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**Death and Taxes: A Korean Approach to Hell**

by Laurel KENDALL

One of the most terrifying personalities in the Korean folk pantheon is the Saja, or Death Messenger. The Death Messenger appears at the deathbed to snatch the soul away to judgment in the courts of Hell. In Korean shaman rituals for the dead, the Death Messenger appears in the person of a possessed shaman and stalks the guarded house door, prowling for a new victim. The Death Messenger bears a grim visage and an insatiable appetite.

In the hierarchy of the underworld, the Death Messenger serves Yomna, the King of Hell. The Death Messenger is the netherworldly equivalent of a yamen runner in the magistrates’ courts of the old Korean kingdom. The magistrate, as judge, was an awesome, distant, and vague presence, while the yamen runner intruded into the families of the accused with threats and demands. In the underworld (chiok), the Hell King commands a similar distance, but the Death Messenger lurks about the village byways, pouncing upon the unwary and hauling them away to justice.

In Korean funerals, the pallbearers sing of the Death Messenger’s journey to arrest a soul summoned by the Hell King:

By a chain thick like your forearm,

The body thin like a thread,

Is seized, tied and dragged away.

Surprised near death the soul takes flight.

“Listen to me honorable envoy,

“You must be hungry have some lunch,

“Let me prepare my shoes and then. . .

“Take some travel money and come.”

Will the messenger listen,

To supplication due to ten thousand loose ends?

 (Dix 1977: 213, his translation)1

But the Messenger hastens the soul away on an arduous journey “All the way to the main gate of the other world...” (ibid: 214).

In shaman rituals for the dead, the Death Messenger assumes a bold, vivid presence; the Hell King’s court is only glimpsed through a mist of [page 2] symbol. In their dealings with the middle-man, with the greedy Messenger from the underworld, Korean peasants most graphically dramatize the process of netherworldly justice, and it is this confrontation that I wish to consider here.

My remarks are based on nearly two years’ field work, in 1977 and 1978, in a place I call “Enduring Pine Village,” a rural community on the periphery of Seoul.

The dead are an ambivalent presence in Korean folk religion. One’s own familial dead are entitled to sustenance and succor from the living. Appropriate categories of ancestral dead are invited back into the home for periodic feasts and libations, for “ancestor worship.” Tending the ancestors, filial sons reveal the full measure of their virtue. But the dead are also a baleful presence. Ghostly wives try to carry living husbands away—and many succeed. A man who died in his prime hovers inauspiciously about his living family. An ancestral grandmother reaches out to fondly stroke her infant grandchild, and the baby sickens. Some dead souls—those who died young, violently, or filled with desire— bear envy or malice toward their living kin. Others, like the doting grandmother, act true to living form and are dangerous simply because they are dead When the dead are too much with the living, no good results. As a Korean proverb tells it, *chugunsonun kasisonida*, “the hand of the dead is like a hand of nettles”: it cannot touch living flesh without inflicting injury. Lurking familial dead must be exorcised, cast away from the house with a slice of a knife and a tearing of cloth to break their hold on living kinsmen.

When a housewife suspects the ominous presence of an unquiet soul meddling in the affairs of the living family, the housewife consults a shaman, or mansin. The mansin performs a divination. She shakes her bell rattle ana intones an invocation. Visions appear before her eyes and she asks her client increasingly specific questions: “Was there someone in your family who died far from home? Someone who, died dripping blood? Was there a bride who died young? A suicide who swallowed poison?” If the mansin’s visions bare her client’s family history, if her diagnosis confirms her client’s fears, the mansin will advise the woman to sponsor an elaborate ritual to guide the restless soul through Hell and into the Lotus Paradise.2

These rituals, called *Chinogi kut* in central Korea, combine and reconcile contradictory responses to the dead: obligation, aversion, and compassion.3 The family assists the soul through the perils of the underworld, pays an appropriate bribe to open an appropriate gate, and then sends the soul along the road out of Hell and into the Lotus Paradise. The living feed, console, and succor the dead while at the same time, they distance the dead, [page 3] they send the unquiet souls away “to a good place”(*chohundero*).

