

# The History of Blind Diviners in Korea

A Historical Overview of the Changing Perceptions and  
Organizational Activities of Blind Diviners in Korea

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the history of blind diviners in Korea, using a review approach to examine the existing literature in Korean on the topic. Beginning with a discussion of theories on the origins and practices of blind diviners during the pre-modern period, and then moving into the drastic changes that occurred during the Japanese colonial period, the thesis ends with an exploration of how the situation has developed for blind diviners in the modern period. The thesis utilizes four main sources: Chu (2008, 2020), Pak and Chŏng (2019), and Son (2019). With this exploration of the topic, this thesis aims to amend the lack of available literature in English by exploring the phenomenon of blind diviners, especially the disability aspects of their existence, utilizing some of the literature available in Korean.

**Keywords:** Korea, disability, disability history, blind diviners, fortune-telling

## Sammanfattning

Syftet med denna uppsats är att utforska blinda siars historia i Korea genom en litteratur review av den befintliga litteraturen på koreanska inom ämnet. Uppsatsen inleder med de blinda siarnas ursprung och arbete under den förmoderna perioden, och övergår sedan till de drastiska förändringar som inträffade under den Japanska kolonialtiden. Uppsatsen avslutas med en utforskning av hur situationen har utvecklats för blinda siare under den moderna perioden. Uppsatsen använder fyra huvudkällor: Chu (2008, 2020), Pak och Chŏng (2019) och Son (2019). Med denna utforskning av ämnet syftar denna uppsats till att fylla ut en del av avsaknaden av litteratur på engelska, särskilt de mindre utforskade funktionsnedsättningsaspekterna av blinda siars existens, genom att använda en del av den litteratur som finns tillgänglig på koreanska.

**Nyckelord:** Korea, funktionsnedsättning, funktionsnedsättningshistoria, blinda siare, divination

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose

Although there does exist some research on disability in a Korean context in English, it is still a developing field of research. This thesis aims to fill out some of this gap in information by making some of the research in Korean more available to English speakers through a review. The specific topic, the history of blind diviners in Korea, was chosen for its value as a fairly uncommon phenomenon that is not well known in the West, and for the insights it may provide in how disability is constructed and how perceptions of disability change throughout history.

## 1.2 Research Approach

This thesis is a qualitative literature review that examines four different secondary sources. The aim is to present the historical development of the living conditions and organizational activities of blind diviners in Korea as well as the changes in perception towards blind diviners throughout Korean history. The motivation behind choosing this method is the lack of literature available in English focusing on blind diviners from a disability studies viewpoint. This is also one of the reasons for the thesis taking a less systematic and more topical approach, as the use of literature only in Korean entails significantly more time spent on each article. Another reason for this topical approach is the reliance on the information provided in Korean researchers' works, as opposed to any research performed by this author, as my lacking knowledge of Classical Chinese makes it difficult to read any pre-modern historical material in the original language. Owing to these limitations, there is the possibility of selection bias regarding the literature featured in the review. To avoid this the literature chosen takes on varying perspectives and theoretical approaches, which will hopefully reduce the risk of a biased view of the topic represented in this review.

## 1.3 Material

The research on Korea's blind diviners available in English is sparse, and the research that does exist generally focuses on the religious/spiritual role of blind diviners or mentions them in passing when discussing shamans. One example of research conducted in English that mentions blind diviners in a religious context is the 2010 research article *Healing and Exorcism: Christian Encounters with Shamanism in Early Modern Korea*, written by Ok Söng-dük, which brings up blind diviners in the context of shamanism, but does not put any particular emphasis on the phenomenon. Another example is the 2017 article *Evolutionary Adaptation of Korean Divination to Religious Markets: A Case Study of Three Divination Communities in the Seoul Metropolitan Area*, written by Yu Kwang-suk, which mentions the blind diviners' village in Miari, and does contain some brief descriptions of the historical social position of blind diviners, but still focuses on the religious aspects of the phenomenon.

There is some mention of blind diviners, and blind people in general, in publications written in English by Christian missionaries during the Japanese colonial period. These texts have previously been used to analyze the changing living conditions of blind people during the colonial period (Chu 2008, 2020), but exclusively using these sources to analyze the phenomenon of blind diviners would undoubtedly lead to a limited and biased view. This necessitates the use of Korean sources, since there is, at least to this author's knowledge, no available research that delves into the disability aspects of blind diviners available in English. Therefore, this study will exclusively review material in Korean, specifically secondary sources such as academic articles and books. These materials were found primarily through the database DBpia, which contains research articles in Korean on various different topics. Searches were also conducted in other databases, such as KISS, as well as general internet searches, to ensure that no particularly relevant material was omitted. The one exception is the book written by Chu (2020), which was found through their research article from 2008. The articles used were chosen to cover several different time periods and to provide varied perspectives on the topic. Other factors taken into consideration were the time when the articles were published, the author's experience within the field, and how often they were referenced in other articles on the same topic. Unfortunately, the inherent limitations of a Bachelor's thesis, and this author's limited fluency in reading research articles in Korean, had the consequence that the number of articles used had to be fairly limited. For instance, the

article *Han'guk maengin chömbokcha-üi chön'gae yangsang* (A Study of the Development Aspect of Blind Fortune Tellers in Korea) written by Kim Man-t'ae (2008) was frequently cited by other papers but was excluded due to lack of time.

Amongst the research utilized in this thesis, two of the sources were written by Chu Yun-jöng. Chu is a senior fellow at the Institute for Social Development and Policy Research at Seoul National University. They have done extensive research surrounding the history and living conditions of blind people and could very well be considered an expert within this field. The research article from 2008, *Chasön-gwa chahye-üi kyönghap: singminji ki 'maengin' sahoe saöp-kwa t'ajahwa kwajöng* (The competition between charity and benevolence: The social work surrounding, and process of othering, the blind during the colonial period), goes in-depth into the colonial period and the living conditions for blind people during this period. In their book from 2020, *Poiji anün yöksa* (An unseen history), Chu offers a wider look at the issues facing blind people in society, although the references in this thesis are primarily from chapter two.

The research article *Sosuja paeje-esö p'oyong-üroüi sahoe kongganjöck byönhwa yön'gu: Söulsi Dongsön-dong Chömbokch'on-üi sigak changaein yökhaksa-rül sarye-ro* (Socio-spatial change from exclusion to inclusion of minorities: a case study on blind diviners in the diviners' village in Dongsön-dong, Söul), written by Pak Chun-hong and Chöng Hui-sön, analyses the socio-spatial exclusion of blind diviners as well as the move towards an “inclusive city”. Although this article primarily focuses on the modern period, it also contributes some perspectives on the premodern and colonial periods. The aim of the addition of this perspective to the review is to broaden the information provided and to present different perspectives on individual issues when applicable. Additionally, one of the authors, Chöng Hui-sön, is clearly experienced with this theoretical framework, as they have published articles examining the socio-spatiality of different cultural phenomena for over 15 years.

The last research article, *Chosön sidae sigak changaein-üi kuhyul-gwa chigöb-e kwanhan koch'al* (A study on the relief works and occupation of the blind in the Chosön period), written by Son Ku-ha uses historical documents to describe the occupations and government policies in regard to blind diviners during the Chosön period. The article is useful in that it includes direct quotations from the historical documents it references. As a result of this, it is clear where the basis of the claims come from. The author, Son Ku-ha, has no other published

articles, but they participated as a speaker in a seminar<sup>1</sup> held by Kim Man-t'ae (who has previously published several works on blind diviners and related topics) on *myōngnihak* (명리학, translated by the article's author as "the science of *yin* and *yang*"), which indicates that the author has some connection to this specific field. The seminar description also indicates that the author was in the process of finishing their PhD in 2019, which explains why they have only published one article so far.

The above-mentioned seminar is relevant because the author chooses to make some remarks in their concluding statements regarding what type of occupations would be appropriate for blind people today. This section seems somewhat out of place since the author makes some claims surrounding blind people's aptitudes that are not necessarily based on the research done in the paper, and have no apparent source listed in the article. The author specifically argues that blind people should pursue the study of *myōngnihak* as a career that could be suitable for them. Since it is possible that the author themselves has ties to this field of study (as mentioned above), it calls into question the motivations for including this section. I believe it could have been improved by including either: 1) specific sources for the claims regarding blind people's aptitudes, 2) several possible fields that could be suitable for blind people, or 3) general information about what steps should be taken to increase the accessibility of all occupations to blind people. However, as this is only one section in the conclusion of the article, and due to the clear showcasing of evidence for the claims within the article, it does not necessarily take away from the research conducted.

