror entertainment. However, this critical potential was systematically disavowed with the consolidation of modern rationalism. At this point, both ghost stories and shamanism were labeled as superstitions. As Junsik Choi notes, shamanism should not be reduced to superstition; rather, it constitutes a religious practice centered on acknowledging and mediating spiritual presences, a fundamental dimension of Korea's spiritual heritage.¹ For context, although shamanistic practices were suppressed during the Goryeo period under the expansion of Confucianism, and further marginalized throughout the Joseon era by Neo-Confucian state ideology, they persevered as a vital form of popular religion until at least the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century, however, marked a decisive rupture. Specifically, Enlightenment thought and modern science introduced Western cultural frameworks, particularly Christianity and scientific rationalism, which fundamentally restructured Korea's epistemic landscape. As a consequence, both shamanistic beliefs and ghost stories were pathologized and gradually faded out from modern Korean literature. In this way, the history of Korean shamanism serves as a paradigmatic case of the supplanting of "irrational" traditional worldviews by "rational" modern epistemologies.

Once rational order prevails, the irrational "chaos" yields to power and loses its vitality. The ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu famously recounts a fable concerning Chaos,

1 See Junsik Choi, *Mugyo: The Fundamental Beliefs of Koreans Rejected by Political Power*, Seoul: Mosineun Saramdae Publishing, 2016, 95.

The Emperor of the South Sea was called Shu [Brief], the Emperor of the North Sea was called Hu [Sudden], and the Emperor of the central region was called Hun-tun [Chaos]. Shu and Hu, from time to time, came together for a meeting in the territory of Hun-tun, and Hun-tun treated them very generously. Shu and Hu discussed how they could repay his kindness, “All men,” they said, “have seven openings so they can see, hear, eat, and breathe. But Hun-tun alone doesn’t have any. Let’s try bringing him some!” Every day they bored another hole, and on the seventh day, Hun-tun died. (97)

In this fable, Shu and Hu create holes (their order) for Hun-tun out of good intentions, which results in Hun-tun’s unexpected death. In other words, enforcing rational order destroys the world of chaos. The fable also suggests that Shu and Hu fail to recognize the special order of Hun-tun’s world. A similar situation occurred during the Enlightenment era. This period marks the dominance of Western rationality as the primary cultural force, systematically marginalizing traditional East Asian belief systems, such as shamanism and mystical cosmologies, that could not be empirically verified. Thus, the Enlightenment promise of emancipation through reason shifted into a regime of instrumental rationality, in which knowledge was valued not for its liberatory potential but for its utility in optimizing control and efficiency. Following this logic, rationality hardened into a closed system of fixed rules and cold calculations, tolerating no deviation. In turn, this rationalism constituted a dominant way of thinking that elevated certain forms of subjectivity while invalidating others. When examined more closely, its constitutive exclusions manifested as masculinism, Eurocentrism, and scientific dogmatism, epistemic frameworks that hierarchized difference and legitimized systemic inequalities. Consequently, what presents itself as universal reason operates instead as a mechanism of social discrimination, naturalizing oppression in the name of progress and objectivity.

Through *Midnight Timetable*, Chung leverages the East Asian imagination to break the facade of the contemporary rational world, exposing the violence and legitimized oppression that underpin it. The research institute in the story marks the limits of Western rationality; it is a liminal space where the rule of reason ceases to function, and the distinctly East Asian “irrational” takes hold. The title, *Midnight Timetable*, suggests that conventional rationality operates according to the logic of the “day,” but the ghost research institute follows the order of the “midnight.” In this sense, the “midnight” is not merely a time of darkness, but a temporal sanctuary

for the repressed logic of the East Asian imagination.