Korean popular religion incorporates the Chinese notion that Hell is a bureaucratic institution. The soul stands trial and receives appropriate, often excruciating punishment. The courts of Hell, vividly depicted in the iconography of Chinese popular religion (Eberhard 1967; Yang 1967: 2, 88), probably entered the Korean religious imagination with Buddhism. In Korean Buddhist temples, the Ten Kings of the Ten Courts of Hell have a separate shrine where the walls bear garish paintings of the tortures awaiting condemned souls. The dead are manacled, chained, strapped to wooden canques, flayed with knives, sawn in two, or cast adrift in vats of boiling oil. Isabella Bird Bishop, the intrepid gentlewoman traveler of the last century, called the Hell paintings “horrible beyond conception, and [they] show a diabolical genius...”(Bishop 1897: 136). One of my mansin informants provided her own moralistic descriptions of the Hell court:

There are twelve great gates in Hell, like the twelve great gates in the palace. You have to pay a special fee to pass each one. After you have passed through them all, you are judged by King Yomna. He asks,”Have you given food to those who are starving? Have you given clothes to those who have no clothes?” He knows the answers already; the facts are there; it doesn’t do any good to lie.

Those who insult people and give them trouble sit on cushions covered with needles. Thieves and murderers get their desserts. They go right into a vat of boiling oil. They dangle on a thick rope suspended from the celling and are dipped in and out.

Those who have lived good lives, she concluded, are sent to the flowery fields in paradise.

By Buddhist doctrine, the soul navigates hell for forty-nine days after death. Some Korean families hold a memorial service at a temple on the forty-ninth day; monks chant prayers to ease the soul’s passage. Shaman rituals are more flexible: the dead are led out of hell when their unquiet souls are the diagnosed cause of sickness or ill luck. A mansin might lead souls through the underworld and along the road to paradise months or even years after their demise. In the summer of 1977, I witnessed a send-off for a ghostly family from North Korea, reputed to have been executed during the Korean War and hastily buried in a common grave. A full quarter century had passed before a mansin drew a connection between their wretched fate and a run of domestic problems in their refugee niece’s household. [page 4] But when an unmarried young woman perished with her lover in 1977 on the night before the young man was to report for military service, the mother hesitated only a few months before consulting a mansin. The mansin determined that yes, indeed, the unlucky couple should be sent along the road, tidily sent as husband and wife.

A family may send on a particularly salient soul, or more often, they will use the occasion to send a cluster of ancestors away “to a good place.” Those who died young and without children are potentially the most dangerous, troubled souls, but lacking descendants, they have no one to “open the road” and release them from Hell. At a Chinogi kut for these ghosts, the family sends proper ancestors along the road first, in sequence by genealogical seniority. The less fortunate familial ghosts tag along in their wake.

A family sends off dead souls after honoring all of the gods inside the house with a nightlong kut. A kut is the mansin’s most elaborate ritual. Beginning outside the house gate at dusk, costumed shamans summon the gods and ancestors into the home. In the person of the possessed mansin, the household gods appear throughout the dwelling to be feasted and entertained. The ancestors appear, mourn with their living kin, and depart. By the following morning, the kut shifts from the house interior into the inner courtyard and finally out the gate. The *Chinogi kut* is held here, outside the house, at the end of the “inside” kut.4

Women prepare a fresh tray of offering food on the flat space in front of the gate. This tray is heaped with rice and delicacies for the ancestors. The women prepare a smaller tray with seven little mounds of rice for the seven Death Messengers who come to claim the soul. Kinswomen also prepare this “Death Messenger rice” (Sajabap) at the time of death and set it out with straw shoes for the journey.

The spectators at a kut anticipate the Death Messenger. A shaman disappears around the side of the house. She ties a cap of rough hemp cloth onto her head with rope and winds more rope around her waist. She thrusts a dried fish, wrapped in a length of hemp, into her belt to signify the dead soul. The rope belt, hempen head covering, and wooden staff all approximate traditional mourners, apparel. Now the mansin is ready to reappear as the Death Messeger.

She makes a bold entrance, her face twisted into a grotesque leer. She strides up to the house gate, but the women crowd the doorway to repulse the Death Messenger. Sometimes, the Death Messenger attempts to slither through the opening at an unguarded moment. The women rush into the breach, pushing, shoving, and tugging at the Death Messenger’s costume. [page 5] They defend the house, but with an air of playfulness.