## 1.4 Structure and Scope

This thesis is structured chronologically into three main parts: Premodern Korea, Colonial period, and Modern period. Each part aims to provide an overview of the living conditions of blind people in that era, but they each have a slightly different focus. The section concerning premodern Korea aims to concretely explain the origins and practices of blind diviners. The section concerning the colonial period aims to explain how the conditions for blind people changed during this era, focusing especially on the effects of social work and the

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<sup>1</sup> *Che 9 hoe 2019nyōndo ch'un'gye myōngni sōngmyōnghak chuyōk haksulsemīna* (The 9th academic seminar of *myōngni sōngmyōng* and Zhou [dynasty's] *Yijing* studies, spring 2019), held on the 25th of May 2019, at Dongbang Culture University: <https://m.blog.naver.com/ware4u/221547927049>

organizational activities of blind diviners. The section concerning the modern period aims to explore how the organizational activities of blind diviners developed after the end of the colonial period, with a specific focus on the Miari diviners' village, and to examine how the changes during the colonial period affected the perception of blind diviners and blind people in general. Note that the modern section only covers the situation in South Korea, as it is difficult to find material that discusses the phenomenon in regard to North Korea.

Owing to the lack of research available in English, and the consequent use of material in Korean, the thesis is necessarily limited. This is partially due to the work required to read and partially or fully translate the different materials, but it is also a result of this author's still insufficient cultural and historical knowledge as an undergraduate student, leading to more work being required to make sure no nuances in the material were overlooked.

## 1.5 Notes on Transcription and Translation

The McCune–Reischauer romanization system is used in this thesis to transcribe Korean terms, with exception for common geographical names. For most terms, the word is also provided in Korean script (*han'gŭl*) and, if available, Chinese characters (*hanja*) in brackets after the word. Additionally, an English translation of the term may be provided within the brackets as well, if the term is not defined otherwise. For the names of institutions, and the translations of Korean titles of books/articles, the official translation is provided if available. Note that Korean names are provided in the Korean order, i.e. surname-first name, and all Korean names use McCune–Reischauer romanization.

## 1.6 Notes on Gender

When approaching the information provided in this thesis, it is relevant to note that both the terms *maengsŭng* and *p'ansu* are gendered terms that according to the unanimous opinion of Korean researchers specifically refer to men. The usage of these terms in historical documentation thus leaves a limited view of the gendered aspects of the information provided. It is unclear how much of the information applies to female blind diviners, specifically in the premodern period, but it is clear that they did exist. In both works by Chu cited in this thesis,



women practicing divination are mentioned, but unfortunately, the information becomes increasingly sparse the further back one goes. The clearest indication that blind women did practice divination during at least the later part of the Chosŏn period is the school for blind girls in Pyongyang [P'yŏngyang], but even then, it is not entirely clear to what extent these practices differed from their male counterparts.

## 2. Premodern Korea

### 2.1 The Origins of Blind Diviners

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of blind diviners in Korea. The first mention of this occupation can be found in the “Koryŏsa” (고려사, 高麗史: History of Koryŏ) (Pak and Chŏng 2019: 126), which was composed at the beginning of the Chosŏn period. Other sources written during the same period also suggest that blind diviners might have first appeared at the end of the Koryŏ period (Son 2019: 876). These diviners were called *maengsŭng* (맹승, 盲僧), meaning “blind (Buddhist) monk”. They engaged in sutra chanting, reading fortunes, they repelled misfortune and brought good fortune or happiness. They would also be called on to cure illnesses and ask for rain during drought (Son 2019: 876-877). It is unclear exactly why divining became the occupation associated with blind people, but Chu mentions the claims of one Japanese folklore scholar, Murayama Jijun (村山智順), who wrote about Korean folklore whilst staying in Korea during the Japanese colonial period. It is relevant to note, as Kim Man-t'ae (2008) explores in their critical review of one of Murayama's studies, that although their work was significant in that they collected much data on folk beliefs and divination, they also held a biased view of the subject, and Kim claims that they distorted reality, specifically to serve Japan's colonization efforts. Because of this, it is important to take a critical approach to the claims made by Murayama, to make sure that no biased views are unknowingly passed on.

The first claim made by Murayama as to why divination became the occupation associated with blind people is that it was partially due to the folk belief that owing to their lack of eyesight, blind people could instead see things that other people could not, indicating that they

have a proclivity for seeing the mystical or spiritual. The second claim is that this association was partly due to the lack of other suitable occupations for blind individuals (Chu 2020: 86). This claim refers specifically to the Chosŏn period, and can thus not be argued as a reason for the appearance of blind diviners during the Koryŏ period, and only as a reason for the increased prevalence of blind diviners moving into the Chosŏn period. As it is still unclear where exactly this phenomenon originated, further research is still needed, as well as further examination of the claims made by Murayama.

Furthermore, blind diviners were not unique to the Korean Peninsula. They were also a relatively common phenomenon in other East Asian countries, such as China (Chu 2008: 146). Chu once again mentions a claim made by Murayama. They claimed that the domination of the field of divination by blind people (specifically amongst men) is unique to Korea, and specifically claimed that 80% of diviners were blind, presumably based on the situation Murayama Jijun observed whilst in Korea. It is unclear from Chu's text where exactly this claim comes from, and how applicable it is to earlier periods within Korean history (Chu 2020: 86). Further comparisons with research on blind diviners, particularly from China, would be beneficial in verifying this claim of uniqueness.

## 2.2 Chosŏn Period

With the advent of the Chosŏn period and the subsequent decline of Buddhism in favor of Confucianism, the situation for blind diviners changed. The blind diviners followed the shift from Buddhism towards Confucianism (Chu 2020: 86), and the practice subsequently saw a boom (Son 2019: 875). That being said, blind diviners were not the only ones practicing divination, and the practice was not necessarily limited to “professionals” such as blind diviners or shamans but could also be practiced by ordinary civilians. It is also relevant to note that the practice of divination is wide and varied, encapsulating many different practices that in some way aimed to tell someone’s fortune or foresee the future.

## 2.2.1 Occupations

The primary occupations for blind individuals during the Chosŏn period were divination, sutra chanting, and orchestral music. The blind diviners of this period would commonly be referred to as *p'ansu* (판수) (Son 2019: 875).

### Divination

According to Son, divination appealed especially to young and intelligent blind people, and it was the most universally recognized occupation for blind individuals during this era. The reasons presented for this are that diviners could support their families through their work, but it is also implied that the type of divination performed, called *poksŏ* (복서, 卜筮), appealed specifically to young and intelligent people due to its systematic nature, using books and systematic ways to tell fortune. Divination also afforded blind people relatively more independence compared with other disabled people during this era (Son 2019: 876).

Chu brings up a noteworthy perspective on the actual issues the *p'ansu* were asked to consult on. They indicate that *p'ansu* were asked about the miscellaneous happenings of life and how to resolve problems, such as how to find lost objects, how to avoid punishment after committing a crime, whether a person would be rewarded for a kind act they performed, and if an endeavor would be successful or not. In this way, rather than just being someone with strange or mystical powers, the *p'ansu* was a wise man who resolved common conundrums with their wisdom about everyday life (2008: 147).

### Sutra chanting

Simply put, sutra chanting refers to the reciting of a text with some religious or spiritual importance. Sutra chanting was generally performed as a combined service together with divination, meaning that one person would perform both sutra chanting and divination. Sutra chanters took part in events and rituals, prayed for blessings and good fortune, and repelled calamity/bad fortune. Something distinctive for the Chosŏn period was that these types of services were commonly performed together with several sutra chanters, rather than individually. Beyond this, sutra chanting was also used to treat illnesses. Commoners would visit a sutra chanter to discover the source of their illnesses, and then sutra chanting was used to cure it (Son 2019: 876-877).

### Orchestral music

The third occupation associated with blind people during the Chosŏn period was playing orchestral music, specifically playing wind and string instruments. Blind musicians would perform when feasts were held in the palace, and some were admitted into *Changagwŏn* (장악원, 場樂園), a state institution where they performed musical instruments for a living (Son 2019: 877). There existed several well-known blind orchestra players in the first part of the Chosŏn period, including Yi Pan (이반, 李班), Kim Pok-san (김복산, 金卜山) and Chŏng Pŏm (정범, 鄭凡) (Son 2019: 878).

## 2.2.2 Government Policies

During the Chosŏn dynasty, the main responsibility for taking care of disabled people lay on the family. This included blind people, but the government did enact various policies that specifically benefited blind individuals and their families (Son 2019: 880).

Just as most other disabled people of the era, blind individuals only had limited access to different occupations. But, as illustrated above, blind people stood out in that they could sustain themselves through divination or sutra chanting, and it was thus easier for them to live an independent life compared to other disabled people. The government also viewed blind people as capable of being independent, and encouraged this independence. They established government posts specifically for blind diviners, where they could earn a rank and receive a federal allowance/stipend, like other government posts. Son does point out that there is no way to know if all blind people benefited from this attitude, as it is unclear which of these benefits were afforded only to those practicing divination, or practicing divination in a way the government rewarded (2019: 880). It is possible that those blind individuals who, for some reason, did not have access to this occupation might not have benefited in the same way. It is also entirely possible that blind people in general benefited, as this special attention paid towards blind individuals might have had other origins than simply the acknowledgment of ability, such as cultural, spiritual, or religious beliefs.