II. The Structural Oppression in the “Day System”

Ghost stories do not just invert rational order; they give refuge to those exiled in the real world. This is especially clear in East Asian ghost lore, where female spirits return to seek legal justice for their wrongful deaths. These figures hover in the space between life and death. Similarly, the “midnight” order of Chung’s research institute is marginalized within social and academic structures. This parallel shows that both the female ghosts and the institute sustain exclusion and tension. Hyejin Jeon unveils the underlying veracity concealed within the enduring tales of female spirits handed down through generations.¹ She argues that these ghost narratives fundamentally represent the injustices suffered by women, victims of societal crimes. However, trapped between life and death, these ghosts give voice to the untold. They reveal what women were once forced to hide, their eyes covered and their mouths sealed shut.² The common theme of vengeful female spirits and revenge in traditional ghost narratives stems from pent-up resentment resulting from gender oppression. In this light, ghost stories function as narrative tools of grievance: they provide a discursive outlet for wrongs that, rendered unspeakable or unwitnessed, can finally manifest through the haunting tales.

In “The Blue Bird,” Chung reconstructs a tragic odyssey rooted in the historical displacement documented in the *Samguk Yusa*. The story follows a noblewoman’s infant who survives a massacre by an enemy general. The child, left with a permanent disability in her left hand, is raised by a benevolent couple and grows up to become a skilled embroiderer. When her talent is discovered, she is forced to make a handkerchief for the wedding of the general’s son. The son’s twisted obsession with the maiden is revealed to be a sinister fetishization of her vulnerability. When the maiden rejects him, he kidnaps and locks her up, showing his power. While the wedding preparations proceed, with the maiden’s embroidered handkerchief dispatched as a ceremonial gift, a turning point occurs. During the bridal procession, the bride flees in horror after a flock of birds attacks her entourage. Upon hearing this news, the general’s son blames the maiden and attempts to kill her by slitting her throat. At that moment, the sky darkens, and birds, identical to the ones embroidered on the handkerchief, dive from the sky. The birds attack and kill the son and his parents. Here, the act of artistic creation transcends mere aesthetics, transforming the maiden’s handicraft into a literal instrument of

1 See Hyejin Jeon, *Women Becoming Ghosts*, Seoul: Hyeonamsa, 2021, 24.

2 See Hyejin Jeon, *Women Becoming Ghosts*, Seoul: Hyeonamsa, 2021, 19.

divine retribution.

As Chung notes, this tale derives from the trauma of refugees fleeing the fall of Gaya to Silla.¹ Yet, as the stories imply, such oppression did not disappear in the twenty-first century; rather, it has been reconfigured in a patriarchal capitalist society. Specifically, through the harrowing backstory of the deputy director in “The Silence of the Lambs,” the narrative lays bare the operation of systemic misogyny across generations. Before taking her post at the research institute, the deputy director worked in a sweatshop, and most of her earnings were used to repay her husband’s debts. As a result, she is trapped in a cycle of economic exploitation and lives in constant fear that her daughter will inherit not only financial indebtedness but also the structural conditions that perpetuate female subjugation. Her dread, therefore, is not merely a private neurosis; it stands as tangible evidence of the structural violence that continues to control women’s lives across time.

Every issue within the household flowed downward like a gutter, accumulating upon the most docile and submissive figure. In most cases, it was women’s vulnerable position that bore the weight of this gutter: daughters, daughters-in-law, mothers, and granddaughters. [...] They must sacrifice themselves to sustain the semblance of a family. In this manner, dysfunctional families exhibit similar patterns. (132)

Thus, the story argues that women are consistently relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Under the patriarchal order, women are positioned as the sacrificial stratum. Their sacrifice upholds the family’s fragile structure. Besides the persecution of female ghosts, *Midnight Timetable* extends this structural oppression to non-human beings. The narrative unearths a mass grave of experimental lamb carcasses behind a veterinary school. This grave is next to the deputy director’s residence. These animals, used as experimental subjects, suffer from repeated artificial wounds, deliberate infections with pathogens, and toxication. Humans ruthlessly advance their own interests at the expense of animals. The lives of experimental animals become an endless chain of suffering, akin to that of a woman burdened with debt. Such systemic exploitation reduces living beings to expendable resources, mirroring the plight of the debt-burdened woman, each compelled to sacrifice their vitality for others’ gain.