The Death Messenger stalks through the crowd, demanding cash with an open palm and a leer. The Death Messenger approaches the ancestors, table, cackling with anticipation. Sometimes, the mansin smears her face and body with grease from the piled meat offerings. The Death Messenger tries to steal some of the fruit and sweets prepared for the ancestors. Irate women block these advances, insisting that ample food awaits on the Death Messenger’s own tray. This the Death Messenger invariably disputes before squatting down to gobble up vast quantities of food in a theatrically disgusting show of gluttony. The mansin crams food into her mouth, smearing her cheeks in the process. She spews the overflow into a dipper she holds beneath her chin, as if vomiting the excess.

The Death Messenger demands more cash, threatening to strike at the fish she carries to represent the soul. Kin stuff small bills and coins into the fish’s mouth. The Death Messenger threatens to cast the fish away altogether—but refrains and accepts more cash from the women who implore her to treat the dead soul well. The Death Messenger disappears around the side of the house, and the mansin removes her costume.

A mansin, dressed in the rinbow-sleeved costume of a princess or a bride, sings the long ballad of Princess Pari (Pari kongju), the seventh daughter of a sonless king and queen. The royal parents cast out this last unwelcome girl child, but Princess Pari, raised in obscurity and coached in magic, braved the perils of the underworld to find a magic herb and restore her parents to life, A “filial daughter,” Princess Pari inverts the idea of the filial son. Men give sustenance to their parents through ancestor worship after death; women—as shamans and clients—lead the dead through the dangers of Hell and restore them to life in the Lotus Paradise. The mansin say that they sing the ballad of Princess Pari’s journey to teach the dead the path through Hell. After the song, the mansin thrusts her open fan over her head. The fluttering fan indicates the Road Messenger’s (Toryong) descent. The mansin circumambulates the offering table in a paced dance to lead the dead through the underworld. Sometimes the deceased’s spouse and children, bearing incense and candles, follow the mansin in procession.

The mansin asks a fee to get the dead past the Thornwood Gate (Kasi Mun); she attaches the money to a branch bent in an arch over a basket.5 Relatives and neighbors hold out long strips of cloth, stretched taut in their hands, to make the road out of Hell. They put cash contributions on top of the cloth to help “open the road” and drape nylon clothes for the dead over the cloth road.

A mansin, fish “soul” bound to her waist, chants to Buddha. She [page 6] rushes at the cloth road. She jabs it with a knife and thrusts her body along the length of the fabric; the soul progresses. The mansin rips her way first through a length of coarse hemp, the road out of Hell; then she rips through a length of finer cotton, the road into the Lotus Paradise.

When death is recent, the mansin uses several yards of cloth as graphic illustration of a difficult, reluctant separation. Several times, the mansin stops her journey along the cloth and, speaking for the dead soul, declares her unwillingness to continue. The soul demands one last look at a favorite relative, bolts back inside the house, seizes kin or friends by the shoulders, and weeps. The women urge the unwilling soul, “Go on, go on. You’re going to a good place. Take your travel money and go.” Kin and friends must here acknowledge the necessity of separation and urge the tenacious dead to depart.

Once the soul is sent off, the family holds ancestor worship, or more appropriately, “mock ancestor worship.” The family’s proper ritual heir can, but does not necessarily, perform this rite. A junior son or nephew who happens to be handy, or even a wife or daughter-in-law can, with the man- sin’s coaching, offer cups of wine, rap a pair of chopsticks against a bowl, and bow, the essential gestures of a chesa rite. There is no congratulatory address, no spirit placing for the ancestor, and no extended prostrations by a group or junior male kin. Women and shamans merely approximate the form of a chesa as a fitting way to honor the dead. The dangerous, unquiet soul is settled; the respectworthy ancestor emerges. Immediately after the mock chesa, the dead make one final appearance in the person of the possessed mansin. With sobbing expressions of gratitude, they promise to help their living kin.

The ritual is complete. A mansin propitiates wandering ghosts and noxious influences with scraps of food and coarse grain she casts away into the field. The family burns the spirit clothes and the torn cloth “roads.”

Mansin borrow both the terminology and expressed intent of Buddhist ritual. In both Buddhist doctrine and in my mansin informant’s idealized explanations, punishment in the court of Hell makes just retribution for life’s transgressions. Justice may be seasoned with mercy only when sincere prayer inspires a bodhisattva’s intercession on behalf of the deceased (Clark 1961: 54). But shaman ritual adds a cynical twist to the legal process. Justice is tempered by cash and favors bestowed upon a corrupt supernatural functionary.