The government also established an institution for blind diviners called *Myōngt'ongsa* (명통사, 明通寺). *Myōngt'ongsa* was a meeting place for blind diviners established sometime in the early 15th century. The organization had a strict hierarchical structure and held regular meetings to pray and perform sutra chanting. Up until the abolishment of the national rituals in the late Chosŏn period, successive generations of kings made the blind diviners of *Myōngt'ongsa* perform rain calling ceremonies, for which they would receive rice or cloth as a reward. *Myōngt'ongsa* was abolished around the middle of the Chosŏn period, but in the late Chosŏn period, it changed form into a private organization called *Maengch'ōng* (맹청, 盲廳) (Son 2019: 877).

It is also clear that blind people were prioritized in other aspects, such as in the government's aid policies. Son showcases one example of how blind people were prioritized during the reign of King Sejong, where, when halting grain support for people in need, blind individuals were excluded and kept receiving grain (2019: 873). Another example is how not only blind individuals, but also those assisting blind individuals, were exempt from doing forced labor. The reasoning for this was that blind individuals would have a hard time maintaining their livelihood if their assistants left even for a few days (Son 2019: 874). Furthermore, blind individuals were sometimes exonerated, or received a reduced sentence, after committing a crime. There are even examples of blind people being exempted from the death penalty after killing someone, with the reasoning that they should not receive such a harsh punishment since they are disabled (Son 2019: 874).

During the Chosŏn period policies existed that benefited disabled people in general, but it is also clear, as illustrated through the examples above, that blind people in particular received more assistance. Chu points out that there is a common tendency to assume that the lives of disabled people were worse in traditional times compared to how it is today (2008: 147). By looking at the available data, although not reliable enough to fully understand the lives of blind people during the period, they enjoyed opportunities and a social standing that could perhaps be argued was better than that of blind people in today's Korean society, and both Son and Chu argue that this is the case (Son 2019: 880, Chu 2008: 147).

## 3. Colonial Period

The Japanese colonial period was a time of significant changes in Korean society. With the colonial government's emphasis on creating a "civilized society", based on science and modernity, many of the traditional aspects of Korean society changed forever. This change greatly impacted the lives of blind people in society, and for many, it meant giving up their traditional way of life. However, this was not a simple process and was not met without resistance.

### 3.1 Social Work

The blind diviners' way of life was first challenged by the arrival of Christian missionaries, and later by the advent of the Japanese colonial period. These occurrences marked the start of a significant shift in the way blind diviners were seen and treated in society. The new emphasis on science and modernity resulted in shifting attitudes towards things deemed as superstition, such as divination. At the beginning of the colonial period, a majority of blind people worked as diviners, but during the colonial period, divination was othered and suppressed for being a symbol of premodern and unscientific superstition, instead making way for the introduction and spread of massaging as a more modern profession for blind people (Chu 2020: 82). Several of these changes were accomplished through the use of social work and charity targeting blind people.

#### 3.1.1 Christian Missionaries

After the opening of the ports of Chosŏn, Western missionaries arrived, and social work began spreading rapidly. This was a result of the missionary tactic adopted by the Western missionaries, which focused more on education and medical treatment rather than direct missionary work. They did not target the upper classes of Chosŏn and instead attempted to turn the socially disenfranchised, such as women, the poor, and the disabled, towards the Christian gospel (Chu 2008: 148). It was through this interest in the disenfranchised that the Christian missionaries found an interest in educating the blind. There was however an additional layer to this interest.

Chu points out that the missionaries who were active in Chosŏn during the enlightenment period were aware of the blind diviners' activities, and the social position of blind people at the time. Chu claims that the missionaries paid great attention to shamans and *p'ansu* because they represented folk beliefs that the missionaries believed needed to be rejected to further the spread of Christianity (2008: 149). In this way, the missionaries' interest in the blind was twofold: they were a marginalized group that the missionaries could target for education, but they were also significant for the role they held spiritually and were thus an even more important target for proselytism and effectively spreading Christianity. For example, Rosetta Hall, who started the first school for the blind in Chosŏn, said that the goal of her special education program for blind women was to ensure that they rejected superstition and lived according to Christian values (Chu 2008: 149).

Rosetta Hall was a prominent figure in the realm of the education of blind people. Not only did she open a school for blind girls in Pyongyang, but she also developed a version of the 4-point New York Point system<sup>2</sup> adapted for *han'gŭl* and began teaching this version of *han'gŭl* in 1898 (Chu 2008: 150). In addition to learning this modern writing system, the girls at the school were taught other modern skills, such as handicrafts, sewing, and typing. The aim was to turn these girls into modern, skilled individuals, who were capable of living independent lives (Chu 2008: 152), although there was more to the education at the school than simply learning new skills.

Chu showcases how, for the blind girls entering this type of missionary-run school, it not only involved receiving a modern education. They also had to give up their past way of life and past beliefs. They had to give up on divination and send away the spirits they used to call forth. Some found this process frightening, as the shift in lifestyle involved significant changes (2008: 151). Even as many blind girls stopped engaging in divination in favor of receiving an education from Hall, it was not easy to let go of the belief in spirits, a belief they had carried with them their entire lives. There were even cases where women were baptized and lived their lives as Christians, yet still carried around items such as talismans, unable to throw them away (Chu 2008: 150). This illustrates how deeply ingrained these beliefs were,

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<sup>2</sup> A tactile writing system similar to braille. It is called a 4-point system because it uses one to four pairs of dots to make up each letter, meaning that each letter can have between one and eight dots. In contrast, braille is a 6-point system, where each letter is made from one to six dots.

and how the missionaries' efforts to save these girls from “superstition and corrupt practices” by turning them into Christians (Chu 2008: 152) were only partially successful.

It is clear that the Christian missionaries actively excluded the blind diviners, as one of the aims of their social work surrounding blind people was to remove them from what they perceived as evil and corrupt practices. Chu indicates that this was a way to control the actions of blind diviners through moralistic means (2008: 166), which is markedly different from how the colonial government tried to control the blind diviners, described below.

### 3.1.2 The Colonial Government

With the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910, the colonial government showed an immediate interest in the blind population of Korea. There is no definitive answer as to why this is, but Chu postulates that the interest shown by the colonial government could be due to an awareness of the active interest and institutionalization of blind people by the missionaries active in Korea. Chu further argues that the establishment of an institution called *Chesaengwŏn* in 1911, aimed at providing specialized education for blind people, might relate to this awareness of the missionaries' social work. There are several perspectives on the reasons behind the establishment of this institution, one being that it was established for the benefit of the Japanese people living in Korea, so that they had massagers available. Another perspective is that the establishing of an educational facility for blind people was used to display how Japan was modern and civilized, and additionally served as an example of the emperor's benevolence. An example that supports this perspective is that in books published by the colonial government in English in 1911, the education provided by *Chesaengwŏn* was brought up as a representative example of the advancements of the colonial era (2008: 153).

Looking more concretely at the services provided by *Chesaengwŏn*, they differed from the schools for the blind established by Christian missionaries. Here, both academic education and vocational training took place. This included education for the blind and the deaf, but the institution also took in orphans and took care of people with mental illnesses (Chu 2008: 153). Looking specifically at the education for blind individuals, they took classes in ethics, Japanese and Korean languages, arithmetic, music, etc. However, most of the classes provided were devoted to massage and related services, specifically acupuncture and moxibustion



therapy<sup>3</sup> (Chu 2008: 156-57, 162). Massaging took such a major role in the educational program because it had been the traditional occupation for blind people in Japan since the end of the 18th century. Despite its history, it was introduced as a modern occupation in Korea, even though Korea did not have the same established culture surrounding massage, and it was unrelated to the traditional occupations for blind people in Korea. This dissonance can be seen in how most of the clients of the massage facilities at the time were Japanese people residing in Korea, and after liberation, many facilities closed, due to a lack of customers after the Japanese left the country (Chu 2008: 157).

Returning to the colonial government's interest in the blind population in Korea, Chu notes that if one examines the funding allocations, it is clear that the government took the education of the blind into serious consideration from the very beginning of the annexation. The funding for establishing *Chesaengwŏn* came from the emperor's royal bestowment. In 1910, concurrently with the annexation, 30 million yen was paid out as royal bestowment to the colony, and of this, 500 thousand yen was allocated to *Chesaengwŏn*. Chu specifies how this funding was used to emphasize the kindness and grace of the emperor and colonial government. The aid and charity aspects, such as *Chesaengwŏn* also operating as an orphanage, were emphasized, and because of this, it operated as an aid institution (2008: 154-55). This differs from the way schools for the blind operated in Japan, as there was already a movement for distancing these schools from the concept of charity, instead moving towards the educational sphere (Chu 2008: 158).