Chung deepens her critique of the patriarchal and capitalist society in “Why Cats” by juxtaposing the victimization of a woman and an animal. Here, the story

1 See Bora Chung, *Midnight Timetable*, Seoul: Seagull Publishing, 2023, 239.

functions as a meditation on the predatory logic of human desires. After the sudden death of his close friend, a married man develops a romantic relationship with the grieving widow. At the beginning, he offers her comfort at the funeral. As she overcomes her grief with time, she decides to end their relationship. However, the man, unwilling to give up his sense of superiority and possessiveness over the woman's vulnerability, persistently badgers her with the one-sided question, "Why aren't you meeting me?"¹ Eventually, he kills her. The murdered woman returns as a ghost, standing in the man's house, confronting him silently. As his fear intensifies, the man seeks ways to expel the ghost. After hearing a ritual that a ghost could be expelled if a cherished item of the deceased is nailed to the place of death, the man revisits the deceased woman's house, kills her most beloved cat, and nails the cat's corpse to the head of the bed where the woman's body lies. The ghost does not appear for a while. However, the cat's spirit is trapped in a stuffed form at the research institution, constantly questioning, "Why did I have to die?" (218) This trajectory illustrates the metonymic nature of capitalist desires. Unlike pre-modern societies, which based social operations on basic needs, the capitalist system marks the first time in human history that insatiable human desires are embraced and effectively utilized as a driving force for social progress. The dark underbelly of this dynamic mechanism is the negative aspect of stimulating human greed, thereby fostering evil by fulfilling one's desires at the expense of others. The man's possessive desires for the widow and his killing of the cat reflect the commodity logic in the capitalist society, where life is merely a resource to be priced and discarded.

However, the story denies simple closure through sacrifice. After his wife gives birth to a boy, the man finds that his son bears a red birthmark resembling a nail mark on the dead cat. Years later, the boy chillingly questions his father over the killing of the cat, repeating the haunting phrase of the woman's ghost, "Don't go. [...] Die with me" (204). Extreme fear makes the man abandon his son at a dangerous pedestrian crossing, leading to the tragic death of his poor son in an "accident." Ironically, the man ends his days trapped in the dead woman's house, becoming a ghost himself, yet still unable to escape the structural confines of his own making. This story represents more than mere revenge; it is a structural collapse. Chung

1 Chung in this novel discusses the extensive history of male violence against women under the name of "why aren't you meeting me." For instance, it mentions cases "where men have violently intruded into women's homes, claiming them as their possessions, resulting in acts of aggression such as brandishing weapons (April 2021) and detonating self-made explosives (October 2020). Moreover, these male perpetrators have been known to escalate their violence beyond the targeted women, including their families as well." See Bora Chung, *Midnight Timetable*, Seoul: Seagull Publishing, 2023, 197.

dismantles the binary of oppressors and the oppressed to expose how capitalist desires trap all in violent cycles. In this system, even the perpetrator is not exempt from suffering; he, too, is devoured by the very anxiety and brutality he caused.

Extending the critique of structural oppression, “The Handkerchief” maps the process by which humans are reified into ghosts. This story begins with the funeral of a matriarch, who leaves her entire estate to her favored youngest son and disinherits her estranged eldest son and daughters. Entrusting her children with her final wish: to have her embroidered handkerchief buried with her, the mother inadvertently sets the stage for a perverse drama of possession. The youngest son becomes obsessed with the handkerchief, opposing his mother’s explicit request. As the narrator asks, “Why would an adult male, the youngest son, lust after a brightly colored woman’s handkerchief embellished with flowers and birds?” (55) This pathological obsession is similar to the general’s son in “The Blue Bird,” whose desires for the disabled maiden were driven not by genuine affection, but by a need for control. Consequently, the youngest son’s pursuit triggers a spectral metamorphosis. As he rummages through trash bags in search of the handkerchief, he is gradually consumed by his own obsession. His humanity erodes into a pallid, haunting ghost. Thus, the story completes the closed cycle of distortion. Within this oppressive system, even the oppressor also mutates into the very ghost that was trapped in the real and rational “day system.”