Scholars of Chinese religion have suggested a parallel between the traditional Chinese bureaucratic hierarchy of magistrates and the supernatural hierarchy of gods in popular religion.6 The parallel is most explicit [page 7] in the iconography of the courts of Hell where magistrates sit in judgment surrounded by lictors standing ready to administer punishment.

In her recent discussion of Chinese ritual and politics, Emily Ahern argues that “certain rituals can be analyzed as if they were forms of political activity”(Ahern 1981: 4). She suggests further that Chinese rituals contain “information that includes exact details about how the political system works as well as useful strategies for dealing with it”(ibid.: 5). Is this what transpires in the Chinogi kut?

The Korean polity borrowed upon an ambitious Chinese model for both good and ill. The Korean king—subordinate only to the Chinese emperor—sat at the apex of a centralized bureaucracy. Below him, provincial magistrates, and below them, county magistrates administered their territories from yamens that were palaces in miniature. They conducted local rituals synchronized to the ritual calendar of the court in Seoul. As in China, magistrates were appointed on the basis of their performance in a civil service examination and then sent to serve outside their home districts as a check against the claims of kinship. In practice, the system suffered many of the same limitations as its Chinese model. The magistrate’s lack of familiarity with the district had the unintended consequence of strengthening the hand of local notables or the sticky palms of the entrenched yamen staff, ajon, who collected fees, registered land for taxation, and worked a squeeze where they could. As in Chinese historiography, the corrupt underling has become a scapegoat for the kingdom’s ultimate demise. In fact, the ajon functioned within a “system of institutionalized corruption”(Palais 1975: 13). The local staff were not on the government payroll and were expected to sustain themselves through their own mercurial abilities (ibid.). In somewhat jaundiced accounts by early foreign observers, “The temptations of the ajun [sic] are very great. The whole revenue of the district passes through his hands, and it would be surprising if some of it did not stick to them”(Hulbert 1906: 55). Or, “The exuberant vocabulary in Corean for the various taxes, mines, mulcts, and squeezes of the understrappers of the magistrates in gross and in detail, chief and supplementary, testify to the rigors and expenses of being governed in Chosen” (Griffis 1911: 232).

Tax exemption and underreporting of taxable land by the local elite— in complicity with the yamen clerks—strained the magistrate’s budget and called again for some official squeezing to sustain the magistrate’s household, his personal staff, and his professional ambition. The magistrates were often subject to only weak supervision by the central government although, theoretically, they were monitored by secret censors (amhaeng [page 8] osa) who roamed the land in disguise (ibid.: 10,13; Henthorn 1971: 202; Chon 1975). This “check” yielded its own abuses (ibid.: 138). From a wry turn-of-the-century newspaper report: “Lately the interior towns have been crowded with royal inspectors, imperial inspectors, Home Department inspectors, inspectors of morals, and many other kinds of inspectors; thereby a good portion of the public and private funds have been spent in entertaining them and frequently considerable sums of money from Government revenues have been loaned to these worthies by the local officials in order to be on their right side” (The Independent, 4 December 1897).

The corrupt magistrate, the rapacious underling, and the righteous or fallible inspector appear in Korean folk tales and vernacular literature. One finds them today in costume dramas on Korean television.7 While some filthy lucre necessarily greased the administrative apparatus, thoroughgoing corruption was worthy material for drama or comedy—as in the Death Messenger Play, where the soul falls into the clutches of the Death Messenger, a supernatural counterpart of the extortionate yamen runner, the stock villain in nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts of Korean life. According to one Korean legal scholar:

A criminal prosecution meant an opportunity to extort money from the accused ana his family. It was a happy occasion for the law enforcement officials. Wretched underlings who went to arrest the accused demanded remuneration for their journey to and from the accused’s house (Hahm 1967: 87).