### 3.1.2.1 “Breaking Superstition”

Although the colonial government did not actively exclude blind diviners in the same way as the Christian missionaries, the introduction of massage as a modern occupation for blind people still affected the perception of blind diviners (Chu 2008: 158). Moreover, the government enacted policies aimed at “breaking superstition”, which greatly affected blind diviners. During the 1910s, these policies were heavily enacted, and debates on how blind diviners were taking wealth from the common people also developed. Their practices were seen as deluding and deceiving the people, running counter to the colonial government's

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<sup>3</sup> Moxibustion therapy refers to the burning of moxa, made of ground mugwort leaves, on or near the skin.

civilization and enlightenment policies. This made the blind diviners subject to suppression, and if discovered, their divination and sutra chanting practices would be punished as a severe crime (Chu 2008: 166).

Going into the 1920s, these policies were more or less relaxed, and blind diviners were able to form a guild in 1925. However, at the end of the 1920s, a case involving medical practices similar to those of blind sutra chanters led to someone dying during the process. This generated a heightened awareness of divination, and being perceived as a social problem, the suppression of divination and sutra chanting practices began once more. There developed a degree of public consent to these “breaking superstition” policies within such varied groups as right-wing nationalists, socialist and Christian groups, and amongst regular young people (Chu 2008: 167).

Taking all these factors into account, it is clear that the colonial government significantly affected the lives of blind people in Korea, both in how the livelihoods of blind people changed, and how blind people in general, and blind diviners in particular, were perceived.

### 3.1.3 Competition in the Field of Social Work

As illustrated above, both the Christian missionaries and the Japanese colonial government had a vested interest in the socially disadvantaged. This resulted in a kind of competition between the two parties in the field of social work. Both aimed to extend their own modern institutions, and in the process, they both in some way otherized the traditional way of living for blind people (Chu 2008: 158).

As mentioned previously, Christian missionaries began working within Korea after the opening of the ports. Chu mentions how they were generally respected due to their devotion and self-sacrificial attitude and were actively spreading their social work across the country. In spite of this, with the consolidation of the colonial government, Japanese enterprises were strengthened, and the missionaries’ social work gradually faced more hardships.

*Chesaengwŏn*’s vocational training for the blind secured its expertise, monopolized the means to official licensing, and gained the upper hand when it came to teaching material, such as textbooks, which led to a gradual decline in the social work of the missionaries. There were

also issues concerning funding, as the great depression in the US led to a decrease in money coming in from abroad. This led to the school in Pyongyang having to temporarily close, but blind people in Korea were able to collect funds to reopen the school, even though they were also in a similarly poor financial situation. Then, starting in the middle of the 1930s, the school was funded through subsidies from the colonial government (Chu 2008: 159).

Moreover, at the start of the colonial period the teachers at the Pyongyang school for the blind did not learn Japanese and conducted lessons without Japanese textbooks. However, with the strengthening of *Chesaengwŏn* as the main institution for the education of the blind, the textbooks and teaching materials gradually started to be produced by the colonial government, which led to the missionary-affiliated teachers having to learn Japanese. Chu also points out that this resulted in the devaluing of the 4-point system developed by Hall in favor of the 6-point system used by the Japanese, and from the start of the 1930s the Pyongyang school also used the 6-point system (2008: 159). A large part of this shift was due to the increasing dominance of the 6-point system, as it was used at *Chesaengwŏn* and had widespread usage across the world. It also became clear that the 4-point system did not truly fit with the *han'gŭl* alphabet, which might have contributed to its demise (Chu 2008: 159).

Another issue facing the missionary-run schools identified by Chu was the system of licensing, since the colonial government held the vocational training and work-related license issuing rights. Those who graduated from *Chesaengwŏn* received acupuncture, moxibustion therapy, and massage licenses as they graduated, whilst those who graduated from a private school had to take a licensing and qualification test to acquire a license. This meant that the students studying at *Chesaengwŏn* received 3 licenses through a 3-year process, whilst some of those who studied at a private school went through a 6-year process just to take the massage licensing test, and then might not even receive a license, as the test was notoriously difficult to pass (Chu 2008: 161).

All these factors combined led to the decline of the missionaries' social work within Korea. The missionaries were initially superior in their expertise surrounding social work. Despite this, through a lack of development compared to the efforts of the colonial government, the scale and financial aspects of the missionaries' work were weakened and resulted in the colonial government taking over this area of influence (Chu 2008: 163). Attitudes changed, and the once well-respected missionaries were looked upon negatively, both by the Japanese,

and the people of Korea (Chu 2008: 162). In addition to this, Western missionaries were deported by the Japanese colonial government in 1942 (Chu 2008: 152), cementing the government's hold on the field of social work.

### 3.1.4 Changes in Perception

By examining the practices of both the Christian missionaries and the colonial government, it is clear that both in some way contributed to the otherization of blind diviners and their practices. The modern education, the active exclusion by the missionaries, the positioning as recipients of charity, and the “breaking superstition” policies of the colonial government all played a part in this change in perception, and in how blind people were viewed in general.

As mentioned previously, blind diviners had a specific role in society during the Chosŏn period, both in the ritual roles they would embody during official ceremonies, and as the wise man the common people could turn to when in need of guidance. According to Chu, the decline of the diviners can be attributed to the introduction of Christianity, the establishing of schools, and the development of medicine, transportation, and mediums such as newspapers. Additionally, the spread of the rational and scientific mindset of the West enabled people to look at these diviners more analytically, which might have removed some of the mysticism surrounding them, and thus also removed some of their status and social standing.

Furthermore, the physical changes to society also impacted the perception of blind diviners. One example brought up by Chu is how, with the building of roads and railways, the fear of being harmed by evil spirits when straying from the road disappeared, which decreased the need for advice from those who knew the spirits. Consequently, as the way people related to the world around them changed, the blind diviners held a gradually smaller and smaller place in society (2008: 164).

The efforts of the colonial government to position massage as the modern occupation for blind people further cemented the blind diviners as “less civilized” (Chu 2008: 158) and in opposition to the modern society the colonial government was attempting to build. The view that the blind diviners’ practices were fraudulent even started to spread (Chu 2008: 164), further positioning the blind diviners as a societal problem. Chu uses survey data from 1921 and 1927 to showcase this shift from divination towards massage. According to this survey

data, in 1921, 1,737 blind people were engaged in divination and related practices, and 97 blind people were engaged in massage and related practices. In 1927 the number of blind people engaged in divination went down to 1,539, and the number of people engaged in massage went up to 383. Although the number of blind diviners was still much larger than the number of blind massagers, there is an indication that the number of blind diviners was decreasing, whilst the number of blind massagers was increasing. Chu does however mention that it is highly possible that the first survey in 1921 was not as thoroughly performed as the one in 1927, indicating that the numbers might not be fully accurate<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, these numbers only cover a limited timeframe, and not the entire colonial period. Thus, this data gives no indication of the changes after 1927, although Chu claims that the number of blind massagers continued to increase as more students graduated from *Chesaengwŏn* (2020: 92).

To understand why the number of blind diviners was still relatively high despite the increasingly negative attitudes towards them, one has to understand that everyone did not have equal access to the new "modern occupation". Many blind people, especially those who were poor, did not have the opportunity to partake in the education provided by the missionaries and the colonial government. For these people, divination remained their only means of survival. Chu indicates that the change in perception towards blind diviners and the policies aimed at "breaking superstition" affected these people the most, as they essentially had to choose between forgoing divination and starving to death, or practice divination and risk being beaten to death by the police (2020: 90). Because of this, Chu argues that those blind people who were engaged in divination were additionally marginalized compared to those blind people who were engaged in massage. Blind diviners generally had a lower socioeconomic status than blind massagers, and they did not receive the same kind of material support as those not engaged in divination (Chu 2020: 96). They were also socially ostracized due to the stigma surrounding divination practices, which meant that they were not only marginalized due to their disability, but also because of their occupation and economic vulnerability.

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<sup>4</sup> Chu indicates that the largest inaccuracy of the 1921 survey was the total population of blind people. In the 1921 survey the total number of blind people surveyed was 8,792, but in 1927, the number rose to 11,206. Chu postulates that this increase was not due to any actual drastic increase in the number of blind people in Korea, but instead that the first survey was simply not thorough enough. This is supported by the fact that the number of unemployed blind people surveyed rises significantly between the two surveys, from 5,305 in 1921, to 8,353 in 1927, making it highly possible that the first survey was simply not thorough enough, as unemployed blind people would likely be the most difficult to find and survey.