While the stories in *Midnight Timetable* may appear thematically discrete, they coalesce into a cohesive critique of the “Day System,” portrayed as an inexhaustible and transgenerational tragedy. Though narratives like “The Blue Bird” and “The Handkerchief” lack direct plot continuity, they converge in their deployment of the possessed object, the handkerchief. It functions as a condensation of unresolved grudges and desires that transgress temporal boundaries. This persistence of malice lays bare the inherently insatiable nature of human need. Crucially, Chung reframes the vengeful ghost not merely as a vestige of the past, but as a custodian of generations. This narrative strategy dismantles the transgenerational chain of tragedy, a condition not rooted in natural deficiency but imposed by the contemporary rational order. Consequently, Chung leverages the East Asian imagination to carve out a liminal space beyond the reach of rational reason, suggesting that what truly haunts the living is not death itself, but the endless repetition of structural oppression in the “Day System.”

III. The Tree of Life and Healing

If the “Day System” represents the triumph of a rationality that severs

connections and perpetuates oppression, its roots lie in a primordial choice between two modes of being: the pursuit of knowledge versus the embrace of life. To fully grasp how rational order generates such transgenerational tragedy, it is necessary to situate Chung's narrative within a broader civilizational dialectic. Gao Xudong frames the central dichotomy in terms of the biblical story of Eden: The Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. Western civilization, or modernity dominated by the West, chose the Tree of Knowledge, privileging analytic reason. Ancient East Asian civilizations, by contrast, opted for the Tree of Life, emphasizing ethics and aesthetics.¹ Gao makes this dichotomy explicit: science as the fruit of knowledge, ethics, and aesthetics as the fruit of life.² Maneuvering within the generic confines of the ghost story, Chung conducts a speculative thought experiment³ in her ghost stories like SF writers. Drawing on the experiment, she suggests that the path to the Tree of Life is a long, labyrinthine process.

This split manifests in stories such as "Do Not Enter Here," in which the protagonist, Chanyi, is ensnared in a labyrinth that serves as "an archetype of the maternal unconscious⁴." This space, as mentioned above, encodes the tension between rational consciousness and the irrational depths of the self. Navigating its Möbius strip-like topology demands a radical perceptual shift: abandoning control in favor of acceptance. Moreover, the warning "Do Not Enter Here" operates as a caution against approaching the unknown through binary lenses, marking the shift from one mode of perception to another. If Chanyi's dilemma illustrates the failure of perception in the Chaos, a contrasting dynamic emerges in "The Cursed Lamb." Its protagonist, a YouTuber, sneaks into the research institute to film the place for entertainment and fame. Regardless of the institute's rules and the director's warning, he even steals a pair of sneakers. As he enters the parking lot, he meets a bug-like creature and only then realizes he's wearing the stolen shoes. Initially believing he can simply kill the tiny creature, he finds that it cannot be killed; instead, it grows larger, becomes more dangerous, and then strikes back. This moment signals that the hierarchical order—man over woman, human over animal, possessor over possessed—does not apply here. In this sense, the stolen sneakers function as more than personal spoils; they are the material anchor of a predatory logic that confuses appropriation for mastery.

1 See Gao Xudong, *Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010, 4-7.

2 See Gao Xudong, *Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010, 7.

3 See Ursula Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, New York: Grove Press, 1997, 9.

4 See Joseph L. Henderson, "Ancient Myths and Modern Man," *Man and His Symbols*, edited by Carl G. Jung, New York and London: Anchor Press, 1964, 125.