Once in prison, the arrested man’s family and friends would bargain for his release while clerks and jailers claimed a variety of fees to expedite the case or provide the prisoner with minimal comforts (Hulbert 1906: 57; Hahm 1967: 67). Rampant arrests were the mark of a corrupt administration. Consider, for example, an early newspaper expose of one Magistrate Yun, “whose disposition is dark, and whose heart is covetous and stingy, (who) employs those only who are skillful in the art of extortion... thirty runners and two detectives. Innocent people are arrested throughout the district like a string of fishes and locked up in jail. Eighty to ninety persons are always found in prison through no fault of their own”(The Independent, 9 June 1898). The author of an early “modern” Korean novel draws this unflattering parallel between a corrupt magistrate and the Hell King:

The people of P’yongan Province say they have two Hell Kings. One is in Hell, and one is the magistrate who sits in the yamen in P’yongan. The Hell King in hell snatches away the [page 9] old and sick who have become a burden to humanity but the magistrate snatches away all those who are healthy and wealthy (Yi 1906: 9-10,my translation).

In the *Chinogi kut*, it is the Death Messenger who imposes demands upon the family of a soul snatched away to judgment. The Death Messenger demands treats and cash favors to secure the good treatment of his charge. In dynastic times, a bribe from relatives or friends softened the number and severity of the inevitable blows the prisoner received in the *yamen* (Moose 1911: 186) much as women stay the Death Messenger’s hand with cash.

The typical Korean prison of the last century was a simple shelter with an earthen floor and no fire. The prisoner was dependent upon relatives and friends for food, warmth, and eventual release from torment (Hulbert 1906: 64, 182-4). Similarly, family and friends give the dead soul food, clothing, and travel money. They bribe the Death Messenger and pay the appropriate fee to open the Thornwood Gate. Without this aid, both the accused in prison and the soul in Hell might starve, suffer ceaseless agonies, and become malevolent ghosts.

One significant difference between the *Chinogi kut* and the rituals Ahern describes for China is the emphasis on bribery and corruption in the Death Messenger play. In the Chinese pantheon, ghosts and low gods are amenable to bribes, but for most significant transaction, supplicants have direct access to the impartial, incorruptible high gods. Bribery is unnecessary and irrelevant. One gives the high gods gifts out of respect, not in anticipation of special favors. Ahern finds here a single salient contrast between the actual lived Chinese polity and the imagined Chinese supernatural polity. “High officials are shielded by corrupt underlings or are available only through subordinate and less upright officials... high gods are not so shielded and access to them is relatively open,” she suggests (Ahern 1980: 99-103). Did the Koreans not follow the Chinese in envisioning a better supernatural state?

Indeed, many of the gods who possess Korean shamans are “high gods,” mountain gods, supernatural generals, and the tutelary gods of home and community. They do not importune the spectators for cash; this would be beneath their dignity. They merely extend a spread fan and claim their due. These are regal beings and the mansin describe their bearing as “like kings,” which is also to say like magistrates who were kings in miniature. In a kut, the high gods are followed by their avaricious underlings, the Taegam, or Officials, whose antics provide much of the real drama and comedy of a kut. The Taegam are never satisfied. The householders must [page 10] bargain with, argue with, cajole, and sometimes try to outwit the wily Taegam, much to the spectators’ amusement. One of my mansin informants suggested a parallel between this pantheon and “what you see on television”: the king sits up on the throne stroking his beard and the Taegam are all down below scheming.

Insofar as shaman rituals provoke both mirth and consternation in contemporary participants, one must ask if they reflect enduring perceptions of political behavior. It is my impression that they do. Anthropologists who have worked in Korean villages note a profound wariness in dealing with the state’s low-level functionaries. Particularly discomfiting for all concerned is an unheralded visit by a plainclothes policeman come to check on the resident anthropologist. When confrontations are unavoidable, one notes also a canny generosity.

In the Chinogi kut, it is the avaricious low-level functionary who claims center stage while the judge is only a shadowy presence. Although hellish torture is a vivid component of Korean religious consciousness, the soul’s punishment is remarkably underplayed in the Chinogi kut. The dead express anguish, not because they have been meted severe punishments in Hell, but because they must leave the world of the living. They weep because they have left loved ones behind, because they carry smouldering grudges, or because they are filled with desire. The Chinogi kut is not, primarily, a morality play of retribution and reward. Expressed belief in netherworldly justice is belied by flagrant extortion and bribery in the Death Messenger play. If anything, the Chinogi kut is psychodrama with some comic relief. The living must acknowledge death and free themselves from the unwholesome emotional claims of dead souls. The Chinogi kut makes this callous task an act of compassion: the dead go away, but to a good place. Kin cannot influence the administration of impartial justice一and the ritual does not question the possibility of a righteous King Yomna. Kin can bargain with a corrupt low-level functionary to secure the soul’s good treatment and ultimate release. The Chinogi kut does say something about strategies for dealing with the political system, as Ahern suggests. What the mansin and their clients choose to say reflects the particular problem they address: ambivalence toward the dead. The “political information” contained in this ritual reaffirms the positive powers of kinship and friendship against overbearing officialdom and outrageous fortune.