The positioning of blind people as recipients of charity also greatly affected the attitude towards them. As previously described, blind people enjoyed a comparatively independent lifestyle during the Chosŏn period. However, the language surrounding the social work enacted by the missionaries and the colonial government was that of charity, which had long-lasting effects on the social position of blind people in Korea. This change in social positioning could be seen as a loss of autonomy, a transition from being seen as people able to support themselves independently, to people in need of help and assistance to survive (Chu 2008: 164). Blind people also received government assistance during the Chosŏn period, but during that time they were not positioned as dependent in the same way they were during the colonial period. This indicates that the changing perceptions towards blind people was not necessarily tied to the act of receiving assistance in itself, but was instead tied to how this assistance was framed and perceived by the wider society.

Taking all of this into account, there were two shifts in perception occurring simultaneously. The blind diviners and their practices were otherized and demonized, whilst blind people in general were positioned as the recipients of charity, in need of help and assistance. This created a dissonance in the way blind people came to be viewed in society, and Chu points out the two emerging images of blind people. On the one hand, there was the blind diviner who scoffed at society through their practice of divination, and on the other hand, there was the poor/pitiful blind person in need of protection and charity. These two conflicting views were one issue that arose within the missionaries' and colonial government's efforts to win blind people over to a modern way of life (2008: 168), but the perception of blind people as recipients of charity still lived on after liberation from the Japanese (Chu 2008: 164).

### 3.2 Blind Diviners' Organizational Activities

Judging by the information provided so far, it might seem that the fate of blind diviners lay at the hands of those in power: first the government aid during the Chosŏn period, then the social work of the Christian missionaries and Japanese colonial government. This characterization is not entirely true, as blind diviners as a group have a long history of organizing for their own mutual benefit.

As previously mentioned, *Maengch'ōng*, a private organization for blind diviners, was established during the late Chosŏn period. Through this organization, blind diviners organized economic and educational activities, and it had its own set of principles (Chu 2020: 87). These principles were dictated by a doctrine called “5 hun-gwa 5 kye” (5훈과 5계). The doctrine emphasized the mutual-aid principle of the organization, as well as the importance of taking care of people who came into hardship. It also emphasized the importance of not hiding how much one earned and paying up to support other blind people. This support was organized through a traditional Korean type of private fund called *kye* (계, 契), which essentially acted as a mutual aid fund. Members of the organization paid into the fund based on their earnings, and the funds were then distributed to those within the organization who needed support (Chu 2020: 88). This type of economic activity was made possible by the system of collecting sutra chanting fees from the members of the organization, and it is estimated that, in general, approximately 10% of the money earned through sutra chanting by blind diviners had to be paid in fees (Chu 2020: 89).

During the *Taehan Cheguk* (대한제국: Korean Empire) and the colonial period, *Maengch'ōng* appears to have existed only in name, but thanks to the arduous efforts of some blind diviners the organization was revived. Through gathering and organizing that started in 1924, the blind diviners established a guild in 1925 (Chu 2020: 87). Chu suggests that this change into a guild was related to the changing trends in society rather than any great changes within the organization. Ostensibly it meant a transfer of a traditional organization into a new organizational form<sup>5</sup>. There still occurred some significant changes through this transition, the largest being the repeal of the cast-based rank system. The distinction did however remain implicitly as it was still possible to know what rank someone had belonged to previously (2020: 88). In addition to this, there were some other organizational changes. While the basic organization of *Maengch'ōng* was still maintained, the members directly elected the chairman of the organization. Furthermore, after liberation, a trustee system was introduced, which became the beginning of a representative system. With these changes, the decision-making process and meeting proceedings became relatively democratic (Chu 2020: 89).

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<sup>5</sup> Another example testifying to the transformation of traditional associations into formal organizations in the 1920s can be found, for instance, here:

Kim, Joong-Seop. 2003. *The Korean Paekjōng under Japanese rule: the quest for equality and human rights*. London; New York: Routledge.

Chu identifies this organization as an example of how exclusion from the economic sphere can lead to the formation of a sense of collectiveness within a minority group. The reciprocal and communal economic activities of the blind diviners were beneficial not only for the group as a whole on a societal level, but also for the individuals within the group. Chu also emphasizes the importance of the perspective presented by the existence of these types of organizations, as they showcase the possibility of an alternative economy based on reciprocity (2020: 83-84).

In essence, the organizational activities of the blind diviners are representative of the culture of mutual aid that existed among them, a culture that continues to this day (Chu 2020: 89). Through these organizations, blind people helped each other survive in a world that did not always treat them kindly. This could be the reason why we still see these traditional practices continue to this day.

## 4. Modern period

### 4.1 Blind Diviners' Organizational Activities

Moving into the period after liberation from the Japanese, there was an initial decrease in the public activities of blind diviner's organizations due to a renewed Christian influence that aimed to suppress these "unscientific" practices. Despite this, the number of blind people practicing divination gradually increased after liberation. This was due to the previously mentioned decrease in the number of customers visiting massage parlors after the Japanese left the country, as many blind massagers lost their means of survival, and had to find another way of supporting themselves. This caused the blind diviners' guild to expand and led to a general increase in the organizational activities of blind diviners (Chu 2020: 94).

The diviners' guild became affiliated with the Korea Blind Union (사단법인 한국맹인복지협회<sup>6</sup>) in 1956, under the name "Great Assembly for Blind Divination"

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<sup>6</sup> The current name of the organization is "사단법인 한국시각장애인연합회" the only difference being the specific word used to mean "blind"; <http://www.kbuwel.or.kr/>



(대한맹인역리대성회). In a process that began in 1969, the blind diviners aimed to achieve national recognition for their organization. This culminated in the organization successfully becoming a corporation in 1971, under the name “Korean Society for Blind Divination” (대한맹인역리학회<sup>7</sup>). Chu notes that this push towards turning the organization into a corporation was partly due to the previously mentioned recognition it would afford the organization, as the formalization of the organization into a corporation indicated official recognition from the government. Another substantial reason for this shift was the long-term possibilities for educational activities, such as creating a university, that would be made possible by the transition. There was indeed an attempt at establishing a university, but it did not succeed. Still, this further showcases the blind diviners’ openness towards adapting their organization to a changing society, an aspect that Chu highlights as a reason for how the organizational activities of these blind diviners have been so long lasting (2020: 99).

In addition to the Korean Society for Blind Divination, an affiliated organization called “Korea Welfare Association for the Blind” (대한맹인복지회) officially began its operations in 1997 (Chu 2020: 100). Chu indicates that this organization was established because it would be easier to receive government support for welfare-related endeavors for a formal social welfare organization. This organization held lectures and would host vocational training for blind diviners (2020: 101).

Chu notes that although there were several organizational changes throughout this period, the central principles and basic operations of the organization remained the same. There was still an emphasis on apprenticeship-style education, and funds were still secured through the collection of sutra chanting fees (2020: 104). A system reminiscent of the type of private fund, *kye*, that existed in the organization during the Chosŏn period, was thus also present during this time. This system was essentially a way for the organization to collect some additional funds by lending money to its members. This was mutually beneficial, as the increase in funds made it possible for the organization to provide its members that were in need, specifically those who had suffered a loss within the family, with financial help, and it also made it possible for the members to acquire a low-interest loan, which they could use to

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<sup>7</sup> The current name of the organization is “대한시각장애인역리학회”, and once again the only difference is the specific word used to mean “blind”; <http://kbfo.or.kr/>

purchase a house or other property (Chu 2020: 104-105). Chu indicates that the need for this system arose due to the difficulty for blind people, and disabled people in general, to receive a loan from a bank, or even to open a bank account (2020: 107). Because of this difficulty, blind people had to organize their own communal financial system to be able to gather capital, which Chu argues was made possible thanks to the already existing community-centered economic culture of the blind diviners' organizations (2020: 109). These money-lending practices saw a decline moving into the 1990s, which Chu suggests was at least partially due to a decrease in the amount of discrimination blind people faced within the financial sphere, leading to increased access to conventional financial institutions (2020: 105).

This section gave a brief overview of how the organizational activities of blind diviners continued to develop after the colonial period. The following section will focus on a specific aspect of the organizational activities of blind diviners: blind diviners' villages. Some of the organizations mentioned above will appear in the next section as well, but it is by no means representative of all the activities performed by blind diviners during the period, as it only focuses on the activities in a specific area, although this area was particularly relevant to the organizational activities of blind diviners.