Chung seeks to reconcile the split trees. She re-roots ethics and aesthetics in a rationalized world and offers the ghost story as an effective way to bridge the Cartesian divide. In contrast to Chung's human characters, who are often trapped by their own desires, her ghostly characters frequently emerge as agents of empathy and liberation. Instead of being trapped in the perpetuating cycles of violence, the lamb ghost intervenes to break the chain of tragedy in the "Day System." By granting the deputy director the ability to perceive the invisible, the lamb ghost empowers her to escape domestic abuse and protect her daughter. Crucially, the lamb ghost's intervention operates not through the possessive logic of the Day System. Instead, it works through the integrative mechanism of the Tree of Life, prioritizing relationality over domination. In Chung's stories, the staff at the research institute do not seek to explain, categorize, or control haunted objects as scientists do; rather, they act as their guardians, maintaining a delicate, permeable threshold between two worlds. At the same time, the research institute stands not only as a gateway to the irrational world but also as a sanctuary for society's outcasts, offering them a space to dwell and time to heal. More profoundly, its meticulously crafted heterogeneous space does more than advance the narrative; it emerges as a quiet rebellion against contemporary mechanized society. Within this unique space, the marginalized find a sanctuary beyond the reach of oppressive systems. Moreover, it provides an opportunity for people who have been marginalized by mainstream society to make a fresh start. For example, Sook, a woman who has endured a lifetime of societal ostracism as a cleaning lady. After her husband's fatal accident, she raised three children alone. When her husband's insurance payment runs out due to her youngest child's illness, she has to do two jobs, by day at a part-time job, by night at the research institute. Unlike other workplaces, the institute does not discriminate on the grounds of social class and provides Sook with a foundation for navigating the complexities of society. Through her perseverance, she manages to secure a better education for her elder children and accumulates enough money to afford medical treatment for her ailing youngest child. Thus, the institute does not merely offer shelter; it restores the Tree of Life, allowing those crushed by the logic of profit to revitalize themselves.

However, this requires a death-like ordeal: the merging of the "Day System" with the "Midnight System." Susan Sontag observes a pervasive tendency to treat others' pain as entertainment or as a source of relief¹, a phenomenon rooted in the division between the "I" and the "non-I." As Feng Youlan notes, the most

1 See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador Modern Classics, 2004, 126.

significant event in Western civilization was the recognition of the “I,”¹ which creates a division between the subjective realm and the objective world. This unbridgeable divide underlies core Western philosophical issues and calcifies into moral hierarchies. Ursula Le Guin characterizes Western civilization as a “yang” force, distinct from the “yin” of the East. She critiques the Western curse: the violent severance of yang from yin, coupled with the moralization of yang as “good” and yin as “bad.”² Unlike this dualistic paradigm, which conflates the logic of knowledge with the Tree of Life, ancient Chinese philosophy prioritizes the unity of man and nature (天人合一).³ This framework rejects the split, shifting the imperative from conquest to the reintegration of the “I” with the “non-I.” Chung exemplifies this integration by invoking a Korean Shaman (Mudang)⁴ to embody the ghost’s suffering and dissolve the boundaries between self and other through a process of “becoming-other.” Here, the Lamb’s compassion is not abstract benevolence but shared precarity; having endured similar trauma, it sympathizes with the Deputy Director’s pain. Similarly, Chanyi undergoes a change following the tunnel accident. Fractured by internalized homophobia and social abuse, he has rejected Gak’s love because he could not accept himself as gay. However, his survival in the tunnel accident marks a turning point: he accepts Gak’s love, signifying unity with his own nature. Healing, ultimately, is achieved through acknowledgment of one’s true nature, not domination.

Moreover, in this collection, the author, like her ghost characters, acts as a Mudang-like figure, embodying others’ pain and telling their stories. As Han Byeongcheol explains, healing occurs when patients are freed from blockages that prevent them from sharing their stories.⁵ By taking on the role of voicing spirits who cannot speak, the author mirrors the Mudang, who communicate with ghosts and act as their mouthpiece. In the “Author’s Note” to *Cursed Bunny*, Chung articulates,

I wanted to tell the reader that death, vengeance, or revenge may be necessary

1 See Feng Youlan, *History of Chinese Philosophy* Vol. I, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2011, 9.

2 See Ursula Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, New York: Grove Press, 1997, 16.

3 See Gao Xudong, *Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010, 33.

4 “Mudang (무당)” in Korean is clearly identified in historical texts such as *Samguk Sagi* and *Samguk Yusa* from the Goryeo period. These records illustrate the rituals conducted by Mudang, including interpreting unusual events, fortune-telling for the future, treating illnesses, and communicating with the deceased. See National Institute of Korean History, *Musok, Connecting God and Humans*, Seoul: Kyungin Publishing, 2011, 68.