[page 11] **NOTES**

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1. Dix translated the “Song of Repentance”(Hoesimgok) from a book of Buddhist chants but found the text to be almost identical to the pallbearers’ dirges he observed in a South Ch’ungch’ong village, with some extemporizing in each pallbearers’ performance (Dix 1977: 210-211). The mansin I worked with sing the Song of Repentance just before the Death Messenger’s appearance, memorizing a version contained in printed prompt books of shaman songs.

2. The Korean term, kungnak, means “(place of) eternal bliss.” The mansin describe a boundless garden of flowering lotus, thus my liberal gloss.

3. For an interesting comparison of the Chinogi kut and the Catholic requiem mass, see Kiester (1980).

4. Kut are held for many reasons and are loosely distinguished by their instrumental functions: kut for prosperity, kut to send off the dead, healing kut. The Chinogi kut is actually a tail appended to a basic household kut, and for which the sponsoring family pays an extra fee (Kendall 1985).

A night long household kut followed by a leisurely Chinogi kut that lasts the better part of the next day is the “classic” pattern in central Korea. Urban kut cease in the early evening to avert charges of noise pollution. Some mansin in some circumstances will rush a kut and have the souls sent off by dawn.

5. Although the bribe at the gate was brief and simple in the ceremonies I observed, other mansin seize this opportunity for extensive dramatization and high comedy. One of Kim Taegon’s informants described an elaborate Chinogi kut held in Seoul in the 1920’s. On this occasion, twelve gates were set up in the shrine where the ceremony was held. A shaman stood at each gate demanding certification before allowing the soul to pass the threshold. Kin provided fees, and the shaman would produce a key, but declare it too rusty to work; it could be polished for an additional fee. Fees were collected three or four times at each gate before the soul could be lead across all twelve thresholds (Kim 1966: 75-6).

Drowning and deaths away from home yield unsettled, dangerous souls. Among Cheju fishermen, the shaman’s ritual for the dead begins with a progress through the Hell Gates to the house, signifying the calling back of one who died away from home. The soul, reconciled to death, is sent back through the gates in the second half of the rite (Beuchelt 1975). The dramatic structure of the Cheju ritual addresses a recurrent tragic motif in seaside villages.

6. Eberhard (1967), Jordan (1972: 40-1), Wolf (1974: 133-45), Yang (1967: 156-8), et al.

7. As a preface to his retelling of the tale of “Sin the Squeezer,” “X” offers this observation:

The Koreans being capital story-tellers and much given to folklore it is natural that in [page 12] Korea where, during some periods—it would be untrue and misleading to say at all times—the people have been grievously oppressed and robbed by governors, magistrates and other officials put over them, they should have stories about how these thieving miscreants have been exposed and brought to punishment by those they have so cruelly and remorsely oppressed and plundered.... On the other hand the Koreans with characteristic and most commendable fairness have tales of how rascally officials have also by smart tricks and cunning expendients contrived to hoodwink or outwit the higher officials and to cover up their evil deeds and thus escape the punishment they so richly deserved (‘‘X” 1898: 419).

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GLOSSARY

ajon 衙前

amhaeng osa 暗行御史

chesa 祭祀

Chinogi kut 지노기 굿

 or chinogwi kut 지노鬼굿

chiok 地獄

chohundero 좋은데로

chugunsonun kasisonida 죽은 손은 가시손이다

Hoesimgok 回心曲

Kasi Mun 가시門

kungnak 極樂

kut 굿

mansin 萬神

Pari kongju 바리公主

Saja 使者

[page 14] Sajabap 使者밥

Taegam 大監

Toryong 도령

Yomna 閻羅