## 4.2 Diviners' villages

After liberation from the Japanese, a new organizational structure appeared for blind diviners. This structure involved blind diviners taking up residence in one area, thus creating a diviners' village. This section is primarily based on the research performed by Pak and Chŏng and is thus limited to the scope of their research article. Therefore, this section will not focus on diviners' villages in general, but specifically on Seoul and the diviners' villages that appeared there, specifically the village in Dongseon-dong [Tongsŏn-dong]. Owing to this case study approach, not everything said about the specific diviners' villages in this section will be generally applicable. The aim is that the focus on the specifics of the development of the village in Dongseon-dong will still lend some insights into the development of the phenomenon, and how it interacted with the larger society on a national, regional, and community level.

Before diving into the descriptions of diviners' villages, it is necessary to understand one of the central concepts of the research conducted by Pak and Chǒng, specifically spatial exclusion. The authors argue that an understanding of the socio-spatial environment (referring to the sociological aspects of a space) is particularly pertinent in the case of the diviners' village in Dongseon-dong, and that it is a useful perspective for analyzing the exclusion or inclusion of the blind diviners operating within the village (2019: 112).

### Spatial exclusion

The working definition of exclusion used by Pak and Chǒng is: "Being in a state (or the process of reinforcement of) differentiation and separation from the qualification to fairly access various services, opportunities and support from society in various aspects such as political, economic, cultural and residential" (2019: 113). The spatial aspects of this exclusion can take the form of a lack of access to certain spaces, or some degree of physical segregation of the affected group (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 114). Some examples of this could be the lack of access ramps to public buildings, excluding wheelchair users from those spaces, or the creation of rich and poor neighborhoods within a city, effectively segregating the population, which can result in issues such as food deserts in poorer neighborhoods.

Pak and Chǒng emphasize the importance of looking at spatial exclusion, as it is often tied to social and other forms of exclusion. Especially for disabled people, the exclusion they face tends to be dynamic and multidimensional, increasing the importance of studying its different facets (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 113-114). Furthermore, the achievement of spatial inclusion, or the lack of spatial exclusion, is described by Pak and Chǒng as, on the most basic level, all inhabitants being able to secure a livable residential space. This further emphasizes the importance of studying the question of spatial exclusion/inclusion, as this is one of the most basic requirements for being able to engage with society on an equal footing with others (2019: 116).

### 4.2.1 The Origins of Blind Diviners' villages

As mentioned previously, blind diviners were actively engaging in communal activities through their divination organizations ever since the Chosŏn period. Pak and Chŏng point out that although there are ample records detailing this type of organizational activity during the Chosŏn period, no records can be found that showcase blind diviners' organizations settling into diviners' villages (2019: 117). In other words, this is seemingly a new phenomenon that appeared during the modern period. Pak and Chŏng argue that one of the main reasons for the lack of diviners' villages was the generally positive societal view of divination and blind diviners during the period. They argue that the discrimination faced by blind diviners was not bad enough to force diviners to reside together. The second reason brought up by Pak and Chŏng is the difference in the way divination and sutra chanting was performed compared to the modern period. During the Chosŏn period, it was not uncommon to see diviners venture into the street to perform divination whilst waiting for their next customer, and sutra chanting was generally performed within the customer's residence, or at a special location. Because of this, Pak and Chŏng argue that a specific organized place where blind diviners lived would likely have had no meaning or use (2019: 117).

Pak and Chŏng instead identify the origins of this form of organizing in the "breaking superstition" policies. Due to the changes in perception and intensifying discrimination towards blind diviners during the late Chosŏn period and Japanese colonial period, the need for this type of organized diviners' village appeared (2019: 117). Despite this, the first appearance of a blind diviners' village was not recorded until after liberation. Pak and Chŏng argue that this was a result of how intense the efforts to control and regulate blind diviners were, with legal measures such as imprisonment and fines making it difficult and dangerous to organize into villages, as they would become easier targets (2019: 117). They claim that the changes in perception towards diviners that were facilitated through the "breaking superstition" policies were the root of the move towards organizing into diviners' villages, but that this organizational form could only begin appearing after liberation, when these types of policies were not as strictly enforced as previously. Some uncertainty surrounding this issue does still exist, and further research is needed to provide a more definitive reason for the appearance of blind diviners' villages.

## 4.2.2 After liberation (1950s-1970s)

Blind diviner's villages first began to appear at the beginning of the 1950s with the Korean war. In Seoul, a diviners' village formed in what is today Namchang-dong, right next to Namsan Mountain. Pak and Chŏng identify three general factors for why the village appeared in this specific location, and at this time. Firstly, the impoverishment after the Korean war led to an increased number of people telling fortunes on the street. Secondly, the whole region of Namchang-dong was frequented by people coming and going to the adjacent Namdaemun Market and Namsan Park. This made it an ideal position for fortune-telling, owing to the high flow of people. Lastly, many of the blind diviners in the Namsan diviners' village were defectors from the north. Blind people who crossed the border after liberation often settled in Haebang-chon (another area adjacent to Namsan), and some settled on the skirt of Namsan to be able to maintain a livelihood through divining. All these factors contributed to the formation of the Namsan diviners' village (Pak and Chŏng 2019: 118). It is however possible that other factors not mentioned by Pak and Chŏng also contributed to why the diviners' village was formed at Namsan. For instance, during the late Chosŏn period, there existed an important Shaman's temple at Namsan, which could also have contributed to the placement, as the mountain was spiritually significant<sup>8</sup>.

The Namsan diviners' village enjoyed its heyday during the 1960s, which was sustained until the early 1970s. Despite this, Pak and Chŏng showcase how, during the latter part of the 1960s, blind diviners became subject to spatial exclusion due to the redevelopment projects at Namsan. There was an increased importance put on the city center, as well as a lack of housing, which led to attempts to relocate the unauthorized settlements within the city center to the outskirts of the city (2019: 118). This heavily affected the Namsan blind diviners' village, as unauthorized roadside villages in all of Namsan were demolished and relocated between 1968-1972, which included the demolition of many blind diviners' establishments. Pak and Chŏng point out that these redevelopment projects were not only meant to improve and systematically reorganize the city center, but also served a secondary role in eliminating and hiding a negative aspect of the city, that being the divination and sutra chanting practices

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<sup>8</sup> Further information on the temple at Namsan:

Walraven, Boudewijn. 1998. "Interpretations and reinterpretations of popular religion in the last decades of the Chosŏn Dynasty". *Korean Shamanism: Revivals, Survivals, and Change*, ed. Keith Howard, 55-72. Seoul: Seoul Press/Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society

of the blind diviners (2019: 119). The origins of this secondary goal can be found within the renewed “breaking superstition” movement, which was actively driven forward due to the New Village Movement that began in the early 1970s (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 118).

### 4.2.3 The Formation of the Miari Diviners’ Village

Owing to the demolition of the Namsan diviners’ village, many blind diviners instead moved into another area of Seoul: Dongseon-dong in the district of Seongbuk-gu. Here, a new diviners’ village was formed, commonly referred to as Miari<sup>9</sup> diviners’ village or Dongseon-dong diviners’ village, although there are more variations on the name in Korean.

The first blind diviners began settling in Miari village in 1966, and the village gradually grew as more diviners moved in during the 1970s. Pak and Chǒng illustrate the relationship between the demolition of the Namsan village and the expansion of the Miari village, as there were only two diviners’ establishments in Miari in 1970, but after the demolition in and around 1972, they claim that the number of establishments increased rapidly (2019: 118). Pak and Chǒng indicate that the increased number of blind diviners moving into Miari village was not only because other blind diviners were already living there, but also because there was an increasing attitude of openness towards blind diviners within the area, at least compared to other regions, where they might face outright rejection. Furthermore, the Korean Society for Blind Divination had its Seoul office relocated to Dongseon-dong in 1978, which contributed to the development of the community of blind diviners within the area (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 120)

Besides the social reasons behind the development of the Miari diviners’ village in Dongseon-dong, Pak and Chǒng also identify the spatial reasons behind the development at this specific location. They argue that the main reasons for the development in Miari Ridge were the cheap price of land and the large number of people circulating through the area. In 1937, during the Japanese colonial period, the Donam Land Readjustment Project took place in the area and left it with many residential houses. Later, the area was designated as a refugee resettlement district, and poor and working-class people who were displaced due to the demolishing of

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<sup>9</sup> Referring to Miari Ridge, the specific location within Dongseon-dong where the village is located.

unauthorized settlements in the city center resettled in this area, which drove down the land prices. The large number of people circulating in the area was partially because of the construction of the Miari Ridge overpass in 1966, which transformed the area into a connecting point between central Seoul and the outskirts of the city. This was positive for the diviners in the area, as the large number of people passing through meant a larger customer base and made the expansion of the Miari diviners' village possible (Pak and Chŏng 2019: 119).