5 See Byeongcheol Han, *The Crisis of Narrative*, translated by Jisu Choi, Seoul: Dasan Books, 2023, 114.

in some cases, but that even after the necessary work is done, the world will remain lonely; humans will still feel lonely, and this fact will never change. However, in this loneliness, I wanted to comfort the lonely readers who struggle alone in this strange and ferocious world. (326)

Crucially, the act of telling the pain of “others” is an ethical act. As Nie Zhenzhao points out, ethical selection is what sets humans apart from animals.¹ However, the contemporary age has witnessed a spectral transformation in humans, who often exist as ghostlike creatures stripped of their humanity. In this context, literature serves as a vital moral compass for both material and spiritual existence², perpetually probing how to be a moral subject. By giving voice to ghosts, Chung effectively reflects our own image to us. Her stories show that the lonely struggle against oppression and the pursuit of healing is not just for living. These are shared ethical experiences that help define our humanity.

Conclusion

In *Midnight Timetable*, ghosts are not simply remnants of the dead. Instead, they are inhabitants of the Night, a realm that is the ontological opposite of the Day and embodies darkness and mystery. Chung’s ghost stories explore these realms, utilizing spirits as mediators between two distinct worlds. The Night and Day represent opposing yet interconnected realities. She reveals the terrifying realities generated by structural oppression and shows how humans would become ghosts through the distorted expression of greed. Real terror does not reside in the ghosts themselves, but in the ferocious desires of the living and the fearful reality we construct. Chung’s ghost stories also offer alternatives to alienation and reversal. Transcendence echoes shamanistic practices that routinely cross boundaries between worlds. This leads to the central philosophical axis: the integration of the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. The Tree of Knowledge, symbolizing Western scientific rationality, represents an epistemology of domination and binary opposition. The Tree of Life, by contrast, symbolizes a view of nature as a web of interdependence. The crisis arises from a pathological split, an imbalanced world full of yang or yin. Chung challenges Western logocentrism and dualism with a primal East Asian perspective. In this way, she advocates merging “I” and “non-I,” subjectivity and objectivity, so that they are no longer estranged from one another.

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383.

2 See Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 191.

The ghosts and the author emphasize the unity of separation. They break down barriers between humans and non-humans, offering a perspective that is neither human-centered nor limited by dualism. Healing comes after the dissolution of hierarchical binaries and the relinquishment of control.

In the concluding story, “A Sunny Day,” the research institute exposes preserved objects to the sunlight. A stuffed cat and sheep bask peacefully, their wounds healing. One day, the director’s jacket expels transparent, sharp glass shards and ignites only after the last grudge is released. This “Sunny Day” is not a return to the ignorant bliss of the “Day System.” Instead, it is a purified midnight, a liminal space where glass shards of history are expelled, freeing the ghosts from their entrapment, while humanity remains human.

Returning to the broader cultural context, it is noteworthy that contemporary East Asia—China, Korea, and Japan—witnesses a revival and reinterpretation of traditional ghost stories. This revival opens new horizons for understanding the human condition. Chung’s *Midnight Timetable* stands as a testament to this shift. It is a “ghostly cartography”: an imaginative map charting emotional and existential pathways. It leads us back to the Tree of Life, rekindling the call of ethical responsibility. To live, one must listen to voices ignored in the “day system.” In this sense, East Asian ghost stories by SF writers have conducted a scientific thought experiment: What if these two divided trees could be integrated into an integrated whole? They uphold the Tree of Knowledge, symbolizing logic and empiricism, which should join with the Tree of Life, representing wisdom and vitality, to bear healthy fruit. Chung redefines healing not as taking revenge but as accepting nature as it is. The ghosts in her collection function as mirrors reflecting our oppression and vulnerability and demonstrate that seeking unity amidst loneliness is a universal human journey.

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