#### 4.2.4 The Development of the Miari diviners' Village (1980s-1990s)

During the 1980s the Miari blind diviners' village faced a period of economic prosperity, which lasted until the beginning of the 1990s. Pak and Chŏng emphasize the importance of the efforts of the blind diviners during the 1970s to expand and invigorate Miari village, but they also bring up the relevance of the external environment to this economic success. They suggest that there is a misconception surrounding the relationship between the external economic situation and the success of divination. This misconception is that divination would prosper during times of economic hardship, as people would seek guidance in times of uncertainty. In their research Pak and Chŏng showcase that this is not the case, and that divination actually prospers in times of economic stability and prosperity (2019: 120).

Diving deeper into the economic prosperity of the 1980s, despite this success, not all the blind diviners within the village achieved economic security. This was at least partially due to internal competition, as Pak and Chŏng claim that the large number of diviners active within the village all had varying levels of success and income. Although the village as a whole seemed to thrive, the internal competition caused many blind diviners to still face economic hardships (2019: 120).

During the 1980s blind diviners still faced exclusion, and their access to cultural and social activities was limited, owing to a continuing negative perception towards blind diviners. Pak and Chŏng elaborate on this limited access for blind diviners, showcasing how it was tied to limited mobility, a lack of leisure time outside of business activities, and a lack of space for cultural activities within the community. There were some efforts to alleviate these issues and increase the social and cultural welfare for blind people in the area. One example is the

construction of a braille library in Dongseon-dong that began in 1989 but was delayed due to a lack of funding. The library was finally able to open in 1992, thanks to the efforts of the blind diviners in the area, using assets from the Korean Society for Blind Divination as well as funds gathered by the individual members. After 1998 the library was transformed into the Seongbuk Welfare Center for the Blind<sup>10</sup> (성북시각장애인복지관), which turned the building into a space for cultural, societal and educational activities (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 121).

Pak and Chǒng point out that the construction of this library not only had issues with funding, but also with resistance from the local population in Dongseon-dong. There was a lack of understanding towards disabled people, as well as a lack of developed relationships and connections between the blind diviners and the other residents. Therefore, for the successful construction of the library there was a need to resolve the local residents' resistance and prejudice towards facilities for disabled people (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 121).

After the 1980s prosperity, another issue arose for the blind diviners of Miari village. Because the adjacent Miari overpass was chronically congested, the road was widened in 1989, which led to part of the Miari diviners' village being demolished (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 121). During the planning of the road expansion project, efforts were taken to invite public participation and take into consideration the local environment, and steps were taken to ensure the cultural value of the area and the living-environment for the local residents. However, Pak and Chǒng point out that throughout this process no consideration was given to the effect the project's demolishing of residences, especially those of the blind diviners that were crowded next to the road, would have on their residents. Moreover, no consideration was given to the cultural value of the Miari diviners' village, which had come to be representative of the area. This had a negative effect on the Miari village, as many blind diviners' establishments were demolished. It also had the additional effect of physically hiding a large part of the village from view from the overpass, as the difference in height between the expanded overpass and the village became quite large. This resulted in the remaining blind diviners' establishments having a subsequent decrease in customers, which severely impacted the economic prosperity of the village (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 122).

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<sup>10</sup> Affiliated with the *Korea Welfare Association for the Blind* that was mentioned previously.



Following this, the period of prosperity for the Miari village had its definitive end with the 1997-1998 national economic crisis. Pak and Chǒng point out that the subsequent decline was not simply due to the economic situation. Due to the high level of unemployment, an increasing number of people took up divination, which increased competition within the field, and negatively affected the Miari village. Furthermore, the rise of the internet also led to increased competition, as there was a boom in online divination services (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 120).

#### 4.2.5 Discrimination Faced by Blind Diviners

The lack of concern for, and negative attitudes towards blind diviners not only created the larger-scale issues of resistance towards projects for blind people, and the demolition of many blind diviners' establishments. It also affected people on an individual level. Pak and Chǒng mention several examples of the type of discrimination blind diviners in the area would face on a day-to-day basis.

As mentioned above, one of the issues facing blind diviners in the Dongseon-dong area was the negative attitudes of the residents. Pak and Chǒng bring up interview material from blind diviners in the area, showcasing how local residents disliked facilities for disabled people, and disliked the idea of disabled people living in the area. This showcases a clear prejudice towards the blind aspect of the blind diviners' identity, but the discrimination towards blind diviners was multidimensional, and also included the fact that they practiced divination and sutra chanting. Although Pak and Chǒng illustrate that there was an attitude of acceptance towards blind diviners in the Dongseon-dong area, this attitude was more superficial, and though their treatment was better here than in many other parts of the country, there are still negative attitudes and discrimination towards diviners (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 121).

Another issue faced by the blind diviners was resistance from religious circles. For example, in the middle of the 1990s, the Seongbuk-gu District Office (성북구청) planned to set up a traditional street focusing on sutra chanting and divination, as well as establishing a "world day of fortune-telling". Pak and Chǒng indicate that this project was unsuccessful because of opposition from religious communities, specifically on the grounds that it would promote superstition (2019: 121).

Lastly, from a spatial perspective, Pak and Chǒng point out that housing was an issue for many blind diviners. Although Dongsǒn-dong had low land prices and a general openness towards divination compared to other areas, diviners, even those without any disabilities, had trouble finding secure housing, and landlords were hesitant to rent to them. Furthermore, Pak and Chǒng showcase that the number of blind diviners who opened their establishments through purchasing property was minimal, which resulted in some diviners frequently moving around, and they even mention situations where someone moved to a different region because they were unable to find housing (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 121).

As demonstrated above, blind diviners are both excluded because of their blindness, and because of their occupation. This leads Pak and Chǒng to raise the importance of looking at these multiple dimensions when examining exclusion and inclusion. In the case of blind diviners, it is not enough to understand how they are excluded due to their disability, or how they are excluded due to their occupation alone. These factors are interconnected and contribute to the unique experiences faced by blind diviners, and to understand these experiences one has to examine the social, economic, and spatial perspective, as well as looking at the national, regional, communal, and interpersonal level (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 122).

#### 4.2.6 A New Appreciation (2000-2019)

Coming into the 2000s there was not much change in the situation for the Miari diviners' village, but moving into the 2010s there was a resurgence of appreciation for the practices of blind divination and blind sutra chanting, specifically focusing on its historical and cultural value.

##### Legal and Institutional Recognition of Blind Diviners

Starting in 2010, Miari diviners' village began garnering interest on the Seoul city level. Pak and Chǒng demonstrate how the pushback against an increasingly monolithic and standardized city of Seoul led to an increased emphasis on the historic nature of different locations, and a focus on urban regeneration, as opposed to the pre-2000s policies of

demolition and urban redevelopment. With this new mindset, Miari village became recognized as a historically valuable part of the city. In 2014 the village was designated as Seoul Future Heritage under the name “Miari Chömsöngch'on” (미아리 점성촌), a designation that is meant to protect and prevent any destruction or damage of modern or contemporary cultural artifacts (Pak and Chöng 2019: 122). Pak and Chöng argue that this designation is significant as it showcases that the village is now seen as having value, a value that is worth passing on to future generations. They also argue that it is significant as it solidifies the Miari village as a public place that holds importance not only to blind diviners, but also to the residents of Dongseon-dong, and the population of Seoul as a whole (Pak and Chöng 2019: 123).

In 2014 the village was also picked as the location for a “village vacation” event that took place within Seoul. The event not only brought interest to Miari village, but it also involved installing direction boards and maps, a story photo zone, a fortune telling-themed sculpture, etc. It also involved folk culture and art programs and activities where people could experience divination and sutra chanting. Pak and Chöng specify that these activities were intended to increase the local residents’ understanding of blind diviners, and to also promote the area as a tourist attraction. This was not only meant to increase the visibility of the diviners’ village, as well as improving people’s perception of blind diviners, but it also intended to improve the economic security for the blind diviners in the area, by inducing people to visit the village (2019: 123).

Moving on to divination-related education, in 2018 the Seongbuk Welfare Center for the Blind was designated as a vocational ability development training institution through the support of the Korea Disabled People’s Development Institute (한국장애인개발원). This meant that the Seongbuk Welfare Center for the Blind was able to provide financial support to those receiving education on divination. Pak and Chöng point out that this financial support entailed the recognition of divination as a legitimate occupation for blind people and contributed to the expansion and passing down of the traditions of blind diviners (2019: 123).

Additionally, in 2005, 2007, and 2014, Seoul’s regional sutra chanting practices were chosen for a project within Seoul that aims to protect traditional art and culture. It was also designated as a Seoul Intangible Cultural Asset in 2017, under the name “Seoul Blind Sutra

Chanting” (서울맹인독경), and at the yearly Seoul Intangible Cultural Festival blind sutra chanters have consistently held sutra chanting performances. Pak and Chŏng claim that this institutional recognition of sutra chanting played a role in widening people’s understanding and perception of sutra chanting, including the residents of Dongseon-dong. They emphasize the specific importance of this recognition of sutra chanting, as the practice of sutra chanting is generally not performed in a private space, like a diviner’s establishment, but is usually performed in a more public place. Even if the sutra chanting is performed in a private residence, the sound of reading the sutras, as well as any visual aspects such as the instruments that are brought to the performance, makes sutra chanting more visible, and therefore also more vulnerable. Pak and Chŏng reason that the additional negative attitudes towards sutra chanters owing to their visibility were somewhat countered by the designation as a Seoul Intangible Cultural Asset, and that the designation also contributes to an expanded understanding of divination and sutra chanting practices (2019: 123).

### Local Community Activities

In 2014, a project called *Miindo*<sup>11</sup> (미인도<sup>12</sup>) was established by the Seongbuk Cultural Foundation (성북문화재단) and the Arts Council Korea (한국문화예술위원회). The project involved designating the area underneath the Miari overpass as a community space meant for community regeneration and art activities. Pak and Chŏng indicate that the space has continually been utilized for markets, workshops, networking parties, and other activities (2019: 124), and by looking through the project’s website it is clear that these activities are still continuing (as of May 2021).



Figure 1: Picture of an event at the Miindo community space.  
Source: Hill Village Cooperative, Seongbuk Cultural Foundation  
(협동조합고개엔마을, 성북문화재단)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.meindo.net/>

<sup>12</sup> The name is an acronym for “미아리, 사람, 도시”, translating to “Miari, People, City”.

The *Miindo* community space has hosted several events that focus on blind diviners. To celebrate the beginning of operations in 2015 a sutra chanting performance was held, and art relating to blind diviners was displayed. In 2016 the Seongbuk-gu Regional Office hosted a project focused on the historical and cultural value of the Miari Ridge area, which led to an increased number of activities related to blind diviners. Some of the activities set in motion by this project were the publication of a storybook relating to the development of the Miari area, hosting sutra chanting performances and opportunities to experience divination in the *Miindo* community space, culture and history lectures relating to the Miari diviners' village, tours of the local area, as well as other community activities. Pak and Chǒng argue that activities like these helped the local residents recognize the cultural and historical value of Miari diviners' village and the practices of divination and sutra chanting. They also mention the significance of these activities, and the community space in general, for the inclusion of blind diviners in the local community. These activities allow them to build relationships with local residents and allows the local residents to become more familiar with these historically and culturally significant practices, creating a mutually beneficial exchange (Pak and Chǒng 2019: 124).

#### Independently Organized Projects

Looking at the communal level, there are several organizations run by blind diviners that are working against the exclusion of blind diviners, which have already been mentioned. One example is the Korean Society for Blind Divination, which holds the role of a political organization, and works to protect and expand the rights of blind people, as well as the business rights of blind diviners. Another example is the Seongbuk Welfare Center for the Blind, a foothold for education and the development of the abilities of blind diviners, that assists blind people in accessing cultural and social activities. For instance, they hold yoga and singing classes, organize a culture plaza, and screen movies. These types of programs are not only aimed at blind people but also include the participation of the other local residents. Pak and Chǒng note how this, similarly to other communal activities, is used to develop relationships with the local residents, and to improve the perception of blind diviners (2019: 125).

Going back somewhat into the 1990s, another project that was independently developed by blind diviners was the initiative in 1997 to standardize the signage of the different diviners' establishments. This included maintaining the signs outside of the different houses, as well as taking care of any illegal installments. The purpose of this project was to improve the image of the Miari village through the standardization of signage (Pak and Chŏng 2019: 125), and the change can be observed in figure 2 and 3<sup>13</sup>.



Figure 2: Miari diviners' village before the standardization of signage in 1997.

Source: Seongbuk Village Archives (성북마을아카이브)

Another more recent example is the webpage “*Sorisaju*”<sup>14</sup> (소리사주), developed in 2013 with support from the Korea Disabled People's Development Institute, and was meant to help blind diviners gain experience with phone and internet consultations, which Pak and Chŏng note was a way of furthering the socio-economic expansion of blind diviners' activities (2019: 125).



Figure 3: Miari diviners' village after the standardization of signage in 1997. The three signs to the right showcase the new standardized signage.

Source: Seongbuk Village Archives(성북마을아카이브)

When looking at the interest and activities related to Miari diviners' village on a national and local level, this interest can be found both on a legal and

institutional level, with the local administration of Seoul city and Seongbuk-gu district, with regular citizens, the residents of Dongseon-dong, and the blind diviners themselves.

Pak and Chŏng do however emphasize that the participation and influence of the blind diviners, the Korean Society for the Blind, and the Seongbuk Welfare Center for the Blind is very clear. In this way, the efforts of the blind diviners were central to the increased interest in the Miari diviners' village, and divination and sutra chanting practices, during the 2010s (Pak and Chŏng 2019: 125).

<sup>13</sup> <https://archive.sb.go.kr/isbcc/home/u/index.do>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.sorisaju.co.kr/>

## 4.3 Changes in perception

As showcased above, the “breaking superstition” policies, and the shift in the societal role and societal perception of blind diviners that occurred during the colonial period, had long lasting effects on the lives of blind diviners. Pak and Chŏng point out the continuous prejudice and lack of understanding towards blind diviners and their practices, something that blind diviners’ themselves have worked against through numerous different endeavors. Blind diviners developed different strategies to overcome their own exclusion from general society, such as organizing into diviners’ villages, or fostering their own communal financial systems.

On a national level, massage was still the occupation that was associated with blind people, as the previously mentioned *Chesaengwŏn* was changed into the National School for the Blind after liberation. In 1963, licensing education for blind massagers was implemented, further showcasing the government's recognition of blind massagers, something not afforded to blind diviners at the time (Pak and Chŏng 2019: 118). However, moving into the 2010s, there was a clear increase in the legal and institutional support for blind diviners, demonstrating an increased appreciation for the cultural and historical value of blind diviners’ practices, and the blind diviners’ village in Miari.

## 5. Conclusion

As demonstrated in this thesis, several things have changed for the blind diviners living in Korea. Using a literature review, this thesis aimed to showcase these changes, and provide a historical overview of blind diviners in Korea, focusing on the organizational activities of blind diviners, and changes in perceptions towards blind diviners.

The first records of blind diviners, found in the *Koryŏsa*, suggest that the phenomenon appeared at the end of the Koryŏ period. Moving into the Chosŏn period, the practice saw a boom. Blind people during this period benefited from government policies that supported them not only as people in need, but also as people capable of independence.

The colonial period was a time of great change for Korean society, which also extended to the lives of blind people. Owing to the influences of Christian missionaries and the Japanese colonial government, there was a dramatic shift in the attitude towards blind people. Despite the hostile environment towards blind diviners, they were still able to continue some of their organizational activities during the colonial period.

After liberation, these organizational activities continued, with several structural changes that helped them adapt to the changes of society. The negative attitudes towards blind diviners also continued, leading to exclusion and discrimination. Blind diviners were able to combat this exclusion through their organizational activities, including the development of the blind diviners' village in Dongseon-dong. In the 2010s there was an increase in the legal and institutional support aimed at blind diviners and their practices, as well as a new appreciation for their cultural and historical value.

In summary, the social position held by blind diviners in Korean society has changed significantly since they first appeared: from valued members of society to arbiters of corrupt and unscientific practice, to the new increasing perception as practitioners of a historically and culturally significant craft, that is worth protecting and elevating. There is no telling exactly how the situation for blind diviners will develop in the future, but with their newfound appreciation, there is some hope that these practices will not be completely forgotten.

Still, several aspects of the history of blind diviners remain unexplored. As there is very little literature available on this topic in English, any further research that explores the phenomenon of blind diviners would be a step in the right direction. When examining the literature available in Korean, there are still some aspects that have not been examined enough, such as how factors like gender, class, geographical location, etc. affect the experiences of blind diviners. The portrayal of blind diviners in the existing literature is somewhat monolithic, but Chu does elaborate on some of these factors in their 2020 book. Additionally, both Chu and Pak and Chŏng mention the need for expanding upon these factors, which may serve as suggestions for which direction future research shall take. Another avenue for further research would be to examine the blind diviners' role in relation to other disabled people, and possibly also apply different models of disability to the exploration of this topic.



As a final thought, if there is one thing that I wish that any reader takes away from this thesis, it is that the positions of disabled people are not rigid. The way society perceives and treats disabled people is ever changing, something clearly demonstrated in how drastically the social position of blind people changed during the colonial period in Korea. In this way, disabled people do not necessarily need to change to be accepted or appreciated in society, as it is possible for society to change and to understand and accept disabled people.

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<sup>15</sup> The English translation by the author of the original article is "From sorcerers to massagers: modernization/subalternization of the blind in colonial Korea", but as this is not a direct translation of the original Korean title, a more precise translation was provided by the author of this thesis.

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